

The Use of Printing Techniques in the Preparation of Theatrical Costumes in the 18th Century: the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra de Paris' Book Pattern Samples and King Stanisław August Poniatowski's Theatrical Wardrobe Inventory

Wodrska-Ogidel, Katarzyna

The Theatre Museum, Teatr Wielki – Opera Narodowa, Warsaw, Poland

Abstract

Theatre is an illusion, and so are the means that are used to create this illusion on stage. Various painting techniques, block printing, or the use of stencils was, and still is, the easiest and the cheapest way to decorate even the most unusual costume. Sketches carved in wood or stencils enable creating single decorations or entire patterns. Since antiquity, block printing has been imitating more expensive and labour-intensive forms of costume decoration: embroidery and different forms of *appliqué*. These types of techniques became very popular in the 18th-century theatre. Examples of their usage can be found in costume designs or in paintings, but also in pattern samples from the second half of the 18th century, notably in the collection of the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Some of these patterns are also mentioned in King Stanisław August Poniatowski's theatrical wardrobe inventory.

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Types of techniques imitating various decorations on theatrical costumes

Theatre is an illusion of the world, and so are the means that are used to create this illusion on stage. They depend on technical capabilities, the stage size, and the budget available to the performance creators. This applies to both decorations and costume designs. Gorgeous, eye-catching outfits can be made with simple tricks. Various painting techniques, block printing, or the use of stencils was, and still is, the easiest, the fastest, and the cheapest way to decorate and to

create even the most unusual costume; especially when a larger number of identical outfits need to be prepared. Sketches carved in wood or stencils enable creating single decorations or entire patterns. The design only depends on the creator's imagination. This makes it possible to prepare unique decorations linked to a specific theatre production, consistent with the stage design.

Since antiquity, block printing has been imitating more expensive and labour-intensive forms of costume decorations, such as embroidery and different forms of *appliqué*. These types of decorations were used by lower classes in the 18th and 19th centuries, but were also popular in theatre. Throughout the 20th century, screen printing was commonly used both in the textile industry and in theatre. Unfortunately, digital printing is becoming more and more common nowadays, displacing traditional theatrical craftsmanship.

Theatre popularity in the 18th century

These types of techniques, imitating various decorations on theatrical costumes, became very popular in the 18th century. It was a time when public theatre was becoming increasingly popular throughout Europe. Actors and singers often performed in different cities and travelled with theatre companies. It was notably the case for Italian theatre companies, who specialised in *commedia dell'arte* and *opera buffa* in the 18th and 19th centuries. Italian artists appeared in Paris, London, Vienna, and St. Petersburg, and on their way to Russia, often stopped to perform in Warsaw. They disseminated new working techniques while travelling, including those related to theatrical costume and decoration designs.

Such companies, as private enterprises, depended on ticket revenues and had to focus on creating the greatest possible effect on their audience and, on the other hand, save on expenses.

This reflection on theatrical production is illustrated in an advice published in an anonymous pamphlet from Venice, in 1720, untitled *Il teatro alla moda*. This satire, written by Benedetto Marcello, as later research has shown, humorously points out the most important aspects of working in an 18th-century theatre (Szweykowska 1981, 138).

To the impresarios.

Today's impresario does not need to have the slightest idea about theatre matters [...]. He will engage such constructors, kapellmeisters, tailors, [...] etc. as his friends advise him and will try to save as much as possible on them. [...] With the painters of decorations, tailors [...] etc. he should agree to pay for the entire job and should not care at all how they serve him, counting only on primadonnas, intermezzos, bears, lightning, earthquakes, etc. (Szweykowska 1981, 186-187)

The necessary savings also applied to costumes. Designers and tailors tried their best to express the characters' features and attract the eye, using painted, and later stamped and printed patterns. The earliest surviving costume designs linked to pattern books of printed decorations are associated with the *Théâtre Italien*, which has been active in Paris since the 17th century.

Pattern samples from the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra

A few years ago I had the opportunity to see an exhibition, *Un air d'Italie | L'Opéra de Paris de Louis XI à la Révolution*, organised by the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra at the Palais Garnier.¹ Among the scenographic designs and costume sketches by eminent painters such as Antoine Watteau or François Boucher, presented at the exhibition, a simple pattern book of costume decoration elements caught my eye. These pattern samples from the second half of the 18th century are part of the collection of the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (inventory number Rés-1081). They constitute fragments of fabric with borders or small decorative elements made using block prints or stencils. These samples consist of two or three mostly contrasting colours overlaid on each other on fine linen. The decoration or the border could be directly applied to the costume or stamped on another fabric and then, after cutting, sewn onto its surface.

These are mainly imitations of bird feathers, armour, fish scales patterns, shells, leaves, masks, snakes, and antique floral or geometric patterns. Creating this type of simple decoration was related to the increasing popularity of 18th-century theatrical productions and the formation of large theatres. Therefore, there was an emerging necessity to prepare more costumes, cheaper and faster. Decorations sewn onto the basic costume could also be changed as needed for other productions. Those dresses or suits were colourful and attractive, but often of poor quality. For that reason, such costumes have not survived, and examples of their existence and usage can only be found in costume designs or in paintings depicting actors or dancers from that time (**Fig. 1**).

Costume designs with patterns from the sampler book

Similarities between various samples and costume elements designed by Jean-Baptiste Martin and his successor, Louis-René Boquet, are highlighted in the exhibition catalogue (Vinciguerra et al. 2019, 175-180). The sampler book's patterns designed by Martin include, for instance, bird feathers border on an Indian woman's costume created for Jean-Philippe Rameau's *opéra-ballet Les Indes Galantes*²; costume designs for the *ballet héroïque, Aline, reine de Golconde*, with music by Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny to a *libretto* by Michel-Jean Sedaine³; or the extraordinarily rich costume of an Incan ruler with a feather skirt and feather-trimmed coat.⁴ Such feathers often appeared in the costumes of inhabitants of distant lands, like Africa and America. One of the earliest examples is an African or American skirt from the final scene of the *Ballet de Flore* by Henri de Gissey from 1669.⁵ However, we do not know whether real feathers or printed imitations, similar to the one in the template, were used by costume designers for the *Ballet de Flore*.

¹ *Un air d'Italie | L'Opéra de Paris de Louis XIV à la Révolution*, Palais Garnier, Paris, 28 May–1 September 2019.

² Jean-Baptiste Martin, Indian woman in *Collection de figures théâtrales*, BnF, département Arts du spectacle, FOL-ICO COS-3 (16).

³ Jean-Baptiste Martin, *Africain: Dans Aline Reine de Golconde* from *Gallerie des Modes et Costumes Français*, Paris: Esnauts et Rapilly, 1779, The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Accession Number 44.1426.

⁴ Jean-Baptiste Martin, *Incas* in *Collection de figures théâtrales*, BnF, département Arts du spectacle, FOL-ICO COS-3 (10).

⁵ Henri de Gissey, *Costume of the African or American from the final scene of the Ballet de Flore*, Musée du Louvre, 1607 DR/ Recto.

Fish scales pattern constituted another popular decorative motif from the pattern book. Such decoration appeared on maritime-themed costumes or as armour ornamentation. In Martin's designs, this particular pattern can be found on draperies from the Thetis⁶ and Neptune⁷ costume projects. Shells, coral fragments, and leaves, also used on these dresses, were probably made similarly. The armour imitation, on the other hand, appears on an ancient warrior costume designed by Louis-René Boquet.⁸ One of the most popular decorations of this type was leopard print, which was in fashion at that time. Those prints can usually be found on costume's drapes of ancient, mythological, or exotic figures: for example, on the costume of *Driade* by Martin⁹, and *Silvie*¹⁰ by Bouquet, or on Barbara Campanini's dress, on her portrait painted by Antoine Pesne¹¹.

(Figs. 2 to 6)

The inventory of the King Stanisław August Poniatowski's theatrical wardrobe

Some of these patterns can be compared with the Warsaw theatre archives from the reign of King Stanisław August Poniatowski (1764-1795). Bouquet's designs, resulting from a cooperation with Jean-Georges Noverre, were well known in Poland. Firstly, Noverre's manuscripts of *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* illustrated by Boquet, with a dedication to the Polish King, were kept in the royal library¹²; secondly, artists who collaborated with Noverre often performed in Warsaw. But the most interesting document is the *Inventory of his Majesty's theatrical wardrobe according to the 1797 lustration*, stored in the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw¹³. These costumes were mainly used on stage at the National Theatre in Warsaw, which was created by King Stanisław August Poniatowski, a great theatre enthusiast, in 1765. The inventory was made after the third partition of Poland and was prepared and signed by the King's butler and favourite, Franciszek Ryx, who had also been, for some time, a theatre entrepreneur. He was helped by a theatre tailor called Linck. Both of them had a good knowledge of textile types, sewing techniques, and tailoring, and, above all, having been associated with the National Theatre for many years, were familiar with these costumes.

This 99-pages-long physical inventory was made on the basis of an early, unpreserved inventory and organised according to where and how the costumes were stored: in chests or wardrobes. Costumes from the Royal Theatre wardrobe came from Polish, Italian, French, and German theatre companies. They were created in the Warsaw theatre workshop or purchased from other

⁶ Jean-Baptiste Martin, *Thetis* in *Collection de figures théâtrales*, BnF, département Arts du spectacle, FOL-ICO COS-3 (33).

⁷ Jean-Baptiste Martin, *Neptune* in *Collection de figures théâtrales*, BnF, département Arts du spectacle, FOL-ICO COS-3 (41).

⁸ Louis-René Boquet, *Costume design for an unidentified performance*, BnFrance, département Bibliothèque-musée de l'opéra, D216 I-82.

⁹ Jean-Baptiste Martin, *Neptune* in *Collection de figures théâtrales*, BnF, département Arts du spectacle, FOL-ICO COS-3 (28).

¹⁰ Louis-René Boquet, *Costume design for Silvie*, 1766, BnFrance, département Bibliothèque-musée de l'opéra, D216 I-30.

¹¹ Antoine Pesne, *La Barberina*, 1745, Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin.

¹² Jean-Georges Noverre's *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* have survived and are now preserved in the Drawing Room of the University Library in Warsaw.

¹³ *Inwentarz garderoby JKMci teatralnej wg lustracji z 1797 roku*, AGAD, Archiwum ks. Józefa Poniatowskiego i Marii Teresy z Poniatowskich Tyszkiewiczowej, 1/346/0/-/0278.

The text of the inventory is presented on the basis of the typescript by Stanisława Mrozińska "Kostiumy w teatrze stanisławowskim", Warsaw: Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 1979.

theatre companies. The King occasionally purchased used costumes, but many of them ended up in his collection as contracts required the donation of worn costumes following guest performances.

The inventory provides a lot of information: the appearance of the costume, its colours and decorations, the textile type, and its state of preservation. In some cases, the general character of the outfit is also given, mostly Spanish, Greek, or exotic: Oriental, American, or African; exceptionally, it refers to a specific character of a play: a knight, a priest, or a witch; in some cases the title of the performance is also included, for example, *Axur, re d'Ormus*, an opera by Antonio Salieri, staged in Warsaw in 1793. Among the descriptions of the costumes' decorations, statements such as 'garnished' (Polish: *garnirowane*) and, less frequently, 'painted' are also mentioned.

Unfortunately, the compiler of the inventory did not specify the printing techniques, and rather used the general expression 'painted,' only differentiating the 'harlequin painted,' which mainly refers to costumes from *Comedia dell'arte* performances. However, there is little information about the so-called 'falsified decorations' (Polish: *falsze*), potentially a good reference to the printed decorations. Among the patterns that also appear in the sampler book from Paris, the author of the inventory noted leopard spots on elements of the Roman costumes, and fish scales pattern on the armour imitation: 'twenty Roman dresses, linen, yellow, with gold-painted mottling' (page 51, no. 26) and 'three knight's dresses painted in silver fish scales pattern *karpiołuska* to resemble armour' (no. 27); or the chain mail pattern: '14 knight's dresses, linen, ordinaries, that is, collets and trousers, painted in iron armour, old' (page 59, no. 12).

The inventory also includes women's and men's outfits, which can be linked to Boquet's costume designs for the Fury characters in *Médée et Jason*, and to the *Psyché et l'Amour* ballet by Noverre, which were both in the Warsaw Royal Library's collection at the time. These encompass around fifty various black, red, and yellow dresses with buffs in flame red, drapery of the same colour, and decorations with snakes and flames in various places, described as 'imagining Hell.' In addition to this, nine women's headdresses with serpents for the Furies of Hell are also listed, single snakes made of putty and cloth, and four masks with turkey throats and horns for men (page 76, no. 2–5, 14, 20; page 77, no. 1–8, 14, 16–22).

Comparing the Paris pattern book and Boquet's costume designs from that time with descriptions from the Warsaw inventory, one can assume that some of the decorations, such as snakes, flames, devil masks, or small geometric decorations, for example, those appearing on the costume of Medea¹⁴, were probably made using block printing or stencils. The Fury costumes may have come from the Hoftheater in Stuttgart, left by the Gaetano Vestris, who was responsible for the Warsaw *première*, or prepared later for the performance by Leopold Frühmann, as the ballet was staged twice in Warsaw in 1767¹⁵ and in 1777¹⁶. But the large number of multi-part costumes may indicate that the pattern was replicated locally. Therefore, we can assume that the technique used for the Paris pattern book's samples was also known in Warsaw in the 18th century. Active theatre life required simple and efficient solutions, and frequent visits of foreign artists allowed them to quickly adapt new ideas.

¹⁴ Louis-René Boquet, *Habits de Costume pour l'Exécution des Ballets de Mr. Noverre dessinés par Mr. Boquet dessinateur des manus plaisirs du Roi de France*. T. VII, card 5, the Drawing Room of the University Library in Warsaw.

¹⁵ 1767 choreography by Gaetano Vestris based on J.-G. Noverre, in Operalnia Saska.

¹⁶ 1777 choreography by Leopold Frühmann based on J.-G. Noverre and G. Vestris, in Radziwill Palace Theatre.

(Figs 7 & 8)

The use of printing techniques in the decoration of the Grand Theatre costumes, in the 19th and 20th centuries

The Grand Theatre survived the turbulent time of the last partition of Poland and the Napoleonic wars. The new building opened in 1833, and still exists today. The Warsaw Government Theatre became a Russian state institution. The new location had more space for theatre workshops and a huge costume wardrobe. Unfortunately, we have no information about the use of block printing in 19th-century costume decoration there. The majority of the surviving costumes from the late 19th century belonged to popular actors who could afford the best craftsmen and rich decorations. In the 1920s and 1930s, during the economic crisis, Warsaw theatres were subsidised by the city board, and painted decoration on costumes was most frequently used. It was cheaper, simpler, and did not require the work of specialists.

The years following World War II were primarily marked by the popularisation of the screen printing technique. For many years, since its reopening in 1965, it was the supreme technique applied in the workshops of the Grand Theatre. Until then, the theatre studio primarily used stencils. Costumes from the ballet performance *Red Coat* by Luigi Nono, staged in 1962—which are now part of the Theatre Museum's collection—constitute one of the most interesting examples from this period. They were decorated with texts made with stencils, and the same pattern in magnification was on the props and set pieces. Those costumes were designed by Andrzej Kreutz Majewski, one of the most important Polish set designers of the second half of the 20th century and also long-time chief set designer at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw. He was the one who introduced the screen printing technique to the Grand Theatre. As a designer, he attached great importance to each costume, as unique piece. Fabrics and elaborated costume decorations were prepared within the theatre studio. They were true works of art. Nowadays, fewer and fewer projects of this kind are being created; it is common to buy ordinary, ready-made costumes, and prints are usually outsourced to external large companies. Simple printing techniques used in the 18th century to prepare large quantities of theatrical costumes at a lower cost have now become something exclusive in the age of digital printing. The work of theatrical craftsmen is expensive; projects implemented by traditional methods are completed more slowly. They are not perfect, but are representative of the work of enthusiasts. Happily, there are still young people eager to learn the secrets of traditional methods.

(Fig. 9)

The costume decoration Department at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw

There are currently two ladies working in the costume decoration Department at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw. One is an artisan with many years of experience; the other has recently started training. They are both mainly involved in decorating and ageing the costumes but also preparing patterns for printing in an external printing company. The most common forms of decoration used in the workshop now are painting, for example with swelling paints, printing, and powder coating. Some of the largest and the most interesting projects recently completed by the studio include *Casanova in Warsaw* (2015) with costume designs by Gianni Quaranta, *Pupa* (2015) and *Pinokio*

(2024) with costume designs by Katarzyna Rott, and *Dracula* (2022) with costume designs by Charles Cusick Smith and Phil R. Daniels. (**Figs. 10 to 13**)

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Fig. 1

The Pattern samples book from the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra at the exhibition 'Un air d'Italie | L'Opéra de Paris de Louis XI à la Révolution.'

Photo by the author.

Fig. 2

Jean-Baptiste Martin's design with the bird feathers border in the costume of an Indian woman for opéra-ballet *Les Indes Galantes*.

BnF, département Arts du spectacle, FOL-ICO COS-3 (16).



Fig. 3

Henri de Gissey, 'Costume of the African or American' from the final scene of the *Ballet de Flore*.

Musée du Louvre, 1607 DR/ Recto.



Fig. 4

The fish scales pattern, shells, coral fragments and leaves on Jean Baptiste Martin's costume design for Thetis.

Collection de figures théâtrales, BnF, département Arts du spectacle, FOL-ICO COS-3 (33).



Fig. 5

Louis-René Boquet. 'The armour imitation in the ancient warrior costume design.'

BnFrance, département Bibliothèque-musée de l'opéra, D216 I-82

Fig. 6

Antoine Pesne, 'La Barberina,' 1745.

Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin



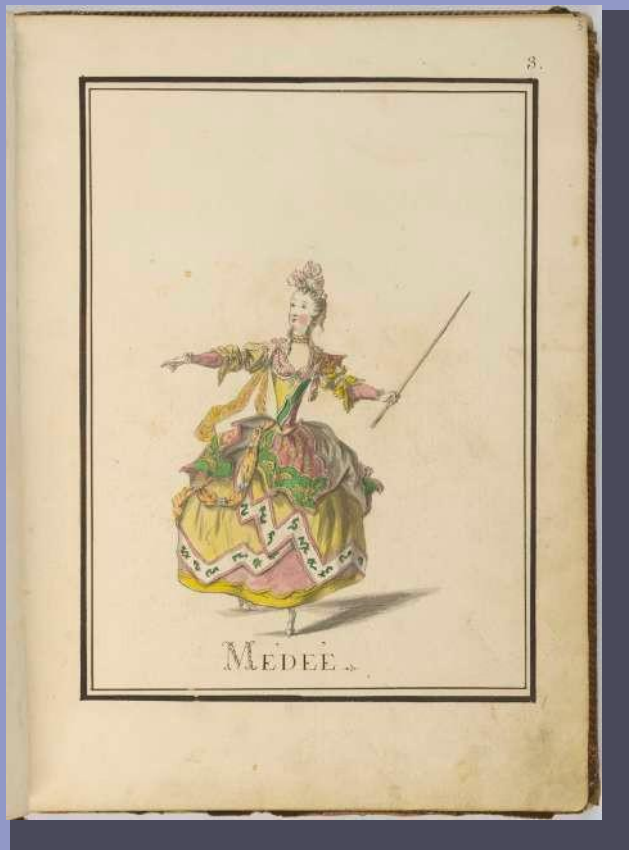


Fig. 7

Boquet's costume design for Médée, from *Médée et Jason*, Louis-René Boquet. *Habits de Costume pour l'Exécution des Ballets de Mr. Noverre, dessinés par Mr. Boquet, dessinateur des manus plaisirs du Roi de France.*

T.VII, card 5, the Drawing Room of the University Library in Warsaw



Fig. 8

Boquet's costume design for Demon, from *Psyché et l'Amour*, Louis-René Boquet. *Habits de Costume pour l'Exécution des Ballets de Mr. Noverre dessinés par Mr. Boquet dessinateur des manus plaisirs du Roi de France.*

T.VII, card 53, the Drawing Room of the University Library in Warsaw



Fig. 9

Costumes from *The Red Coat* 1962, designed by Andrzej Kreutz Majewski,
Photos by the author.

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Fig. 10

Imitations of embroideries, *Casanova in Warsaw* (2015).

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Fig. 11

Painted and printed patterns on costumes, *Pupa* (2015).

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Fig. 12

Painted and printed patterns on costumes, *Pinokio* (2024).

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Fig. 13

The Costume Decoration Department.

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