

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Edith Head designed clothes for the mid-century aesthetic

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The character Edna Mode in the Disney movie franchise "The Incredibles" cleverly said, "I never look back dahling! It distracts from the now." This week, Palm Springs looks back with delight, and not a small amount of distraction, at the mid-century aesthetic. • "Incredibles" Director Brad Bird said the diminutive character came from several different inspirations. Palm Springs' mid-century modern architecture, so forward-looking in the middle of the 20th century, set the style for the film, and Edna Mode, whatever her multiple origins, certainly conjures up Edith Head, the quintessential Hollywood costume designer of the time.

Both Edna Mode and Edith Head wore bangs and big glasses, and both were exceedingly tiny in physical stature, but giants for their memorable and witty aphorisms.

The riff on Head in the animated movie makes understanding her real biography and statements even more interesting. Once quoted as saying "All women look the same in the bathtub," Head had the ability to dress women so beautifully, her designs defined them.

Modernism Week this year offers Susan Claassen in a confection of a stage play offering delicious Hollywood stories from the intimate perspective of the woman who created the style of the stars. The legendary designer's incredible six-decade career saw her dressing the greatest stars of the century on over 1,000 motion pictures for which she received 35 Academy Award nominations and won an unprecedented eight Oscars.

The Modernism Week presentation A Conversation of Wit, Wisdom, and a Whisper of Gossip with Edith Head (2 and 6 p.m. Friday, Feb. 23) is being offered again after selling out to rave reviews at Modernism Week 2023. According to festival consultant Mark Davis, Claassen isn't merely an impersonator of Head, but she perfectly embodies her, with a full-theater production including furnishings, photographs, dress forms, costumes, and, most importantly, her quotes.

"Accentuate the positive and camouflage the rest" was her adage.

Head's biographer, Paddy Calistro, notes Head dressed the most famous stars of the time from Mae West and Clara Bow to Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn and Bette Davis. She also famously attired Ginger Rogers, Elizabeth Taylor, Cary Grant, Steve McQueen, Paul Newman and Robert Redford.

Head, like the rest of the Hollywood crowd, often came to Palm Springs. The Los Angeles Times reported that "just outside the Movie Colony neighborhood" she had a home at 1172 May Drive.

Born in nearby San Bernardino, Head began sketching at a young age. She once said, "I didn't have what you would call an artistic or cultural background. We lived in the desert and we had burros and jackrabbits and things like that."

She attended University of California, Berkeley, studying language and art. She earned a master's degree at Stanford in French. She taught French and Spanish at the Bishop School of Girls in La Jolla and then at the Hollywood School for Girls. Bored just teaching, she studied art at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. In 1923, she was hired as a sketch artist at Paramount Pictures. Incredibly, she became the head costume designer in 1938.

Head's distinctive designs became synonymous with classic Hollywood glamour.

In 1956 the fabled designer was at the microphone in Palm Springs. Many in the audience awaiting her pronouncements were wearing "Bermuda-type shorts," according to the Desert Sun.

"Edith Head, paramount Studios designer, will give a run down on the clothes worn by the men and women guests attending the premiere of Bob Hope's latest, 'That Certain Feeling' at the Plaza Theatre... According to reports, the audience will represent the latest thing in shorts wear and casual, resort type clothes. A poll showed that practically all the men will arrive in Bermuda or walking shorts with a number of white dinner jackets scheduled by the more formal minded. Shorts are indicated by the majority of feminine guests and the evening promises some gay surprises and unusual clothes... Among the feminine stars Miss Head will introduce and upon whose costumes she will comment are Eva Marie Saint, co-star with Hope; Lucille Ball, Ginny Simms, Bonita Granville Wraether, Virginia Farrell."

That evening, The Desert Sun article states, Head "interviewed stars and a few Villagers arriving at the premiere. Among them were Bob Hope (in shorts) who arrived with daughter Linda and son Tony, Groucho Marx, Sue and Alan Ladd, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Joan Droste (she arrived on horseback and was wearing a glamorous Western outfit with decorated Palm



Audrey Hepburn, famously attired by Edith Head, with her husband, Mel Ferrer, at the Racquet Club in Palm Springs c. 1955. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Famed designer Edith Head had a Palm Springs home "just outside the Movie Colony neighborhood" at 1172 May Drive.

Springs hat) and the Charles Mendelson (they wore leather Tyrolean outfits) and Diane Martin in denims and diamonds. Miss Head commented that this was a new look in openings, differing widely from Hollywood's dressed-to-the-teeth premieres."

Indeed, just two years later, at the 30th annual Academy Awards, United Press International writer Vernon Scott wrote in an article titled "Movie Stars Head Mutiny Against the Sack Dress," "Such tinsel town glamour girls as Elizabeth Taylor, Lana Turner,

Lauren Bacall, Deborah Kerr, Natalie Wood and Janet Leigh will bedeck their curves in high style gowns—under strict cleavage supervision."

"Behind the parade of beauties, six-time Oscar winner Edith Head, who has ruled out such French frivolities as the chemise (didn't that used to be some kind of underwear?) and the sack. 'We want our models to look like girls instead of bags,' the outspoken wardrobe designer said."

In her campaign against the sack dress, Head was further quoted as saying "Your dresses should be tight enough to show you're a woman and loose enough to show you're a lady."

Vernon continued by quoting Head: "'I've asked the stars participating in the show not to wear black or white dresses because they don't televise well, and we've advised against wearing too much glitter for the same reason."

"Our big problem will be cleavage. If it comes to a contest of low necklines, we'll be ready. A special wardrobe censor...er, consultant, will be backstage with small pieces of fabric to tuck into any necklines that plunge too deeply. But we can't tell the stars exactly what to wear," she said. "They provide their own clothes and naturally believe they know what is best."

"Miss Head went on to say that nowhere in the world have so many movie stars gathered together to show off high style. 'If one star appears at a fashion show, it's usually a sell-out,' she said. 'Academy Award night we'll have such diversified personalities as Irene Dunne, Mae West, Eva Marie Saint and Esther Williams on hand. Of course, they will be performing, accepting or presenting awards. But every woman viewer will be looking at their clothes. Most actresses like to wear bright red gowns, but the color washes out to a dull gray on television. Many stars consult me about their clothes, but they don't always take my advice."

Stars incredibly ignored her advice at their peril. Head was also quoted as saying "There's nothing like a row of Oscars for putting the fear of God into an actress who thinks she knows everything about dress designing." To avoid such peril, Mr. Incredible in the Disney movie had no choice but to heed Edna Mode's advice about his superhero costume. "No capes!"

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