

Designing *Lizpatra* (1963): The Vision and Influence of Irene Sharaff

This presentation explores the genius, breadth, and versatility of the American designer Irene Sharaff (1910-1993), who used her artist's eye to design sets and costumes for numerous Hollywood films, Broadway plays and musicals, and ballet productions for some of the world's leading dance companies. Over the course of her fifty-year-long career, she earned fifteen Oscar nominations for costume design, winning five – for *An American in Paris* (1951), *The King and I* (1956), *West Side Story* (1961), *Cleopatra* (1963), and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) – and one Tony Award, for the original stage version of *The King and I* (1952). With her rich creative imagination on display in each of these notable films, Sharaff frequently inspired contemporary aesthetics (and sparked retail sales booms) in fashion and interior decoration, especially in her innovative choices of fabrics and colors, such as the sumptuous Thai silks of *The King and I*, or the fiery cherry reds and purples worn by the Sharks in *West Side Story*.

In particular, this presentation examines the visual brilliance and enduring influence of Sharaff's costume designs in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's blockbuster *Cleopatra* (20th Century Fox), starring Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and Rex Harrison. Together with her collaborators, Renie Conley and Vittorio Nino Novarese, Sharaff designed a staggering 26,000 costumes for the lavish epic film, including 8,000 pairs of shoes distributed among the legions of extras and day players. In the role of Cleopatra, Taylor required sixty-five costume changes – a record at the time – and each gown could easily be considered a veritable couture piece appropriate both for the glamorous star and the notorious Egyptian queen. For the scene of Cleopatra's spectacular entrance into Rome, Sharaff was expected to invent something dazzling, and she did – an extravagant cape of 24-carat gold cloth patterned after the wings of a phoenix, with a price tag of several thousand dollars (Cyrino 2005: 141). Sharaff's designs for this film ushered in new styles

in women's beauty and fashion trends, such as snake-motif jewelry, high-waisted gowns, and dramatic "Cleopatra Eye" make-up. Although Sharaff found Taylor's proportions difficult to dress – the star was petite with a heavy bosom and short arms, and her weight reportedly fluctuated throughout the entire *Cleopatra* shoot – the two worked together on several films in the 1960s, and Sharaff even designed the sunflower yellow silk jersey dress Taylor wore for her first wedding to Burton in 1964.

While her work on the men's costumes has not received as much attention, Sharaff did extensive research in the ancient sources (including Suetonius) in order to develop the unique and ingenious look she used to dress Harrison as Julius Caesar, breaking with the standard 1950s cinematic Roman military kit: she covered the actor in long sleeves, knee-length leather coats, leather leggings, and thick flowing capes in dark colors to bulk up his rather slight frame (Jorgensen and Scroggins 2015: 275). Moreover, Sharaff seems to have intended this look as a direct visual contrast to Burton's shorter tunics and close-fitting breast plates that she designed in vibrant blues and silvers, which would also serve to underscore the narrative opposition between the two Roman male characters in their respective erotic affairs with the queen in their separate "halves" of the bipartite film. After reviewing Sharaff's work in *Cleopatra*, this presentation concludes by considering the impact her "ancient" designs had on modern popular fashion and whether or not they responded to or shaped contemporary tastes and objectives in the forward-looking years of the early 1960s.

Bibliography

Cyrino, Monica. 2005. *Big Screen Rome*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell.

Jorgensen, Jay and Donald L. Scroggins. 2015. *Creating the Illusion (Turner Classic Movies): A Fashionable History of Hollywood Costume Designers*. Philadelphia: Running Press.