



Costume Design For "Helen! "

Yinong Qiu

My concept is inspired by Oliver Messel's all white set for Helen's bedroom in Act II in *Helen!* (1932), notably the serene purity of the room, draped in Rococo fabrics and framed by swan imagery, subtly evoking her mythic, divine origins as the daughter of Zeus.

Mirroring this duality, my design appears classical and understated by day, yet reveals hidden layers in darkness: fluorescent beads form a series of watchful eyes, and a glowing message reads "I'm not guilty." These unseen details invert the notion of the mythological woman as passive victim; instead, they embody resilience and agency—an elegance that conceals strength, revealed in the shadows.

Inspiration 《Helen! 》



Unknown photographer, Helen (photograph), date unknown. Victoria & Albert Museum. Courtesy of the V&A.

Act I: The Temple and the Goddess of Love

1. Introduction and Chorus

All performers sing in front of the temple, setting the background of the story.

2. "Amours divins" – "Divine Love"

The chorus and Helen sing together, praising the sacred nature of love.

3. "C'est Parthoénis et Léœna"

Orestes and the chorus recount the story of Parthoénis and Léœna.

4. "Au mont Ida" – "On Mount Ida"

Paris and the chorus describe the scene on Mount Ida.

5. "Marche des Rois de la Grèce" – "March of the Kings of Greece"

A grand procession of the Greek kings, showcasing the arrival of monarchs from different lands.

6. "Gloire au berger victorieux" – "Glory to the Victorious Shepherd"

Helen and the chorus sing in praise of the victorious shepherd.

Act II: Love and Play

1. Interlude

A brief musical transition preparing for the next scene.

**2. "O Reine, en ce jour" – "O Queen, On This Day"

Performed by the chorus, offering blessings and honor to the queen on this special day.

3. "Dis-moi Vénus" – "Tell Me, Venus"

Helen's solo, in which she prays to Venus for guidance in love.

4. "Marche de l'oie" – "March of the Goose"

A whimsical scene showing a procession of geese.

5. "En couronnes tressons les Roses" – "Let Us Weave the Roses into Crowns"

An offstage chorus describes the scene of weaving rose garlands.

6. "Oui c'est un rêve" – "Yes, It Is a Dream"

A duet between Helen and Paris, expressing their romantic dreams and fantasies.

7. "Un mari sage" – "A Wise Husband"

A waltz between Helen and Menelaus, discussing the qualities of an ideal husband.

*Design costume
for this
scene*

Act III: Betrayal and Resolution

1. Interlude

A musical passage preparing for the dramatic shift in the story.

2. "Vénus au Fond de nos âmes" – "Venus in the Depths of Our Souls"

Performed by the chorus and Orestes, expressing reverence for Venus.

3. "Là vrai, je ne suis pas coupable" – "Truly, I Am Not Guilty"

Helen's solo, declaring her innocence.

4. "Lorsque la Grèce est un champ de carnage" – "When Greece Becomes a Field of Carnage"

A trio by Agamemnon, Calchas, and Menelaus, reflecting on the horrors of the Greek battlefield.

5. "La galère de Cythère" – "The Galley to Cythera"

Performed by the chorus, describing the journey to the island of Cythera.

6. "Soyez gais" – "Be Cheerful"

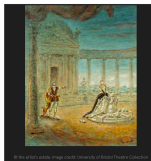
A Tyrolean-style song by Paris, encouraging everyone to remain joyful.

Scene 2



<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O124898/bel-design-messel-oliver-hilary/>

Helen's bedroom



Maquette of Helen's Bedroom in C.B. Cochran's production of Offenbach's *Helen!*, Adelphi Theatre 1932.

Oliver Messel's design for an all white set for Helen's bedroom in Act II, scene ii of C.B. Cochran's production of Offenbach's *Helen!*, Adelphi Theatre 1932, was an innovative and sensational colour scheme for the period. The canopy and drapes are decorated with Rococo designs and the swans either side of the bed are a reference to Helen's classical mythology, Zeus seduced Leda while disguised as a swan, and Helen was born from an egg.



Photograph by Cecil Beaton
Messel wearing a costume from *Helen!* (V&A Collections)

Scene 3

Image (via V&A Images), © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



The costume would appear to be that worn in the original production by Bruce Carfax as Paris in the final scene outside the walls of Troy, when he is rescued from Menelaus by Venus.



Inspiration 《Helen! 》

Helen as a Microcosm of Women's Plight

can be interpreted as:

- A “bargained” woman (married to Menelaus)
- A “kidnapped” woman (taken by Paris)
- A “judged” woman (blamed for causing the war)

From this perspective, she embodies the powerless, objectified, and condemned fate of women in antiquity—victims of male power struggles without a voice.

When Helen says, “I am not guilty,” is she merely deflecting responsibility with irony, or is she resisting her vilification in historical narratives?

Warner writes:

“Helen is not the goal of the war: she is its local excuse. Women bring armies of men together.”

This statement straightforwardly points out that Helen was not the true purpose of the war, but merely a “local excuse” — a pretext used by men to ignite and justify the conflict. Her existence may have sparked the war, but it was not its actual core.

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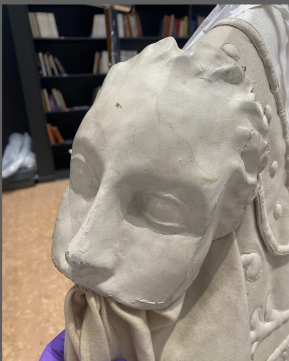
A Tyrolean-style song by Paris, encouraging everyone to remain joyful.

7. Finale – Full Cast

All performers join together to conclude the story.

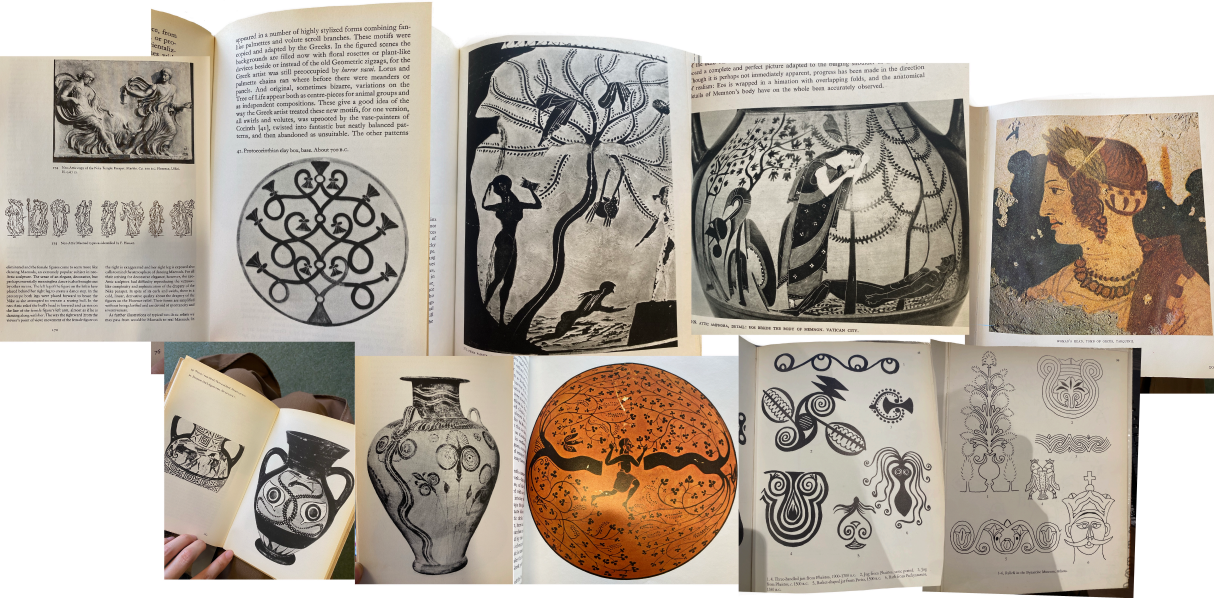


V&A East Storehouse



Leather fabric

pattern inspiration



Boardman, J., "Greek Art", 4th edn (revised and expanded), Thames and Hudson, London, 1997.

Jones, Owen. 1856. "The Grammar of Ornament: Illustrated by Examples from Various Styles of Ornament". London: Day & Son.



Leda and the Hat-pin

Medal

1999 (made)

ARTIST/MAKER

Crook, Linda (maker)

PLACE OF ORIGIN

London (made)

Linda Crook (born 1946) is a British painter and sculptor and among the leading makers of art medals in today. This work belongs to a trilogy in which Crook challenges Greek mythology by giving the upper hand to the female subject. Of the medal, the artist says: "I wanted to make a set of three medals based on stone carvings which I made around three Greek myths. I felt that these myths - Leda and the swan, Apollo and Daphne (Museum no.A.12-2004), and Europa and the Bull (Musuem no. A.13:2004) - needed some re-working. I wanted to free the women in them from the role of "victim". In Leda and the hat-pin, the first in the series, we see the concluding episode of the story, hitherto unpublished. The swan is unable to escape being made into a fancy hat - which Leda tidles up nicely with a hat-pin!"

[Read less](#)



On display

V&A South Kensington
Sculpture Room 111, The
Gilbert Bayes Gallery



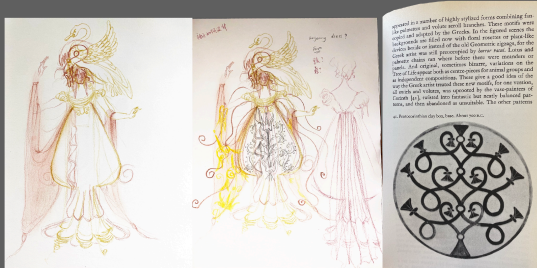
Linda Crook, Leda and the Hat-Pin, art medal (bronze), 2023 (acquired by Victoria and Albert Museum, collection number O.298-020). Courtesy of the artist. V&A Museum.

Hat inspiration

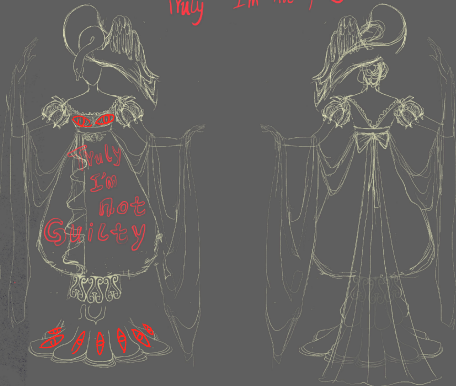
While researching at the V&A Museum, I came across a medal that deeply moved me and felt highly relevant to my theme. Linda Crook is a British painter and sculptor who created a set of three medals based on Greek mythology. This is one of them. Her design concept was also to liberate female figures in Greek stories from their roles as "victims."

Walter Crane, Swan, Rush and Iris, design for dado wallpaper, gouache and watercolor on paper, England, 1875. Victoria & Albert Museum, accession number E.17-1945. Public domain.

Design process



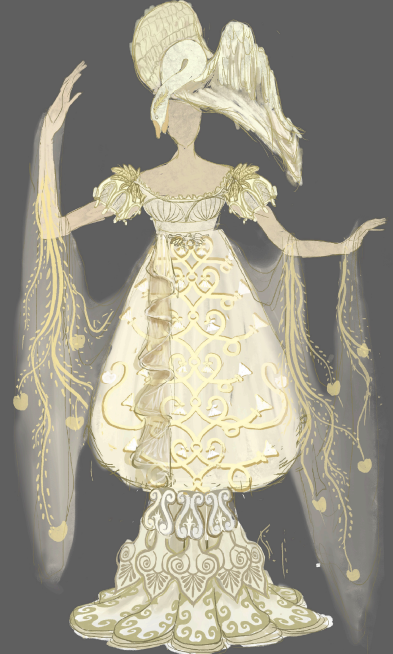
arranged in a number of little vertical lines resembling fan
and arranged in the circles for the figure across the
sides and in the back row with floral motifs on plain the
design. In the panels of the civil Government signs, the de-
signs were all perceived by their own. Lines and
curves shape are where before there were straight or
sharp. All angles, corners, lines, variations on the
line of the figure with an accent on the central figure and
a separate composition. There are a good deal of the
and the back were made close row made, for one reason,
to make the design, as required by the requirements of
Greek art, which was before the world behind pat-
terns, all the elements in available. The other pattern
in the panels of the civil Government signs...



Truly I'm not guilty



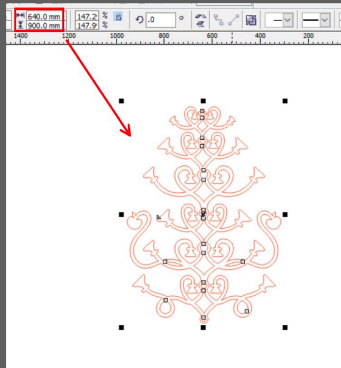
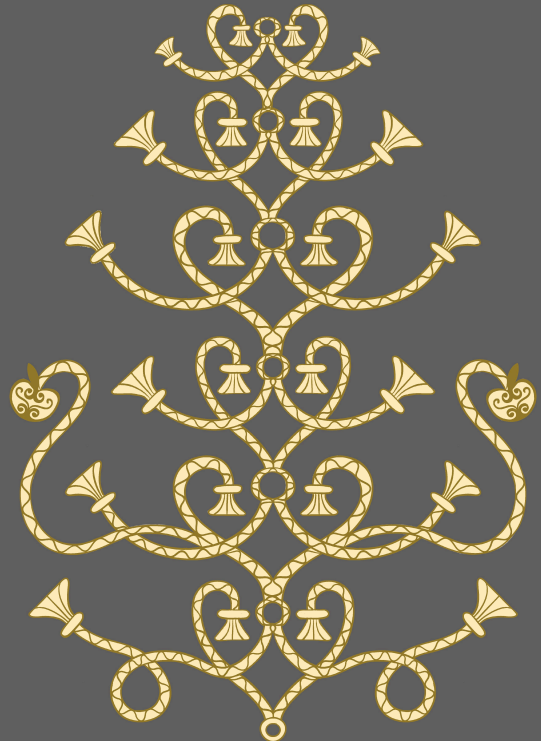
Inspired by Oliver Messel's stage design for Helen and Linda crook's medal design, I envisioned a garment that appears conventional in daylight but reveals a hidden narrative in darkness: eyes formed by fluorescent beads and glowing embroidery that reads "I'm not guilty." These elements suggest the enduring gaze cast upon women in myth and speak to contemporary challenges to female agency.



Embroidery design

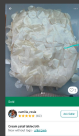


Lase cutting design

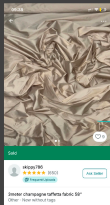
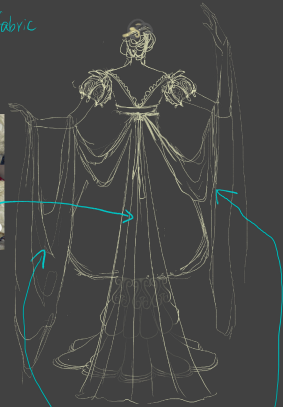


Fabric

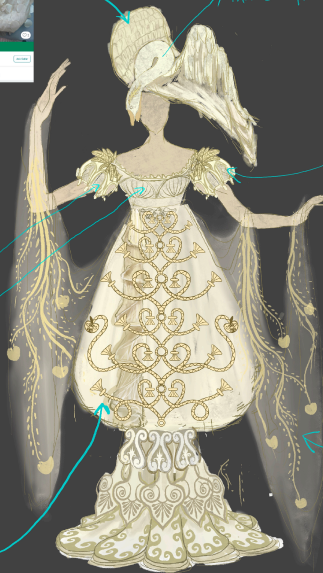
My main source of fabric comes from surplus materials originally listed on Vinted and other second-hand websites, primarily consisting of taffeta and silk organza.



make from surplus fabric



for embroidery

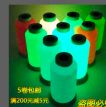
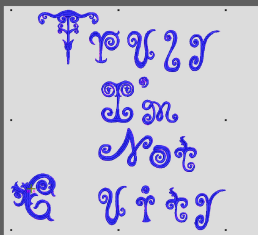
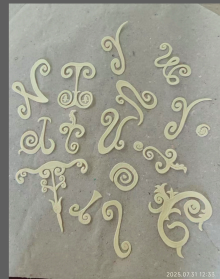
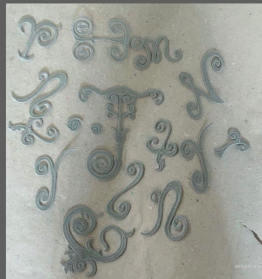


excess fabric from the other order



working process

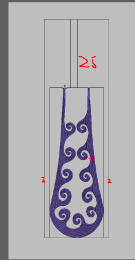
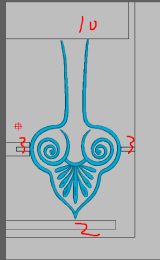
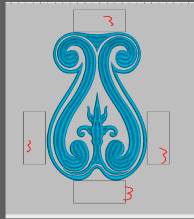
embroidery



working process

embroidery

Combined hand embroidery and laser-cut techniques bring ancient motifs to life with both craftsmanship and precision.



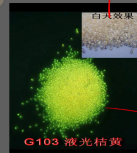
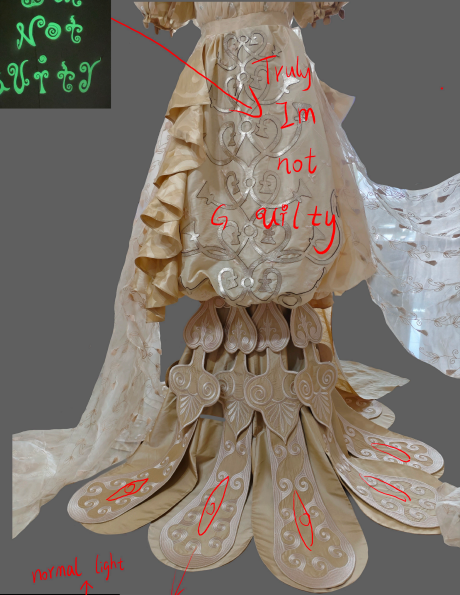
working process



laser cutting



working process



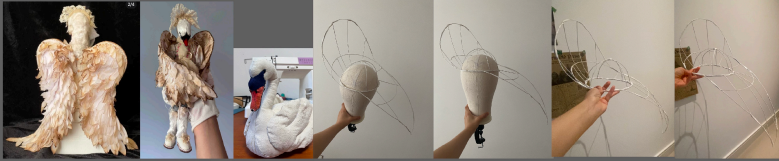
bead embroidery

working process



working process

Hat









Opera uniquely merges visual art, narrative, music, and performance into a cohesive, emotionally immersive experience. This project has reshaped how I think about opera—not merely as static staging, but as a dynamic canvas for immersive storytelling and layered narrative. I now see costume design not just as dressing a scene, but as crafting narrative interfaces between performers and spectators. By using costumes as storytelling tools—blending tradition with unexpected elements like hidden messages and interaction with lighting—I believe I help reframe opera as an evolving, participatory art form. Reinventing opera for contemporary audiences, I aim to embed interactivity, symbolism, and emotional cues into costume design, making opera feel fresh, resonant, and inclusive—where every spectator can uncover meaning through active participation.

References

Unknown photographer. (n.d.) Helen [Photograph; set design “Ttessel ofver htaryl”]. London: Victoria & Albert Museum. Courtesy of the V&A; © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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Victoria & Albert Museum. (c. 1820–1823) Evening Dress [Evening dress; silk satin trimmed with applied silk satin and silk bobbin lace]. London: Victoria & Albert Museum; accession no. T.156-1962.

Fashion Museum Bath. (late 1810s) Beautiful duck egg blue silk evening dress [Evening dress; fuller skirt with cream satin bands and rouleaux loops]. Bath: Fashion Museum, Bath