

Feature



Return to Barsoom: Costuming *John Carter of Mars*

Edited by Philip Gust*

We compare designer Mayes Rubeo's approach to costumes for Disney's "John Carter" movie with the approaches of the "Costuming by the Book" teams who designed costumes for a fictitious "John Carter of Mars" movie, and get reactions by three members of those design teams.

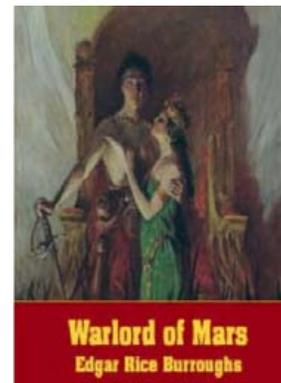
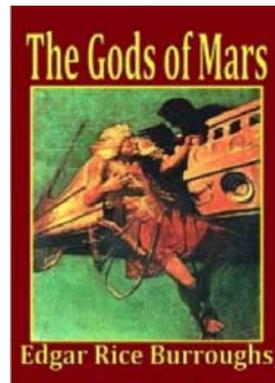
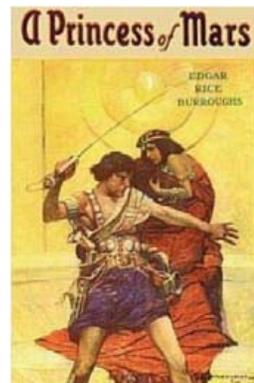
In early 2009, four teams of costumers embarked on a project to design costumes for a fictitious *John Carter of Mars* movie, based on the first three books of the Edgar Rice Burroughs series. The purpose was to explore the problems that movie costume designers encounter when adapting a book to make a movie. Creating costumes from literature is sometimes referred to as "Costuming by the Book."

They chose this Burroughs series because the stories are compelling, and the cultures and people in them provide scope for costumers. The eleven books in the series were the originals on which later franchises built, from *Superman* to *Star Wars*. According to *Avatar* creator James Cameron, "With *Avatar*, I thought,

Forget all these chick flicks and do a classic guys' adventure movie, something in the Edgar Rice Burroughs mold, like John Carter of Mars—a soldier goes to Mars."

The teams pretended that they were auditioning for the job as costume designers for the fictitious movie, and that the studio had asked each of them to prepare concept drawings showing their vision for the movie. They were to design for the three principal characters: John Carter – our hero, Dejah Thoris – Princess of Helium, and Tars Tarkas – a 16-foot tall, four-armed Thark warrior, plus several others of their choice.

They presented their work in the art show and during a panel at the Bay Area Regional Science Fiction Convention (BayCon) in May 2009. The art show exhibit was very successful, with many people viewing the designs and reading the descriptions throughout the convention. The panel played to a full house, with lively



discussion among the presenting teams, and many great questions from the audience.

The event was covered in a special issue of VC ([volume 7 issue 3](#)), including the costume drawings, the presentations, and the discussions about issues the teams encountered.

Shortly before BayCon 2009, Pixar announced that they planned to make a movie of the *John Carter of Mars* series, which was scheduled to come out sometime in 2012. This coincidence made the presentations and drawings more interesting to BayCon attendees, but it also added pressure to the four teams, who knew that their work would some day be compared with the "real thing."

The teams consisted of SiW members Christina and Christofer

Bertani, Kathe and Philip Gust, Mette Hedin and Bryan Little, and Dana and Bruce MacDermott. Each of the teams had been costuming together for a number of years, which added an interesting dimension to the project. SiW member Kevin Roche acted as moderator and wrote a lively introduction to the issue.

In mid-2011, Walt Disney, who now owns Pixar, released a teaser trailer and announced that they planned to move up the release date of the newly renamed *John Carter* movie from June to March 2012. Several other trailers followed that showed principal character costumes.



Costume Designer
Mayes Rubeo

John Carter opened to mixed reviews by critics but generally enthusiastic response by fans of the series. The costumes, by *Avatar* costume designer Mayes Rubeo, were innovative and captured the ancient warrior society depicted by Burroughs.

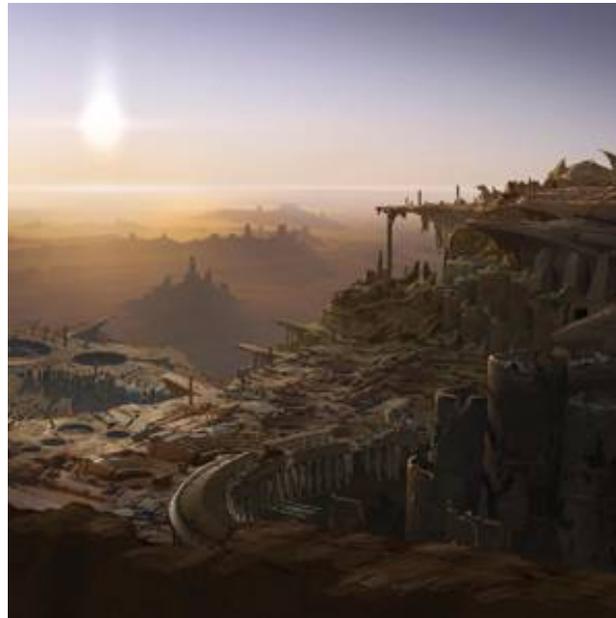
On the third anniversary of the BayCon 2009 event, and the release of *John Carter* on DVD, this article takes a look back and compares how the four teams of costumers approached their designs for the fictitious movie with how Rubeo approached the designs for the actual movie. We'll also get reactions of several members of the design teams after seeing Rubeo's work on screen.

While the design teams worked with characters from the first three books,

Rubeo's designs were for characters in the first book, *A Princess of Mars*. The notable exception was the the Therns, a priest-like race of white Martians that Burroughs introduced in the second book, *The Gods of Mars*. The movie Therns had a different role and a different origin than in the book, which influenced their costume design.

Design Approach

Rubeo and the costuming teams took somewhat different approaches in their design. The overall look of the movie presented a vision of ancient cities and civilizations (below). According to Rubeo, “The way Mars has been portrayed in science fiction has always been in the very distant future — very far off, very futuristic. The vision Edgar Rice Burroughs had when he wrote these novels at the beginning of the



Concept art of a crumbling Barsoom (Mars). Disney, 2012.

20th century was an unusual one. This movie is different because it's a science fiction movie set in an ancient civilization.”

The costuming teams' designs were generally brighter and less ancient looking than the movie. Christina Bertani felt that, “Everything on Barsoom is bright, colorful and larger than life. Lines should be crisp and sharp, colors clear and saturated, metal bright and intricately worked.”

Sources of Inspiration

Rubeo and several of the costuming teams consulted external sources, including the work of previous illustrators, but ultimately used their own judgements.

Rubeo said that other than glancing at what had been done before, she didn't concern herself with pre-existing images of Mars. “We looked at everything but we didn't really look at the comic books,” she said. “You look at the artwork of the *Princess of Mars*, stuff you find in 1976, 1945 — they were brave! They were fantastic! But I think we did our own thing a little bit without being so different or far-fetched from it.”

According to Kathe Gust, “We looked at all kinds of things for inspiration, including movie costumes from *The Ten Commandments*, *Cleopatra*, the Sinbad movies and others. We pulled all the old classic book jackets for both Tarzan, as well as the Barsoom series. We checked sites for modern club wear and ancient Egyptian illustrations, for all types of ethnic garments



John Carter out west; from left: designs by Mayes Rubio, and Kathe Gust.



wanted the designs to be unique enough to make them stand out from other movie franchises. This was a very different approach from what we normally do, as we tend to do mostly recreations.”

Cultural Influences

Although the film’s production designers looked to ancient Greek, Mayan, and Egyptian cultures to create Barsoomian cities and temples, Rubeo turned to a different era and place for her costume designs. “I went to go see many kinds of civilizations, including an old civilization that existed in the Adriatic on the coast of the Adriatic Sea at the time of the Etruscans [late 700 and 600 B.C.],” she said. She also looked at smaller and less well known ancient civilizations as well as other the societies of ancient Mesopotamia.

Dana MacDermott reported that she and Bruce chose a very different era for their designs. “Although the stories begin post Civil War, and quickly progress to Earth’s late 1800’s, Burroughs’ series of books began to be published in 1912. It could be interpreted that futuristic design at that time

would be the variations of Art Deco. This is where I went for the majority of my inspiration.”

According to Kathe Gust, she and Philip used a variety of earth cultures as models. “We agreed that the Tharks bore similarities to some Native American cultures, as well as to some Asian nomadic groups, notably the early Huns. Once we hit on the idea of looking east instead of west, we were able to map 'our' Martians onto various Terran cultures.”

Christy Bertaini said that she and Christofer, “began by creating 'style guides' for the different Martian cultures, with style variations within each culture to differentiate further. We wanted even background characters to be recognizable as coming from a particular place of their particular culture.”

Use of Harnesses

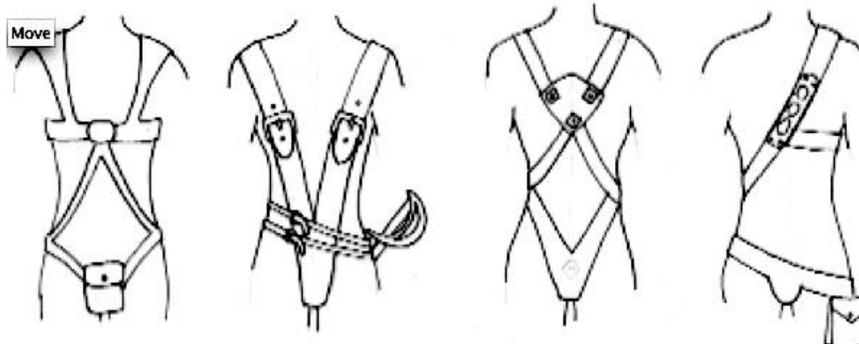
Rubeo and the costuming teams all incorporated harnesses in their designs. Harnesses were one of the few recurring costuming themes in the books that were described in detail.

The most conspicuous example in Rubeo's designs is John Carter's Thark harness, which he wears during the first half of the movie. She also incorporates harness-like shapes into other costume designs. Overall, though, her use of actual harnesses is much less than described in the books.

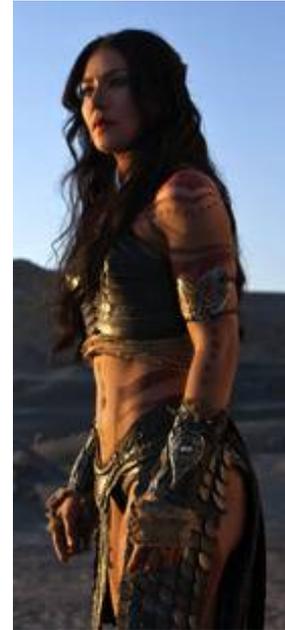
and drawings of historical people from Genghis Khan to the Civil War. Anything was fair game.”

Christina Bertani added, “I did a lot of what I call 'idea research', finding pictures of interesting historical garments and techniques, seeing what other people had done with the same text, and looking at historical and contemporary versions of 'harness,' from ancient armor to current parachute and rock climbing gear.”

On the other hand, Mette Hedin said, “We consciously avoided all visual input such as book and concept art, to avoid getting stuck in a specific mindset or other people's imagery. We



Harness style guide developed by Christina and Christofer Bertani.



distinct Barsoom cultures, as well as differences within a culture.”

In describing one of her designs for Dejah Thoris, Kathe Gust said, “The major feature is the leather harness that keeps its wearer from falling off the aircraft. We have ample mention in the book of straps and hooks, and also words that imply the footgear (sandals) do not do anything to keep a wearer on the deck. I got some inspiration from Keira Knightly in the movie, *King Arthur*.”

Dana MacDermott reported that, “Some of their strappings are textured ... which I consider to be the normal leather surface of a Martian animal hide ... The elaborate designs are braided, tooled and

Dejah Thoris field costume; from left: costume designs by Mette Hedin and Bryan Little, Kathe Gust, and Mayes Rubeo.

According to Christina Bertaini, “Most Barsoomians wear 'harness' and jewelry, and little else.” She and Christofer developed a style guide for harnesses used in their costumes. “The harness styles of the Red Men vary, loosely depending on their city of origin, but are generally symmetrical in shape with central chest plaques of gold or bright silver, often with jewel-toned enamel, in several basic shapes.”

Mette Hedin reported that, “we honed in on the concept of the 'Harness.' It is the main 'clothing' mentioned for a large number of the various races, and seems to be the universal garment of Mars. We decided to take this as a starting point, yet riff on the harness theme in various more or less literal ways, to express differences between the



John Carter among the Tharks; from left: costume designs by Mette Hedin and Bryan Little, Christina and Christofer Bertani, and Mayes Rubeo.

dyed; an art the Helium culture has been interpreted to embrace.”

Armor

One design element widely used in the movie was armor. Both the Helium and Zodangan soldiers wore elaborately embossed metal armor breast plates, pauldrons, vambraces, greaves, and helmets that appeared to be styled after Etruscan armor. Jonay Bacallado, who did a number of designs for Rubeo, posted some of them on his [website](#).

The four costume design teams did not design metal armor for any of the characters since it was not specifically mentioned on the first three books though, according to Kathe Gust, Philip did incorporate some armor into his design for Tars Tarkas.

“He started with a 'classic armor' design. The corselet serves as a cuirass, and the bones and scales serve as pauldrons (shoulder armor). The leather harness incorporates the chest and back mirrors (the back one is mentioned in ‘The Gods of Mars’). The leggings protect like chaps when Tars rides his giant Thoat. The cuirass and leggings are “slate” blue Zitidar hide. Articulated leather tassets (leg pads) protect from swords when mounted.”

Nakedness

Burroughs frequently described his characters as “naked,” which presents a challenge for any movie costume designer who hopes to maintain a “PG” rating. The



Tars Tarkas, Jedak of the Tharks: clockwise from top left: costume designs by Dana MacDermott, Mette Hedin and Bryan Little, Christina and Christofer Bertani, Mayes Rubeo, and Philip Gust.

four design teams spent considerable time thinking about this aspect.

For at least one team, this led to a spirited debate. Kathe Gust said, “As a result of having the entire oeuvre in my subconscious I kept saying they are not naked. After reading only the first three books, Phil kept repeating that they were. That’s when I got the idea of discussing just how naked is 'naked', and whose idea of naked should we use?” They finally decided to go with John Carter’s idea of nakedness. “The books begin in the late 1860’s and Carter describes the Apache Indians in *A Princess of Mars* as naked savages. That was our baseline and we could move more or less bare from there.”

According to Mette Hedin, “The books keep hammering on the nakedness, but we wanted a more interpretative take on this for three major reasons: 1) Not designing any costumes would defeat the purpose of the exercise; 2) From a practical point of view, any studio making what is essentially an action adventure film, would at most want the age limit to be PG-13. Anything higher is going to limit sales severely; and 3) We really didn't want this to look like the adaptation of 'Saturday Night at the S&M Club.’”

In explaining her team's approach, Christina Bertani said that, “as most of the characters John Carter encounters are described explicitly in a state of undress, our

primary challenge was turning a few scraps of leather and some jeweler's work into costumes that not only preserve contemporary modesty, but also outline both individual characters as well as distinguish visually between the distinct cultures of Barsoom.

Dana MacDermott agreed, saying, “The costumes are indicated to be very revealing, which does create a difficulty for a PG-13 rated treatment, I have chosen to approach this in the spirit of an accurate interpretation of Barsoom as written by Edgar Rice Burroughs and reported by John Carter. As a result of this choice, the primary costumes are designed entirely of leather and ornamentation.”



Dejah Thoris at court; from left, designs by Christina and Christofer Bertani, Kathe Gust, Mette Hedin and Bryan Little, Dana MacDermott, and Mayes Rubeo.

Rubeo has not specifically mentioned her approach to nakedness in interviews, but it is clear that she did discuss it with actress Lynn Collins, who portrayed Dejah Thoris in the movie. According to Collins, she told Rubeo, that she didn't want her revealing costumes to take away from her character's importance in the film. "In the end, what I like about the skin that is shown, is that it shows her vulnerability," Collins said.

Reactions to the Movie

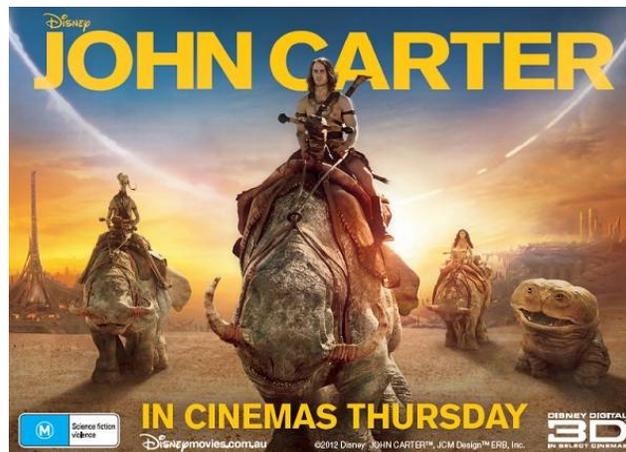
Three members of the Costuming by the Book teams offered their reactions and observations after seeing the movie.

Dana MacDermott: When the movie's visuals began to be shown in the lead up to the film's release, I was pleased to see that designers took the same approach that motivated my designs. The decision to follow descriptions and sensibilities from the books was likely motivated by knowing that the audience would largely be readers of the works, and possibly also by producers' respect and affection for the stories.

They selected images reflecting design styles that were familiar at the time the books were written rather than ones contemporary with the period Carter was living in, or current styles. I had made the same decision, but chose Deco where the designs in the film were more Nouveau. (I personally prefer Nouveau, but one does not always design based on one's own taste. In this case, I wanted to use variations of Deco styles to differentiate the sub-cultures.)

The overall production design also used a bit of Steampunk, particularly in the flying machines. The harness-like appearance of many of the costumes was reminiscent of the few clues Burroughs gave to the costuming. The creature designs corresponded well with Burroughs' descriptions. The Tharks were reduced in size the same way I did in my project, and they remained sufficiently menacing.

The movie paid little regard to what was practical, or even realistic for Mars; only Barsoom was considered. There seemed to be a conscious decision to leave



the majority of the fantastic, impractical design and plot structures alone, except for a few that the team felt modern sensibilities simply could not handle.

It is particularly interesting which plot and design elements they chose to modify, probably more indicative of evaluating the modern mindset than anything else. I have no doubt that choices were made with

considerable care and discussion. For that, I respect the staff, even where I do not agree with their conclusions.

The choice to give Barsoom people navels in the movie was disappointing. I anticipate that they would change the egg-laying to more conventional human reproduction in later movies, but I will be surprised if the series continues because of the relatively low box-office success.

I did not like the Therns' costumes; they did not at all relate to the rest of the costuming. According to Burroughs' meager descriptions, Barsoomian clothing was largely based on animal skins of one sort or another.

Elevating the Therns to arch villain status was not consistent with the original story line, but it contributed to a more cohesive plot line to our 21st century minds. Using a mystic or supposedly science based talisman for the interplanetary travel was convenient as well as more acceptable to a post *Star Trek* audience. We understand what a transporter is, so there is no further need for explanation.

Kathe and I both included a Thern costume for Phaidor, Daughter of Mati Shang in the original project, but it was a female character and, given the approach of the film, that renders the designs irrelevant to this discussion.

My impression is that tattooing took the place of racial differences in the books. Certainly, Dejah and her compatriots had red

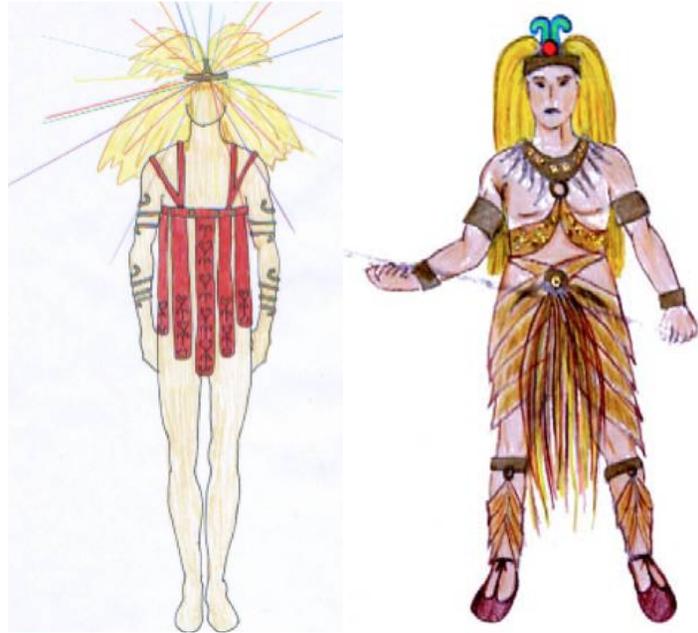
tattoos. If so, it is a genuinely clever way of making distinctions where we would not at all be comfortable were the red, black, yellow and white Barsoomians portrayed by the race of the actors. Again, only another film will tell.

The approach to nakedness seems to embrace the pulp fiction, show-lots-of-skin aesthetic. I appreciated the diaper Carter was clothed in as an inhabitant of the nursery; it showed a sense of humor while indicating that the production designers were aware of the deviation from the nakedness of the original story.

In general, I see clear evidence of a rigorous, intelligent and respectful design process, fully integrated with the production decisions, and deeply aware of the historical significance of Burroughs' works.

Kathe Gust: We all commented that following the book was challenging. The historical part of the film was great but not difficult. I did notice a color shift. John Carter post-Mars wears a lot of black, almost like he's in mourning. Pre-Mars he has a dark duster, but not dark clothing.

The red Martians in the film were problematic. I wanted more differentiation between the red Martian groups. I felt the old red/blue trick, which dates back at least to Zefferelli's *Romeo & Juliet*, was not particularly effective, and took audiences a while to figure out. The designer should have made the differences more extreme, particularly the armor. Possibly there was an attempt to tie the "good guys" to a color



Mati Shang Hekkador of the Therns; from top left, designs by Christina and Christofer Bertani, Philip Gust, and below by Maye Rubeo.



approaching "confederate" blue, but it didn't work for me.

The movie made significant changes to the story line, which required new costume designs. The Therns were really different. They looked alien to both Earth and Mars, and the medallions were prominent as their main decorative accessory. None of that came from the book.

The red Martian armor was not what I imagined from the books. Too much metal and not really functional as protection. If you are going to use metal, you should at least cover the torso. Again the bluey-silver watery inspired Helium armor vs. the coppery harder edged Zodangan armor wasn't enough to distinguish the armies. I finally picked up the differences in viewing #2 or #3, but not in the first viewing.

Some of us tried to use the real-world to guide our designs, but Dana MacDermott pointed out that this wasn't absolutely necessary since this is fantasy. Still, none of them seemed to clip their harness to the fliers and they frequently(!) fell off as a result. But then, they also survived crashes and falls that would probably have killed them, so there's fantasy for you. They also put saddles on the Thoats, and gave JC some leg protection, but not Dejah or Sola. I would have expected some rubbing after riding for three days.

Normal people on the streets of Helium and Zodanga, looked good. They were different, but not so exotic as to be unbelievable. I wish I had seen more of

them. They wore nothing like the stuff we see the "royals" wearing. I saw some ikat weaving, much more covered bodies and lots more necklaces and adornments in Zodanga. I couldn't tell much about Helium.

I liked the controversial (to some book aficionados) tattoos, but again wanted Zodanga to be more different. Maybe more obvious brown or black mixed with the red so you can easily tell who is what. It is possible the Zodangan tattoos are more angular, but I can't swear to it. They all move so much it is hard to focus on them.

Like our fictitious movie, *John Carter* was rated PG-13. Unlike our movie studio, though, Disney almost certainly didn't ask the costume designers to push the limits. If you count JC's bare bottom dumped into a bath, this film *had* nakedness, but he was allowed to keep his boots on throughout, so maybe Disney counted that as clothing?

Based on comments from several hundred people on the "[Take me Back to Barsoom](#)" Facebook group, Dejah Thoris was "incomparable" in her wedding dress. She was also not bad in armor. They pretty much ignored her Fortuny pleated gold dress with the blue robe, but some of the older gals took notice of it.

In interviews, the director said the princess was a character and not a set



John Carter at court; from left: designs by Christina and Christofer Bertani, Mayes Rubeo, and Dana and Bruce MacDermott.

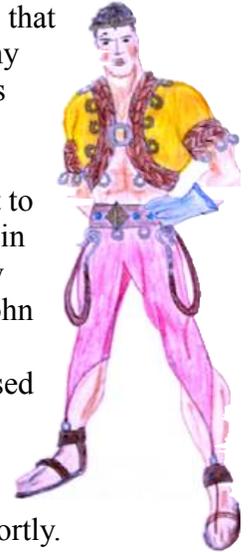
decoration. I assume that the costume designer agreed with him, which is why we got some eye candy for both genders, but nothing beyond. The armor was pretty much the same for men and women in terms of coverage and basic useless-ness, so there were considerable thighs.

Most of the court gowns in Zodanga offered a lot of bare back, but not in Helium. All-in-all rather zippy for the House of the Mouse, but no worse than some of the later Harryhausen stop motion films. I was quite happy with it since I did not find myself constantly distracted by lashes of bare body parts and could watch the story instead.

Philip Gust: I thought that the most successful costumes, which also followed

the books most closely, were for the Tharks. They weren't exactly what the books described, but they had the same primitive appeal. Lots of ornaments and metal bits tied together with leather and other things; no style but plenty of character. I understand that they were actually built on full-size statues, scanned, and draped on the Tharks,

The costumes that really differed in my mind were the ones from Helium. The colors they chose were very different to the books: Helium in the books is yellow and red (e.g. my John Carter Air Scout at right), while in the movie they used blue and gave the warm colors to the Zodangans. Then there is the armor. I'll say more about that shortly.



First, I'd like to discuss the Therns, a degenerate race of priests who showed up in the second book. They had no special powers, except those conferred by being high-priests to the Goddess, Issus. In the movie, they're an alien race, more like angels or wizards. In that sense, they're completely new characters, rather than just a different take on ones in the books. The only similarity was the bald heads. I keep trying to picture them wearing yellow wigs in a

movie sequel, but somehow just can't.

Given the new treatment, I thought the alien-looking robe design in the movie was brilliant. They were futuristic wizards robes, and the designs were distinctive and unlike anything else on Barsoom. Therns also had a wizard staff in the form of the medallions that enabled them to teleport around and control people and things.

Where they successful?
STOP ME BEFORE I CAN RECREATE THE COSTUME!

My biggest beef with the movie costumes was the armor. I have a strong impression from the books that most armor on Barsoom is leather. If they were going to use metal as well, I'd be thinking of [Lamellar](#), primarily of leather with metal worked in (see examples [here](#)).

I realize that they were trying for an Etruscan military look, but for me the armor just didn't cut it as something Barsoomians would wear. It's impractical (the Etruscans were much better protected) and the fanciful metal designs seemed out of character for the culture. This is where real-world versus fantasy comes in. As fantasy, they can make the armor as impractical and



Jonay Bacallado, did costume designs for Rubeo, including armor for [Kantos Kan](#) and [Sab Than](#).



fanciful as they want and just have it look way cool (STOP ME BEFORE I CAN RECREATE THE ARMOR!).

Somehow, though, I just can't get past some aspects of practicality. All of the soldiers on the airships were fully armored, even though most of the combat was aerial, and the only hand-to-hand combats were boarding actions. From a class I took on combat during boarding actions, I wouldn't want to be encumbered with metal armor if speed and agility are important. Better to have weapons that keep opponents away, like pikes and nets, or bucklers and short swords for close combat.

So for me, the armor was the aspect that was least successful as costume design in this movie, but I freely admit my prejudice. I just think they went in the wrong direction.

They did something very interesting with their approach to nakedness, though. What we got was a Disney version of naked. They showed lots of bare skin for a Disney movie, but nothing objectionable. What made it seem more naked than it really was, was skin peeping out in unexpected ways. For example, Deja Thoris' navel was framed

by strips of cloth in her wedding dress. However, they didn't employ [Bill Theiss'](#) favorite trick of making the costume seem dangerous. Even when Deja Thoris was in full combat, you knew that everything would stay firmly in place.

However they did one thing that was totally unexpected and heightened the sense of nakedness for me: tattoos. Lots of swirly, sensuous, and very primitive tattoos that lead your eye from areas of bare skin towards areas of the body on both men and women where they wanted to draw your attention. Tattoos appeared in unexpected places and looked dangerous in ways Theiss would have appreciated.

The tattoos were the trick that took it beyond the typical Disney fare and made it work for me, without being uncomfortable or getting in the way. As a result, nakedness became an element rather than the defining aspect of the costuming.

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.