

Katie Concannon
Patternmaking through Draping

The Inspiration: *Cinderella* (2015) Work Dress

For my final project of my Winter Term Internship, I chose to recreate Ella's work dress from Disney's live-action remake of *Cinderella*, released in 2015. On my first watch, I was enamored by this dress. I was attracted to it because of the structured bodice, flowing skirt, and the delicate, almost transparent portions of fabric at the sleeves. It also held an element of mystery because I've yet to find a satisfactory recreation of the garment online. While mimics of various Cinderella dresses are common for cosplayers, children's costumes, and brides, all of the examples I found seemed to lack the combination of structure and daintiness that made this dress so distinct. In this draping project, I hoped to discover how this effect was achieved and capture it.



Ella's work dress (Powell).

As I explored the available information online about Ella's dress, my sense of the complex decisions that went into costume designer Sandy Powell's aesthetic vision deepened. There was an extraordinary amount of history, profit, and influence relying on this dress. When the original *Cinderella* was released in 1950, its critical acclaim and popularity saved the Walt Disney Studios from bankruptcy. The Disney princesses once again proved their worth during the "Disney Renaissance" from 1989-1999 in which the popularity of its most iconic heroines, including Ariel, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan were introduced, sky-rocketing the studio to its modern-day domination in the film sphere ("Disney Renaissance"). These princesses are as iconic to Disney's brand as Mickey Mouse. Each is symbolized by her unique colorway and style, instantly recognizable and endlessly profitable to successive generations caught up in the magic. Without the dress, there would be no princess.



Each princess is visually distinguished through the cut and color of her dress (“Disney Princess”).

While less iconic than her ball gown, Ella spends a majority of the film’s run time in her work dress and it therefore communicates the most information about the setting and her character. The delicate pleats and baby blue color project information about her femininity and mild nature. Additionally, the dress’s simplicity and practicality, often emphasized by an apron, contribute to the plot momentum as she is required by her stepmother to work as a maid.



Ella is shown farming, riding horses, scrubbing floors, and sleeping in this dress (Powell).

In essence, the live-action *Cinderella* is a remake of one of most famous productions of one of the richest corporations on the planet, and Ella’s work dress is one of the most important aesthetic elements of that movie. A lot depended on it. This made my job harder, as we can be sure no expenses were spared. As Robin helpfully pointed out, I’m never going to achieve an exact recreation because I don’t have \$20,000 to drop on this dress, as was likely spent in the film.

At the same time that so much relied on the artistry of this dress, it occurred to me that it was equally important that its appearance be... well, a little bit boring. While I find a childlike joy in re-watching every *Cinderella* remake that exists, I make no claims to the cinematic or

screenwriting brilliance of the live action version. It had to generally appeal to people across cultures and language barriers, and to children and adults alike. Any bold cinematic choices would likely have been criticized for departing from the original animated version. The result? I say this lovingly: It's a bland movie.

My impression is that Ella's work dress was under a similar pressure. It had to appeal to modern-day notions of beauty while also communicating a vaguely historical setting. Leaning too far into a specific historical time or place would risk drawing the mind to the nastier parts of a historical era—human rights violations or a lack of plumbing, for example.

I find this lack of historical specificity to be a loss. One of my favorite Cinderella versions, *Ever After*, succeeds because the directors made the choice to set the film in a fantastical version of Renaissance-era France. The intentional inclusion of historical elements in court life are intriguing and often humorous. The dresses are unfamiliar enough to the modern-day eye to appear unique and thoroughly enchanting, Leonardo DaVinci makes a cameo, and our protagonist, Danielle, received more in-depth character building because she is allowed to interact with her surroundings—she speaks out against indentured servitude, for example, and struggles to overcome the class difference between her and the prince.



While making no claims to historical authenticity, Ever After embraces a fantastical version of late 15th century fashion. This is the gown Danielle wears to the masked ball, and also my favorite dress to ever exist (Beavan).

Cinderella (2015), on the other hand, foregoes this specificity, which is visible in the costumes. While they still appear to be heavily influenced by historical styles, they communicate more subtle messaging about our modern-day perceptions of “historical dress,” rather than anything that people actually wore in the past.

Ultimately, Ella's work dress had to project a message about her character, and thereby Disney's brand. It had to be historically influenced but in a way that was understated enough to match with Ella's persona of humility, and not distract a viewer who is seeing through the lens of contemporary perceptions of beauty.

Historical Influences

While the *Cinderella* world is not set in a specific place or time period, the costumes show clear ties to traditions of Western dress, particularly among Ella and her stepfamily.

Ella's dress is reminiscent of styles in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. The silhouette of Ella's torso is curvier than would have been allowed by stays boned with reed, cane, or wood. Nonetheless, the inverted conical effect of her bodice support is similar to silhouettes seen during this time. Additionally, the bottom of her bodice which dips down into a shallow 'V' which was also a popular stylistic choice.

I used Lydia Edwards's book *How to Read A Dress* to learn more about dress fashion from the latter half of the 18th century. Three popular dress styles: *robe à la française*, *polonoise*, and *anglaise* each contained distinct elements, but also shared features in common with each other and the Ella work dress. These include fitted, $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves, wide and square necklines, and roundness at skirt waist, with extra volume at the hips or rear (Edwards 69-107). I found it interesting that the *robe à la polonoise* fashion appropriated working women's fashion by incorporating shorter underskirts and overskirts that were looped, fastened, or tied up, which prevented skirts from dragging in dirt. This is an example of how work dress influenced fashions of the elite. Lastly, I can even see influences from the *chemise à la reine* fashion in the gauzy, translucent layers of voile that cover the work dress's structural elements (Edwards 76).



Two images of a *robe à l'anglaise* show similarities to Ella's dress in their fitted sleeves, conical torso, and rounded volume at skirt waist (Left: Met, Right: Philadelphia Museum).

Powell describes the stepsisters' costumes as "the 1980s version of the 19th century," due to the garish, bright colors and emphasized shoulder height (Camhi). To me, they appear to be a mix between 1950s prom dress and the 1830s, with excessive decoration, puffed sleeves, and hems that skim the tops of their shoes.



Powell explains that the stepsisters' dresses were designed to look exuberant, garish, and somewhat tacky. The coloring is modern but stylistically, I thought they had some elements in common with dresses from the 1830s (Powell, Los Angeles Public Library).

Lastly, the stepmother's costumes draw heavily from the late Victorian period, with a tight-fitting, elongated bodice, high neckline, and visible bustle in certain scenes.



The stepmother's style seems to be influenced by the late Victorian silhouette (Powell, Iowa State Collections).

I found it interesting that Ella's dress seemed to harken from the earliest time period, as it ties into concepts that I've learned in my environmental studies classes. In the Western canon, a long-standing trope exists with its roots in the Romantic era of a fantasy of "a time gone by" which depicts a simpler, un-technologized past. In many ways an antidote to the pollution and environmental destruction of capitalism, it recalls visions of people living off the land in harmony with nature and animals. The fantasy genre as it exists today is defined by this

mythicized vision of pastoral European history (think of *Lord of the Rings*), with protagonists often depicted as young, white farmers, peddlers, or shepherds. Meanwhile, antagonists or outsiders are portrayed using long-standing stereotypes of racial Others and are defined by their darkness, ugliness, or savagery (think of the Dothraki from *Game of Thrones*, or most of the Disney villains).



Villains in Disney princess movies are defined aesthetically by ugliness and darkness (“List”). Elsewhere extensive critique has been done on how Disney films narratively associate whiteness, purity, youth and beauty with moral good, while racial “Other-ness”, atypical bodies, and queerness are associated with evil (Somerton). Compare this photo to the lineup of Disney princesses.

The costumes in *Cinderella* follow this trope by associating the evilness of Ella’s stepfamily with garish, artificial colors and modern styles made possible through industrial advancement such as the steel-boned corsets of the late Victorian period. Meanwhile, Ella’s dress remains in a more “pure,” mythologized past.

While the movie never explicitly goes into the sexual undertones of this personification, Ella’s clothes demonstrate a projection of femininity that is markedly different from her stepmother (who I’m now realizing doesn’t have an actual name). At one point in the movie before the ball, Ella admits that until the prince, she’d never met a man other than her father (yikes!). Meanwhile, Ella’s stepmother is portrayed as a gold digger who married Ella’s father in hopes of accruing his wealth and status.

This personification of innocence vs. seductive know-how is portrayed in their clothes. While both show a good amount of cleavage, Ella’s unkempt hair and the ash smudges on her cheeks from which she got her nickname demonstrate an irreverence towards her appearance. In contrast, her stepmother’s sleek coiffure, visible makeup including red lipstick, and body-conscious silhouette suggests that she is aware of her beauty and seeks to use it to her advantage. I found it interesting that Disney strayed from their usual depiction of villainous female protagonists in this respect, who are usually defined by their ugliness in opposition to the protagonist’s beauty. Nonetheless, the aspects of seduction and vanity suggested in the stepmother’s costume use long-standing sexist tropes to further her persona of cruelty.

The Construction Process

Pattern Pieces and Materials

Before draping a mock-up of this dress, I first needed to determine its structure. Because the dress from the film has been included in various Disney exhibitions, I was able to take

advantage of detail photos taken by other fans and cosplayers who were interested in the garment's construction.

It was immediately apparent that in order to get the correct fit, this dress requires bodice structure. The actress was likely wearing a corset. In order to save time and learn a new skill, I am boning the bodice itself. These bones will not be visible from the outside, but will provide the bust support and stiff, tight-fitted look of the bodice which shows no visible wrinkling, even when Ella is bending or riding a horse. Boning the bodice was unnecessary for the first mock-up because the hard foam of my dress form will mimic this effect.

We determined that the film dress likely used several types of fabrics. One or more layers of cotton voile created the delicate, wispy skirt layers and sleeves, which are so fine as to be almost translucent. A broadcloth was also likely used to add volume to the skirt. Because I am boning my bodice, it will include a foundational layer of coutil for structure. The bodice will also incorporate a layer of broadcloth.

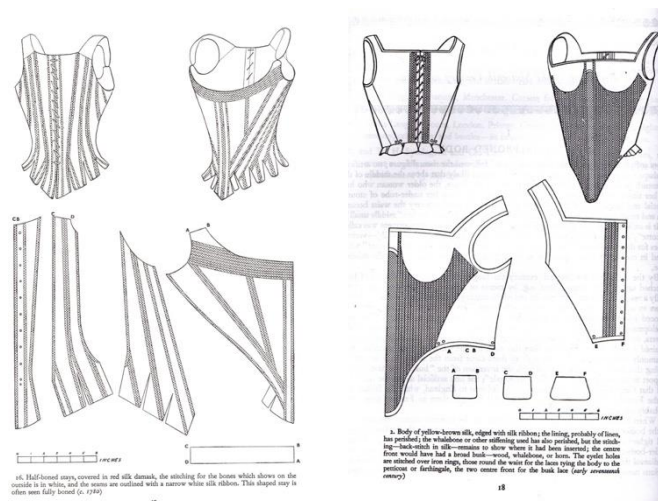
Carol and Robin explained that the purpose of the initial drape is not to be identical to the dresses we were attempting to create. Instead, it is to establish what pattern pieces we would need, as well as how we were going to accomplish specific stylistic details involved in the patterning.

We ultimately determined that I would need:

- a bodice
- sleeves, pleated at the cap, $\frac{3}{4}$ length and tight in fit
- a pleated placket attached at the shoulder and center front displaying the pleated 'V' detail as well as bloused bust
- one layer of skirt pleated at the top, attached to the bodice via waistband

The bodice, while unboned, would be made from duck canvas to mimic the structure of coutil. Everything else was draped and constructed with muslin.

At this stage, examining sources for historical draping proved to be very helpful. I used diagrams that we had already referenced from Sharon Sobel's book *Draping Period Costumes* to guide my seam placement, in particular the 1820s bodice which made use of a drop shoulder and back armhole princess seam as seen in the film. I additionally referenced historical patterns from decades that the Ella dress seemed to draw from.



Patterns from Norah Waugh's book The Cut of Women's Clothes depict late 17th and 18th century stays (18, 42). Ella's bodice is a combination of many elements that draw from the same general

time period. For example, my center front bodice piece looks similar to that of the c. 1780s stays without the tabs, while my center back pieces are nearly identical to the back piece from the 17th c. example. While my bodice 'V' is not quite so distinct, it is also incorporated. Hopefully once boned, my bodice will provide the same structural effect as a pair of stays.

Lastly, we determined that the decorative elements of the dress would be achieved primarily through cartridge pleating. Cartridge pleats can be packed densely, one next to the other, like a sheath of paper. They stand out perpendicularly to the body as opposed to lying flat against it, like knife pleats. They would form the 'V' at center front, as well as add volume to the skirt and sleeve cap.

Construction Timeline



Style lines were established using ¼" black twill tape. These help to determine where seams should fall when draping. This dress included a low, wide neckline, a princess seam creating a 'V' at front, and an armhole princess seam at back.



The bodice was draped out of muslin. Seams are marked with pencil. Notches are marked along long, curved lines to help determine the placement of ease on the pattern.



The draped bodice pieces were transferred to paper and then to canvas.



The bodice was constructed. This was the only part of the whole process that went smoothly!



My first two attempts at sleeve patterns were incorrect. In my first two tries, I slashed and spread only at the sleeve cap, thinking that this would preserve the tight fit of the arm. However, only adjusting the cap resulted in a sleeve that was ill-fitting and restrictive. I should have known better. In most cases it is impossible to isolate and change just one part of a pattern without also affecting everything else.



This photo shows my first attempt at both sleeves and the center front pleated piece. I marked a 60" width of muslin at $\frac{1}{4}$ " intervals in five lines, one inch apart. These lines were then basted. Pulling the strings at either end pleats the fabric together. My pleats were too messy, large, and loose, and there was too much volume gathered in at the bust. At this point, I still thought that my pleated pattern piece would resemble a 'V' to mimic the shape of the pleats I was trying to achieve in the final product.



Getting closer! Adding more lines of stitching to the cartridge pleats allowed me to cinch them in so they could lay tightly parallel to each other. It was at this point that I determined that in the film dress, all cartridge pleats were likely $\frac{1}{16}$ ". The pleating at bodice front and at the skirt waist is so small that from a distance, the mass of pleating almost looks solid—the individual lines disappear. For this mock-up, I would be sticking to $\frac{1}{8}$ " to save time, but this is something to keep in mind moving forward.



The sleeve pattern is corrected according to Carol's advice. I drafted a fitted one-piece sleeve using my arm measurement and the measurement of my bodice armhole. I then slashed and spread this pattern 3.5" in two places, reaching from sleeve cap to elbow line. This evenly distributed the excess fabric down the length of the sleeve.

In addition to drafting my sleeves incorrectly, I also realized that I was sewing my cartridge pleats incorrectly. I did not include the facing, or folded-over portion, at the pleats' edge that enable the cartridge pleats to sit upright. This picture shows a corrected version of the pleat stitching at the cap.



This photo shows the drastic difference in fit between my first (right) and final (left) sleeve attempts. The length is the same, but my corrected sleeve pattern allows for a more relaxed drape that follows the natural hang of an arm at rest.



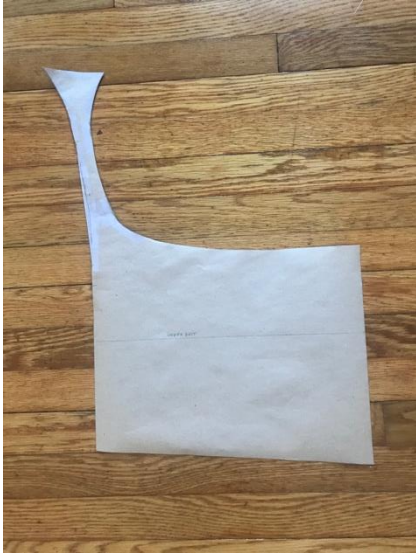
The photo on the right shows my first attempt at the sleeve cartridge pleats, which just looked like gathers. Once I reviewed the correct way of pleating and stitching with Carol, the photo on the left shows a successful attempt at cartridge pleats. The sleeves are finally done!



The process of drafting the skirt was simple, but quite laborious because it involved a large amount of fabric. This photo shows my center front panel. I also made two side front panels, and two back panels. The waist was measured to my waist, with length added according to my 1/8" pleating ratio. As is visible in the photo, the side seams were angled outwards 5"-10" to achieve a flowing, gently sloped skirt shape, rather than a dome or bell shape that results from rectangular skirt panels. I used about six yards of fabric in total.



This photo depicts the marking of my cartridge pleats at the waist of my center front panel. 3" was left flat at center front to accommodate for the dip in the bodice because I am not yet drafting a shaped waistline.



At this point, I also converted my center front pleated piece to a paper pattern. While it does have an angled bottom hem, we determined that this piece actually has center front and side seams that are parallel to each other, with pleats cinched tighter at the bottom than the top, rather than a pattern piece shaped like a 'V'.



The final product!

Challenges and Skills Learned

In terms of technical skills, my biggest gains from this project were practicing cartridge pleats as well as drafting a skirt pattern for the first time. Even though we established beforehand that I would be using cartridge pleats at center front, sleeve caps, and skirt waist, it didn't fully dawn on me until the end of the project that about 80% of the work involved marking and stitching these pleats.

One challenge that I kept running into was the limits of my materials. Robin made a helpful metaphor: "If the muslin you're working with right now is the baked good equivalent of bread, then the cotton voile that the actual dress is made out of is croissant." What she meant, and what Carol had to constantly remind me of, was that muslin and duck canvas simply won't work in the same way that voile and a corseted bodice will work, and so it was inevitable that this first mock-up will look unsatisfactory in some ways.

Additionally, this project taught me the importance of a lesson that Carol has repeated before, which is that you don't truly know a skill until you've incorporated it into a garment—and even then, it often takes several times to really feel comfortable with a technique. While I knew how to do cartridge pleats in theory, it wasn't until I had tried and failed a couple of times that I got the hang of it, and I still have plans for how I can improve when I begin the next stage of dressmaking.

If I were to do this project over again, I would:

- Consult Carol before embarking on several faulty sleeve drafts
- Sew my skirt panels together before stitching the cartridge pleats to have more control over the cinching process
- Make my waist band longer to accommodate for shrinkage during the process of stitching the cartridge pleats onto it
- Add 1" onto the neckline of the center front pleated panel

I am proud of:

- Getting a pretty skirt shape on my first draft
- Being able to notice and correct my mistakes when they happened
- My cartridge pleats—even though they are all too bulky, they are achieving the same effect as Ella's work dress, so correcting these will involve fiddling with my patterns once I start working in voile

Lastly, writing this paper and talking over the construction steps of this dress has drawn my attention to how I don't yet have an excellent working vocabulary for how to talk about dressmaking. While I can picture something in my head, I often have a difficult time describing it. Should I refer to something as volume? A gather? A pleat? A poof? I know that these skills will come with more practice, and that writing about my projects is an excellent way to cultivate better verbal skills in regard to dressmaking.

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