

TAM 2280: DESIGNING WITH GINGER



“I can never emphasize enough how important clothing was to me.”

- Ginger Rogers, *Ginger Rogers: My Story*, 1991

GINGER ROGERS: COSTUME

Eight costumes worn by Ginger Rogers were gifted to the Missouri Historic Costume and Textile Collection (MHCTC) in the Department of Textile and Apparel Management (TAM) by Roberta Olden, Rogers’ personal assistant from 1977 to 1995. As the steward of much of Rogers’ costume and clothing, Olden selected the MHCTC as the permanent home for garments carefully curated over the last two years from Rogers’ nightclub revue and stage career. Olden was referred to the MHCTC by Marge Padgitt, founder of the Owens-Rogers House Museum in Rogers’ childhood home in Independence, Missouri. Padgitt also gifted a variety of magazines and other media from her own curated collection beginning in 2021. These gifts became an opportunity to introduce Rogers’ iconic fashion and talent to a younger generation of college students and showcase the University’s unique research opportunities and creative design scholarship to the broader national and international community.

The importance of fashion to Ginger Rogers’s success as a performer cannot be denied. Costume selections for her Hollywood films became legendary. Many of them, and the dance numbers in which they appeared, later influenced many of Rogers’ costume and performance choices in her solo career. Rogers’ costumes not only impacted her success as a performer, but also many of the performances themselves. The weight, material and shapes of Rogers’ costumes required agility, stamina and a sense of form and movement, as well an understanding of how the garments were perceived by her viewers.

Color was another performance element Rogers understood in terms of viewer perception and experience. Like other variables that affect social perception, color can convey meaning which varies as a function of the context in which the color is perceived. Meanings of colors within a group are learned over time through repeated pairings with a particular experience or message. Color-in-context theory posits that the color can have functional as well as aesthetic value and that the mere perception of a color can evoke cognition and behavior through implicit affective cues. Two colors in particular have strong psychological associations in American culture: black is frequently associated with power, aggression and death; red with energy, warmth, and sexuality. As a function of these associations between colors and experiences, messages, or biological tendencies, color acts as a stimulus; people either inherently approach or avoid. Rogers, who drew fans for over six decades, clearly understood these associations of color and chose her costume colors to attract viewers. Pink, a shade of red – and Ginger’s favorite color – appears frequently in her costumes, as does the color black.

GINGER ROGERS: THE INFLUENCE OF COSTUME IN EARLY FILMS

In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, both men and women were drawn to movies partly by the luxury they saw on screen. As Jeanine Basinger wrote, "Fashion and glamour were direct connections to the audience's need to see things they could never have and to experience feelings absent from their daily lives." To make their fantasies more real, viewers tried to recreate what they saw and heard at the movies, duplicating the fashion and hairstyles they saw. Feather sales skyrocketed when Ginger Rogers wore a blue feather dress in the 1935 film *Top Hat*. It was possible to form hair braids like Rogers in *Tender Comrade* (1943) or make a 'Kitty Foyle' dress simply by adding a contrasting light collar and cuffs to a dark dress or suit like those designed by Renié for Rogers as 'white collar' girl Kitty Foyle in *Kitty Foyle* (1940). A variety of Rogers-inspired Hollywood dress patterns like that pictured at right made Rogers' stylish and glamorous film fashions available to the average American woman. This was the influential power of costume film, a factor clearly understood by Rogers who stated in her 1991 autobiography, "I can never emphasize enough how important clothing was to me."

IMAGE: Ginger Rogers Dress Pattern, Ca 1933 National Museum of American History.



For Rogers, costume was critical: critical to making performance and critical to spectatorship. Rogers recognized from a young age the role of clothing as part of a complex performative dynamic: it is in the context of the performing body that ideas are experienced, communicated and understood. It is the viewers' understanding of the clothed and communicating body and their own memories and experiences that enable them to engage and connect with the ideas and narratives revealed. Award-winning Hollywood designer Edith Head described Rogers as "such a definite personality that, although she can convincingly assume the role of child or of sophisticate, the strong personality is always Ginger. No matter how you dress her, the clothes get the stamp of her individuality. She doesn't really put on a costume as an actress would, but as a girl getting ready for a high school prom, wanting her dress to be prettiest. It's a game of make believe... Ginger never *will* grow old; she has some element of clear spring in her chemistry. With one of the best figures in Hollywood, she can and does wear the beaded ball gown, but she loves the gingham dress." Rogers understood the importance of this costume dynamic and assisted with the design of many of her film costumes.

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- Edith Head, *The Dress Doctor*, 1959



FOLLOW THE FLEET, 1936

Ginger Rogers assisted RKO Studios Head Designer Bernard Newman with the design of a grey beaded dress for the “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” finale of *Follow the Fleet* (1936). The gown weighed almost twenty-five pounds with wide sleeves and a large collar of fur around the shoulders. Rogers commented in her autobiography how the dress was so heavy, she had to learn to steel herself against the “onslaught of the “third person” in their routine: her dress.” Her partner, Fred Astaire, noted in his 1959 biography: “Ginger came up with a beaded gown that was surely designed for anything but dancing . . . had heavy beaded sleeves that hung down from the wrists . . . When Ginger did a quick turn, the sleeves, which must have weighed a few pounds each, would fly—necessitating a quick dodge by me.” Astaire’s dodges were successful in rehearsal, but during the film’s first take, one heavy sleeve did in fact hit Astaire “smack on the jaw and partly in the eye.” Despite Astaire’s frustration, Rogers insisted on wearing the garment which became a hit with audiences. The beaded dress pictured at left is the collection of the Smithsonian Institute.

Rogers’ and Newman’s relationship was a collaborative one. Rogers’ opinion was important to Newman as she was the expert for what worked on the dance floor. Together, the two fleshed out Rogers’ ideas for each film, incorporating her 5’5” figure with chest-waist-hip measurements of 34”-24”-35”. Dresses were fit to Rogers’ figure by Newman’s cutter Marie Ree and built for movement.

IMAGE: *Follow the Fleet* film costume of beaded and fur-trimmed dress worn by Ginger Rogers. Designed by Bernard Newman (1936) Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

***Kitty Foyle*, 1940**

In 1941, Ginger Rogers won an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for her dramatic performance in *Kitty Foyle* (1940.) Her character's dress, an ensemble of dark fabric and contrasting light collar and cuffs designed by Renié, became a popular style for women into World War II (1939-45). Called the 'Kitty Foyle' dress, it was modest, practical and easily copied or modified at home. The style has been explained as being intended for films, the large amount of white around the face reflecting light onto the face. Renié's costume, shown on Rogers at right, made a strong statement with its dark colors and historic accents.

The same collar and cuffs could easily be added to a simple, button-down shirtwaist style of dress like that shown here. The shirtwaist silhouette first rose to popularity during the 1930s with the development of the Junior dress industry. Part of its appeal lay in its versatility: the dress could be worn for a variety of purposes simply by using interchangeable buttons and cufflinks!

Images: (upper left and far right) Black and white photos of Ginger Rogers dressed in dark-colored "Kitty Foyle"-style dresses with white collar and cuffs from *Kitty Foyle*, 1940.

Image: (lower left) Still photo of dark-haired woman ironing while dressed in "Kitty Foyle"-style shirtdress.



LADY IN THE DARK, 1944

In 1944, Ginger Rogers determined a change in costume designer for the visually spectacular film *Lady in the Dark*. Rogers preferred the favored Hollywood designer Edith Head over Valentino, the original designer selected for the film. For the 'Saga of Jenny' sequence, Head and Director Mitchell Leisen designed a costume that was the most expensive garment ever designed at the time: a \$35,000 mink, sequin and ruby encrusted dress. As only certain shades of mink photograph well, only specific skins were selected for the costume. In her book *The Dress Doctor*, Head described the selection process: "Director Mitch Leisen, Ginger and I studied the minks and picked out the most photogenic, Ginger sitting among them, stroking them like a child. Mink dress or gingham, my clothes never changed Ginger's personality; she changed *them*."

Rogers wore two versions of the dress, one for singing and still close-ups and a lighter version for dancing.

Image: (left) Color still photograph of Ginger Rogers showcasing the beaded and sequined interior skirt of the red costume for *Lady in the Dark*, 1944.

Image (right): Black and white still photo of Ginger Rogers dressed in mink coat and mink skirt holding a mink stole for *Lady in the Dark*, 1944.



TOP HAT, 1935



As dancing partner to Fred Astaire in the 1930s, Rogers often collaborated with studio designers including Bernard Newman who designed Rogers' infamous blue feather dress in the 1935 film *Top Hat*. As stated in Rogers' 1991 autobiography, when it became time to design the dress for the film, Rogers told designer Newman that she wanted something in the kind of blue found in a Monet painting. "It's funny to be discussing color when you're making a black-and-white film, Rogers confessed, "but the tone had to be harmonious." The resulting gown was exactly as Rogers had envisioned it, complete with \$1,500 worth of ostrich feathers.

Astaire recalled how he had seen a sketch of the original feather dress prior to rehearsal and thought it looked nice. However, upon filming, he recalled how "feathers started to fly as if a chicken had been attacked by a coyote. I had never seen so many feathers in my life. It was like a snowstorm. I had feathers in my eyes, my ears, my mouth, all over the front of my suit..." The dress was a problem, according to Astaire. Rogers, however, fought to keep the now-iconic costume. "I was determined to wear this dress, come hell or high water," she wrote in her autobiography. This blue gown was the influence for two of Rogers' feathered nightclub costumes in the MHCTC collection.

Image (left): Black and white movie clip of Ginger Rogers dancing in blue feather dress in *Top Hat*, 1935.

Image (right): Black and white illustration of Ginger Rogers' blue feather dress for *Top Hat* by Bernard Newman.

**“Feathers - I hate feathers -
And I hate them so that I can hardly speak,
And I never find the happiness I seek
With those chicken feathers dancing
Cheek to Cheek.”**

- Fred Astaire and Hermes Pan, “Cheek to Cheek” Parody,
Fred Astaire: An Autobiography 1995
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**Pink Silk Dresses with Ostrich Feathers; Rhinestone Bracelet
1975-1979
Designer: Jean Louis
MHCTC; Gift of Roberta Olden**

Ginger Rogers wore these pink feather gowns as part of her nightclub revue, *The Ginger Rogers Show* from 1975 to 1980. Rogers asked award-winning Hollywood designer Jean Louis to design a costume for the revue that was inspired by her infamous blue feather dress from the 1935 film *Top Hat*.

French-born Jean Louis first worked for fashion entrepreneur Hattie Carnegie, designing her iconic Carnegie Suit, before becoming head designer for Columbia Pictures from 1944 to 1960. Beyond styling Ginger Rogers, other famous stars who wore his designs included Rita Hayworth, Marlene Dietrich, Vivien Leigh, Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn, and Marilyn Monroe whose sheer, sparkling gown designed by Louis in 1962 for President John F. Kennedy's birthday celebration was worn by Kim Kardashian to the 2022 MET Gala.

Images: (left and center) Front and back photographs of light pink feather dress on mannequin. Designed by Jean Louis for Ginger Rogers. MHCTC. Gifts of R. Olden. Photos by Abbie Lankitus.

Image (right): Front view of hot pink and sequin feather dress on mannequin accented with rhinestone bracelet. Designed by Jean Louis for Ginger Rogers. MHCTC. Gifts of R. Olden. Photo by Abbie Lankitus.

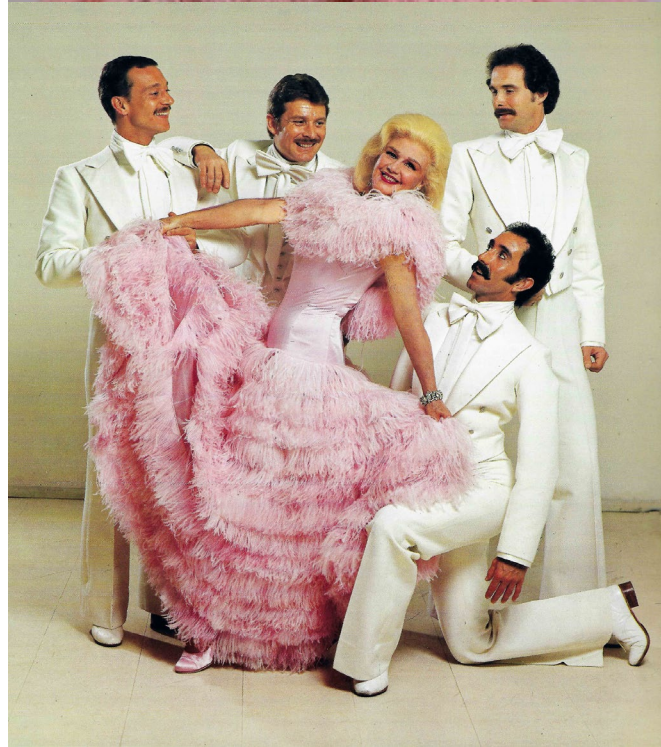
As shown in these first two images of the light pink feather dress, the top three rows of ostrich feather trim were a later addition to the garment, an alteration that raised the waistline from the hips to the natural waist.

Both dresses include a full leotard which helped ensure the garment remained in place. A small pocket trimmed in feathers was tucked into the folds of both skirts on the reverse side to possibly hold a battery pack for a microphone.

Image: (upper left) Skirt detail photo of light pink feather dress. Designed by Jean Louis for Ginger Rogers.

Image: (lower left) Ginger Rogers Show publicity photo of Ginger Rogers wearing light pink feather dress surrounded by four men in white tuxedos.

Image: (right) Detail photo of pouch, feathers and sequins of hot pink feather dress. Designed by Jean Louis for Ginger Rogers.





Black Silk Satin Dress and Coat with Rhinestone and Fox Fur Trim

1975-79

Designer: Jean Louis

MHCTC; Gift of Roberta Olden

As Jeanine Basinger wrote in *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*, "Fashion and glamour were direct connections to the audiences' need to see things they could never have and to experience feelings absent from their daily lives. Clothing for women in the movies became a subtle instrument, teaching the need for conformity, stressing the woman's role as sex object or love partner, and showing the viewers consumer goods that they would want to purchase for themselves. In 1930s and 40s film, women were defined by their clothes, and the clothes were fantastic, outrageous, and astonishing!"

Rogers' 1930s and 40s film costumes reflected this outrageous luxury, a look she and Hollywood designer Jean Louis successfully transformed into this 1970s revue costume pictured here (MHCTC gifts of R. Olden): glossy black silk and sparkling white rhinestones contrast with luxurious ivory fox fur. The shape of the dress beneath consists of a skirt made of long, narrow strips, a look similar to that of a wedding gown worn by Rogers in the 1944 film *Lady in the Dark* when Rogers removed a voluminous outer skirt to reveal a second skirt comprised of numerous strips of chiffon (photos by Abbie Lankitus.) The right image is a black and white still photo of Rogers dressed in the satin and fur ensemble accented with rhinestone jewelry.

'Carioca' Costume of Bejeweled Silk Taffeta Sleeves and Skirt, Silk Chiffon Scarf, Spandex Leotard, and Silk Heeled Shoes

1975-79

Designer: Jean Louis

MHCTC

Gift of Roberta Olden

Inspired by her "Carioca" gown in *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) (lower right picture), her first film with Fred Astaire, Rogers and Louis designed this bejeweled ruffled ensemble for her nightclub revue, *The Ginger Rogers Show*. Not only are the ruffled sleeves designed with elastic to keep them in place on the upper arms, but the flamenco-style skirt is fully ruffled on both the exterior and interior layers, creating an ensemble of significant weight which required skill and agility to masterfully maneuver with such ease as depicted in this 1978 [video](#) of Rogers' 'Carioca' television performance from 1978.

Image: (left) *Ginger Rogers Show* 'Carioca' costume dressed on mannequin. Designed by Jean Louis for Ginger Rogers. MHCTC. Gift of R. Olden. Photo by Abbie Lankitus.

Image: (upper right) Black and white photograph of Ginger Rogers posed in the ruffled 'Carioca' costume for the *Ginger Rogers Show*, accenting the scarf and inner ruffle layers of the skirt. Designed by Jean Louis for Ginger Rogers. MHCTC. Photo from *The Ginger Rogers Show* booklet by Lela Rogers. Gift of M. Padgitt.

Image: (lower right) Black and white film clip of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire dancing the carioca in *Flying Down to Rio* in 1933.





***Hello, Dolly!* Red and Pink Silk Satin Gown with Bead and Embroidery Trim and Fringe, Leather Gloves
1965-1967**

Designer: Freddy Wittop

MHCTC

Gift of Roberta Olden

Fashionable clothes may only be worn a few times, but in a successful stage production, a costume is worn every night for months or years. The clothes must stand up to robust handling, quick changes, and sweat. From 1940 to 1980, Rogers appeared in a total of 18 theatrical performances, including as the lead in Broadway's long-time smash hit *Hello, Dolly!* from 1965 to 1967. The national tour of the Broadway show stopped in over sixteen cities, with the final curtain call in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1968. At the age of 54, Rogers performed for 1,116 performances as Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*, all while wearing a corseted satin bodice and skirt heavily weighted by thousands of hand-sewn beads, sequins and fringe.

Designed by Freddy Wittop, the silk satin costume was worn by Rogers in the most notable scene in the popular Broadway musical *Hello Dolly!* – an evening at Harmonia Gardens - and includes full-length leather gloves, beaded high-heeled shoes, a bustle, and a feather headdress complete with faux hairpiece! To sing *and* dance in this heavy costume – twice per night – at the age of 54 took incredible agility!

Images: Front and side views of *Hello, Dolly!* dress on mannequin.
MHCTC. Gift of R. Olden. Photos by Abbie Lankitus.



Hello, Dolly! Red Feather Headdress with Faux Hairpiece
1965-1967
MHCTC
Gift of R. Olden
Photo by Abbie Lankitus



Hello, Dolly! Red Beaded Silk Shoes with Elastic Upper
1965-1967
MHCTC
Gift of R. Olden

“I sent my measurements to New York so that the turn-of-the-century dresses of velvet brocade and taffeta could be manufactured by the costume designer, Freddy Wittop. The minute I got there, I was to go in for my first fitting. [Opening night] I was wigged, rigged and ready to go on. I hadn’t been on the New York musical stage since *Crazy Girl* [1930]. But the moment the horse-drawn buggy halted in the middle of the stage, and I put down the newspaper that was covering my face, the audience went wild with applause (says she, modestly.) During my run on Broadway in *Dolly*, there had never been an empty seat in the house.”

– Ginger Rogers, *Ginger Rogers: My Story*, 1991

Image: Black and white still photo of Ginger Rogers posed on staircase wearing *Hello, Dolly!* beaded and fringed silk dress, leather gloves and feather headdress on Broadway set of *Hello, Dolly!* Gift of R. Olden





**Red and White Polka Dot Silk Satin Dress and Belt
1959
MHCTC
Gift of Marge Padgitt**

Rogers wore this silk dress in the 1959 short film *Tender Shoot* on “The June Allyson Show.” The garment reflects the popular full-skirted, corseted silhouette of the 1950s.

The dress was utilized in fall 2022 and spring 2024 by TAM 2280 *Apparel Production* students at the University of Missouri as the first of several Rogers-related design and scholarship activities in Textile and Apparel Management. Graduate instructor Mackenzie Miller (below) measured the physical garment before creating a 3D digital pattern using the software program CLO3D available through TAM’s Technology Lab. Students manipulated the dress pattern into one-of-a-kind garment designs influenced by Rogers’ costume and career.

Image: (left) Red and white polka dot dress on mannequin. MHCTC. Gift of M. Padgitt. Photo by Abbie Lankitus.

Image: (right) Color publicity photo of Ginger Rogers posed in red and white silk polka dot dress with red scarf tied at her neck wearing white gloves and white heeled shoes. Photo from *Ginger Rogers: A Biography of Pictures and Story* by Lela E. Rogers booklet. Gift of M. Padgitt.



Beaded Blue Silk Chiffon Gown
1967
MHCTC; Gift of Marge Padgitt

As the *Washington Post* reported in 1992, “We tend to think of Ginger Rogers floating, or seeming to float; flying, or seeming to fly; twirling through the air in satin or silk or feathers.” This was the affect Rogers created with a beaded blue silk chiffon gown worn to the 1967 Academy Awards. Co-presenting an award with Fred Astaire, the couple danced their way on stage, performing an unexpected, effortless spin; the numerous godets at the hem of Rogers’ gown flared with movement, seemingly light as air. A small size 12 tag inside the gown indicates it was not a custom design; however, the gown still reflects Rogers’ consideration of color and form.

This gown shares features with another beaded blue chiffon gown designed by award-winning Hollywood designer Edith Head for Rogers in the “Blue Dream” sequence of the 1944 film *Lady in the Dark*. In the colors of the ocean with clouded silks in shades from aquamarine to deep blue, scattered throughout with sequins and imitation sapphires, the 1944 blue gown (shown below) also featured a cropped bodice, beaded sleeves and a low back.



Images: (left and center) Front and back views of beaded blue silk chiffon dress on mannequin. MHCTC. Gift of M. Padgitt. Photos by Abbie Lankitus.

Image: (right) Black and white still photo of Ginger Rogers lounged on the floor to highlight the back view of the beaded and sequined blue chiffon dress worn in *Lady in the Dark*, 1944.

Pink Chiffon Outer Gown with Feather and Rhinestone Trim

1960s-70s

MHCTC

Gift of Marge Padgitt

Multiple layers of crisp chiffon create a voluminous skirt on this outer gown worn by Ginger Rogers in the 1960s to 1970s. In her trademark color of pink, the garment's full sleeves feature another trademark element of Rogers' style: feathers, similar to the pink feathered garment Rogers wore in the 1940s as shown in the image at far right.

In a 1966 interview on the *Merv Griffin Show*, Rogers stated, "Feathers have always been a sort of good point of argument, they tell me."

Image: (left) Pink feathered outer gown on mannequin. MHCTC. Gift of M. Padgitt. Photo by Abbie Lankitus.

Image: (right) Color publicity still of Ginger Rogers wearing a pink chiffon gown with pink feathers. Ca 1940s.





Orange Nylon Robe and Nightgown
 Label: Ginger Rogers for JCPenney
 1972-1975
 MHCTC
 Gift of Marge Padgitt

From 1972 to 1975, Ginger Rogers served as Fashion Consultant for J.C. Penney, designing clothes and lingerie under the label "Ginger Rogers for JC Penney." Rogers hand-picked clothes for the mail-order catalog and traveled around the states to help women find affordable but fashionable clothing options. Of particular interest was lingerie. As she noted in her 1991 autobiography, J.C. Penney executives chose her as their representative due to her fashion knowledge and because they believed her famous legs would help the company sell pantyhose. Pictured at far left, is a 1973 catalog advertisement for the company's lingerie collection of Ultron nylon. "Ginger Rogers designs things to put you to sleep. And some to wake up to."

Image: (center) Orange nylon robe and gown on mannequin. MHCTC. Gift of M. Padgitt.

Image: (below) Detail of 'Ginger Rogers for JCPenney' garment label from orange nylon robe and nightgown. MHCTC. Gift of M. Padgitt.

