

Virtual Author Talk



Irene: A Designer from the Golden Age of Hollywood **Frank Billecci**

The co-author of a new book on costume designer Irene's MGM years talks about Irene, researching the book, and inside information on the studio's costume department from 1942-1949.

How did the book come about?

I knew very little about Irene before 1983. However, while living and working in Los Angeles for eleven years from 1983 until 1995, Irene's personal secretary, Chrys Carter, was my next door neighbor. Throughout those years, Chrys and I became very good friends, and it was during those years that I became immersed in the many facets of Irene's life and career.

Years later, in the spring of 2005, I was fortunate to meet Virginia Fisher, Irene's personal artist at MGM, and her daughter Lauranne, while looking for information on the many original sketches and a large set of tracings that Chrys Carter had given me. By the end of that year, Lauranne and I had decided to write a biography of Irene's life with both Virginia, and Chrys providing our road map.

Tell us a little about Irene.

Studying Irene's life and career in silent films and as a clothing designer requires learning about her relationship and life with F. Richard 'Dick' Jones. During the decade of the 1920s, Irene's social position became ensconced within Hollywood's film community as a result of their relationship, and remained secure until her death in 1962.

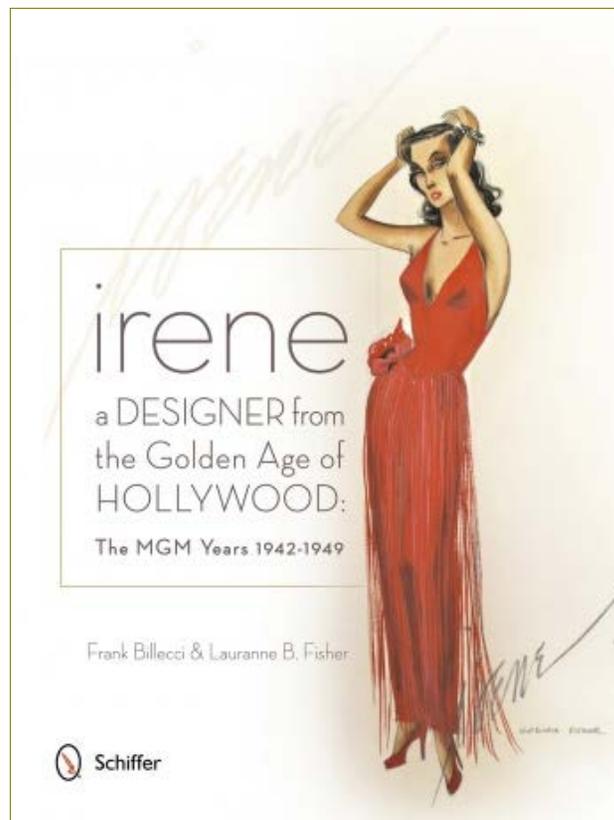
Irene Gibbons (nee Lentz) was born on December 8, 1901. By 1917, she had graduated from high school, and by spring

of 1919 she had moved to Los Angeles with her mother Maude and her younger brother. Irene was barely eighteen. According to her own remarks, she "...was 'discovered' in a drugstore..." by Dick Jones on April 1, 1920, as she was working as a saleswoman in downtown Los Angeles.

On that day, Jones, a leading director of silent films, convinced Irene that she could make more money working as an extra and a production assistant at the Mack Sennett Studio. A month later, she was an extra in Mabel Normand's film *Molly O'*, directed by none other than Jones. Soon after, Irene found herself working as one of *Sennett's Bathing Beauties* and as a busy production assistant for both Jones and Roy del Ruth.

Meanwhile, Irene became close friends with many of her co-workers and, along with Dick Jones, continued to expand an ever-growing social circle, including: Louise Fazenda, Carole Lombard, Phyllis Haver, Patsy Ruth Miller, Billie Dove, Charles Ruggles, Mal St. Clair, Roy del Ruth, Frank Capra, Tay Garnett, and Richard Wallace to name a few.

As a leading lady, Irene appeared in over a half dozen films at the Mack Sennett Studio. At that time, *Picture Play Magazine* wrote: "Of the new girls, Irene Lentz seems to have some of the qualifications of a potential[sic] Gloria Swanson. She has a



similar ability to set off well extreme clothes..." However, with encouragement and financial help from Dick Jones, she gave up the limelight and decided to attend the Wolfe School of Design. There, she learned to specialize in the design and manufacture of women's 'modern' clothes.



Lucille Ball for *DuBarry Was A Lady*, 1943.

By fall of 1926, with Dick Jones' financial backing and Irene's astute business sense, they opened their first business on University Avenue—a shop known simply as *irene's*. All the while, Jones, remained a 'silent partner', hoping not to appear as a man who was "...lining his own pockets." As they began to capture clients from what was often called the Hollywood 'Colony', Irene and Jones relocated their successful business to Highland Avenue in 1928. It was from this shop that Irene launched her first commercial line, with the able assistance of costume designer William Lambert, fresh from the Hal Roach Studio, and a very young, and talented designer, Kay Nelson.

It was also during this period that Dick Jones began expanding their business by networking with friends Douglas Fairbanks, Samuel Goldwyn, Hal Roach, Mack Sennett, and other directors and producers that he knew. Irene soon began designing and dressing many leading ladies who were sent to her shop. Lupe Velez, Dolores del Rio, Joan and Constance Bennett, Vilma Banky, Colleen Moore, Carole Lombard, Mary Brian, Nancy Carroll, and Loretta Young all began wearing Irene's clothes. They trusted her decisions for their personal clothing and, in many cases, became life-long friends.

Irene and Dick Jones married while on a trip to New York in the Fall of 1929, but the marriage ended just a year later, in December 1930, with his untimely death. Devastated and heart-broken, Irene closed

her business, and visited friends in France. After a short five week stay, she returned to Los Angeles. Realizing that there were problems with Dick's estate, she opened yet another business, *Irene, Ltd.* on Sunset Blvd. With partners Mary Wallace (wife of film director Richard Wallace) and Margaret Epstein, Irene continued to serve the needs of Hollywood's stars.

In the spring of 1933, Irene agreed to



open a French Salon in *Bullock's Wilshire*, where she remained until June of 1942. She also continued to independently design for many of Hollywood's leading ladies. Irene's ever

growing list of clients included Virginia Bruce, Ginger Rogers, Jean Arthur, Claudette Colbert, Rosalind Russell, Ruth Chatterton, Marlene Dietrich, Merle Oberon, and Sandra Shaw (Mrs. Gary Cooper).

Irene accepted L.B. Mayer's offer to serve as the head of MGM's costume department in July of 1942, where she remained until being fired in 1949. She also opened *Irene, Inc.* in 1947, and continued designing for many of Hollywood's leading ladies until her death in 1962.

A word of caution to collectors: a few other designers go by the name *Irene*. There is *Irene of Hollywood* – this is not Irene Gibbons of MGM; then there is *Irene Hats of New York* – this too, is not Irene Gibbons. Also easily confused with Irene are Irene

Saltern and Irene Sharaff, who also designed from the late 1930s on.

What information is in the book?

We made use of oral histories from two key eye-witnesses: Virginia Fisher, Irene's personal artist, who shared a work space within Irene's private office for five years; and, Chrys Carter, Irene's personal secretary who, throughout her time at MGM, had direct access to all of Irene's personal information, and was one of Irene's closest friends and confidantes.

The combined oral history from both eye-witnesses covers Irene's years at MGM

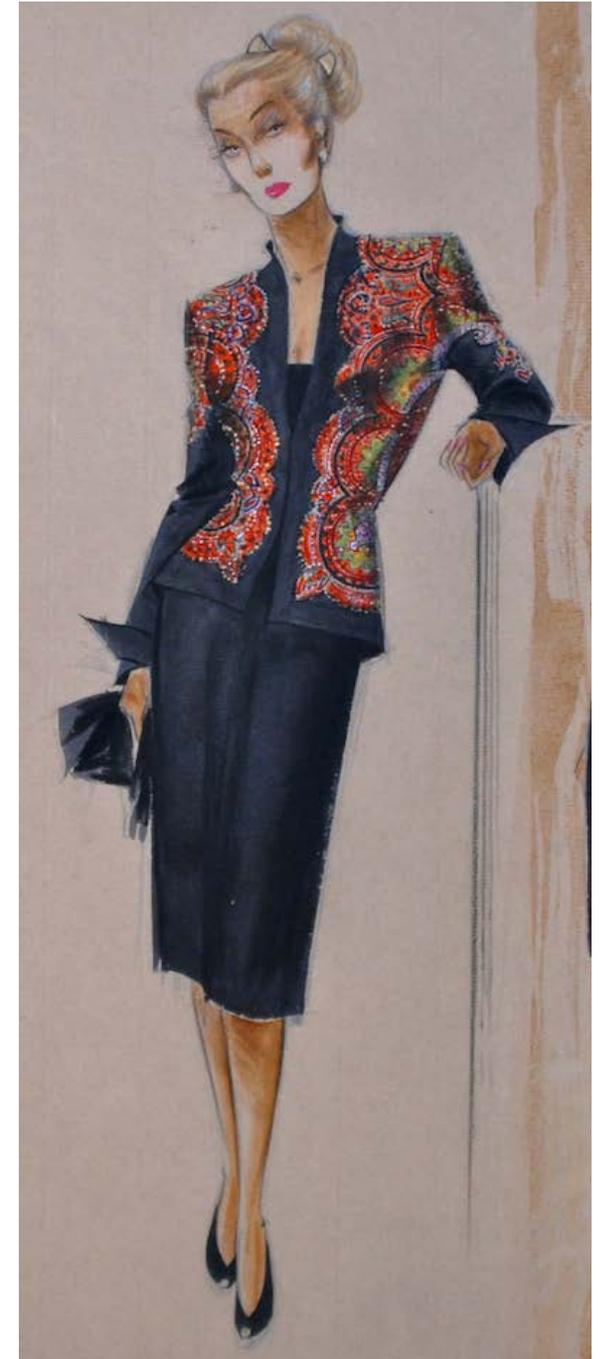


Irene wearing her own design.

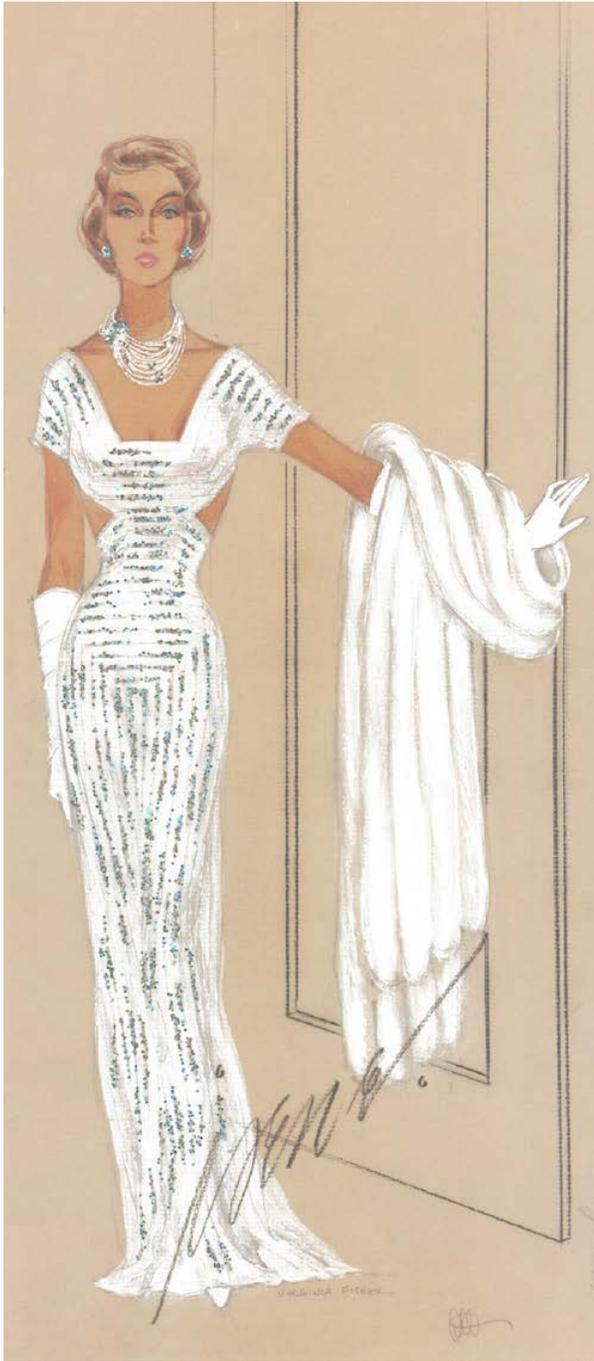
from 1942 her departure in 1949, and, her early years of establishing *Irene, Inc.* in Culver City. No longer 'guarded' in what they shared with us, both women truly shed new light on Irene and the challenges she faced during those years.

My co-author, Lauranne Fisher, and I are proud that our narrative provides information to which no other authors have had complete or total access. We are confident that, for the first time, we are presenting:

- The designers who actually designed the costumes for film projects prepared and completed during Irene's first contract, rather than who was credited by MGM;
- The political pressures and deadlines that frequently impinged on design decisions that Irene and her entire staff faced;
- How Irene's longtime personal history within the Hollywood community and her relationships with directors, producers, and stars came to bare on many design decisions;
- Insights into Irene's battle with alcoholism, and its roots in her personal life, feelings of inadequacy in the male-controlled studio environment, and self-doubts from the pressures of meeting deadlines; and finally,
- How Irene obtained the funds needed to open *Irene, Inc.* through her connections of Harry Cohen's undisclosed sources, and the ramifications it had on her work and daily life at MGM.



Irene's personal beaded suit.



Barbara Stanwyck for *B.F.'s Daughter*, 1948.

What will interest costumers, costume collectors, and students of fashion?

First, we provide Irene's filmography as an easy reference chart where researchers can quickly locate the actual designer per film title, and the designer's sketching dates. Seldom does anyone know when the costumes were sketched; and, it is that date that determines the cultural or historical influences that might have influenced the designer—not the date of the film's release, as has been so frequently used in the past.

Second, we present many of Irene's and/or her staff designer's original working sketches. A few of them have not seen since the 1940s! Of special interest is Irene's sketches for Judy Garland's costumes for her role in *The Pirate*, putting to rest many years of misinformation caused by Vincente Minnelli's book, *I Remember It Well*.

Was this your first attempt to find a publisher for Irene's MGM story?

No! As the saying goes, "The third time's a charm!" is definitely true. To beginning writers of Hollywood's history, all we can say is, "Don't Give Up!"



Judy Garland for *The Pirate*, 1948.

At the end of the day, as we wrote the acknowledgement page, we realized that the journey of writing would never have been possible without the effort, help and support of many people. We know that our interaction with others – those incredible, talented people who shared their knowledge, resources, encouraging words, along with their love and understanding – will be cherished the rest of our lives.

Frank Billecci was a freelance designer in Hollywood from 1983-1992. During that time, he designed for stage, independent films, and television

productions. After receiving the NAACP Image Award nomination and the "Dramalogue Critics Award of the Year" for his work in 'Showgirls', Frank served as the designer for the ever-popular TV series, 'The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers'. Leaving the field of entertainment, Frank returned to work in education where he was a teacher, administrator, and the author of educational materials.

For more on "Irene: A Designer from the Golden Age of Hollywood - the MGM Years 1942-49" (ISBN13: 9780764345555) visit [Schiffer Books](#) and Frank's new "The Golden Age of Irene" [website](#).