

Feature



Elizabeth Taylor's Phoenix Cape from *Cleopatra* *Philip Gust**

The iconic Phoenix cape worn by Elizabeth Taylor was recently sold by Heritage Auctions. Here is a analysis of its materials and construction from descriptive material and high-resolution images on their website.

In the internet age, costume auctions present a rare opportunity for costumers to study some of the classic designs from film and stage productions at no cost. In many cases, the high-resolution images posted by the auction house are the best documentation available for the design and the construction techniques that were employed.

A case in point is the iconic gold cape that Elizabeth Taylor wore in two major scenes from the 1963 film *Cleopatra*. The costume was designed by Irene Sharaff to look like the wings of a Phoenix. The craftsmanship is



Elizabeth Taylor in the 20th Century Fox production of *Cleopatra*.



Front of ceremonial cape worn by Elizabeth Taylor in the 20th Century Fox production of *Cleopatra*. Heritage Auctions, 30 March 2012, item #7053.

impressive, and reflects the time, effort and money that went into the design of Taylor's costumes. More than \$194,800 was budgeted for her wardrobe, the highest ever for a single actor at the time (around \$1.5 million in 2012 money).

Taylor wore the gold cape in two pivotal scenes: first for the portrayal of Cleopatra's entrance to Rome and, second in the final scenes of the film where she commits suicide using the venom from a snake bite. Although this piece has been exhibited several times and many publicity photos are available of Taylor wearing it, little has been written about how it was constructed or the materials that were used to guide costumers who would like to try their hand at recreating it.

This beautiful and exotic piece of movie history was recently offered at auction on 30 March 2012 by Dallas-based auction house [Heritage Auction](#). Bidding for item #7053 opened at \$10,000 and closed at \$59,375, somewhat below the estimated range of \$75,000 to \$100,000.

The auction page for this item included high-resolution images of the cape, together with a physical description that included the materials and some dimensions. Those who were lucky enough to capture this information can use their knowledge of costume construction to learn what they need to know to reproduce it. This article tries to provide an analysis of this information and demonstrate some simple ways to do it.



Back of ceremonial cape worn by Elizabeth Taylor in the 20th Century Fox production of *Cleopatra*. Heritage Auctions, 30 March 2012, item #7053.

**From
the
Catalog
The
Elizabeth
Taylor
Ceremonial
Cape
from "Cleopatra."
20th Century Fox,**

1963. Crafted to resemble the wings of a Phoenix, the ornate piece is made of very thin panels of gold-painted leather adorned with hand-stitched gold bugle beads, seed beads, and bead-anchored sequins, visible areas of mesh lining offset each beaded panel, two hidden hook-and-eye closures sewn along the front; worn as the star portrayed the title character in two pivotal scenes: Cleopatra's dramatic entrance to Rome (the most lavish portrayal of this event in film history) and Cleopatra's dramatic 'exit' by asp bite; included with images of Taylor wearing this cape. (Please note there is evident wear due to age, some beads are missing around the collar and other areas, and some minor tears appear on the mesh lining.) Cape's Wingspan: 124" with 62" from the center seam to each tip

Below: layout of ceremonial cape worn by Elizabeth Taylor in the 20th Century Fox production of *Cleopatra* Heritage Auctions, 30 March 2012, item #7053.



Left: Detail shows feathers and nylon mesh around neck area of ceremonial cape.

from pulling through. After beading, the leather and fine mesh was attached to a heavy black mesh lining that was cut to shape.

It is unclear from the photos whether whole sections of the feathers and fine mesh were assembled and attached to

Construction Notes

According to the auction catalog, the cape was made of thin strips of gold-painted leather. From enlargements of high-resolution images (right and above), it appears that the leather pieces were cut and fused to fine black mesh material that reinforced them and kept the bead stitches



Detail of the inside front from back view on previous page shows both fine and heavy nylon mesh.

the heavier mesh, or whether individual mesh-backed feathers were assembled on the heavy mesh. A high-magnification sample of the previous detail (below) shows fine mesh between the feathers in some areas.. However, the fine mesh is not evident in another high-magnification sample of the small feathers around the neck area from the previous page (top at right).



High-magnification sample of a previous detail shows fine mesh between the feathers. Also note tan stitches of beadwork from the back.



High-magnification sample of a previous detail shows no evidence of fine mesh between small feathers around neck area. Note what appears to be a seam that runs all along the center of the back.

Without being able to examine the actual piece, my guess is that sections of feathers assembled on fine mesh were used for the lower feathers, while the individual mesh-backed feathers around the neck area were assembled directly on the heavy mesh where more mobility was required.

Several areas of the back-side reveal that the mesh and leather strip assemblies were tacked rather than glued to the heavy mesh lining.

Leather Fabric

The auction catalog describes the material as made of “very thin panels of

gold-painted leather.” It also notes that “there is evident wear due to age, some beads are missing around the collar and other areas.” In the 1960s, a paper-thin fabric known as *fashion leather* was used for shoes and billfolds. It is much harder to find today, replaced by synthetic materials that are easier and less expensive to manufacture. The material was so thin and supple that it could be stretched and shaped over other material as an outer cover. It is very likely that the cape panels were made of this material to keep weight of the cape to a minimum and have it drape correctly.

I looked for patches in the high-resolution photos where beads were missing and found several candidates. One of them is shown in a high-magnification sample (right) of the laid out cape image shown earlier. The fabric appears to have a pattern. While this



could indicate patterned leather, there is a more likely explanation. The fine mesh that the strips are attached to runs in the same direction in this area of the photo and has the same scale as this pattern (compare with the image at far left on the previous page).

If the material really is very thin fashion leather, the strips could readily show the impression of the fine backing mesh if the mesh was laid out on a surface, a thin layer of glue was applied to the backs of the leather strips, and the strips were pressed in place on the mesh by hand once the glue became tacky. The layout of strips was very likely drafted onto a sheet of paper below the fine mesh as a guide. This also gives an idea of how thin and supple the material must have been to hold the impression of the mesh, about the weight of the lightest non-woven interfacing.

The gold paint used on the leather was most likely an acrylic based metallic paint. Acrylic paint was originally developed in the late 1940s, and by the mid-1950s water-based acrylics were developed. The late 1950s to early 1960s introduced the kind of flexible, high-viscosity water-based acrylics that would be ideal for this kind of finish. Acrylics adhere very well to fabrics and leather, and stand up to use.

Beadwork

The auction catalog describes the leather as, “hand-stitched gold bugle beads, seed beads, and bead-anchored sequins.” The high-magnification sample from around the area where the long strips meet the small



feathers around the neck area illustrates the various kinds of beadwork, sizes, and the general pattern used for their layout.

Calculating sizes from photos can be difficult and is prone to error, but it can be fairly accurate if you do a sufficient number of measurements and cross-checks with known dimensions and ratios. Scaling the section in the previous highly-magnified photo to its actual size based on the known wing tip to center neck dimension allows estimating the width of the strips, and from that the size of the beads and sequins.

The bugle beads appear to be either #2 or #3 (1/4" to 3/8"), with #3 the most likely. The seed beads appear to be around 3/32", which makes them size 10/0 (the size is roughly the number of beads per inch), and the sequins either 5/32" or 3/16" in diameter.

The thread would have been either silk or nylon during that time. An earlier, high-



magnification illustration of the back of a leather strip and mesh also shows the beading threads from the back. To prevent the bugle beads from cutting the thread, they would most likely have used the thickest thread possible or a double thread.

Notice the beadwork on the small feathers in the previous illustration and below. There are both bugle beads and sequins radiating from the base of the feather, with sequins at the edges sewn on with the same thread as the bugle bead to enhance the feather effect. Sequins interior to the feather are attached in the same way.

Clasp

According to the auction catalog, there are, "two hidden hook-and-eye closures sewn along the front." An examination of the front view photo at high-magnification does not show any hook-and-eye closures. However, some of the edge is rolled over as the cape is draped on the form, so they may not be evident. What initially looked like hooks and eyes turned out to be T-pins that held the cape to the form. Taylor appears to have worn the cape open.

Summary

Based on analyzing the photos and descriptions provided by the auction house, the construction of the cape is relatively straight-forward. Close approximations of the required materials are available, and the sewing techniques required are not difficult. The main difficulty is the beadwork required to produce the pattern seen on the original cape. Although the beadwork is not



Publicity still of Elizabeth Taylor in the 20th Century Fox production of *Cleopatra*.

technically difficult, it would require several months for one person to complete.

Still, compared to the \$59,375 price tag of the original, making your own would be a very reasonable return on your investment, and more fun too. I hope someone will start with this article and give it a go. Good luck!

Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20th C.