

VOGUE

Romance Isn't Dead. The Proof? Massimo Cantini Parrini's Costumes for *Ophelia*

by LAIRD BORRELLI-PERSSON



Ophelia may be a feminist retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—based on a novel by Lisa Klein—but you won't find a single pink hat or protest sign on view when it's released this week. In the film, *Star Wars* actress Daisy Ridley trades outer space for time travel and her Rick Owens-y warrior woman look for a ravishing and romantic one inspired by the Middle Ages, or, more accurately, the Middle Ages as they were imagined by Pre-Raphaelite painters such as John Everett Millais and John William Waterhouse, who chose the Bard's beautiful but tragic suicide as their subject. These paintings, ancient Greece, and the work of Mariano Fortuny were references for Massimo Cantini Parrini, the award-winning Italian "fashion archaeologist" who designed the beautiful costumes, which are garnering apparently unanimous approval from critics and viewers alike—not to mention actors. "There was real fun to be had with the costumes," says Naomi Watts, who has two roles in the film: the regal Queen Gertrude and the bedraggled witch Mechtild. So appealing were the costumes that Watts practiced

some real-life magic and spirited one of her looks into her own closet. “I somehow had a vision of myself poolside in Gertrude’s diaphanous bathing robe,” she tells *Vogue*, “[and] I did manage to keep it, shhh!”



Cantini Parrini’s jewel-toned dresses with floor-sweeping sleeves are a world away from this summer’s athleisure-inspired kit; they are also indisputably beautiful. Still, the Middle Ages was hardly a time of liberation for women. Which raises the question: Can these costumes be feminist? “I wanted the clothes to express femininity as very fluid, exalting the women at the center of the film as strong characters,” says the costume designer of his approach. “With the story’s historical period, it was important that the audience could get enchanted by the clothes enough to imagine the sensuality breathing below the surface.” Even when things get steamy and complicated, the costumes remain an oasis of beauty amid strife.

Here, Cantini Parrini talks *Vogue* through his process.

What was your starting point for *Ophelia*?

When I face a new film, whether [it's] contemporary or historical, the first thing I do is visit museums in Italy, and elsewhere in Europe if I can, looking for inspiration, looking for the idea. It is only through a stark concept that my vision materializes...to bring out the best possibilities, and avoid the trivial or stereotypes, to land on something unique. My job is not just to costume a character, but also to dress an actress in a manner that helps her physically tell the story.



For Ophelia's character, a main reference was actually ancient Greece. I was always struck by a favorite marble statue at the Centrale Montemartini, a wonderful museum of ancient art in Rome: the "Thoughtful Muse," from the second century A.D. The muse wears a dress and a cloak that, for me, contained the elegance and mystery which our film's Ophelia had to possess. So a world opened up in my mind and I found parallels in clothing between ancient Greece and the romantic Middle Ages, which flavored my thinking for many characters.



Were there specific sources you referenced?

Some longtime inspirations were certainly influences for the project: Most significant were probably the paintings of John William Waterhouse; the palette of the great British paintings by J.M.W. Turner; and the opera of Macbeth that Piero Tosi designed in the '50s was another important reference for me. I also have a huge library at home with thousands of fashion and costume books, old and new, and piles of periodicals. And of course I buy many fashion magazines that can reflect current tones useful in connecting a movie's characters to the audience. It is often in photography that I discover an essence that shapes my work.



Did I see some Fortuny references?

Yes, of course! Absolutely. Fortuny was the only artist who, inspired by Greece, recreated the romanticism of the Middle Ages in modern clothing. He had amazing success worldwide until his death, and his aesthetics live on. In my personal costume collection/archive, I have Mariano Fortuny clothes that have served as great inspirations. I always feel that there isn't a woman who would not wear one of his famous pleated Delphos dresses. The Fortuny clothes in my archive were the most useful reference for Ophelia. But overall my collection doesn't date back far enough to cover the relevant historical periods this film focused on, even though I own one outfit from 1630 found at a flea market in Florence.



Can you tell us a bit about your archive?

I started collecting vintage clothes at the age of 13. My archive spans a range of fashions from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries [and] I have about 4,000 dresses in my collection, and as many accessories of every age. The pieces [have been] found everywhere, but lots [are] from private collections and antique markets. I've also got wardrobes of noblewomen, which were given to me as gifts. When I began building my archive, there were clothes by Dior, Schiaparelli, Fortuny,

Lanvin, Poiret, Worth, etc. that I bought for little money; there was less focus on vintage clothes then, few people paid attention. I still remember my excitement when I was 17 at a flea market in Florence and I found a Chanel suit from the '50s! Today it's impossible to buy [one] for less than \$4,000, but I paid the seller \$30. Many clothes in the archive have belonged to famous personalities.

Whenever I find an authentic old piece to acquire, it's a journey through time for me, since I get to imagine what life was like when someone wore it. A dress can communicate a great deal beyond the social status of the person who wore it [to] provide a true imprint of an era. This often inspires me to want to recreate the past through my work. The future does not interest me.



What do you think we can learn from history?

History repeats itself, so studying the past can help us appreciate the challenges we all face. The struggles, the passions, the hunger for attention and power, the hope for love and loyalty, the desires that consume us...these things grow in meaning when we connect to people from different time periods who shared our emotions, who sought answers just like we do. In films, the costumes can help draw the audience to characters who share the same human traits as them.

[Period films] show that many of the struggles and dramas people experience connect us all on a personal level, even in very different historical periods with different politics and values. The core personal dramas of a character transcend time.



What were the challenges and surprises of this project?

The biggest challenge is always time! On *Ophelia*, I had barely six weeks of preparation before the shooting started. Managing a movie that was so aesthetically rich, plus with a stellar range of cast to serve, was not easy. And this kind of period film has crowds of extras, a royal court...it requires hundreds of outfits. We somehow got everything we needed ready just in time, with lots of key work done in Italy, before I moved to Prague for production; then, while tailoring was done in Prague, I continued to make other costumes for the later scenes in the movie. We had a quite limited budget, but thankfully I am experienced at period pictures—and at short timetables!

Do these medieval costumes speak at all to what's happening in fashion today, or are they completely of another world?

I would say the clothes in this film are completely from another world. So much of fashion today is focused on contemporary wonders, aiming at pure show and the desire to amaze. The Middle Ages were a time and society much more bound to ceremony with less freedom, and of course confined by a brutal class system. From our story's female perspective, I focused on bringing out the ways in which the women's wardrobes could appear striking and romantic, but still grounded with simplicity.

