



Picture Perfect: Recreating a Classic Painting in Costumes



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At Costume-Con 26, a crazy group of costumers entered an ambitious project in the historical masquerade: a faithful recreation of the painting, "Portrait of the Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Maids of Honor." Here is their amazing story.

What started as an innocent shopping trip blossomed into huge project that tested and forged our skills as costumers and our bonds with each other, resulting in a Best in Show win.

The Idea

It all began four years earlier, on a Saturday morning trip to Haight Ave. in San Francisco for breakfast with friends. Kendra's eye was caught by a pretty green and black shot silk taffeta that was on sale at Discount Fabrics, and it reminded her of one of the dresses in the gorgeous painting of the Empress Eugénie of France. Never

one to pass up a sale, she grabbed the fabric, stuck it in the stash, and let the idea germinate in the back of her mind.

At Costume College in 2005, Kendra was chatting with some friends about plans for Costume-Con 26, to be in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2008. The idea arose to do some kind of group entry -- safety in numbers! After kicking around various ideas, Kendra remembered the Eugénie portrait, which she had on her laptop. She pulled up the image, everyone loved it, and we started running around College asking people we knew to join us.

The Painting

Empress Eugénie was the wife of Napoleon III of France. She was a leader of



fashion in the 1850s and 1860s in Europe, patronizing renowned couturier Charles Frederick Worth, and is credited with introducing the cage crinoline (hoop skirt). She was often painted by Franz Winterhalter, one of the leading court portraitists of his era, and the "Portrait of the Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Maids of Honor" (1855) is often referred to as his masterpiece.

The Participants

Some people joined right away, others hemmed and hawed – which dress would they rather make? Some chose the dress that caught their eye, while others, who joined later, had fewer choices.

The final roster included: Lana Bailey as the Empress Eugénie, Trystan L. Bass as the Marquise de la Tour-Maubourg, Bridget Bradley-Scaife as the Baronne de Pierres, Katherine Caron-Greig as the Baronne de Malaret, Maegen Hensley as the Princesse d'Essling, Teresa Liao as the Marquise de las Marismas, Sarah Lorraine as the Vicomtesse de Lezay-Marnesia, Lynne Taylor as the Duchesse de Bassano, Kendra Van Cleave as the Comtesse de Montebello, Thomas Dowrie as the painter, Franz Winterhalter.

Maegen declared that the fact that she got to be a (literal) princess almost made up for the fact that she had to make a pink dress. Teresa was excited that her character was holding a book. We immediately identified Lana as the Empress Eugénie, as they share a certain resemblance. Also, did everyone want to make a strict recreation? Most of us were historical costumers who loved trying to recreate costumes exactly, but not all! Trystan, our resident goth-fantasy-historical costumer, was lured in by the promise of a purple and black dress – every goth’s dream!

Making the Costumes

Soon after Costume College, we set up a Yahoo! discussion group to plan our entry. We agreed to keep our preparations secret – most of us are longtime costume bloggers, and we didn’t want to spoil the drama of unveiling our project on stage.

We decided to try to reproduce the painting as faithfully as possible given financial and time constraints. Those time constraints got more constraining as the Con approached! You never have as much time as you think you do. Most of us are historical costumers who like to make recreations, although some people wanted to be stricter than others. However, the fact that there was a majority of accuracy nerds in the group won out, plus the fact that we were entering a competition – this was the time to break out the big guns!

At the same time, we talked about how we did not want to enter this competition in



Lana Bailey as the Empress Eugénie. Photo by [Richard Man](#).



Trystan L. Bass as Marquise de la Tour-Maubourg. Photo by [Richard Man](#).



Bridgett Bradley-Scaife as the Baronne de Pierres. Photo by [Mike Schweizer](#).



Katherine Caron-Greig as the Baronne de Malaret. Photo by [Richard Man](#).

just to win – we wanted to create something wonderful to share with the audience. Of course, it would be nice to win, but we didn’t want to focus on that. Instead we focused on creating an amazing, immersive version of our art form.

There were a lot of specific elements that needed to be hammered out. For

example, it is generally accepted that the Empress Eugénie is credited with “introducing” the hoop (meaning, she was probably the first highly fashionable woman to adopt it), but records show the first hoop patent in England as being 1856 – and our painting was 1855. We decided to use hoops, mostly because it would be easier for us (no making 10,000 floofy petticoats!), but with the logic that if the first hoops appeared in England in 1856, and Eugénie introduced them in France (the leader of fashion), then it seems logical that she could have been wearing them the previous year.

Next, would we use sewing machines? Our research showed that while most garments were hand sewed in the 1850s, sewing machines were also used. We found a good source on nineteenth-century sewing techniques that said that when sewing machines were used, they were only used on interior seams, while all finishing was done by hand. Given this research, we agreed to use this method of machine interior/hand exterior.

We spent months, if not years, staring at the painting. Kendra scanned a large image of the painting from a book in the highest resolution possible, and we peered and debated every little detail. What kind of fabric was that ruffled bit? Where did that flounce attach? What’s going on with the backs of the dresses, and all the parts that we can’t see?

Luckily the dresses all shared many common style elements, and we were able to

pull elements from the gowns we could see to fill in those we couldn't. In addition, we spent a good deal of time looking at period fashion plates for similar styles, which helped to fill in gaps. Many of us had extensive research knowledge and practical construction experience with mid-nineteenth century costumes, which we were able to draw upon and share.

Even sourcing materials was difficult for many of us. Some of the supplies we needed simply aren't created any more – like silk moiré ribbon in the right color and width. Poor Sarah had the hardest fabric to try to reproduce: first we had a long debate about whether the stripes on her white sheer fabric (probably organza?) were pink, red, bronze, or gold, then it was a matter of finding silk organza with a gold satin stripe... with the stripes grouped the way they were in the portrait (some close together, some farther apart)! Sarah ended up buying multiple fabrics, and even entertained the idea of applying narrow satin ribbon to 15 yards of silk organza, before Bridget found a special order source for silk striped organza in India! Even so, Sarah had to sew tucks in the fabric in order to group some of the stripes together.

For some of us, making the costumes was time consuming but relatively straight forward. For Trystan, this project was the ultimate in "stepping outside my comfort zone." She's been sewing since she was a kid, but she says her methods are a hodgepodge of theatrical techniques, corner-



Maegen Hensley as the Princesse d'Essling. Photo by [Mike Schweizer](#).



Teresa Liao as the Marquise de las Marismas. Photo by [Richard Man](#).



Sarah Lorraine as Vicomtesse de Lezay-Marnesia. Photo by [Mike Schweizer](#).



Lynne Taylor as the Duchesse de Bassano. Photo by [Richard Man](#).

cutting, and cheapskate tricks. For starters, the Eugénie gown required materials above her usual budget, and she nearly hyperventilated at the store when Bridget found the perfect, but \$15/yard lace for the gown. On top of the \$12/yard silk!

But it was the construction that nearly killed her -- it was her first attempt at

Victorian sewing techniques. Kendra had to talk her off the ledge, over the phone, when she sewed the bodice together incorrectly because she'd never flat-lined (she's a big fan of bag lining). She made piping and hand-bound eyelets for the first time (and she says it showed). She hand-sewed about 80% of the skirt simply because of the massive amount of fabric and the complicated layers -- and she despises hand-sewing!

Trystan writes, "Sometimes I felt like the slow kid picked last on the football team. I worried that my crappy sewing might hold this group of spectacularly skilled craftspeople back. But the part I was looking forward to was the presentation. Showing costumes on stage is what I love, and I knew we had something truly special. In the end, I was really glad my friends asked me to be a part of this project and held my hand all the way."

In addition to making the actual costumes, we also decided to try to reproduce all the accessories as exactly as possible. So various members either made or found close reproductions of all the jewelry, flowers, ribbons, shawls, etc. You would be surprised how hard it can be to find a particular style of gold bangle when you're looking for it! There was much scouring of eBay and flea markets.

Our members were spread out geographically – some in Southern California, some in Northern California, one in Las Vegas, and one original member, who

later had to drop out, in Massachusetts! So our Yahoo! group was our lifeline to each other. Those of us in the same areas got together to help with fittings, or to teach each other techniques, or help with crises. We posted updates and photos to our Yahoo! group, so that we would be able to know what each other was doing and offer constructive criticism when needed. And that brings us to...

The Joys and Pitfalls of a Large Group Project

While in the end, most of us have incredibly fond and proud memories of this project, in the immediate aftermath, there were a lot of declarations of, “No large group projects ever again!” A lot of things can go wrong when you are counting on ten individuals to create dresses to similar standards and on time, plus contribute to writing documentation, direct and/or show up for presentation rehearsal, be on time for performance, etc.

We thought we were doing everything right – we began very early on with a discussion of standards, and we agreed to set deadlines for completing various pieces of the project. But life has a way of getting in the way, and there were definite roadblocks we had to overcome. We worried what would happen if someone had to drop out, and recruited a backup person in case this happened. It turns out we were smart, because one member who joined early on had to drop out due to buying a house, and



Kendra Van Cleave as the Comtesse de Montebello. Photo by [Richard Man](#).



Thomas Dowrie as the painter, Franz Winterhalter. Photo by [Mike Schweizer](#).

not being able to afford to attend the Convention.

Other elements did not pan out so well: although we set deadlines, many of them ended up being ignored. This turned out to be a definite problem, as some of our members were sewing up until literally the last minute; we couldn't complete the documentation until their dresses were done enough to photograph, so we entrusted them with finishing the documentation and turning it in on time. Cue last minute sewing panic and a printer malfunction, and they were only able to turn in the documentation about 5 minutes before the deadline.

Meanwhile, the rest of us were left angry and upset, printing out the half-completed documentation in the Convention business office and discussing how we could enter the masquerade with only three-fourths of our members present. Luckily, this didn't end up happening, but it was close!

Other issues came up along the way. One member went through a traumatic breakup, moved to a different city, and was working long hours all during the month before the Convention. We were very worried – what if we had to replace her? Another member stepped in and spent a long weekend sewing right alongside her, offering emotional and practical support. Finally, at the convention, two of our members were very sick! Luckily they got themselves there and did everything they needed to do, but no doubt would have been better off in bed.

Creating the Presentation

The core idea for our presentation started early on – bringing the painting to life, while at the same time making sure the judges could get a clear view of ten individual costumes. How exactly to accomplish this, we weren't sure! Some of our early ideas included some kind of digital projection of the painting – could we walk into place into a projected image of the painting? One early germ of an idea was to have the artist Winterhalter there painting us in the presentation, and Trystan suggested her husband, Thomas, to play the painter.

As we discussed various options, we nixed the idea of the digital projection but held on to the idea of Winterhalter finishing the painting. In the end, with a lot of input from various members, the idea crystallized: we would be the women in the portrait gathered for our final sitting. Various ladies would enter in groups and mingle on stage,

and then the Empress would enter and we would all fuss. Winterhalter would enter, tell us all to take our places, and we would assume the positions of the portrait for a few beats. We would have a copy of the painting on the stage, and we hoped that enough audience members would be familiar with the painting to make up for the fact that it would probably be difficult to see the print.

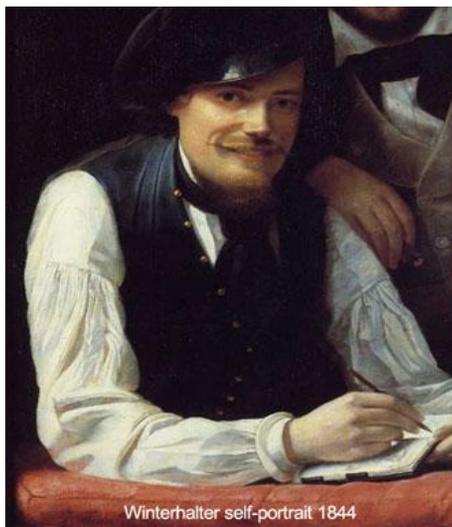
Making this vision happen was surprisingly easier than we might have expected. Bridget volunteered to order a large reproduction of the painting, and Trystan literally found an easel sitting by the side of the road near her house. Kendra picked out a Strauss waltz which her husband tracked down, as well as a soundtrack of women chatting and another of women laughing. Trystan's husband Thomas edited the three tracks together, and Trystan and Thomas recorded our tiny bits of dialogue (Trystan announced, "The Empress!" and Thomas instructed, "Ladies, places please!"). We realized we would need stools of various heights so that everyone could be seen when we were seated in the portrait positions, and everyone scoured their homes and brought what we could find.

Although many people commented on how smoothly our presentation went, and assumed we had been rehearsing for months, we had our only rehearsal on Saturday morning of the Convention – again, we are all spread out across California and Nevada! We met at an ungodly early hour, as it was the only time we could find when we were

all free, and minus one member who was sick, we walked through the presentation 27 times, according to Thomas! Luckily Kendra had thought to time the presentation elements to the music, so it was a matter of telling people to listen for various cues in the soundtrack, and then walking it over and over until we felt comfortable (and, importantly, agreeing on what we were doing long before the rehearsal).

Documentation & Workmanship Judging

The documentation was relatively easy to write – Kendra is a research librarian, so she combed through her sources and found evidence for most of the choices we made. We had always assumed that Thomas as Winterhalter would be more of a prop than a member of our entry, but discovered that the rules stipulated that we had to include documentation and judging for his costume as well.



This threw us a wrench, as we used purchased clothing for his costume! We didn't have time to go back and make him a super accurate costume, so we decided to let the chips fall where they may. It was difficult keeping our documentation to the required page limit. Although a certain number of pages were given per person, it still didn't seem like enough, but we knew the judges wouldn't appreciate having to read 10,000 pages either!

Workmanship judging was interesting, to say the least. First, no doubt due to their busy schedule, we were only scheduled for a 15 minute time block for workmanship judging. This was a bad decision, as we had ten dresses (not including the Winterhalter costume) to discuss! Unfortunately, it meant that the first people to go before the judges had more time than the later members, who felt rushed.

Even so, it probably took about an hour for the judges to meet with each of us. In addition, some of the judges offered critiques of the costumes during the judging. This caused a decent amount of stress for those who were critiqued; some of the critiques were on things we had documentation for (in other words, telling us it wasn't done right when we had documentation to support our approach), others were questions of interpretation.

Either way, we all agreed that it was the judges' role to evaluate our work, ask us questions if needed, but then to praise or critique privately amongst themselves – any

communication to us should be done through awards (or lack thereof). Telling us in person that we had done something wrong felt unnecessary and caused stress and hurt.

A Crisis at Dress Rehearsal

Our dress rehearsal went quite smoothly, except that while we were waiting backstage, someone working at the Convention tripped over one of our many stools we had grouped as we waited for our stage time. There was a decent amount of blood and she ended up needing stitches. Although it was nobody's fault (she was rushing and didn't see the stool), we all felt horribly. There's a saying that a costume isn't a costume until it's been bled on – does that apply to a masquerade entry as well?

Show Time!

We all arrived early, as instructed, to await the show. A few members were doing last minute sewing (bows and other fiddly bits). We were able to look at some of the other costumes being entered in the masquerade from afar. Mostly, we were

nervous, excited, and tired! We lucked out in being assigned Marty Gear as our den mom, and he took the best care of us anyone ever could. He got us food, water, and safety pins, explained the process and walked us where and when we needed to go, and most importantly calmed our nerves and cheered us on.

And then it was our time to go on! We had decided to enter from both sides of the stages, so we split to both sides and waited in the wings as quietly as possible as the entries before us finished. There was a lot of hand holding and deep breathing. And then the stage lit up, the music started, and we entered. Our rehearsal paid off: practice took over and moved us where we needed to go. One group entered, then another, then another. We all turned before the judges, mimed chatting with each other, and moved into position. And then Trystan's recorded dialogue: "The Empress!" We all curtsied, Lana entered as the Empress, and the audience applauded.

Right then, we knew: the audience got it! We were bringing the painting, the costumes, and the people to life, and the audience was joining us in our beautiful dream! Thomas entered as Winterhalter and instructed us to take our places, and we moved smoothly and seamlessly into position, and held the portrait positions for a few seconds. Then the stage went to dark, and the audience erupted into cheers. We wanted to jump for joy immediately, but we knew we had to clear the stage for the next act, so we promptly moved offstage.

Coming off, various techs told us, "Standing ovation! You got a standing ovation!" We ran down the hallway as silently as we could, miming high-fives and flashing devil horns at each other. We would have run cartwheels if we could! We made it to the official backstage where some of us laughed, others cried, and we pulled each other (and Marty!) into the biggest group hug imaginable. It was one of the best moments of many of our lives – knowing we had pulled off something amazing, that it had come together as we imagined, that we had made beautiful costumes and brought them to life, and that the audience was with us on this amazing journey.

After that, we went out for official photographs – the poor photographers obviously hadn't counted on a group as big as us, as we didn't fit into their backdrop! Then some of us went backstage to flop and others snuck into the audience to watch the end of the show. During intermission, we



were able to hug each other some more and chat with friends in the audience. There were lots of questions: how long had we planned this? Did you sew together? How much practice did you do? We heard from a few people who had wanted to do a recreation of this portrait but had not been able to, and were happy to see it finally happen.

And then, judging. We grabbed Marty and all sat together, and watched as many beautiful costumes won great prizes. Marty told us, “It’s Best in Show or nothing!” We clapped in appreciation of all the costumes, for our friends and for all those who were brave enough to enter the masquerade along with us. The judges went through various awards, including master (our division) – so far, no dice. An award was announced for, “Best Confection.” Some of us looked at each other with questions in our eyes – would this be us? No, it went to a beautiful Madame de Pompadour costume. Kendra and Trystan looked at each other and said, “We’re either being snubbed, or it’s Best in Show.”



And then, it was Best in Show! We ran up onto the stage, various members yelling inappropriate things like, “F--- yeah!” and pumping the air with our fists. We clapped for ourselves and for each other, and finally managed to pull it together enough to do a straggly line of curtsies. We were all so proud of ourselves, not just for creating beautiful costumes, but for pulling together, helping each other through difficult times, not killing each other, and bringing our vision to life in a way that reached our audience. As the sign on the masquerade theater at Costume Con 25 said, “Art creates community.”

More Information

- The Eugénie project website, with information on the project and dresses: <http://demodecouture.com/projects/Eugénie/>
- Trystan L Bass' (Marquise del la Tour-Maubourg) dress diary. <http://www.trystancraft.com/costume/characters/Eugénie/>
- Katherine Caron-Greig's (the Baronne de Malaret) dress diary.

<http://www.koshka-the-cat.com/Eugénie.html>

- Theresa Liao's (Marquise del las Marimas) dress diary. <http://booksnthreads.com/Costumes/victorian/hoop/emelie.html>
- Sarah Lorraine's (Vicomtesse de Lezay-Marnesia) dress diary. <http://www.modehistorique.com/portfolio/19thc/Eugénie/Eugénie.htm>
- YouTube video of our presentation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7ca9wIf15o>

Bridget Bradley-Scaife started costuming at the age of twelve when she got involved in Renaissance Faires. Since then, she has expanded her love of costuming to all time periods. She loves researching and collecting images of historical clothing and finding the supplies to recreate them. Bridget is an active member in the Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild and is currently on the board as the Web Administrator.

Kendra Van Cleave has been creating and studying historic costumes for approximately 15 years (although we won't talk about those early mishaps). Her current emphasis is on costume of the eighteenth century, although she suffers from CADD (Costume Attention Deficit Disorder) and really loves most eras. She performs with Bella Donna Venetian Courtesans, at Dickens Fair, and is a past president of the Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild. Visit her [web site](#) to see more of her work.