

Revealing the Value of Visual Design:

Utilizing Design Concepts to Create Mardi Gras Masks

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Keywords: Design, masks, InDesign, PhotoShop



As one of the first courses that design and merchandising students take, Visual Design and Dress creates excitement about the major and serves as a recruiting tool. To coax students to actually utilize course concepts—the elements and principles of design—the final project involves the creation of an article of dress (anything that is worn on the body or carried). The title of the 2014 project was “Mardi Gras Recycled.” Students were charged to create a mask inspired by another country or culture, a festival (other than Mardi Gras), work of art, animal, event, person, place, or another approved influence. The materials had to be recycled or repurposed goods. This project was selected because masks could be constructed and decorated without sewing skills, which few entering students possess. This would also allow students to experience success early in the

program and to begin to build a portfolio.

The professor introduced the project on the first day of class and showed examples of past visual design projects, including designer flip-flops, fascinators, tote bags, and recycled, denim goods. Students could build the mask entirely “from scratch” or use an existing mask as a base. Other project requirements included creating a title and hang tag for the mask and to use Adobe® Photoshop to create a storyboard that showed their inspirations. The course included lectures on finding and using inspirations as well as a workshop on using PhotoShop to create storyboards. This introduced students to PhotoShop as a fashion tool and to the library’s Instructional Media Center, which is a valuable resource for design and merchandising students.

The textbook was Davis' *Visual Design in Dress*¹. The lectures described how to use the elements and principles of design and illustrated how designers use them for garments and accessories. Lectures also included color theory—including color schemes, value keys, and color groups—and Fibonacci numbers. Students were exposed to lots of resources, including books and websites on historic costume, ethnic design, and festivals. In addition, they were prompted to visit websites, costume shops, festivals, and museums to view masks of all kinds.

To assist students in applying course concepts, they completed a design checklist developed by the professor. The checklist required students to record how they used each design element (light, space, pattern, etc.); which principles they used and how; which color scheme and type (related or contrasting), which value key, and which color group they used and why; etc. Twice during the semester, students were required to bring in their masks for progress checks. Neatness and professional workmanship were stressed throughout. Each student also submitted a notebook with photographs that documented the process.

Students demonstrated considerable creativity in selecting materials and themes. Inspirations included the Day of the Dead, operas, architecture, weddings, and various holidays. Embellishments included buttons, feathers, silk flowers, sequins, seashells, wire mesh, beads, paint, and fabric of all kinds.

Students reported that they enjoyed the project and the ability to actually apply the design concepts. They also said that they enjoyed having the creative freedom to make the project unique. Many have listed the Visual Design project as their favorite project in the curriculum.

Because this and other hands-on, design projects have been so successful, they will be repeated with a different topic each time the Visual Design course is offered. They meet the goals of allowing students to experience and expand their creativity; to utilize course concepts; and to experience early success in the major. These projects also serve as an excellent recruiting tool because of the buzz that they create. In the future, however, students will learn to create their storyboards using both PhotoShop and InDesign®.

¹ Davis, M. L. (1996). *Visual design in dress* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc.