

## *Pride and Prejudice* and Pelisses: Costuming Jane Austen

At the December 2018 JASNA Southwest meeting at Sony Pictures Studio, fashion historian Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell gave the day's first presentation, "*Pride and Prejudice* and Pelisses: Costuming Jane Austen."

Initially a literature major at Stanford with a focus on 18th century women writers, Chrisman-Campbell said she quickly learned, "I was less interested in the rise of the novel and literary theory than what everybody in those novels was wearing." When a paper she wrote on petticoats was published in the academic journal *Eighteenth Century Studies*, she realized her passion for fashion history could translate into a career.

"I may be the worst person in the world to watch a Jane Austen film with because I can't quite turn off the fashion historian in me and sit back and enjoy the movie," she told the audience. "Either I'm annoyed by historical inaccuracies or I'm distracted by trying to figure out exactly which historical portrait or fashion plate the costume designer looked at when they were putting together each costume and hairstyle."

Nonetheless, she said she recognized that effective costuming for film and television is about more than historical accuracy. For instance, it can serve as shorthand onscreen for the passage of time, or it can signal differences in class, age and experience. "The Bennet sisters and other Austen heroines are usually portrayed in white or pastels, or sometimes earth tones, usually in matte cotton, sometimes with floral patterns, all of which symbolize their innocence and connection to nature," she said.

She added that more worldly characters — like Caroline Bingley, Lady Russell, Mary Crawford and Elizabeth Elliot — wear richer colors and fabrics, and more exotic accessories, subtly highlighting their sophistication and wealth, and the fact that they are more well-traveled than Austen's heroines.

Costume also underscores changes within a character, she said, using Anne Elliot's progression in the 1995 film of *Persuasion* as an example. "The costumes, hair and makeup do so much of the storytelling in that film and do it so well," she said. "You don't need to know a thing about fashion history to appreciate Anne's physical transformation from an old maid into a romantic heroine."

Chrisman-Campbell also noted that the film is one of the few Austen adaptations "where you actually get the sense that the actors haven't showered or brushed their teeth recently." She compared that to the clean and shiny portrayal of Regency life in the Gwyneth Paltrow version of *Emma*, released the following year. "It's beautifully art-directed in a way that's nice to look at but not remotely plausible for the Regency period," she said.

"It's often the secondary or supposedly plain characters — like Mary Bennet and Charlotte Lucas — who have the most historically accurate hairstyles and hats, which proves that the costume

designer has actually done his or her research but has chosen to set it aside for aesthetic or storytelling reasons,” she noted.

During her talk, she dispelled what she considers myths about Austen and fashion, such as her work not being a good source of information about the era’s dress and textiles. “I contend that fashion plays an important if subtle role in Austen’s writing,” she told the crowd. “Think of the importance placed on having new shoe roses for the Netherfield ball, or Mrs. Hurst noticing the muddy hem of Elizabeth Bennet’s petticoat, or Henry Tilney’s impressive knowledge of muslins in *Northanger Abbey*. These are not just surface details but plot points that would have been understood as deeply significant by Regency readers.”

Chrisman-Campbell also described Austen’s personal interest in the topic. “Austen herself was extremely interested in fashion, as revealed by the few precious pieces of her wardrobe that have survived, and by her vivid letters to her sister, Cassandra,” she said. “In those days before e-commerce, much shopping was done by letter. They’re great sources of historical information about dress.”

In addition, male attire was covered in her comprehensive talk, in which she noted the importance in the filmed adaptations of military uniforms, religious vestments, sportswear, servants’ livery, academic dress — such as the flashback in the 1995 BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* to Mr. Darcy’s Cambridge days — and even swimwear (at which point, she showed the slide of Colin Firth in the infamous wet shirt).

She also explored the importance of hairstyles — for both men and women. “In many ways, hair is even more important than clothing to a fashion historian,” she explained. “Hairstyles have always changed faster than clothing styles. They required much less time and money to update. If I’m trying to date a portrait, I look at the head first.”

For men, facial hair in the Regency era was a big no-no, she said. In the 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice*, Donald Sutherland as Mr. Bennet sported significant facial hair. “I think it was meant to make Mr. Bennet look older and slightly behind the times,” she added. “But since facial hair was basically nonexistent in England from about 1680 to 1825, he would have been more than a century behind the times.”

In describing the difficulty of creating era-appropriate costumes, she noted that “period fabrics are notoriously difficult and expensive to recreate with any accuracy” and are the downfall of many filmed adaptations. “Contemporary fabrics like the polyester gowns in some of the BBC archives are in colors and fibers not found in nature, so not only do they look wrong but they also move in the wrong way,” she said. “Some adaptations do a better job than others in choosing modern materials with the correct weight and texture so the clothes fit and drape accurately.”

Designers on Austen adaptations have incorporated other modern touches, she added. “Caroline Bingley’s sleeveless gowns in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* are a particularly egregious example,” she said. “She might look chic and sexy by 21st century standards, but by Jane Austen’s standards, she is in her underwear.”

Another difference she noted between the Regency and the modern era in terms of fashion is how expensive clothing was in Austen's time. "There was no such thing as fake fur, for example, or pleather or polyester," she said. "You wore the real thing. And if you weren't part of the 1 percent who could afford to buy it new, you bought it second, third or even fourth-hand. There was a thriving and highly organized resale market that would put eBay to shame."

Since the event was held at Sony — home of the former MGM Studios where the 1940 version of *Pride and Prejudice* was filmed — that adaptation's costuming came under particular scrutiny. "Absolutely none of what I just told you about Regency dress applies to the 1940 film," she said, explaining that costume designer Adrian Greenberg — later just known as Adrian for his eponymous fashion line — lobbied to set the story in the 1830s, "the Romantic era, when the high waists, straight skirts and delicate embroidered muslins of the Regency gave way to an exaggerated hourglass silhouette loaded with trimmings, accessories and patterns."

Chrisman-Campbell said the film Adrian previously costumed that had the most influence on his original ideas for the 1940 *Pride and Prejudice* might surprise the audience: *The Wizard of Oz* (also filmed on the former MGM lot). 1830s' fashion inspired the Munchkins' exaggerated silhouettes, imaginative accessories, voluminous sleeves and colorful patterns, she said.

"However, it was another MGM blockbuster in 1939 that became a fashion sensation: *Gone With the Wind*," she explained. "It must have stung Adrian to see Walter Plunkett's period costumes for Scarlett O'Hara turn into sewing patterns and knockoffs by department stores and bridal shops. Undoubtedly he had that film's success in mind when he designing *Pride and Prejudice*. If this is what audiences wanted, that's what he would give them."

Director Robert Leonard, in turn, used the giant bonnets, sleeves and skirts to great comic effect, she added. "In one scene, Mrs. Bennet knocks over several small tables with her skirt, something she never could have accomplished in a Regency gown."

Chrisman-Campbell concluded her talk by noting that every generation gets its own Jane Austen adaptation experience. "It's the universality of the stories, rather than their obsessive attention to period details, that gives them their enduring appeal — which may explain why their costuming has always been susceptible to changing trends in pop culture."

*Chrisman-Campbell earned her master's in the history of dress from the Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London and her PhD in the history of art from the University of Aberdeen. She has worked as a curator, consultant and educator for museums and universities around the world. She also is the author of Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette and writes about fashion, art and culture for The Wall Street Journal and The Atlantic.*