

The Clothing of Dreams

Pamela A. Ivinski (February 27, 2015)



Last week, when Milena Canonero won a fourth Academy Award for Best Costume Design for her work on “The Grand Budapest Hotel,” the world’s attention was drawn yet again to Italy’s history of excellence in this category

Italian costume designers, now having earned 13 Oscars, unquestionably deserve the honors they are also receiving in a terrific exhibition, “I vestiti dei sogni: La scuola dei costumisti italiani per il cinema” (“[The Clothing of Dreams: The Italian School of Costume Designers for Film](#) [2]”), currently at the Museo di Roma.

The show, produced by the [Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna](#) [3] and on view until March 22, traces the history of Italian efforts in the field from 1915 to the present. While emphasizing the genius of a select few designers, the exhibition also highlights the connections between the generations while linking cinematic costume to Italy’s grand sartorial tradition as represented over the centuries in painting and sculpture.

The first costume encountered in “I vestiti dei sogni” is the distinctive red jacket worn by Toni Servillo in *La Grande Bellezza* (The Great Beauty), the 2013 Oscar winner for Best Foreign Language Film. Made by Neapolitan bespoke tailoring firm [Cesare Attolini](#) [4], the sport coat is displayed near a 1775 portrait of Pius V, whose nephew built Rome’s Palazzo Braschi, in which the museum is located.



The rhyme between the color of the jacket and the papal vestments underscores the symbolic importance of red in Italian clothing history. At the same time, it may slyly allude to the persistence of extravagant taste among some well-to-do Italians, shared by the building's first owner, who enjoyed "wealth accumulated thanks to the unprincipled granting of many privileges from the Pope" (according to the museum's website), and the "gagà" (Neapolitan dandy) type associated with Attolini and Sorillo's character, Jep Gambardella.

The exhibition then moves into a section of the palazzo utilized for traveling exhibitions and begins the tale of Italian costume design with examples by actress Lyda Borelli, who designed her own costumes for silent films of the 1910s.

Here we learn about [Vittorio Nino Novarese](#) [5], a screenwriter and costume designer who was the first significant Italian artisan to find success in Hollywood, eventually winning an Oscar for the male costumes of *Cleopatra* (1963).

The blank walls of this part of the museum display stills from early black-and-white movies and clips from later films, including stunning ballroom scenes from King Vidor's *War and Peace* (1956) and [Luchino Visconti](#) [6]'s *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*) of 1963.

Some of the most fascinating insights into the costume designer's process appear in Maria de Matteis's comments about the gowns she made for Audrey Hepburn in *War and Peace*. A wall label (in Italian and English) explains that de Matteis created 22 dresses tinted in accordance with the life cycle of a leaf, from light spring green to "winter Havana brown," and that some were embroidered with horse designs in order to accentuate the actress's childlike features.

After small rooms devoted to Piero Gherardi's hallucinatory clothing for Federico Fellini's 1965 *Giulietta degli Spiriti* (*Juliet of the Spirits*) and Danilo Donati's highly textured, almost sculptural costumes for *Edipo Re* (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967) by [Pier Paolo Pasolini](#) [7], the exhibition expands into luxuriously appointed rooms filled with the museum's art collection.

A large selection of dresses made by various designers in association with Torelli Costumi, the celebrated theatrical and cinematic costuming atelier, includes exquisite examples such as gowns worn by Silvana Mangano in Visconti's *Morte a Venezia* (*Death in Venice*, 1971) and Michelle Pfeiffer and Winona Ryder in Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* (1993).

A room to the side pays tribute to the workshops and designers who complete the outfits with items like a wig worn by Morgan Freeman in *Driving Miss Daisy* and Jack Sparrow's boots from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Another room is dedicated to Milena Canonero's Oscar-winning designs for [Sofia Coppola](#) [8]'s *Marie Antoinette* (2007).

The final section of "I vestiti dei sogni" deliberately places cinematic clothing, including more male costumes than have been seen earlier in the exhibition, in dialogue with works from the Museo di Roma's permanent collection. In one spectacular vignette, three clerical figures from the ecclesiastical fashion show of Fellini's *Roma* (*Fellini's Rome*, 1971) pose in front of a painting that depicts Fabio Chigi Elected Cardinal by Pope Innocent X.

The juxtaposition speaks to the continuing role of sartorial splendor in the pageantry of the Church, exaggerated by Fellini and recently criticized by Pope Francis. In a decidedly more secular vein, three costumes from *Il Casanova di Federico Fellini* [9] (*Fellini's Casanova*, 1976), including a lacy men's suit of pink upon pink, are situated comfortably among portraits of powdered wig-wearing figures from the 18th century.

The beauty of these outfits, which like so many of the dresses and suits on view in "I vestiti dei sogni" were created for [Tirelli Costumi](#) [10], suggests that the upcoming exhibition of Tirelli's cinematic costumes scheduled to open at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York this summer will be just as appealing as this splendid show.



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