

Opera, a new arena for Haute Couture: The case of Christian Lacroix

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Opera and fashion both share the ability to arouse emotions by attracting the eyesight. Aware of its need of enhancement fashion has allied with art since its early beginnings, receiving inspiration and an endless injection of vitality¹.

In a similar manner, Opera also glistens in its own light when the costumes that inhabit it brush perfection. As Gustav Mahler states “what matters is the collaboration of all arts”². Costume is an essential aspect of staging³. From the 19th century onwards importance was bestowed to costume by prestigious composers of likes of Wagner, Verdi, Puccini and the unflagging Weber who maintained long conversations after rehearsals with the person responsible of the wardrobe⁴.

Established designers are ever more present currently in Opera, one of the most extravagant artistic expressions of all times with an extraordinary ability to stir emotions. This presence was timidly started at the beginning of the 20th century with renowned couturiers such as Lucile, Charles Frederick Worth, Mariano Fortuny and

¹ Mackrell, Alice, *Art and Fashion. The impact of Art on Fashion and Fashion on Art*, Batsford, 2005, pp. 135 and following.

² Mahler was interested in “a stage where everything was internalized” because he was convinced that “all modern art has to play a role in the performance”, cfr. Savage, Roger, “La escenografía en la ópera” in *Historia Ilustrada de la ópera*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2004, pp. 362.

³ Until the 19th century, the work of costume designing was usually carried out by artisans who had no other ambition than to follow established guidelines, cfr. Pavis, Patrice, *Diccionario del teatro. Dramaturgia, estética, semiología*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2002, p. 507.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 380.

Cecil Beaton who sporadically contributed to some opera productions. The exception was Romain de Tiroff, the prince of art deco also known as Erté, who dressed more than a dozen operas⁵.

The incorporation of prestigious fashion designers to the Opera world started in the 1980s with Karl Lagerfeld, followed by Marc Bohan, Armani, Versace, Ungaro, Valentino, Viktor & Rolf and Miuccia Prada amongst others. A growing trend that if continues in crescendo, would turn the Opera into a new and promising arena for haute couture⁶.

Take into account that Opera is a cultural event blessed with an indisputable prestige since its beginnings. Born in Italy at the start of the 17th century, this *oeuvre d'art vivant* –the most expensive dramatic art form which requires more performers and specialized professionals for its staging- would not have been established without the unconditional support of sponsors, powerful art patrons who boasted luxury as a privileged emblem of power. The fact that since its naissance Opera had to exalt its promoters explains why it was constituted as a refined show⁷.

In addition to a strong social prestige Opera holds an extremely significant presence in the cultural sphere. Firstly, because distinguished personalities from artistic and literary circles –such as writers, plastic artists, journalists, cultural managers and professors- are frequent spectators who exert an influence in diverse forums.

Secondly, the public of this complex chanted theatrical genre is not as small as might be considered because nowadays many opera performances are broadcasted to thousands of viewers across the world in big cinemas, through internet streaming from

⁵ Lussier, Suzanne, *Art Deco. Fashion*, Bulfinch Press, 2003, p. 79. For the complete operas list view Appendix I.

⁶ Matheopoulos, Helena, *Fashion designers at the Opera*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2011, pp. 6-9.

⁷ Opera Houses across the world also include promoters such as presidents of fashion brand foundations who exert a significant cultural patronage. The Teatro Real in Madrid holds Enrique Loewe, president of *Fundación Loewe* and Pierre Bergé, president of *Fondation Yves Saint Laurent* as members of its Board of Protectors.

big Opera houses or in established and widespread cultural channels such as the prestigious *medici.tv* or the French TV network *artelive*⁸.

On the other hand, the presence of prestigious fashion designers in important music temples has a very significant media impact both on the press and in the digital world. When Miuccia Prada designed costumes for the Met, many bloggers echoed and even mainstream media commented on the event.

Haute couture designers must be conscious of the fact that entering the opera sphere greatly increases their chances of public recognition and appreciation. Furthermore, theatre costumes receive special protection from museums. There are even specific centers specialized in costume preservation which promote attractive temporary exhibitions resulting a huge media impact. One of the most active centers in this sense is the incredible *Centre National du Costume de Scène* of Moulins in France.

Opera as a place of freedom

Opera is an unfailing medium for the costume designer to excel in his creations since he is confronted with a complex task but is ridded of the obstacles and restrictions imposed by the market system.

Creating a theatre costume requires the costume designer to be capable of combining his own qualities with those of creators from different artistic disciplines. This requires the designer to depart his enclosed and sometimes oppressive world in order to access a space of liberty and cooperation, where only the rules of art prevail.

Thus the costume designer's effort becomes part of an amazing convergence of arts forms which makes Opera a total work of art⁹: by embracing music, chant, dance, theatre, painting, lighting, space and costume a "complete world" is reconstructed, the reflection of an unutterable something we all long for.

⁸ The Scala of Milan, the New York Metropolitan Opera and the Covent Garden in London are the three centers who have broadcasted most productions in the cinema. Three million viewers went to the movies last season.

⁹ The concept of total work of art, *gesamtkunstwerk*, was fostered by Richard Wagner who considered that all art forms together could reach greater a more total expression than an individual one, cfr. Oliva, César and Torres Monreal, Francisco, *Historia básica del arte escénico*, Cátedra, Madrid, 2000, p. 81.

To reach that ideal all the contributing arts must necessarily attain their maximum peak otherwise the fragility of one spoils the brilliance of the rest¹⁰. When a perfect combination of art forms is achieved, Opera manages to deeply impact the spectator in various senses and also affects the dramatic pulse, as Bernard Shaw clearly stated¹¹.

As an all-embracing art form Opera escapes the triviality of mere entertainment and becomes constitutes a relevant example for society. Christian Lacroix with vast experience in this sense has bluntly declared that Opera is a place of freedom as opposed to the enclosed and egocentric haute couture world¹². The designer is in a different playing field and has to be at the complete disposal of another person's production concept, setting aside whims and capriciousness.

However, Opera is not a lawless place where anyone can do as pleases. It is a space of liberty because art predominates over all other conditionings in the same way as a musical score restricts musicians' individual ravings in order to unite all the orchestra members into a common task benefiting all. By delimiting and increasing the creative challenge, obedience to a concept enriches liberty: the task becomes a sort of mental gymnastics for the designer, making him produce his best¹³.

Besides being a challenge, Opera is also a test field, an artistic laboratory in which to freely experiment with the fusion of historic periods and styles. At the beginning of the 20th century vanguard artists already anticipated this opportunity offered by dramatic arts and so turned used them as a privileged field for experimentation. The 1913 opera "Victory over the sun" was a crucial contribution because it gave birth to the supremacist theory which made Malevich a visionary of abstract art. Thus, as a high-spirited performance Opera became a showcase of

¹⁰ In 1608 in relation to the first performances of *Dafne* Marco da Gagliano supported the convenience of "the intellect travelling at the same time across [...] the most exquisite arts" in addition to chant and music also "the graciousness of dance, the gestures, [...] costume and sets" cfr. Savage, Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

¹¹ Baudelaire's theories had a great influence establishing this idea, cfr. Sánchez, José A., *La escena moderna*, Ediciones Akal, Madrid, 1999, p. 15.

¹² Matheopoulos, Helena, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹³ John Galliano has sincerely declared that "Opera makes your spirit and mind soar", cfr. Matheopoulos, Helena, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

vanguards, allowing a wider promotion of the movement. Should fashion follow this example, it would probably obtain the same prolific results as the vanguards did at the start of the last century¹⁴.

Lastly, the fact that Opera is required by tradition to be a dazzling performance – as a consequence of the ostentatious tastes of its initial public- , therefore opens the doors of that experimentation to imaginative fashion designers. The requirement to stun spectators allows them to freely display their talent without fear of producing garments that won't sell.

Christian Lacroix, a paradigmatic example

Most fashion history specialists consider Christian Lacroix to be one of the most original and talented French designers since Yves Saint Laurent. Born in Arles in 1951, Lacroix revitalized Parisian haute couture with a daring exuberance and a witty sense of humor. Currently, he is the leading haute couture designer in Opera productions, having dressed more than twenty performances. His contribution to fashion is globally recognized: he has received the *Dedal de oro* in two occasions, the Légion d'Honneur in 2002 and he has been Times cover page in 1986 with an extraordinary headline: “Fashion designer of his generation”.

Lacroix started to costume design by accident. After Classics and Art History studies at Montpellier University he entered the prestigious École du Louvre and started an intense research on “Dress in 17th century painting”.

An encounter in Paris with his future wife became the turning point in his career path, since she makes him abandon his initial plans to become a Museum curator in order to dedicate himself to his evident talent for fashion. In 1978, Picart the PR and luxury consultant –sponsor of other young talents like Thierry Muller- helps Lacroix enter the fashion world by starting him off as design assistant in the Hermès workshop. Two years later Lacroix moved to *Jean Patou* to work as artistic director until 1987. In the same year, he opened his own haute couture house and despite the onslaught of recession it has stayed on foot until 2009. Unfortunately, Christian Lacroix's maison

¹⁴ VV.AA., *El teatro de los pintores en la Europa de las vanguardias*, Aldeasa, Madrid, 2000, p. 11.

then had to close down in spite of critic's praise and the unconditional support of his clientele.

During his haute couture years, directing his own house as well as being the creative director of Pucci from 2002 to 2005, Lacroix never completely abandoned costume design. Therefore, whilst he carved out a name as one of the most prestigious couturiers in Paris he started designing costumes for ballet and theatre with hardly disguised enthusiasm. In 1986 "Cendrillon" was his first chance to dress an opera. His talent as a decorator has taken him to design hotel rooms, cinemas and even the interior of high-speed trains. Lacroix himself recognizes he would have liked to be a set designer in addition to being a costume designer.

To complete these brush strokes on his career path, Lacroix has organized numerous exhibitions and some retrospectives on his work for the *Centre National du Costume de Scène* of Moulins in 2006 (of which he is honorary president), the *Musée de la Mode* of the *Musée de Arts Décoratifs* in Paris in 2007, the *Musée Réattu* in Arles in 2008 and the *National Museum of Singapore* in 2009 amongst others.

Inspiration and cultural references

Lacroix has a wide array of aesthetic ghosts deeply-rooted in his spirit, as suits a character that is addicted to beauty¹⁵.

His vast culture allows him to fill his creations with profound knowledge on costume history¹⁶, personal memories and divergent artistic passions, ranging from cinema to photography through folklore, ancestral traditions and ordinary life. The result is an extraordinary, authentically branded collage due to Lacroix's to confer a perfect and astonishing unity to each fragment.

¹⁵ "Every man needs aesthetic ghosts in order to live. I have pursued them, sought them, hunted them down", claims Yves Saint-Laurent.

¹⁶ Evidence of Lacroix's unquestionable knowledge of fashion history may be found in the catalogue of the Musée de Les Arts Décoratifs de Paris exhibition commissioned and designed by himself, cfr. VV.AA. *Christian Lacroix. Histoires de la Mode*, Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Paris, 2008.

Arles is the first and most important influence in the personal imagery of the French costume designer. His home town is one of the most beautiful cities of Provence, bursting of light and color and imbued with the *joie de vivre* and nonchalance typical of the French Midi.

Lacroix's chaotic character was able to absorb multiple stimuli across different life circumstances. For this reason, during student years in Montpellier his trips to London were crucial for his aesthetic training. Two renowned British personalities became vital artistic references that have inhabited Lacroix's mind: Oliver Messel and Cecil Beaton. Both are well-known for their subtle, imaginative set and costume designs. From the latter, he always cherished *My Fair Lady* stills of Ascott which perfectly capture the elegant and stylish universe that has is a trademark of the Beaton house¹⁷.

Moreover, Lacroix is fatally attracted to Spain and is dazzled by the brilliant *torero* costumes, earthy colors and the baroque excess of Andalucía. No wonder Lacroix is considered as the most Spanish French designer¹⁸.

The style of the most important couturier of his generation

The essential characteristics of Lacroix's haute couture style are logically similar to those that emerge in the majority of his opera designs:

- A very personal philosophy that allows him to bring out the most unexpected creations from irreverent mixes. Thanks to his arrogant sense of humor Lacroix constructs garments with a comic and disconcerting insolence. He has been criticized for his passion for superposition which makes translucence associated with elegance a difficult task to achieve. Detractors of Lacroix consider his blend of sumptuous kitsch and lack of moderation to be insufferable. However, even minimalists recognize his

¹⁷ Mauriès, Patrice, (edt), *Pieces of a Pattern. Lacroix by Christian Lacroix*. Thames and Hudson, 1992, p. 78.

¹⁸ Lacroix has such a devotion to beauty that art forms of any period or country exert an endless fascination on him, so it is useless to list all his interests. This small example evidences his facility to find inspiration to create.

unquestionable creative talent. His innate rebelliousness makes him combine according to his own taste without giving any explanations for his choice, just like punk¹⁹.

- Lacroix is an expert in the use of color which he uses freely regardless of the palette ruling on the catwalks. His feast of alarming colors –an explosion of *joie de vivre*, sensuality and genius- are well acclaimed in the Opera world where a tradition of luxurious arrogance still prevails, despite some recent staging exceptions.

- The baroque of fabrics and shapes evidences an exaggerated, tragic opulence. Nostalgia for lost paradise and lushness place his creations on the border with unrefined taste. This opulent trait is intensified by eye-catching accessories of exorbitant size and the predominance of gold and archaic motifs. And it is embodied in ruffled, overlapping skirts, polka-dot crinolines, embroidered corsets, drapes and fold-over shawls. The most representative piece of this late 19th century style is the “pouf” skirt, which fascinates Lacroix so he reinvents it for the modern woman to enhance triumphant femininity: the 18th century courtesan skirt²⁰. The baroque spirit that distills is emphasized by materials and ornamentation. Lacroix is addicted to fabrics to such an extent that his proposals setback asceticism in favor of splendor and magnificent, sumptuous cloths.

- Lastly, he faces each creation process with an enormous theatrical vision. Owner of an irrepressible instinct for drama, he seduces through the fantasy attached to each of his creations.

Theatre implies enhancing a specific aspect of the character to make it more visible. This requires a clear picture of the idea to be transmitted to in turn choose the adequate elements to convey it. Francisco Nieva, a veteran theatre author claims in his treatise that “the persuasive aspect of costume has diminished towards current times” and that interesting effects are only attainable if the character’s specific traits are

¹⁹ Seeling, Charlotte, *Moda 50 años. Modistos. Diseñadores. Marcas*, Ullmann, Londres, 2011, p.

²⁰ Mauriès, Patrice, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

sufficiently enhanced²¹. Lacroix masters the art of highlighting the most significant, a feature that has made his costumes widely accepted in the theatrical sphere.

Staying on the frontier between haute couture and theatrical costume has always been a reality rather than an aspiration for Lacroix. He is convinced that a woman dressed in haute couture is a diva, an actress whose attire expresses who she wants to be at any given moment. Although this significantly reduces the number of potential customers since only a daring and strong personality uses opulent and risky dresses²².

Lacroix and Opera

Lacroix has always felt an uncontrollable passion for music. As a child he was surrounded by a family that conceived anything related to music as a sacred ritual. For instance every Sunday his grandfather made him listen to an opera on the radio in religious silence. As curious anecdote that would make “Bel Canto” fans smile is that whilst his father was faithfully devoted to Renata Tebaldi from the Italian school, little Christian was fascinated by Maria Callas, due to the way she sang as to the sublime passion of her arias.²³

Surrounded by such an ambience of Opera devotion, his hobby flourished never to be abandoned: after attending a performance Lacroix redesigned the set and costumes in his own manner, reintroducing new color balances and reinventing shapes and forms. Excess was already as a predominant trait.

Another essential influence in his training was the fact that during his college years he had a direct encounter with theatre productions of Strehler and de Chereau, two maestros of dramatic arts and prestigious Opera directors.

Possessing such a natural talent for costume design why didn't Lacroix dress opera scenes from the beginning? As he has personally stated in many occasions it was his wife to be Françoise who convinced him that he could become a fashion designer after seeing his sketches to redesign a theatre play. Therefore, Lacroix showed them to

²¹ Nieva, Francisco, *Tratado de escenografía*, Editorial Fundamentos, Colección Arte, Madrid, 2000, p. 147.

²² Matheopoulos, Helena, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²³ Mauriès, patrice, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

Marie Rucki, director of the Berçot School whom in turn contacted him with Lagerfeld, Tarlazzi, Marc Bohan and Pierre Bergé. They tested his ability to make room for himself as a designer in the fashion world²⁴.

Lacroix's first start in costume design was actually for theatre and ballet.²⁵ He was initially regarded with suspicion because he was considered a famous couturier with theatrical aspirations rather than a true costume designer. Actresses dreaded Lacroix because they thought he wanted to transform them into catwalk models forgetful of the fact that their role as an actor made them responsible for bestowing their characters with a distinct personality²⁶. Their fears were groundless. Lacroix received the Molière prize in two occasions in recognition to his work as a costume designer, which consecrated him as a reliable professional²⁷.

In order to perceive Lacroix's professional expertise it is necessary to approach his work method used when designing an opera's wardrobe.²⁸ Lacroix always starts with quick designs, instinctive scratches that contain the main ideas on which all the others will be based. These initial rudimentary illustrations –small scale drawings equal to the miniatures and outlines of a set designer- constitute the first step of the creative process and establish the main coordinates of a character's vision. After that, comes a series of changes, adaptations and manipulations of raw materials to attain a solution that suits all.²⁹

Just like any experimented costume designer Lacroix knows that in order to succeed the theatrical costume must convey the character in a clear way. More so in Opera which is more complex than traditional theatre because music is the key to

²⁴ Lacroix started off by showing Pierre Bergé (General Director of the Ópera du Paris) a sketchbook he had designed for a "Bohème", cfr. Mauriès, Patrice, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

²⁵ To check his theatre and ballet productions see the catalogue of the exhibition he organized: VV.AA., *Christian Lacroix. Costumier*, Les Editions du Mécène, CNCS, 2009.

²⁶ Matheopoulos, Helena, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁷ In 1995 for Phèdre and in 2007 for Cyrano de Bergerac, both performed for the Comédie-Française.

²⁸ For more information on Lacroix's work method in design collections, very similar in some aspects to his development of ideas for Opera view, Coleno, Nadine, *Christian Lacroix. De fil en aiguille...*, Editions du Regard, 2002, pp. 8-23.

²⁹ Nieva, Francisco, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

understanding the play but sometimes is hard to decipher for the public. The best way to achieve this is to make the costume either symbolic or otherwise more exaggerated than in real life. The aim is to enhance the essence by not distracting with accessories because useless information often attracts attention in detriment of more important aspects³⁰.

Through costume, the audience needs to quickly grasp whether the character is real or an archetype that has a mere symbolic function. Otherwise it might be too late to understand the performance's meaning. Without this essential distinction the spectator cannot follow the plot and is incapable of being seduced by the sincere delusion of the theatre³¹.

After the essential coordinates of theatrical costume are established, Lacroix relating with the singers, which is just as complex as the actors relationship. It is impossible to reach agreements with them to adapt the costume to their personal tastes behind the director's back because it would go against the whole concept of the play. The costume designer is obliged to follow the stage director's vision despite singers' frequent incomprehension and sometimes refusal to being transformed by an inappropriate dress³². Despite the fact that singers tend to have a certain vision of a character which they have often previously performed they tend to respect the free game of theatrical imagination. Thus, singers adapt to the costume proposal and so enable the whole picture to reach perfection.

Lacroix assures himself that the singer feels comfortable by trying on costumes in dress rehearsals. Dress must not hide emotions or hinder the performance, which would happen if the singer feels restrained or has difficulty of movement.³³

³⁰ Brook, Peter, *El espacio vacío, Arte y técnica del teatro*, Nexo, Barcelona, 1990, p. 100.

³¹ Bravo, Isidre, "Notas desde un archivo de figurines" in VV.AA., *50 años de figurinismo teatral en España: Cortezo, Mampaso, Narros, Nieva*, Consejería de Cultura de la CAM, 1988, p. 2.

³² A well-known anecdote is that of the German singer Theo Adam who utterly refused to use a tuxedo to represent Wotan, as a consequence the prestigious stage director Peter Stein decided to abandon the production, cfr. Savage, Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 403.

³³ Peter Brooks, a point of reference as a theatre director who has also directed operas states that "it is extremely easy to spoil an actor's interpretation –as frequently occurs- due to an inadequate costume. If the sketch of the costume is shown to an actor before the rehearsal, he is placed in the same position as a director who has to make a decision before being prepared. Such an actor hasn't

Next, to catch a glimpse of how Lacroix's work is materialized we will consider three of his most important performances. Take into account that these costumes are like the remains of a shipwreck. Opera is a living work of art, thus elusive and ephemeral so only by letting our imagination soar we can visually evoke the magic moment in which those costumes sparkled with their splendor.

Carmen

Lacroix's first important start in the Opera world was *Carmen*, a libretto he faced influenced by the performance he had seen as a child in Arles with a set and costume design by the legendary Lila de Nobili.

The 1989 production that he was commissioned was directed by Antoine Bourseiller. Lacroix showed him two proposals to choose from to best fit the director's vision of the play. One offered an impetuous and obscure *Carmen* with colors and shapes reminiscent of Goya's atmosphere, with shades of 1890 and an echo of 1914. Despite the expressive potential of this proposal, Bourseiller chose the other option – with flowing silhouettes inspired in 1930- in order to set the play in a more contemporary ambience.

It is relevant to mention that updating operas is a recent phenomenon. Until the middle of the 18th century actors dressed in the sumptuous costumes provided by their patrons, no matter the period of time the action was placed in. Their attire was a means to show off their sponsors' wealth and artistic value. Nobody bothered if the costume was coherent with a specific period of time. It might seem an extravagant approach nowadays but it was likewise in baroque painting, where anachronisms were frequent yet nonetheless the public coexisted with it in a natural manner without feeling disappointed.

In France, at the end of the 18th century reformers of the theatre started to propose a more realistic aesthetic in the play settings, amongst them theorists such as

yet physically performed his role so his point of view is still theoretical. If the sketches are splendidly conceived he will probably accept them with enthusiasm; but maybe in a few weeks he will realize they don't suit his intentions. The set designer is faced with a fundamental task: what should an actor wear. A costume does not arise from the imagination of the sketcher but from the surrounding circumstances", cfr. Brook, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

Diderot and Voltaire and acclaimed actors of the likes of Lekain, La Clairon and Garrick. In addition, costumes started to coincide better with the characters they represented and in many cases lost their previous ostentatious delirium.³⁴ Two centuries passed before these historicist performances became enforced, but they have currently been displaced. At present Opera directors follow the new dramatic trends of setting the action in a different period of time than the libretto –as was the case in Bourseiller’s *Carmen*.

The first decisive factor that Lacroix had to face with this performance of *Carmen* was the large location in which the production was situated: the Arènes du Nîmes, an ancient Roman amphitheatre with an elliptic turn of 113 meters of length and 110 meters of width. This difficulty always accompanies Opera since most opera houses have stages of great dimension and capacity where the majority of spectators view the performance from afar.

It is a hard task to create costumes that will have a visual effect in such immense spaces, more so for designers of the likes of Lacroix, accustomed to taking care of minor details. Only the closest spectators and those with powerful binoculars can view insignificant details, the reason why these instruments are widely appreciated in Opera. The public from afar seated in the distant stalls only catches the general effect. Therefore, details although important must never be the main objective in theatrical costumes. Instead the global aspect should be underlined the main factor that separates haute couture fashion shows from opera performances. Whilst fashion is meant to be appreciated in short distances the Opera is more concerned with distant effects.

Considering the large number of characters that inhabit *Carmen* and conscious of the distance from which the public would view them, Lacroix saw in its production a splendid opportunity to exploit the possibilities of painting and collage since from afar they convey more powerful sensations than any other material. Remember that the poetic of materials has a direct impact over spectators’ perception. Reading the language of textures one can distinguish social status or a character’s emotional state³⁵.

³⁴ Pavis, Patrice, *op. cit.*, p. 506.

³⁵ Morales y Marín, José Luis, “Cuatro renovadores del espacio escénico”, VV.AA., *50 años de figurinismo... op. cit.*, p. 7.

Another challenge that Lacroix had to face in Nîmes was a trifling budget due to the large sum of money he had spent in a previous opera production. Undiscouraged, he travelled to Madrid and bought all kinds of ribbons and braids in “El Rastro”, a popular street market, where after much rummaging one can find old good-quality embroidered straps and worn fabrics.

Lacroix found inspiration for gypsies’ choir in 1930 photos that evoked the Spain of pre-Civil War. For this reason, although the women showed the typical oily and wavy hairdo they did not wear the ornamental Spanish head comb or the traditional “mantilla”. The crowd was dressed with rented cloaks and ponchos in order to save money. Lacroix was inspired by public celebrations in Arles to dress the character which was most fixed to tradition, Micaela. On the contrary, he viewed Carmen a prototype of gypsies so he represented her in black, a mysterious woman willing to die instead of losing her freedom.³⁶ Lacroix would have liked Carmen to go barefoot but it was not possible. The final result of the opera basked in the dusty sunset light must surely have been magnificent, although more timeless with less frills and Spanish traits than would have been expected.

Così fan tutte

This opera was the second encounter of Lacroix with Mozart. Vincent Broussard its director aimed to wrap the play in a splendid abstract vision of the 18th century.

Lacroix deeply knows the period and is aware of the intentions of Broussard –a great friend with whom he had worked in previous occasions- so he was able to find the correct path³⁷. In 2003, three years before, they had already started exploring the idea of expressing the 18th century for Mozart’s opera *Il re pastore*. In that occasion they had

³⁶ The production notes may be viewed in the catalogue of the exhibition *Christian Lacroix, costumier*, Les Editions du Mécène, Centre National du Costume de Scène, 2009, p. 53.

³⁷ Lacroix was able to make costumes that fully express Broussard’s intentions due to his keen perception of the director’s idea of the performance. Although a costume designer is faced with the risk of altering the creative intentions of the set director, this is not the case of Lacroix whose excellent understanding with Broussard allowed them to work together in more than a dozen operas.

used a touch of light and cheerfulness to make it seem more contemporary and credible for the modern spectator.

Although the play is performed by middle-aged singers, it is about a teenage adventure so Lacroix decided to dress Dorabella y Fiordiligi with ethereal and flimsy fabrics, subtle crepe and chiffon which are normally used in fabric restoration. The final result was neither a mixture of different periods nor a historic update of ancient costumes instead it was a timeless proposal, a mixture of 18th century and contemporary forms.³⁸

Agrippina

Lacroix is convinced that *Agrippina* has been one of his most important works. The most Italian of Haendel's operas is an extraordinarily dramatic play of great quality bursting with strong characters. On this occasion Vincent Broussard was also stage manager and they worked with splendid singers and great creative freedom. Both decided to create a Rome full of reminiscences for the current public. The wished to highlight the play's thread was centered on the dilemma of power and its exertion in the political and personal field. An approach that allowed them to update and stage the play without major difficulties considering in view of the fact that power and manipulation are universal themes and do not belong to any given historical period.

Lacroix excelled himself by designing austere costumes, unusual in his work but all the same brilliantly created. *Agrippina* is probably one of Lacroix's most memorable creations in his career since he had to abandon his distinctive style in order to attain a new more restrained form of expression although equally sophisticated. In order to construct each model, Lacroix worked with varied historic references, applying all his knowledge of 20th century fashion. A period of time less revisited because he is more attracted by others.

He chose a predominant range of brownish-gray red – the color of dry blood – which emphasized the plot's violent connotations. However he finally changed it to

³⁸ Comments on the costumes of Vincent Broussard and Lacroix's own creations can be seen in the catalogue of the *Christian Lacroix, costumier* exhibition, Les Editions du Mécène, Centre National du Costume de Scène, 2009, p. 63.

black obeying Broussard's orders, owner of the final decision as set director³⁹. Color doubtlessly helps to construct a character by using tonalities that clearly define social position and a character's intentions, for this reason it is very important to reflect on the chosen colors so they fit the play's global meaning⁴⁰.

In this opera the space was sober and very conceptual so the singers' costumes were also responsible for representing the set design itself. Increasingly more opera productions create a set design with few elements so lighting and costumes play an inevitable leading role⁴¹.

These type of aesthetic stage designs aim to show how reality is perceived by the character and not its true nature, as formulated by Appia, an essential reformer of theatre at beginning of the 20th century, together with Craig. Lighting embraces spaces and costumes enhance the mobile dimension of singers' bodies. Thus the spectator is freed from passive contemplation since his perception capability is called to action in order to actively think about what he is viewing⁴².

At present most stage managers try to gain insight into the author's intentions in order to faithfully recreate the play's core ambience. This pursuit of the essential forces –away from literal connotations- forces the costume designer to delve into characters' acts and personality in order to better express their nature, setting aside commonplaces or well-known proposals.

Past codes can be translated to the present without diminishing the play. Peter Brook explains that "in this case meaning is communicated and meaning never belongs to the past"⁴³. In spite of Lacroix's profound knowledge of costume history he has

³⁹ Sometimes the director has a fixed idea which the costume designer has to merely translate, other times he allows the designer total liberty and as the production unfolds they start fixing each character's final appearance.

⁴⁰ Color is one of the aspects that is most related to the set since it can either be harmonious or offer a strong contrast and compete against the set. It is important to have a serious knowledge of the play in order to know what to enhance or to blur, cfr. Brook, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

⁴¹ Nieva, Francisco, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁴² Appia's most important contribution came from her costume designs for Opera. In 1923, he produced the decoration and staging of *Tristan and Isolde* for the Scala de Milan; *The Rhein Gold* (1924) and *Rise of the Valkyries* (1925) for the Théâtre du Bâle. The deception which arose from these operas' staging made him abandon theatrical exercise.

⁴³ Brook, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

usually worked in historicist productions that offered a challenge. Historic recreation is about staging a well-documented replica of the costumes used during the given historical period the opera is set in, if possible under the guidelines of the author of the libretto and the composer. On the contrary, the updating model –as an alternative to Opera’s 19th century naturalism- tries to recreate the play’s original intention to provoke instead of merely presenting a repetition. The aim is to make the audience identify with the scene no matter how distant in time from the opera’s creation. Past reality is set aside in pursuit of the essential. Lacroix has been a maestro of this art, so the Opera world is aware that his talented and daring creations deserve a reverent and affectionate recognition.

Conclusion

In 1914 Jeanne Paquin organized the first fashion runway in the London’s *Palace Theatre* with stage music and a splendid idea of inviting young actresses dressed in her fashion models in order to promote her new fashion collection. Since Opera’s origin, the foyer and box seats have been privileged places to market the latest trends to elegant and sophisticated high-society women. But Paquin’s genius occurrence managed to convert these seats into “conscious diffusion” places. Still, at the turn of the 20th century a much more visible place than the box seats has been conquered by designers: the stage. This innovative window display increases renowned fashion designers’ prestige by associating their creations with one of the most refined dramatic arts.

In addition, Opera is a place for intimate and human liberty, where haute couture creators can display their stunning imaginations without any market restrictions. An easy space to adapt to for haute couture designers as has been seen through Christian Lacroix’s career path. In Opera as in haute couture, each garment is uniquely tailored for the person that will wear it.

However, the designer who wishes to approach this new arena needs to possess a strong artistic personality – confirmed in the case of Lacroix-, must be familiarized with music and conscious of the demands of dramatic action. Likewise, a deep knowledge of

fashion history, fabrics and an outstanding team spirit since the fashion designer needs to work alongside the set designer and specifically with the lightning technician, because light, a plastic element of drama, is one of the main impacts on the spectator's emotions, because it affects the color and textures of costumes.

Finally, we must take into account that Opera costumes have suffered an evolution across time and will continue doing so as years pass by: from ostentatious opera costumes at the beginning of 17th century to authenticity in 19th century, to arrive at present day's prevalence of the essential sign that is underlined by the main set display signifiers. These kind of set displays are more risky than naturalist recreations. But as has been previously mentioned risk should never be feared because it is the substance of the artistic experience. Thus the costume designer has to be prepared to bravely face the challenge posed by such a dynamic and constantly changing space.

Opera as a new arena for haute couture is a future option for the fashion world. Hopefully, a fruitful and inspired contribution between both worlds will arise.

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