

Introduction

The catalogue of costume history available for me to choose from as the focus for my thesis is vast and spans millennia. There are many lifetimes of material to learn from. When I sought to choose my topic, I wanted to focus on an area of costume history frequently seen on stage that also held personal resonance for me. It was important that the flame of my passion for this time period be clearly evident in the research I have done and the garments I have sewn.

I have always been moved by the silhouette, femininity, and glamour of the 1950s.* When considering the subject matter for my thesis I knew I wanted to do a historical reproduction and I began my research into garments from the 1950s. I investigated three of the most notable costume collections, the Victoria & Albert Museum, The Kyoto Costume Collection, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute. My goal in creating a reproduction is to gain more intimate knowledge into how things were done in previous eras of fashion and how I can use that knowledge to create historical clothes for modern bodies.

As I delved into each of the collections, I found many garments that captivated me, but I kept returning to a black and white polka dot strapless evening gown. It was as though I could see some of my own spirit and motivations in this dress. It was that draw and passion that sealed my decision to reproduce a Jacques Fath original from 1953.

Background of Women's fashion in the 1950s

The dress itself has design features emblematic of the early 1950s but it also has very modern appeal. The waist of the dress is very nipped in allowing focus to fall on the bust and hips. The focus on an hourglass shape is characteristic of the period and specifically follows the design aesthetic of "The New Look". The New Look was a set of design features credited to Christian Dior and his contemporaries, Jacques Fath and Pierre Balmain. The focus of the new look shifted from the squared off shoulders and utilitarian look prevalent during the war years of the 1940s and focused on soft shoulders, figure hugging silhouettes, slim figure following pencil skirts coexisted with full skirts with yards of fabric not possible under wartime rationing. (Tortora & Eubank 437)

Biographical Information on Jacques Fath

Jacques Fath was born on September 12th, 1912, in Vincennes, France. He was a fashion and costume designer whose ascent was cut short when he died of cancer in 1954, at the pinnacle of his success. He is often compared to contemporaries Christian Dior and Pierre Balmain. Fashion historians have theorized that his star would've continued to rise like his other designers of note,

He was being lauded early in his career as a rising star. His keen insight into the ready to wear opportunity, partnerships with American manufacturing and sales, made him a trailblazer in his field. "Fath's rise to be a sort of dauphin, or heir apparent, to Dior's throne as ruler of fashion, is

thus a genuine business triumph” (Coughlan 82)

The employment of accentuated features and classically male details rather than looking gimmicky, thrust him into the realm of groundbreaking. He used these elements that could’ve been seen as hyper male or flamboyant, to feminize and to flatter his clients. These details and the language of his designs are emblematic of a person with a fun-loving spirit and a passion for making women feel beautiful. “Fath accentuated these swelling curves almost to the point of eccentricity (poufs, the hobble, Stylo line) and co-opted those male accessories that he found “rascally” (wing collars, ties, a carnation in the buttonhole, etc.)” (Chenoune 65)

He was a pioneer who had a vision of the future for fashion. The burgeoning youth culture in America, that country’s postwar prosperity, and the increased popularity of department stores like Macy’s, Lord & Taylor, and Nieman Marcus, presented an opportunity for an innovative designer, like Fath. He was able to design simplified versions of his high-end couture looks that could be purchased at a more accessible price and sold directly to the populous at department stores. These designs became known as the “boutique collection” to differentiate it from his Paris couture. (Wilcox 74) “He made the argument that his Paris couture and his American wholesale ‘respect and need each other’”. (Wilcox 51)

“The first designers to experiment with prêt à porter looked to American manufacturers for machinery, instruction, and skilled labor. Such pioneer lines as Christian Dior – New York and Jacques Fath for Joseph Halpert, both from 1948, were based on the idea that there was a great appetite for cheaper versions of haute couture designs. The next wave of prêt à porter designs, aimed at a youthful market, meant avant-garde designs at an affordable price.” (Rennolds Milbank 60)

In addition to his innovative business model, Fath also found creative ways to make branding and marketing a lifestyle. He accomplished his own version of advertising in two ways, parties at his Paris home and tours of America with his wife who would be attired in his latest designs.

In the post war economy, he used his social aptitude to encourage influential socialites to wear his garments and talk them up. He would often offer these women his couture fashions at little to no cost, allowing the garments and the women who wore them to speak on his behalf. He held lavish parties that quickly became the place to be seen in Parisian society. The increased visibility of he and his wife socially and with his name dripping from the lips of the influential, his capital in business and social circles was on the rise.

“In days gone by dressmakers and their customers almost never met socially. The bonds of bother personal publicity and social intercourse we loosened during the ‘20s and ‘30s – especially by Elsa Schiaparelli, who became a fixture of international society – but nothing like

Fath's whirlwind success in public relations had ever been seen in France." (Coughlan 89)

Fath and his wife Geneviève who was also his partner, took a tour of America in 1948. Her wardrobe was said to cost \$12,000, which is estimated at over \$130,000 today. Life magazine called her a "Fath's walking show window" (Life 87) This investment in her garments let alone the cost of the trip would bear fruit in the form of his partnership with Joseph Halpert, an American manufacturer, which led to the wide availability of Fath's work and his foray into ready to wear.

Fath's legacy will forever be rooted in the glamour and body skimming lines of his designs and his push to make high end fashion accessible to the masses. Though his life and potential were cut short, he spent much of his time as a success in the world of fashion. While we will never get to know or see all the wonders, he may have given us we can treasure the fashion that was his ode to the female form

The Reproduction

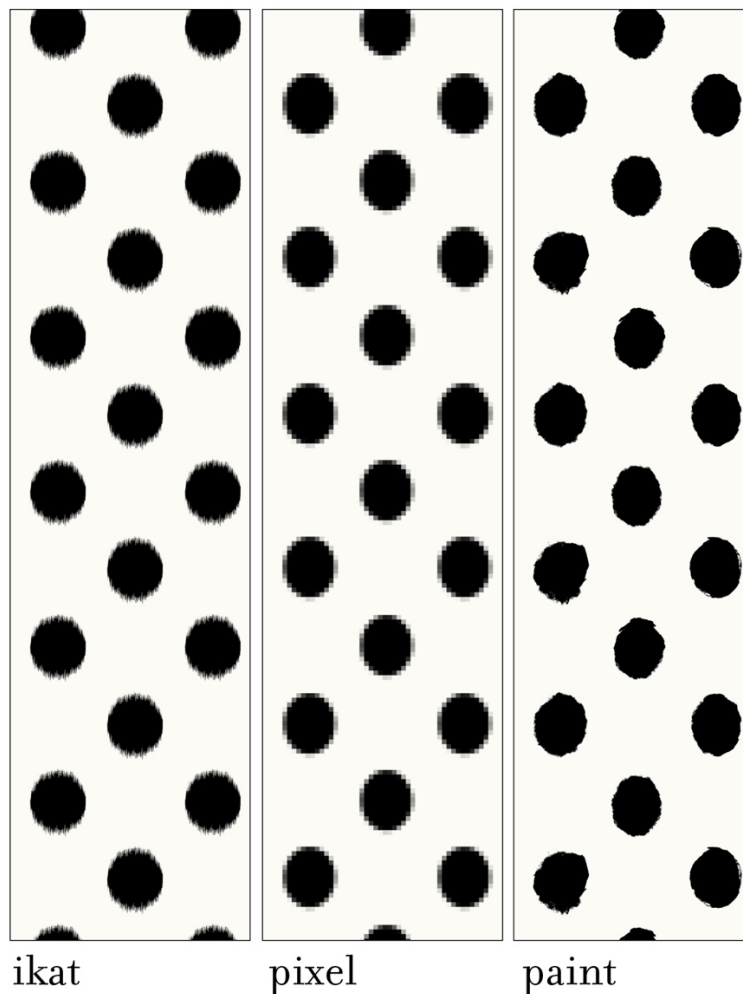
As I look back through the styles and shapes created through costume history, I am struck by how much we can learn from what has been created. An understanding of what came before offers us a springboard to leap forward and innovate. This dress spoke to me, moved me, ignited my curiosity, and inspired me to understand it through recreating it. Reproducing garments from the past allow us to live for a moment in that time period and to recognize the connective tissue between then and now.



The Fabric

One of the potential problems I focused on early in the process was reproducing the original print. I am not well versed in computerized pattern design, but I wanted to make a good reproduction of the original fabric. I collaborated with a costume designer I have worked with previously, Hunter Kaczorowski, to create the design for the print. He created two versions of the print based on the original image, as well as creating an option for the modern interpretation.

The first of the prints was based on the design for woven ikat fabric (Ikat patterns are created by pre-dying the threads so that when they are woven, they create a pattern). The second print was pixelated, very geometric and digitized. The third print was more painterly, the polka dots were made to look like a swirl from a paint brush. After looking at them both I chose to go with the painterly version. Based on the look of the historical garment, the painterly more organic iteration seemed to align with the aesthetic of Fath's original more closely.



(Kaczorowski, Hunter)

Garment Construction

Preparing the Dress Form

In most circumstances when beginning the work of draping a pattern I would start by padding out my dress form to the proper measurements. I would do this by pinning flat pieces of batting (a thick quilted fabric), to certain areas so that the measurements in those areas would mimic the measurements of those same areas on the body. I would then use black twill tape to mark lines on the dress form that will indicate the finished edges and seam lines of the garment.

In this case that part of the process wasn't necessary. I used the muslin of my strapless foundation, which I had already created previously, to pad my form out as well as to ensure that the neckline would trace along the top edge of the foundation. In the process of adding the foundation to the form I was able to pinpoint the locations where extra padding needed to be added to accurately replicate my measurements. I added additional polyfil to the bust cups to round them out.

Draping on the form following your style lines, Flat Patterning, Pattern Correction

Investigating the original I made the conclusion that I would be patterning the dress using a mix of draping and flat patterning. Draping is the practice of applying fabric directly to a dress form to mold desired shapes, whereas flat patterning is accomplished by mapping out the patterns shapes on paper using a series of incredibly accurate body measurements. It was clear in the beginning of my draping process where I would diverge from a completely draped garment. It was very important to drape the bodice over the strapless foundation. In order to get the dress to curve around the bust and to nip in at the waist. I used the fabric to sculpt around the form.

One of the things that was challenging was that as I was working with the garment, I was not very happy with how the neckline was shaping around the body from the center front to the center back. I worked the pattern on the dress form to where I was reasonably satisfied. After reaching this point I knew that I could move forward with making the paper pattern pieces. Any further adjustments to the neck edge could be noted the first fitting of the garment mockup (a mockup is the first fabric version of the garment, often made from a plain fabric which mimics the characteristics of the fashion fabrics).

Once the pattern pieces had been draped on the dress form in muslin, I laid them flat on my cutting table with a piece of patterning paper beneath them. Using a pounce wheel (a spiked wheel used to perforate paper through fabric) I traced the seam lines I draped from the fabric to the paper. With the lines of the pattern pounced onto the paper I took a pencil and clear gridded ruler and traced the lines. I paid close attention to the places where a pattern piece would meet another pattern piece. In the corners where pattern pieces are meeting with other pattern pieces, I tried to make sure that the edges flowed smoothly from one piece to another. Smooth transitions

allow for clean lines in the finished product. Lining up the pattern pieces one at a time with the pieces they connect to enabled me to ensure that the seams were the same length. During this step I also placed any balance marks I would need, so that when I began sewing, I would have multiple marks to pin on to ensure that my seams would line up and finish cleanly. Taking the time to line up all the top bodice edges gave me a good idea of what the top neck edge would look like finished and allowed me the opportunity to make slight adjustments to ensure that it would flow smoothly around the body.

When it came to the skirt and pocket pieces, I flat patterned these. I took measurements from the waist edges of the side front, side back, and center back bodice pieces in order to ensure that the top of the skirt pattern pieces will align properly with the bodice. Once I have the opportunity to see the dress on a body, I will be able to see where I may need to make some alterations. Fath was known for adding padding to the bust and hips in order to enhance and highlight the hourglass shape popular in the 1950s. I will consider similar alterations and additions based on the first fittings.

I laid out my pattern pieces to cut them from muslin to prepare for my first fitting. Muslin is a common fabric used for mockup fittings. The rationale is that it can easily be marked on to note any changes required for a better fit around the body. These first fittings give the draper an opportunity to see any issues with fit, to check that all of the seams are lined up, and to ascertain whether or not the garment may need to be taken in or let out. The immediate problem I ran into was the width of my skirt pieces at the hem. They were too wide to be cut two at a time out of the muslin I was working with, which was 44" wide. Once cut, the mockup went together very quickly. Sewing the seams together was simple, but something that I made sure to include were the large pockets which are a benchmark detail of the original dress. Many sewists will omit their pockets from their mockups but I have always been of the opinion that this is a mistake. Pockets and how they open can dramatically change how a garment sits on the body.

Muslin fitting

The mockup was a great fit. There were not too many changes from the original pattern. Here are the changes we noted on the pattern:

- The waist needed to come up $\frac{3}{4}$ " around the bottom of the bodice.
- Taking up the waist of the bodice meant that it also needed to come up along the waistline of the center front pattern piece. What made this a little tricky was that the center front bodice and center front skirt were all one piece. Additionally, based on what was pinned in the fitting the dress needed to come out unevenly. At the very center front of the waist, it was pinned out $1\frac{1}{4}$ ", but it was only pinned out $\frac{3}{4}$ " where the center front pattern piece met the side front seam. What I did was to take a triangular wedge out of the center front pattern piece that was $1\frac{1}{4}$ " wide at the center of the waistline to $\frac{3}{4}$ " at the side seam. Removing some of this length meant that I had to square up the center front

neck edge again. Taking that length out of the bodice was worth it as it created a perfect fit.

- There was 2" of seam allowance at the center back of the garment originally, we took it in another 1" total, which meant I removed ½" from each side of the center back seam additionally.
- I had added 2" to the hem that I had marked for the pattern. In the fitting the cut length, without turning up the 2" hem, was perfect. It just brushed the floor. This indicated that when I made the final garment, I would need to add not just the 2" hem allotment but an additional 2" to accommodate what was observed in the fitting.

Pattern adjustment

After the first fitting, the next step was to make corrections that we noted during the fitting, on to the paper pattern pieces. I made the corrections in red ink and made sure to date the corrections so that if subsequent corrections need to be made, I will have a record of where I started. This allows me to track the progression of the garment and ensure that nothing is missed, and no corrections are made twice.

Cutting the Fashion Fabric

When cutting the final fabric for a garment it is important to approach the task very mindfully. You want to ensure that you are marking the wrong side of the fabric, that those markings are made as nondistinctive as possible, that you are cutting all your pieces in the same direction, and that finally all your marks and seam allowances have been transferred properly. Additionally, when cutting my fashion fabric, I made sure to cut all of my pattern pieces going in the same direction. Fabric can often have a different shine, nap (Nap is the raised fibers found on fabric like velvet and corduroy. Fabrics like these can often look like different colors depending on how you look at it base on the positioning of the nap.), or pattern orientation depending on what direction you look at it from. It is best practice to lay out your pattern pieces in the same direction so that there is continuity in the flow of the fabric once the garment is sewn.

While custom printing the fabric I needed to do a test on half of a yard. This took my total yardage down to 6.5 yards. I was very careful with my cutting and made sure that I added proper seam allowances so that I would not have to recut anything.

Cutting and Sewing Cording

To create the cording that will be sewn into the side front and side back seams, as well as be used to finish the top edge and hem, I had to cut bias strips from the black velveteen fabric. Cutting something on the bias is accomplished by cutting on a 45-degree angle to the selvage (manufactured) edge of a piece of fabric. The reason to make use of the bias direction in cording is because it offers the most stretch available in woven fabric. Using bias to encase a cord allows the trim you've created to shape nicely in a seam or as a finishing for an edge. The pattern of the

garment I created uses princess seams with a collection of opposing curves that create shaping around the bustline. Because of this it is important to use the biased cording in seams to accentuate and support the shape being created by the pattern.

I cut numerous 2" wide strips of bias across the full width of the fabric. I laid the cord in the center of the bias strip, folding the fabric around the cord with the right side of the fabric facing out. Then using a left side open zipper foot, I stitched as close as I could to the encased cording, without stitching over it.

Assembling the Exterior of the Garment

The first step to assembling the garment was to assemble the center back and side panels. I seamed together the center back bodice panel to the center back skirt panel. I then moved on to assembling the pocket in the dart of the side skirt panel. I first basted (a technique using a large stitch that can easily be removed later) the pocket flap to the front section of the dart. Next, I attached the pocket bag on either side of the dart. Pressing the pocket bag to the inside of the garment I then stitched around the pocket bag and down the length of the dart. I basted in the top edge of the pocket bag to the top edge of the side skirt piece with it pushed towards the front. Once this portion of the skirt was created, I seamed together the side front and side back bodice pieces and attached them to the side skirt panel.

With the individual sections created I moved forward with basting the cording to the side front seam of the center front panel and the side back seam of the center back panel. With the cording attached to the center front and center back pieces I was able to seam the center front and center back to the assembled side panel. I was careful while pinning these pieces together to line up the waist seam, so that the waistline was lining up across all the vertical seams.

Finishing seam edges

An important step to any high-end garment is establishing a standard of seam finishing. Seam finishing is how one chooses to finish the cut raw edges of the fabric to ensure that it will not fray. With the fabric for this garment, I was able to use an overlock machine to overcast the edges. This ensures that the cut edge of the pattern pieces will not fray and will stand up to wear and tear. I overcast the edges as I completed each seam. Finishing your edges as you sew rather than finishing them ahead of time allows you to ensure that your seam allowances are accurate and that you are not prematurely cutting any seam allowance away with the blade on the serger.

Inserting the Foundation

I constructed a strapless foundation from bra net and cotton satin. This foundation was sized up to meet my measurements from another pattern. I used pression tape (a type of tightly woven 3/8" wide ribbon) to create casings for the steel bones. I put on the completed foundation and we

pinned the exterior of the garment to the top edge of the foundation. I basted the top edges together so that they wouldn't shift while I was attaching the back zipper edges together.

With the top edges together, I folded the left center back edge to closely line up with the zipper that was already inserted in the strapless foundation. I machine stitched the center back edge right alongside the zipper, to create the under lap of the lapped zipper. In the fitting, it was clear that the lap of the zipper was a little short, so I created a facing so that the lap extended over the zipper teeth. I folded and pressed the overlap of the right center back edge and I pinned it in place over the right side of the zipper, making sure that the waistline matched up across the center back seam. With the overlap pinned in place I prick stitched the zipper to the exterior of the garment. The prick stitch, a type of backstitch that creates small barely visible stitches across the exterior of the garment. I used this stitch instead of machine stitching to ensure that the zipper was properly attached without needing a line of stitching visible up the back edge.

The last step to inserting the foundation was to add hook and bar closures at the top and waistline of the zipper overlap at the center back seam. This is done to make sure that the zipper will remain covered while the garment is being worn.

Finishing the Top Edge and Hem

I wanted to use the velveteen cording to finish the top neckline edge and hem of the garment. I sewed the cording to the right side of the garment and fold it to the inside edge. I also added a piece of black velveteen to the inside to clean finish and encase the top edge of the foundation. I pinned the inside edge of the cording in place and handstitched it to the of the foundation making sure that no raw edges were exposed. It took some careful finessing to make sure that the finished nicely at the back zipper edge without impeding the functionality of the zipper.

With the top clean finished I was able to do a final fitting using the shoes I would be wearing with dress. Once I put the dress on, I concluded that the hem was almost perfect in its current condition. There was no need to shorten the hem to finish it. I attached the cording to the right side of the garment, 3/8" away from the hem. I pressed the edge of the cording to the inside of the garment and hand stitched the hem in the same manner that I had hand stitched the top edge. I was careful to ensure that the hemstitches were small and did not interrupt the visual effect of the corded hem.

Corded Bow Details

Once the garment was hemmed and clean finished, the final step was to add the spaghetti corded bow details to the top of the side front and side back seams. Creating this cording is different than creating the cording that is encased in the seams. To create the spaghetti cording, you cut a

piece of cording that is double the length that you need. Using a one-inch-wide strip of the black velveteen cut on the bias I laid half of the cording on the right side of the velveteen. Using a left opening zipper foot, I stitched the cording inside of the velveteen. When I reached within ¼” of the end of the velveteen I pivoted and stitched across the cording. Taking my dressmaking shears I then trimmed the available seam allowance down to a scant 1/8” Next, I turned the cording to the right side over the unstitched cord by pulling the velveteen inside out over the other half of the cord I had not sewn. This creates a piece of cording that is completely encased in black velveteen. I cut the encased cording into four even pieces and finished the cut edges cleanly. I tied each piece into a bow and hand stitched it at the top of the center front and center back seams.

Final Takeaway on my Historic Reproduction

I was excited and drawn to this dress at first glance. It was so valuable to dive into the creativity of a historical designer gain a new perspective on my favorite period in fashion history. It is so valuable to capitalize on the opportunity to take the time to invest in couture finishing and historical accuracy. From adding the cording to the side front and side back seams to the final stitching of the decorative bows, I gained an understanding for the significance of quality

Historical Reproduction Gallery

Photos by Pat Jarrett



















































The Interpretation

My designs for the modern dress with the historic influences from the reproduction

The Fath original was a great choice because it offered a streamlined silhouette, which would allow me **license for interpretation**. Once you remove the print as a focal point for the garment you have a figure following dress, which accentuates the waist and bustline of the wearer.

The fit on the pattern from the reproduction was exceptionally flattering. I was particularly happy with the fit across the bust and knew that was one area of the original that I didn't want to tweak over much. Being 5'2" I tend to gravitate towards skirts and dresses that finish either just above or just below my knee. I find that it goes a long wait to lengthening my frame and making me look taller when you can see a good portion of my legs. With all of that in mind, I knew I wanted to make significant alterations to the length of the reproduction pattern. I wanted to find a way to manipulate the hem in a way that would allow the dress to sit above my knee in the front, while still allowing it to feel longer and more flowing in the back. After giving it some consideration, I made the decision to make the hem a pretty dramatic high low hem with a difference of 8" between the height at the center front and center back. Part of the intention behind this was to display the multicolor tulle petticoat. The display of the petticoat is intended to give a nod to the understructures executed in the 1950s, a wink to the explosion of color from the 80s and 90s, all while capturing the sleek lines of current fashion.

I made the decision to update the fabric from the printed pique of the original to a solid white cotton pique with cording from the same fabric. This simplification in fabrication allows the focus to be on the shape and fit of the garment, focusing the eye on the execution of the high low hem and the figure skimming fit. Changing the cording from black velveteen to the white cotton pique, took away some of the cartoony/painterly influences exhibited by 1950s designers like Fath and Hermes, and moved towards a more modern simplicity and minimalism.

Garment Construction

Pattern correction

Using the pattern that I have already fit for the reproduction as my base I used flat patterning techniques to adjust the pattern for the reproduction. The edits to the pattern focused on adjusting the skirt to sit four inches above the knee in the front and four inches below the knee in the back. I also moved the pockets up an inch based on the muslin fitting they were a little too low on the skirt for my proportions

Assembling the exterior of the garment

Much like the muslin for the reproduction garment, constructing the modern interpretation from the cotton pique has gone very smoothly. Using a one-sided zipper foot, I am able to get very close to the edge of the cording. This gives the cording a very snug and rounded fit in the seam.

Finishing seam edges

I am not sure what it is about this fabric, but it will not go through an overlock machine well. Normally I would overlock all the raw edges of the fabric as a means to finish them and keep them from fraying. As an alternative to finishing the edges in my traditional fashion I have opted to run a line of stay stitching in the seam allowance and I will then go back with some pinking shears, which will create a zigzag edge that will prevent the fabric from fraying.

First Fitting

Using the corrected pattern from the original reproduction I can go right into the actual fashion fabric for the modern iteration. With the exterior of the garment together I did a first fit. The corrections that had been made in the initial muslin fit of the reproduction garment made this first fit very successful. After carefully measuring the adjustments, I made to the length and shape of the hem, I found the new look and shape to be quite successful. The only true adjustment that I made was to take in the center back of the garment $\frac{1}{2}$ " on either side of the center back seam, for a total of 1" taken out of the overall circumference.

After seeing the garment on the body, it was clear that this dress was going to require a lining. The seam lines and boning from the strapless foundation were showing through the fashion fabric. With that in mind I think that I will add some spiral steel boning to the lining as well. Spiral steel boning follows and supports the sewn shape of the garment, while adding a flexibility for movement and ease of the wearer. Since I would also be wearing a strapless foundation garment with this dress, I felt that I could benefit from the flexibility of spiral boning verses solid steel boning.

Adding Lining

I have made the decision that the modern interpretation garment will need to be lined. This on its own is fine but the linings that are locally available are polyester acetate and while they function beautifully in a garment, they are notoriously tricky to sew. They have the tendency to pucker and run when you stitch them. I would never use them for the fashion fabric, but I wish I had time for a better lining option.

Additionally, for continuity within the garment, I think I will have to stitch and pink the inside seam allowance edges like I did with the exterior garment. This will create parallels among the garment's finishing. Every time the needle goes into the seams the fabric mars a little bit and runs. I have adjusted the machine to lessen the effects as much as possible and it did make a slight improvement. Some of the issues I am seeing will also lessen with proper ironing.

With the lining assembled, I added boning along the seams, along the side front, side back and sides, around to the center back. This will allow the garment to better hold its shape and add structure to the fit. I used flexible steel boning and corresponding cotton bone casing. The bottom of the bone casing gets finished by catching the bottom edge in the waist seam. This leaves the top edge open so that the boning can be slid in. The top edge of the casing then gets finished when the top edge of the lining is sewn to the exterior of the garment.

Adding the Zipper, Top Edge Cording, Inserting the Lining

I am adding a lapped zipper to the center back of the garment. To begin sewing my lapped zipper I have folded back and pressed the seam allowances on either side of the center back. I pin the zipper to the underlap and edge stitched along the side of the zipper. I then zip the zipper and pin the lap in place, aligning the waist seam and top edge. I then stitch down the length of the zipper at 3/8" from the folded edge of the fabric. When I reach the bottom of the zipper opening, I pivot and stitch across the zipper, making sure to backstitch when I stop and start.

Once the zipper is in, I added the cording to the top edge of the garment. I sewed this on with 1/2" seam allowance. At the center back edge of the garment I stitched through the cording to lock it in place. I then unpicked the stitching at the end of the cording so that I could clip out the cord that would be caught in the seam allowance. This will allow me to fold this extra fabric into the seam allowance without the seam allowance becoming too bulky from having the added weight of the cord in it.

Now that I have completed those steps I stitched in the lining. Turning the lining inside out I pinned the top edge of the lining to the top edge of the garment. When I reached the center back edge, I folded back the seam allowance at the center back so that it would finish just inside of the stitch line for the zipper. With the two layers pinned together I stitched from the exterior side of the garment so that I could stitch just inside of the existing stitch line from the cording at the top edge. Stitching just inside of the existing stitch line for the cording allows me to tighten up the cording while also inserting the lining.

Second Fit

With the zipper in I was able to do a second fit on the garment. Unfortunately, after putting everything on, the dress is a little bit too big. I had already taken it in half an inch when I put the zipper in but now, I am going to have to remove the zipper and a portion of the lining in order to take 3/4" from either side of the seam allowance at the top edge and 5/8" at the waist. This will also mean removing the center back bone casing from the lining and repositioning it based on what I'm taking in. Taking it in further will be important to achieving the figure skimming fit that draws its reference from the 1950s.

Adding Cording and Horsehair to the Hem

To finish the hem of the reproduction dress I wanted to mimic the original finishing of the historical garment. In addition to mimicking the cording present in the original garment I wanted to add a stiff horsehair braid (this is a type interfacing made of braided plastic) to the hem edge. What this horsehair braid accomplishes is to stiffen the hem and give it movement and life. To attach the horsehair, I stitched it to the seam allowance on the wrong side of the fabric. I trimmed the seam allowance to ¼” and pressed it towards the wrong side of the fabric. I pinned the seam allowance on the cording in place so that I could hand stitch and clean finish the bottom edge.

Cutting the Tulle Underskirt

I knew with the dramatic high low hem of the interpretation gown I wanted to take the opportunity to incorporate a pop of color. I made the decision to do this by creating a multi-layer tulle underskirt. I purchased 108” wide tulle, which would allow me to cut a circle skirt without a seam. Once I had cut the circle skirt from each of the five layers of tulle, I concluded that there would not be enough layers to provide me with the coverage and the saturation of color that I was looking for. With the fabric I had left I was able to cut twenty quarter circle pieces from the tulle I had left. I then began to assemble the skirt by placing the solid circle down 1st then layering and overlapping the quarter circle pieces across the center front of the skirt. Once I had layered all five colors, pinning the edges as I went, I basted all the layers in place at ¼”. The circle opening that I had cut for the waste was cut large enough for the full circumference of my hips. The elastic I used for the waist of the skirt was cut 4 inches smaller than my waist measurement. When I began attaching the elastic to the skirt, I made sure that the skirt laid flat across the center front and then I stretched the elastic between the side front and center back on either side of center front. What this accomplished was to gather the excess material between side front and center back, creating a fuller, fluffier look at the back and allowing the skirt to slip on with enough ease over the hip so that it will not require a closure.

Final Fit

Fitting the final garment, I realized that I was going to need to add diva boning to the top edge of the garment to ensure that the strapless foundation would not show above the top edge of the garment. Diva boning is when you use a piece of boning covered in either bone casing or biased tape and attach it to the center front top edge of a garment so that it can be tucked into the top edge of one’s cleavage area of a brassier or strapless foundation. The pressure of the undergarment against the body ensures that the dress will stay in place, not gap at center front, and not slip below the top edge of the foundation.

With the diva boning in place, a final press and steam on the garment I was satisfied with the details I put in and moved forward with a photoshoot of the final garment.

Final Takeaway from the Modern Interpretation

I valued the expansion of my creativity in creating the modern interpretation of a historic garment. As modern creators we often forget to look at the past and recognize the history that helped us to create our present. Using some of the design elements that were present in the original gown allowed me the freedom to innovate and expand on a classic silhouette.

The elements that provided me the most significant learning opportunity are the couture details and finishings. I feel as though the implementation of the handsewn finishings as well as the structural elements elevated my final garment. These features which were present in the historic gown and implemented in the modern interpretation are facets which can be applied broadly and to any project. They will provide me with the tools to distinguish future garments.

Historical Reproduction Gallery

Photos by Pat Jarrett









































The Conclusion and the Takeaway

I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to walk back into history and explore the experience of a respected designer such as Fath. I believe that there is a lot that we can learn from looking back at how garments were constructed in former eras. Living in an age of fast fashion where clothes are practically made disposable, I believe that there is much we can learn from looking back at periods in fashion when things were made to last.

Through this process I learned a lot about how to construct garments that will not only follow the lines of the body but also stand up to the tests of action on stage. The incorporation of the strapless foundation in the historical garment and the diva bones in the modern interpretation, illustrated for me the various ways in which a garment can be made stage ready. The elevated details of both dresses illustrated for me how an item can be finished in a manner that is both structurally stable and grand.

I believe that as theater artists we can raise up our craft by embracing elements of the past and using them as a foothold for future innovations. Our culture is in a race towards highly technical improvements, but there is still a great deal of knowledge to be gleaned from remembering and replicating the past.

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