

Fashion Forward

Audrey Schilt collaborates with the **Westhampton Beach Historical Society** to bring the past to the present through fashion design.

by Allison Malafronte

Audrey Schilt knows firsthand just how finely the fabrics of art and fashion design are woven together. Over the course of her early career sketching for Halston and her 22 years with Ralph Lauren (culminating in the position of creative director of collection, vice president), Schilt learned to assimilate her traditional art training into anatomically accurate yet vibrant fashion sketches. Her further study in pattern making, drapery and textiles served to make those drawings more three-dimensionally convincing, setting them apart for their realistic depictions of how fabrics fall and flow over form.

Now a freelance designer and fine artist, Schilt is bringing her decades of expertise into projects such as limited-edition giclée prints, digital designs and collaborations with artists and organizations worldwide. Her latest project, a collaboration with the Westhampton Beach Historical Society, in New York, hits closer to her



VINTAGE LACE

An asymmetrical, beaded-lace embellishment from the 1800s inspired modernized, unexpected lace trims in Schilt's work seen on this and the opposite page.



LBD WITH A TWIST

Schilt incorporated clothing aesthetics of the past with the contemporary woman's little black dress. Here the classic staple gets a few surprises: a 19th-century-inspired puff sleeve in a gossamer fabric, an open-front bodice and an above-the-knee hemline complemented by patterned stockings.

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Southampton home. Using the society's period clothing from the mid-1800s as source material, Schilt is designing a new collection of contemporary couture clothing. Her creative process will be displayed through an exhibition of preparatory sketches and finished drawings—which will be auctioned for the benefit of the historical society—alongside miniature models of the clothing and the original pieces that inspired them.

This project has become an exercise in Schilt's ingenuity and dexterity as she switches up the de rigueur approach of fashion design and illustration and challenges herself to see and create in novel ways. Schilt came from a world where the fashion sketch was the vehicle to develop and realize the vision of the designer. Unlike fashion illustrating—which involves drawing as realistically as possible to replicate an existing, finished product—fashion sketching is creativity, brainstorming and conceptualization in motion. It's the medium through which inspiration and idea are filtered and fine-tuned. Maintaining an awareness of where reference ends and her own creativity begins, Schilt walks the fine line between illustration and design. “It's that balance between realism, which is replication, and thinking like an inventor and creator of something new,” she says.

A fashion designer who pulls inspiration from the past—especially movements in art history—is certainly nothing new, but how exactly does one bring the past to the present without dating the design or making it deriva-





BODICE MAKEOVER

A blouse from the 1800s (below) is fashionably re-imagined in Schilt's sketch (right). Note the lace collar and cinched bodice of both blouses, and the pattern on the vintage blouse picked up on Schilt's gathered skirt.



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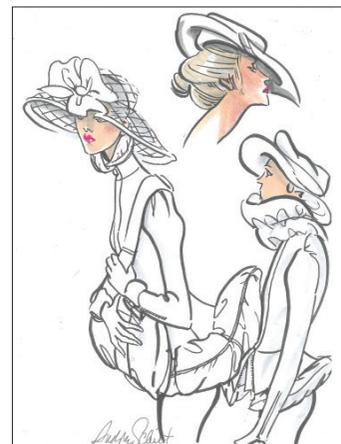
— AUDREY SCHILT

tive? “I look at the original clothing for context and initial inspiration, but at some point, I have to look away,” says Schilt. “The point is not to reproduce the past, but to pull the elements that are inspiring me from that period through my own mind, experiences and soul, and to bring them back out to create clothing that is contemporary, edgy and exciting.”

In doing so, Schilt pushes beyond the tried and true, permitting herself freedom from design parameters she may have dealt with in the past. “I’m trying to be more daring and less predicable with this collection,” she says. “I’m leading with the idea of creative expression, which comes naturally to the younger generations. Instead of my usual mentality of making it wearable and acceptable, I’m mixing fabrics in unexpected ways. I’m putting disparate prints together and making them work—taking something that is a relic of fashion and finding a way to make it functional with the fashions of our time.”

During a visit this past summer to Schilt’s studio in the Quogue village of Southampton, I saw some of her process in action. She showed me the actual period clothing and explained her creative problem-solving process. Holding up a jacket with lace and ruffles, she said, “How do you take this and update it?”

Maybe I’ll draw a skirt with an asymmetrical ruffle down the center to add a hint of the same femininity. How about this jacket and corset? Perhaps I’ll create a leather motorcycle jacket with appliqués of mismatched fabric. And why can’t the corset be soft leather? I could see a young woman wearing that with a pair of skinny jeans and the jacket on top.”



I could sense Schilt pushing as far as she could from the original without losing the source inspiration.

Sketching her way through these various visions and designs, Schilt anticipates being ready for the exhibition this summer. In addition, she’s conceiving additional elements to complement the visual presentation. Discussing the couture fashion shows in Paris, Schilt mentioned their elaborate backdrops, almost setlike in their theatricality. She would like to create similar scenery and artwork to set the stage for this exhibition, as well as educational material about the time period from which the reference material is sourced. The exhibition wouldn’t be complete, of course, without an artist’s statement, detailing Schilt’s creative journey through this project and what she discovered while bringing fashion forward from past to present. ♡

Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in greater New York City.



CONFIDENT BUT COVERED

While designing this collection, Schilt was cognizant of maintaining the modesty and elegance of clothing from the late 1800s while adding a sense of freedom and sensuality through sheer fabrics, edgy embellishments, and feminine lines. The dress on the right is an example of this balance.

SEE THE SHOW

The exhibition of Schilt’s collaboration with the Westhampton Beach Historical Society is anticipated at the end of this summer through early fall. The show will include conceptual sketches, finished drawings in color, miniature productions of clothing from the collection and more.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON AUDREY SCHILT, VISIT AUDREYSCHILT.COM.