



Costume Fandom: All Dressed Up with Some Place to Go!

By Dr. John L. Flynn

For almost 50 years, costume fandom has had a consistent and widespread following with costumers markedly influencing science fiction writers, artists and the media. Costuming, as an innovative, three-dimensional art form, has probed and broken all limits of imagination in SF and fantasy. From the first Worldcon in 1939 to last year's Worldcon in Philadelphia, costume fandom has emerged as a robust and dynamic force within science-fiction fandom.

At the First World Science Fiction Convention in New York in 1939, a 22-year-old Forrest J Ackerman and his friend Myrtle R. Jones appeared in the first SF costumes among the 185 attendees. The future editor of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* was dressed as a rugged looking star pilot, and his female companion

was adorned in a gown recreated from the classic 1933 film *Things to Come*. Both of them created quite a stir among the somber gathering of writers, artists and fans (plural of fan), and injected a fanciful, imaginary quality into the convention's overly serious nature.

Frederik Pohl, in his book *The Way The Future Was*, described the couple as "stylishly dressed in the fashions of the 25th century" but feared that they had started an ominous precedent. He was right! So successful were their costumes that the following year, about a dozen fans turned out in their own "scientifiction" apparel.

Now, over a half century later, costume fandom has come to represent a large segment of the hardcore genre audience. Artists like Kelly Freas, Wendy Pini and Tim Hildebrandt, authors like Julian May and L. Sprague de Camp, and fans by the hundreds dress regularly in costume. Groups, such as the U.K.'s Knights of St. Fantomy, the Society for Creative Anachronism and the Costumers' Guild, conduct business and ceremony in costume, and the masquerade has become the central event of most large conventions. But it has not evolved without its problems.

Rotsler's Rules

Since costume fandom is a collection of individuals with a common background in SF, and a specialized interest in costuming-whether it be design,

construction or display-there have been major disagreements on costuming rules and blunders, For example, in the late 1960's, one fan covered himself in peanut butter-in order to appear as "The Turd"-and when the spread began to melt, he became a nuisance to himself and his fellow costumers. At the 1982 Chicago Worldcon masquerade, a naked woman *accidentally* set herself on fire with two candles, and another fan colored his skin with green food dye and was unable to wash it off for several weeks.

Because of these specific problems, and many others like them, author and cartoonist William Rotsler proposed 35 costuming guidelines, with numerous corollaries since submitted by active costumers, "Rotsler's Rules"-as they have been formally recognized-cover everything from not wearing name tags on costumes to prohibiting live fire or explosives on stage. They are most practical, and they have helped raise the level and quality of the masquerade. (The rules have been printed in *The Kennedy Masquerade Compendium* by Peggy Kennedy, or they're available from local Costumers' Guild chapters.)

Costume Division System

The division of costumes into separate groups-based on skill and prior experience-was originally proposed in 1980 by Peggy Kennedy, the Grande Dame of Costuming, and has helped improve the art tremendously. Basically, her system (which has become known as the Skills Division System) makes masquerade

competitions more fair. It permits costumers to compete according to their experience level, and is designed to encourage participation by first-timers as well as old pros.

The Divisions:

Novice: A costumer who has never before entered a costume competition (i.e. at a Worldcon, Costume Con, or regional) and/or has not won an award at a major con.

Journeyman: A costumer who has taken at least one major convention award, but has not yet advanced to the next level.

Craftsman (a.k.a. Artisan): A costumer who has won three or more awards at a major regional convention, but not yet three awards at a Worldcon.

Master: A costumer who has won at least three major Worldcon awards or has won at least one Master level award at a Worldcon or other designated competition (Costume Con, for example).

The concept of separating the less experienced costumers from multiple winners has been generally well received. Costumers find the system fair, and many first-time costumers have stated that without the system, they never would have had a chance. Within the structure of the Skills Division System, costumes are further designated into three distinct categories: Original, Re-creation and Historic. The rationale behind these classifications recognizes the unique skills and

talents behind each costuming style and gives like costumes the chance to compete against like costumes.

Original costumes are those with designs that are a product of the costumer's imagination or are taken from a fictional description. They reflect the designer's outlook on science fiction or fantasy, and are often drawn from the creator's favorite literary works. Since they are original, the choice of design, construction, materials, and props are left *entirely* to the costumer's discretion.

Recreation, or media, costumes are those costumes whose design is copied, reproduced or derived from film, television, comic books, paintings, etc. They are the most common choices by costumers, but are also the most difficult to construct. Since recreation costumes are not the maker's original designs, they require precision and the demanding skills of reproduction. Design, colors, construction techniques, and textures of fabrics must all be considered in order to duplicate a costume that 10 million people may have seen (and loved) in a movie.

Historic costumes are those costumes whose design and construction must be carefully documented and researched from history. The proliferation of time travel stories has made historic costumes among the most popular at SF conventions; they are also very difficult to construct. Since they represent living history, the need for authenticity and exactness-much like Re-creation costumes-is very important. Many historic costumers spend hours researching the designs and

time period before they ever begin making a costume.

Types of Costumes

Over the years, as the masquerade has become both larger and more complex, two distinct types of costumes have also evolved: the Formal, or Presentation, costume and the Hall costume. The *Formal* costume is one that- because of its elaborate, delicate or uncomfortable nature-requires a formal stage presentation. Specifically designed for the masquerade competition, such costumes are generally large, colorful and spectacular-but *not* very functional or wearable. The *Hall* costume, however, generally worn at *any* time during the convention, can be viewed as art transformed into wearable clothing. From a simple, floppy hat and scarf to a full dress uniform, the outfit may also represent the wearer's "inner persona," or may express a general sense of solidarity with a particular fan group. Usually fun and comfortable, Hall costumes offer both the beginning and experienced costumer a practical avenue for their craft. (Note: at Worldcon and larger regionals, judges award Hall costumes with special ribbons.)

Depending on the convention's size, the type of costume you need for the masquerade is very important. At Worldcons, NASFICs, Costume Cons, and most regionals, the masquerade is highly structured, and only Formal costumes are recommended on stage. However, at small conventions with minor masquerades, or costume calls, the rooms are smaller, the stage is less sturdy, and the crowd is

closer. Elaborateness is scaled down, and many costumers will show here a costume intended as a Hall costume for a larger con. Experimentations at recent convention masquerades have given rise to a third type known as "spontaneous costuming." At Norwescon IV and SciCon attendees who didn't bring a costume were given an hour to use their creativity to construct a costume out of rags, tinfoil, glue, glitter, and colored paper. The results were astounding, and the emphasis was on talent and originality. Future masquerade organizers, including those at Costume Con, are considering spontaneous as part of a Friday evening social.

Costume Conventions

Following the 1982 Chicago World Science Fiction Convention, author/costumer Adrienne Martine-Barnes proposed a convention strictly for costuming. She envisioned a yearly gathering where costumers could relax and share their talents and personal expertise. Karen and Kelly Turner and other members of the Fantasy Costumers' Guild lent their organizational skills and made that dream a reality.

Slightly more than 100 people turned out to swap stories and techniques at the first Costume Con (held in San Diego, CA in winter '83). The convention held three masquerades-an SF/Fantasy, a Historic, and a Future Fashion show-and featured some of fandom's finest costumers. It also published a Fashion Folio and a Whole Costumer's Catalog, and presented panels, workshops, and seminars on

many costume-related topics. Costume Con was so successful that it was repeated the following year in San Diego.

When members of the Greater Columbia Fantasy Costumers' Guild ran Costume Con III, the event reached its broadest audience. Begun as an intimate gathering of costume friends and competitors, this yearly event had developed an international status. Attendees from all over the U.S. Canada, and the Virgin Islands flocked to Columbia, MD in '85. More than 350 costumers participated in the four-day conference and its three masquerades. Costume Con IV was held spring '86 in Pasadena, CA by Drew and Kathy Sanders, and Costume Cons have been held each year since then by various groups around the world. This yearly convention has become the most important event for costumers. The panels, workshops and seminars provide valuable hints and techniques, ranging from "Beading Headdresses" to "Building Robots Out of Fiberglass"-and the atmosphere is one of learning and friendly cooperation. Whether new or established costumer, Costume Con has something for all.

Costumers' Guild

The Greater Columbia Fantasy Costumers' Guild (referred to simply as the Costumers' Guild) was founded in 1984 by Marty Gear, Pat Hammer, Janet Wilson, Sue Abramovitz and John Flynn & Dorsey Rogers as a non-profit charitable and educational organization. Its original goal was to run Costume Con

III; but after the convention, the group's purpose was expanded "to promote the educational, cultural, literary, artistic and theatrical advancement of costume design and construction," according to its charter. Many of its founders were actively involved in organizing the 41st World Science Fiction Convention in Baltimore, and are currently active operators of many local and regional masquerades.

The Costumers' Guild publishes a monthly newsletter (which was nominated for a Hugo in 1986), and holds monthly workshops and socials. It also sponsors a yearly ~200 scholarship for high school students interested in costuming; provides educational panels, slide presentations and fashion shows upon request; and maintains archives of slides, photos and videos of science fiction masquerades since 1981. When interest in membership began to come into the Guild from around the U.S. and Canada, new chapters were added in California, New Jersey and Virginia. Since then, additional groups have been founded throughout the country and in Canada.

Why Dress In Costume?

The making and wearing of a costume has a fanciful, imaginary quality. Whether it is for a convention or party, a contest or festival, costuming allows the wearer to step out of his/her everyday existence, to become someone else, and to live out a fantasy. It also provides costumers with an enjoyable outlet for their own

creative views about fantasy and SF.

The primary consideration in the design and construction of any costume must be the context or general situation in which it will be worn. This decision will then help determine not only the costume's function, but also matters such as cost and complexity. You *must* choose between making a Formal or Hall costume.

When creating a Formal costume, two of the most important considerations are size and scope. Since most masquerades, particularly those of Worldcons, play to a large audience, it is important that the costume's line and shape are bold and clean cut and that the color reaches for the ultimate visual excitement. This is not a situation for subtlety or small detailing. Keep in mind that the stage is an artificial environment, and that costumes which look good up close and under room lights will become formless and faded when seen from the audience under stage lights. From beginning to end, keep size and scope in mind. Keep your presentation short, simple and direct. And when using more than one costume, integrate them to fit your theme.

When creating a Hall costume, which is one that will be seen up close, the workmanship of detail and finish are very important. Comfort is also an important consideration-particularly if you intend to wear the costume for long periods of time. Select a material that is both durable and non-flammable because you will wish to wear the costume more than once. Weapons-because of numerous

conventions' weapons' policies-should be "peace-bonded" or otherwise rendered harmless. Ladies' skirts and men's sashes should be designed so as not to cause the wearer to stumble, and hats and masks should not dangerously restrict vision. Basically, Hall costumes should be wearable clothing, logically designed with practical consideration.

And if you have any questions, please feel free to ask members of costume fandom. They are always courteous, polite and anxious to share their font of experience, and they all remember what it was like when they first began dressing up to enter the world of costuming!

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