

Violent & Definite: Natacha Rambova & her Fashion Designs

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"I loathe fashion. I want to dress in a way that is becoming to me, whether it is the style of the hour or not. So it should be with all women, in my opinion."¹
- Natacha Rambova

Introduction

Natacha Rambova is mostly remembered for her tabloid-worthy marriage to actor Rudolph Valentino and for her work as a Hollywood costume designer in the 1920s. Few people are aware that Rambova was also a New York fashion designer just prior to the Great Depression. Based on her personal sense of style, she designed exotic clothing based on a wide variety of historical and cultural interests.

Born in Utah in 1897 as Winifred Shaugnessy, she was raised in San Francisco and educated in Europe. She adopted the name "Natacha Rambova" while a dancer for Theodore Kosloff's Russian Ballet and shortly before her 1917 arrival in Hollywood. After meeting the Russian actress Alla Nazimova, Rambova began her film career, designing films including *Camille* (1921), *Salome* (1923) and *Monsieur Beaucaire* (1924).

Rambova's Designs

Rambova opened her design studio in June of 1928 on West 55th Street in New York "for the creation of models for individual types of women."² Her clients included actresses, socialites, personal friends and, as *The New Yorker* described them, "intensely individualistic," women and those who were "very sure of their personalities." Her list of clients included Broadway and Hollywood actresses such as Beulah Bondi, Aline MacMahon Stein, and Mae Murray.

She claimed, "I'm in business, not exactly because I need the money, but because it enables me to give vent to an artistic urge."³ She drew inspiration for her designs from the traditional dress of exotic countries, romantic time-periods, and her own distinct personal style. While she disassociated herself from Parisian couturiers, Rambova's designs did reflect her interest in international styles, mythology and mysticism as well as her European sensibilities and education.

Rambova was fond of the dolman sleeve, long skirts, as well as high quality velvets and intricate embroidery. Of her personal taste in clothing, Rudolph Valentino once described her preference for "vivid colors [...] that are violent and definite. Scarlets, vermilions, strong blues, [and] blazing purples."⁴ Examples of these preferences are visible throughout sketches [by Mildred Orrick for Rambova] and extant pieces held in a variety of U.S. museums and private collections. Her interest in rich colors, paneling, pleating, geometric shapes, sleeves of varying lengths (on the same garment), cuts which

segmented the body, sashes, and full long skirts – many of which relate to her own clothing.

She once commented on her distaste for conventional designers who created "wishy-washy things of pastel shades with oddments of flowers here and there." Instead, Rambova preferred "vivid colors . . . that are violent and definite. Scarlets, vermilions, strong blues, [and] blazing purples."⁵ In an article titled, "Period and National Influences Give Personality to Natacha Rambova Costumes," *WWD* described her fascination with color, especially in combination. Solid colored garments displayed her use in French blue and various shades of red. Many of her garments were created with unusual color combinations, including purple-blue with green, gold with white, and chartreuse yellow with fuchsia.⁶ These extreme combinations were not evident within museum collections; however gold was used in combination with other colors.

Rambova also took a strong interest in the use of triangles: as inserts on skirts, at the hips, and at the bust. Triangular inserts were often featured in *Vogue* during the late 1920s and early 1930s, were commonly used by other popular designers, and often referred to as a "modernist" trend. Leon Bakst explained the triangles' appeal early on, in a 1923 *Vogue* article, stating "Inverted triangles and clever draping are the subterfuges which produce an illusion of slimmness."⁷ This belief certainly struck a chord with Rambova. Her interest in geometric shapes reflected the strong influence that cubism had on various art forms. Many contemporary Russian and French designers such as Vionnet, the Callot sisters, and Sonia Delaunay also exhibited this influence.

She had a strong interest in diagonal lines crossing the body. Whether in a wraparound design, with sashes tied around or with yokes which encapsulate and segment the figure, it is clear that Rambova wished to look at the female form in a non-linear way. She had a strong desire to make garments for the individual, and used this wraparound element to allow for personal fit. This idea of customization was important to her. "Every woman . . . has her own definite type and dressing in that feeling of this period brings out all her good points to a greater degree than if she attempted to look exactly like every other woman."⁸ This tactic was successfully executed in her wholesale show held in July of 1928, where she "adopt[ed] individuality as its keynote."⁹

Individuality is also reflected in her use

of combined sleeve lengths and collar closures. Another tendency, which may have changed over time, was the shape of the sleeve, specifically in wide, narrow, or open sleeves. Often, her pieces displayed more extreme sleeve shapes resembling tulips, butterflies, dolman or bat-wing, and geometric figures. Rambova also focused on rounded sleeves, full sleeves, raglan sleeves, widening sleeves, and sleeves slashed at the cuff. She often chose similar sleeve styles for her personal wardrobe. Long ties, sashes and surface ornamentation were typical on coats as well as on evening gowns. All of the elements fit in with her desire for creating garments to fit individual character types, a she had done in her film costume design career. Rambova once said, "I loathe fashion. I want to dress in a way that is becoming to me, whether it is the style of the hour or not. So it should be with all women, in my opinion. All women should not wear knee length skirts, even if that is the prevailing fashion; clothes that are becoming to the tall, languid type, would not do at all for a short girl of the staccato type, who has to have sharp clothes to express her personality."¹⁰

As reported in the fashion press, most dresses in 1929 featured peplums, flounces, and varying length skirts.¹¹ Very few gowns, in fact, were full length all the way around the skirt. Traditionally, when skirts show varying lengths, it is indicative of a change in hemline trends. While there are a few Rambova dresses in various collections and depicted by Orrick which feature flounces and multi-layered hemlines, the majority of her gowns are full-length. This is an indication of Rambova's personal preference, but may also indicate that the collection depicted by Orrick can be dated to later than 1929. Personally, Rambova was known to like longer skirts (to hide her "Kimball legs"¹²), a preference she included in her garments. Interestingly, *WWD*'s coverage of Rambova's wholesale line in 1928 noted her early interest in longer hemlines:

Several fashion themes are definitely adhered to in the collection, principal among which is an unmistakable sponsoring of the longer skirt, endorsed for both afternoon and evening dresses. While the irregular hemline is noted in evening frocks, afternoon dresses more frequently subscribe to even hemlines. The 'at home' group referred to offers more latitude in the way of hemlines, with dipping length often manifested, and trailing themes advocated.¹³

Jean Patou, commenting on the new,

longer dress to come in 1930 said, "We have simply made all women tall."¹⁴ Long skirts continued to be common in the 1930s.¹⁵ This would suggest that Rambova was ahead of current trends, at least in relation to skirt length.

While she all but ignored the fashion for peplums in 1929, she did follow the late 1920s trend for hip-focused gowns and daywear.¹⁶ Many of her sketches show decorative elements near or around the hips, and sometimes show the lowered waistline 1929. Alternatively, a number of these garments feature a raised waistline, which did not come into vogue until 1930 and later. By August 1930, boatnecks and deep Vs were also common,¹⁷ and Rambova used the style frequently.¹⁸

In terms of historical and cultural elements, Rambova's references ran the gamut and reflect her previous interests as well as her earlier intention to write a book on the history of fashion and decoration from 4,000 B.C. through contemporary times.¹⁹ It is possible that while researching for this book, she gained inspiration for her own designs. Specifically, as the *New Yorker* described in 1928, "she disclaims allegiance to the Paris designers and goes for inspiration to the national arts of China, Persia, India, and Egypt, and to the costume art of the medieval and Renaissance ages."²⁰

The analysis in 1928 by *Women's Wear Daily* further elaborates on her design choices by saying that, "Renaissance, 18th century, Oriental, even Victorian, the styles of another period are to be adapted, modernized and reworked by her until models suitable to different individualities are available ready to wear."²¹ Additional sources of inspiration visible in these collections come from Russian avante-garde art, as well as Grecian dress.

Rambova's shop also carried jewelry, and she is rumored to have created a perfume.²² Mae Murray was reported to have purchased a bracelet and necklace from Rambova's shop, although it is unclear whether Rambova designed or imported the jewelry.²³ Additionally, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets were depicted in many of the sketches by Mildred Orrick. It is possible that Rambova designed this jewelry herself, as she had previously designed the bracelet for Rudolph Valentino. Proof of a cosmetics line is less evident. She may have been encouraged by her step-father Richard Hudnut to pursue a line of cosmetics in Europe.²⁴

Conclusion

Rambova's decision to close her shop

in late 1931, after just four years of business was likely influenced by both the Depression and the declining interest in Russian-inspired clothing.

In her later life she collected artifacts from Egypt and other cultures, studying world religions and mysticism. By her death in 1966, she had developed a career as an archaeologist and had acquired a museum-quality collection of Egyptian, Tibetan, and Nepalese artifacts.²⁵ In truth, it was her brief fashion career which served as a bridge to this later work.

Rambova's many endeavors focused on the reinterpretation of the history and art of world cultures. Though her success in these careers varied, her personal independence was a constant. Sadly, after all of these careers in such a variety of fields, her death certificate described her only as a housewife.



Heather A. Vaughan is an independent scholar in the San Francisco Bay Area whose work has recently been featured in *DRESS* (by The Costume Society of America); *The International Journal of Local and Regional Studies* (UK); and the *Journal of American Culture* (forthcoming in March 2009). She was the guest curator of "Personality & Style: The Fashion Career of Natacha Rambova" at the Phoenix Art Museum (AZ) in 2005. More information is available at www.fashionhistorian.net.

Images:
Main Title Page:
Natacha Rambova
(Collection of the author)

Above from Left:
Red Velvet gown attributed to Natacha Rambova
(Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising Museum Collection, Gift of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival).

Label found in Coat (1991.789.1). Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising, CA.
Original owner: Beulah Bondi.

Facing Page:
Shoulder detail of Red Velvet gown attributed to Natacha Rambova (Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising Museum Collection, Gift of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival).



Notes:

- Morris, Michael. *Madame Valentino: The Many Lives of Natacha Rambova*. New York: Abeville Press Publishers, 1991. 194.
- New York Times* 23 Jun. 1928: 28.
- AMPAS, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills. Un-sourced clip, 29 Mar. 1928. Cited in Leider, Emily W. *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino*, 410.
- Rudolph Valentino, "My Own Story," 15 Mar. 1924: 22. Quoted in Leider, 269.
- Rudolph Valentino, "My Own Story," (un-sourced quote) 15 Mar. 1924: 22. Quoted in Leider, 269.
- "Period and National Influences Give Personality to Natacha Rambova Costumes," *Women's Wear Daily* 25 July 1928, Section 3: 2.
- Bakst, Leon. "Bakst: A Famous artist analyzes the slim silhouette," *Vogue* 1 Dec. 1923: 61.
- "Rambova to Enter Wholesale Field," *Women's Wear Daily* 21 June 1928: Sect 1:1, 20.
- "Period and National Influences Give Personality to Natacha Rambova Costumes," *Women's Wear Daily* 25 July 1928, Section 3: 2.
- Morris, 194.
- Vogue*, 1929 (especially issues in May-July).
- Morris, 194.
- Women's Wear Daily* 25 July 1928, Sect. 3: 3, 6.
- "Silhouette Made Becoming," *Christian Science Monitor* 31 Dec. 1929: 15. "Debutantes to wear really long dresses," *Washington Post* 13 Jul. 1930: S2.
- The late 1920s *Vogue* unfailingly show this trend, especially in 1928 and 1929).
- By 1930, "Bodices were slightly bloused; belts emphasized the waist – now reinstated to its natural position; [and] skirts were gently flared. Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye, *Twentieth Century Fashion* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999) 79.
- "Long Skirts will be worn this season: Hips close fitted and Necklines Vee or Boat shaped," *Washington Post* 17 Aug. 1930: S6.
- "I am illustrating the costume book too so, all in all, I haven't much time to throw away." Un-sourced quote from Rambova, Morris, 193.
- "On and Off the Avenue: Feminine Fashions," *New Yorker* 1 Sept. 1928, 50.
- "Rambova to Enter Wholesale Field," *Women's Wear Daily* 21 June 1928, Sect. 1: 1, 20.
- Personal phone interview with Michael Morris.
- "New Suit Faced by Mae Murray Over Valuables," *Los Angeles Times* 26 Feb. 1930: A5.
- Provost, 86-87 (in Grant).
- "Natacha Rambova, 69; Once wife of Valentino." *The Washington Post*, 9 Jun. 1966: B4.