

Creative & Media Arts

A Practical Source Book

Editors:

*Babson Ajibade
Efiong Omini*

Three Ancient Costume Types

Margaret Akpan

The purpose of theatre costume is to separate actors from audience and to distinguish each actor from his fellow while they enact whatever it is the spectators have come to see. The actor's garments maybe accurate versions of the clothing of some period; exaggerate or distort it; they may be primarily symbolic. Costume design is an important aspect of any theatrical production. Designed primarily to fit the human body, costumes function to establish the time and the place of an action. At a glance, the status, nationality, social positions, occupation, age, character relationships etc are communicated through costumes.

As an art of the theatre, it is pertinent to note that costume should not only clothe the actor; but should clothe meaningfully. The definite role it intends to play should be just right and nothing more. People are known and described by the costumes they wear. Be it period or contemporary, their effects should be complete and true. The costumer has the task of designing costume artistically and aesthetically. In line with this, a good knowledge of colour, line, texture, shape, costume accents, fabrics etc. is required as well as the understanding that, to build a period costume is different from building a period dress. An ordinary dress is viewed at very close range but costume is viewed from a distance. This calls for the attenuation of certain features of costumes. However styled, they should not distort the wealth of information to be conveyed. A deep knowledge of period costumes is invaluable for the intending costumer, student or researcher. This is the mo-

tivation for this chapter on ancient costume types (Egypt, Greek and Roman). It offers itself readily to readers especially students providing the following:

- A general knowledge of ancient costumes to all and sundry.
- A resource material for students of theatre offering costume courses.
- Simplified information to stage and film costumers.

Egyptian Costume

The Egyptians (3000 BC-200 BC) were the major producers of linen because of the flax plant that they cultivated. Also, trade in textile, which flourished in Egypt exposed the people to materials like wool that came from Babylon, and cotton from India. Though early clothing was scanty, wars introduced changes that affected to some extent, the Egyptian mode of dressing. The climate was warm and so their costume consisted of the loincloth for men and the sheath gown for the female. The loincloth was called the *schenti*, which was predominantly white. The loin was a long scarf tied around the hips and held in place by a belt or girdle. In the Old Kingdom, the men wore the loincloth or kilt 'with ends tucked in belt and left hanging down the front. Egyptian aristocrats wore theirs with a triangular projection of carefully arranged pleats, finished also at the front. The pleats were a distinctive decorative aspect of the Egyptian dress; and the emblem of Uraeus, the sun god was always attached to the girdle. Kings, Rulers, Priest, Judges and officials wore the *schenti* but with a marked difference from others in that they were lavishly adorned and made of costly and fine materials.

In the Middle Kingdoms, the male loincloth lengthened into a skirt, on top of which, a transparent skirt was worn. This skirt normally had a decorated border, and often overlapped. The priest in addition to the *schenti* used spotted animal skin. Women wore a tight fitting tunic with necklines of varying depths and straps, arranged either above or below the breast, floral-collars made up of circles of cloth, and with fresh flowers attached. The tight-fitting tunic known as *Kalasis* extended from the breast to the ankles, and was made of thick flexible materi-

al. The *Kalasis* was worn by all classes of women in varying colours of yellow, red and occasionally, white.

In the New Kingdom, the men also wore the *Kalasis*, which came in varying lengths and widths. The sleeves of the robe could be short and tight, long and loose or absent all together. The Fabric used was of such fine quality that it was transparent. Mostly worn by women, the *kalasis* followed the line of the body and became the true national costume of the ancient Egyptian women. It was the first sleeved garment. White garments were predominantly used because of the difficulty in dyeing linen. Nevertheless, colours were used in the dress of royalty, gods and the dead. Entertainers loved yellow, and mourners used dark blue. Apart from colours on fabric, bead, feathers, painted leathers etc, all added colour to the Egyptian dress.

Earlier in the century, the Egyptians shaved their heads, and the men shaved their beards. The Pharaohs and high dignitaries wore *postiche* (false beards) attached by a gold chin strap, at occasions (Wilcox, 58). The commoners wore no beards and no moustache but could wear their hair short. Crowns were reserved for kings and were worn to differentiate rulers. For example in Upper Egypt the king wore a white crown and the king of Lower Egypt wore a red one. When the country was united, both colours were projected in the crown. The crowns carried the Uraeus (a rearing viper) while the *Ankh* cross depicts life.

Priests wore the lock hair on one side of the head with a tail hanging on the band of the head-dress. Headbands hanging loosely behind were worn by both sexes with women adding flowers to theirs. To protect the head against the sun, wigs were worn by the upper classes while the others wore skullcaps of felt. The head-dress was also made as bonnets of cotton, wool and linen. The women used a black material called *kohl* to outline their eyes/brows, and green as eye shadow. The veins of their chests were outlined in blue and their lips in carmine. Their chests were coloured with red and white, while their fingernails were painted yellow-red henna. Egyptian jewellery included beads, bracelets (worn both below and above the elbow), necklaces, rings, bands, anklets, diadems etc, mostly used by women. The most important aspect of jewellery was the richly coloured round collar worn

by both sexes. It was mostly made of stung beads. Ornaments signified ranks or office: lotus, meaning abundance; the asp, royal power; the sacred feather, emblem of rulers, etc (Wilcox 58:2) Both sexes went barefoot except for the priest and kings who wore sandals. This remained for a period of time, until being barefoot became indecent and improper, thus leather sandals (some having long turned-up toes) were worn.

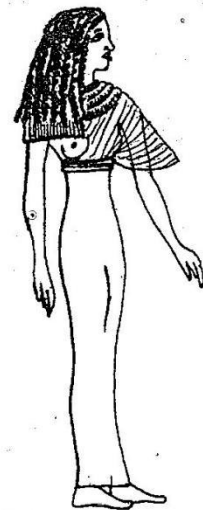
Fig. 3.1: Diagrams of Egyptian Costumes



Schenti or loin cloth



Embroidered sheath cloth



White sheath gown



Triangular apron



King in long apron and coat



King Tutankhamen headgear

The Egyptians loved flowers. They were worn as necklaces, carried in-hand, or attached to the hair. Their fan was made of feather and used to indicate authority, and the nobles used umbrellas to protect themselves against excessive heat of the sun. Though the illustrations in this chapter will help to explain the Egyptian dress, it is suggested that readers watch the *Ten Commandments*, a film produced and directed by Cecil B. Mule (1956).

Greek Costume

The Greek dress is classical by the fact of its acknowledged excellence. The Greek gown being of a loose nature represents the evening gowns of contemporary times: it consisted of the garment and the wrap, worn by both men and women. The garment was made up of woollen or linen pieces called the *chiton*. The men's *chiton* was short while the female's reached the ankle — Kings, old men and magistrates wore it long. The *chiton* was sewn halfway along the sides and fastened at the shoulders by the *filulae* or pins. There were two main variations — the Doric *peplos* and the Ionic *chiton*. The Doric *chiton* was draped round the body without a girdle and called *chlaina* for men and *peplos* for women. The Doric dress was unique since it had no seams and did not need cutting-out. It was open at one side, and 'women who show their hips' was the description for the then wearers (Kybalora et al, 1968).

The *peplos* was sometimes worn over the *chiton*. It was made of wool, dyed in various colours of indigo or saffron and patterned. It was used as a blanket in cold climates. Its upper edge was folded over to hang down on the breast, it was folded around the body, caught together on each shoulder by pins. Leaving the arms uncovered, and though open down the right side, was held in place by the girdle over which it bloused (Port, 1968). When not girdled the surplus was used as a shawl over the head.

The Ionic *chiton* was of oriental origin and was made of linen or fine Indian cotton and later silk. This *chiton* was worn first by men and later by women. It was made of two pieces of material often pleated and sewn together or pinned all the way down the arm forming sleeves. The musicians wore the ionic *chiton* without a girdle, but women gir-

dled theirs lower down the waist and later under the breast, giving the effect of a blouse and shirt. The bloused section was called the *kolpos* or *deplaidion*. The sleeveless *chiton* held on one shoulder only, was also worn by athletes, girls and other folks. Animal skin, usually that of a goat was worn by both men and women.

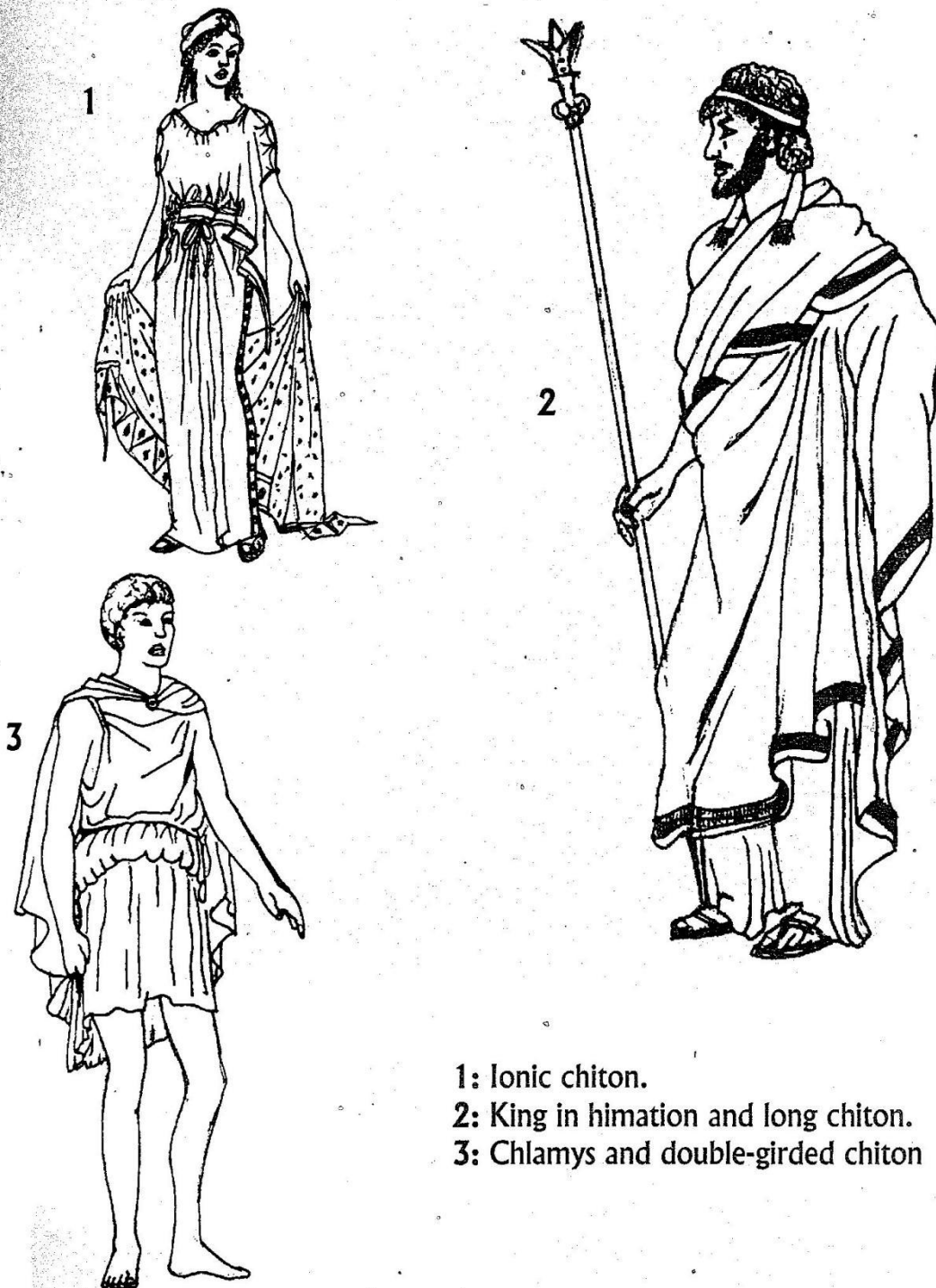
Another garment worn by the Greeks was the *chlamys* which was a small rectangle of cloth, made of wool and of Macedonian or India origin. It was a cloak pinned at the right shoulder or in front and used over the short *chiton* by young men and soldiers. The *himation* was a long piece of square wool wrap used around the body and allowed to fall over the left shoulder leaving the right arm free. Dorian men wore the *himation* as their only garment. A man wearing the *himation* only was said to be adequately dressed while the *chiton* worn alone was considered informal. Women wore the *himation* over their heads as a protective covering. The hands could also be hidden within the *himation*: this was considered good manners for women especially in public places. The Pharaoh's was like the *himation* but was made of linen and worn by noble men on special ceremonies.

The *chloene* was like the *chlamys* but made of coarse wool. It was hooked on one shoulder, folded and fastened across the breast. The female version was called the *diplax*. The *chlamydon* was a pleated narrow *chlamys* over a band and worn from the right shoulder under the left arm. The *banelette* was a decorative tape worn as a support to the breast under or outside the *chiton*. Colours used included indigo, madder or saffron, yellow (worn only by women) various greens, purples, red, black, brown, blue and white. Their favourites were white, yellow, purple and lilac. Certain colours were said to have meanings: yellow was for solemnity while red distinguished the Commanders of Sparta etc.

Men's long hair was later shortened, and with a band tied around the head, while the women's was long and often styled in a variety of ways and colours including wigs. Great care was lavished on their elaborate hairdo, which represented one of the most important things of fashion (Kybalova, 1968). Flowers, ribbons, tiaras and crowns were used to decorate the hair. The women did not cover their heads be-

cause they were not allowed to move freely in public. A conical felt hat called the pilos was also worn by workmen, shepherds and sailors. The *causia* was another hat worn by both sexes when on a journey.

Fig. 3.2: Diagrams of Greek Costumes



- 1: Ionic chiton.
- 2: King in himation and long chiton.
- 3: Chlamys and double-girded chiton

The Greeks were bare-foot at all times except for gods who were depicted in sandals. Later on, sandals were worn by all and were made of strapped sturdy leather. Another kind of footwear was the *cothurnus*, which had thick cork or wooden sole and often worn by actors. Then, the *buskins*, which was lined and laced in front reaching the middle of the calf. It was Greek manners to remove their shoes as they entered the house. The women would adorn themselves with costly Jewellery like earrings, necklaces, bracelets, rings, beads, a hair binder called *sakko*, as well as costly perfumes and oils (Wilcox, 1958). They used umbrella for protection against the hot sun, and fans for both decorative and functional purposes.

Roman Costume

The Roman dress was made up of the *tunica*, a short sleeve shirt for the men and the *stola*, a sleeved long girded *tunica* for the women. The principal garment of the Romans was the *toga*. The *toga*, typically white, was made of wool, draped above the left shoulder, under the right arm and over the left shoulder again. The posture and movement of the wearers were influenced by the weight of the *toga*, enabling them to move in a proud and elegant manner. Only true-born Romans were allowed to wear the *toga*: slaves and exiled citizens were not allowed to wear it. Thus the *toga* became the national costume for the Romans.

Different classes of people were identified by the colour of *toga* they wore. For example, the ordinary citizen wore plain white, magistrates, priests and boys up to sixteen years old of the upper class wore it purple-bordered. The embroidered purple *toga* worn with the gold embroidered tunic was the ceremonial dress of magistrates and generals and it became the traditional costume of the emperors and senators (Wilcox, 58; Russell, 1973). *Toga pura* was for ordinary citizens; dark coloured *toga pulla* was for mourning; *toga candida* for those running elections into public offices; *toga picta* for triumphant accessions and *toga trabea* for ceremonial occasions. The *pallium* was like the Greek *himation* used by men over the *tunica*. It was the characteristic garment for scholars. It was wide and rectangular and could be used as bed cov-

ering. The feminine version was an out-door garment used as the Greek *himation* and made of fine coloured wool.

Fig. 3.3: Diagrams of Roman Costumes



- 1: Senator with white toga, bands and boots
- 2: Undertunic, stola and palla.

The *lacerna* was just like the Greek *chlamys*, being a short cloak used by soldiers and slaves. The *palladumentum* was the military cloak like the *Chlamys*. *Tunica stola* was a woollen under garment worn in doors and out doors; out doors without the toga. It was originally sleeveless but later acquired sleeves. The *intima* was made of fine linen and the *stola* was usually richly embroidered, sleeved or sleeveless. The marriage dress for men was called *tunica talaris*, which was long with loose sleeves. This tunic was not popular. Later in the period, as many as three tunics could be worn at a time, the ones underneath being narrower. *Dalmatica* was another tunic worn as an outer garment.

Basically, the Romans used purple to design the *tunica* and *togas*. Other colours included yellow used by women, green, red, blue, a lot of white, gold, black etc. They used sandals, boots and buskins like the Greek. Made of fine leather, the sandals were always decorated with precious stones. The Romans used beauty patches on their faces: rouge for the cheeks and black to outline the eyes and lashes. Perfumes and other expressive oils were also used.

Women's hair was parted in the middle and dressed into a chignon behind the neck, while veils or *palla* were used as head coverings. During the time of the empire, hairdressing was done according to the latest fashion by rich women, who changed the colour of their hair from red to gold and vice versa. Hair accessories included combs, hair, pins, nets, brushes, pomade, mirror wigs etc. Men wore short hair and short beards that were coloured on festive occasions.

Their jewellery came from precious stones such as diamonds, emeralds, rubies and pearls. These were used in making earrings, necklaces, bracelets etc, used mainly by women to adorn themselves. Other items included umbrellas for protection against the sun, and fans as part of women's dressing.

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