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Surveying Designs for *Auntie Mame*

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Creating a good stage design begins with deep understanding. This starts with truly knowing the play. The text is the greatest piece of research a designer has. In it are all the clues necessary to discovering character, setting, idea, and style. While it is the starting point, outside sources ultimately provide the depth and substance of a design. It is a designer's understanding of history, geography, culture, and human nature coupled with his or her own creativity that makes for an excellent work of stage art. If the text of a play is the soul of a design, then through the outside research the body takes form.

For the play *Auntie Mame* a relatively campy comedy written in the 1956 I read the text several times before beginning the design process. How many times a designer will delve into a play depends on the play and the designer, but multiple readings are standard. Along with the initial readings one must discuss the text with other designers. A remarkable thing about theatre is that it requiremes the audience. The collective perception of a play gives theatre its lasting viability and impact. The benefit of this to the designer is that in collaboration with other artists and peers, one grasps many of the most colorful and critical aspects of a play. Other people's criticism and opinion are a vital form of research that, while difficult to document, cannot be overlooked. In the process of designing *Auntie Mame*, I was fortunate to work alongside several other highly talented artists working on their own designs for the same show. The classroom laboratory provided us the opportunity to express our ideas, discuss our opinions, and thus glean invaluable insight that would otherwise have been very difficult to access individually.

Out of the readings and discussions of the play came the parameters for the design which could then be filled in by the breath of documented research. *Auntie Mame* takes place in New York City, in the 1920s, 1930s, and minimally in the 1940s, so it was in that direction where I focused my scrutiny. Documentation on the culture, style, and history of these decades gave me the skeleton of my design. I then flesehd out this information by steeping my mind in relevant imagery. I absorbed photojournalism, works of art, architecture, and anything that I could see pertaining to those years. The extensive contact with pertinent visual research gives a designer the ability to accurately grasp the sensibilities of the milieu he hopes to represent. It is a mystery what will resonate with a designer in regards to a particular play. When a period is familiar and recognition of its particular nuances becomes natural, almost anything provides inspiration. So long as it truly harks back to that particular period's style, it can inform a design choice.

The books I used gave me a sense of the culture and the style of the time period I was researching. *The American Heritage History of the 20's and 30's* and *The Restless Decade – John Gutmanns's Photographs of the Thirties* provided me a window into the world of those years showing me people, places, and attitudes that gave me a greater understanding of the play. Also useful were books that informed my decisions in regard to color choices. I particularly emphasized the use of color int his design project. Especially helpful were *Authentic Art Deco Patterns in Full Color* and *Color Source Book*. These books documented palettes and patterns that either directly stemmed from the time periods in question or were useful as inspiration for unique design choices. For decisions of style and garment silhouette, I used multiple sources. Books such as *The Complete Costume History* and websites like *The Costumer's Manifesto* gave me a starting point for creating accurate costumes.

Also useful were websites that specialize in art and art history, photography, people, places all things that can be used to inform design choices. The prodigious amount of information available on the Internet is, however, a double-edged sword. While there are vast resources available online, accuracy must always

be taken into consideration. For this reason it is paramount that thorough and reliable research be done prior to and in conjunction with Internet research. Again, once the subject matter is firmly grasped, almost anything can become useful to a designer.

The important thing to note about all research for Stage Design is that it must relate back to the script or it is ultimately of no use. All the choices I made can be traced back to my understanding and interpretation of the text. The way a character dresses, from her hairstyle to the clasps on her shoes, stems from words the playwright penned. As a designer, my job is to honor those words and to give them life through my own creativity in union with determined research.

Auntie Mame
Mame 2.ii
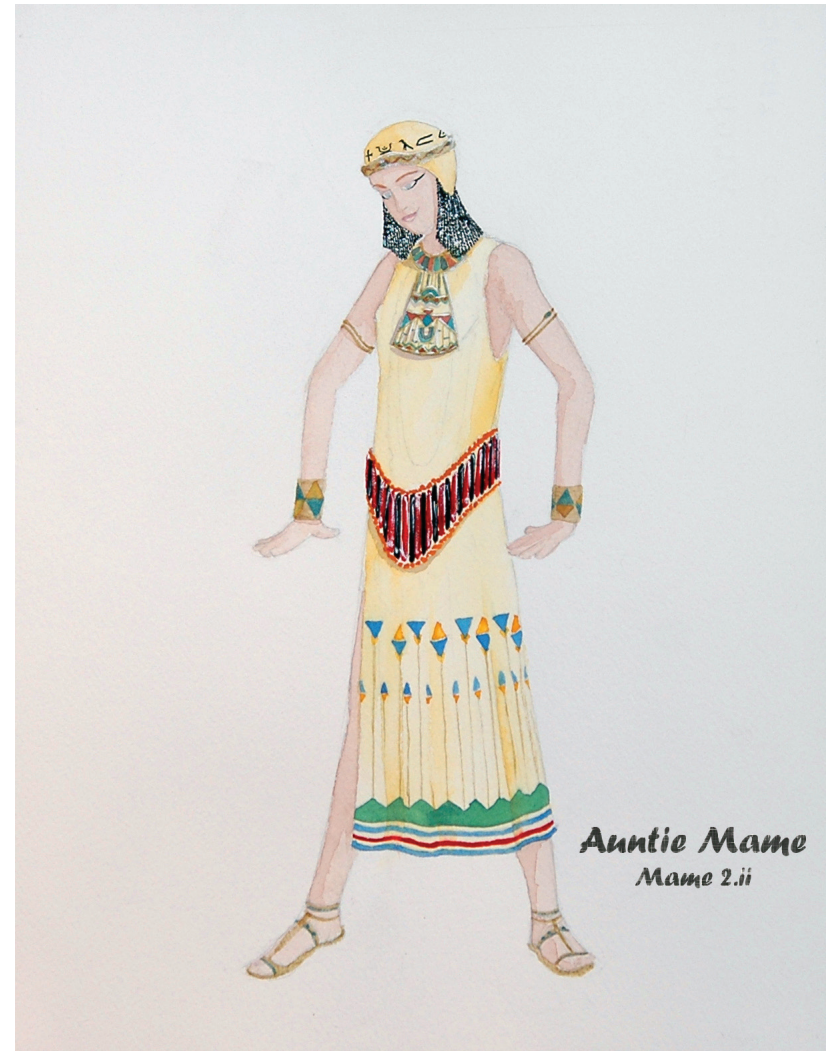
Auntie Mame
Mame 2.v

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