

*Beauty Reinterpreted: 18th Century Fashion
Through The Eyes of 20th Century Film*

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Costume worn in Marie Antoinette (1938)

Background and Goals

One of the most important factors in conveying the setting of a movie is the overall look of it's actors- their costume, hair style, make up, even body type. This is especially important in period films. The actor must look historic in order to successfully take the audience back to another time in history. But how far back do these elements really take us? This project set out to study the phenomenon of twentieth century trends working their way into a historic standard of beauty in period movies. How do these contemporary trends manifest themselves, and why does this phenomenon occur in the first place? By studying the portrayal of upper class women in movies set in the mid to late eighteenth century I hoped to gain an understanding of this phenomenon as a whole.

The two questions addressed were how? and why?. How can an eighteenth century costume, hair style, make up application, and body type used in a movie carry both the appropriate historical aesthetic and the aesthetic from the time in which it was created? And more importantly, why are historic trends adapted and changed to fit in with a modern aesthetic?

Results

HOW?

- ❖ A distinct difference lies in movies created during the studio era (1920s-1950s) and movies created after it. In studio era movies, all four elements of the eighteenth century “look” are heavily adapted. The actress will look historic enough to properly convey the setting, but contemporary enough that the audience will still idolize and want to emulate their favorite glamorous movie star. After the studio era there is more historical accuracy in the costumes, however make up and body type usually remain contemporary. Hair styles contain more accuracy than the ones created for films in the studio era, however contemporary trends are often present.

WHY?

- ❖ Many historic trends which were thought beautiful a few centuries ago look very silly to a modern eye. Thus an appearance must be made palatable to a modern aesthetic in order to not distract from the action of the film.
- ❖ During the studio era both stars and designers were under contract to the studio. The studio controlled the entire career of the star, from what movies to act in to what beauty products they endorse. Similarly, all design decisions were ultimately controlled by the head of the studio. In order for the star to sell movie tickets and beauty products to the public that wanted to emulate them they had to constantly look glamorous and beautiful, because advertising a movie was also advertising a beauty product, and vice versa. Furthermore, during the studio era the predominant acting method was very stylized. If stylized acting could be accepted by a public, so could stylized appearance.
- ❖ Post-studio era a film studio is simply the financial backer and distributor of the film. Designers have more creative control, and any endorsements of beauty products that a star does are completely unconnected to any movies the star makes. Furthermore, there is a greater trend for realism in post studio era movies. As a very realistic acting style became the norm, appearances had to look more realistic to match.

Example



A portrait from the 18th century of a woman in a state of undress. Her hair is styled tall and powdered. Her undergarments give her torso the conical shape desired in the 18th century.

An image from *Marie Antoinette* (1938). The same fabric is used for the sheer robe, however sequins have been added to give it 1930s glamour. The hair is cut in a short style (and unpowdered), and her nightgown conforms to the curves of her body, both 1930s trends.

