



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Frank Cambria and Sophie T. Cambria collection of Vincente Minnelli costume designs

1927, circa 1920s-1930s

*T-Vim 2014-180

Collection processed by Annemarie van Roessel, Billy Rose Theatre Division, 2022.

Summary

Creator: Cambria, Frank, 1883-1966

Title: Frank Cambria and Sophie T. Cambria collection of Vincente Minnelli costume designs

Date: 1927, circa 1920s-1930s

Size: 1.25 linear feet (3 boxes)

Source: Purchased by the New York Public Library in 2014.

Abstract: This collection includes original drawings and renderings for costume designs for various theatrical productions created by Vincente Minnelli for the Balaban Katz and Paramount-Publix theatre companies, under the art direction of Frank Cambria. All designs are works on paper, in a variety of media. More than half the collection are finished drawings; the remainder are unfinished sketches. Only two productions are clearly identified: *Alice in Wonderland* (Chicago, 1925) and *Oliver Twist*. Additionally, there are two portrait photographs taken by Minnelli of Cambria family members and a 1928 letter from Minnelli to Cambria describing his proposed designs for a Paramount-Publix production.

Preferred citation: Frank Cambria and Sophie T. Cambria collection of Vincente Minnelli costume designs, *T-Vim 2014-180. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Collection processed by Annemarie van Roessel, Billy Rose Theatre Division, 2022.

Creator History

In 1916, A.J. and Barney Balaban joined their brother-in-law Sam Katz to create the theatrical management firm Balaban & Katz. With increasing success and larger capitalization, Balaban & Katz began more than a decade of developing new and architecturally significant movie theatres in which they developed innovative connections between motion pictures and elaborately-designed vaudeville and stage performances featuring many of the leading entertainers of the day. By 1924, Balaban & Katz

was the most successful chain of movie theatres in the United States.

Frank Cambria was the art director for Balaban & Katz in Chicago, later transferring to the New York offices of Paramount-Publix after it acquired Balaban & Katz in 1926. This collection was compiled by Cambria and passed down to his daughter, Sophie T. Cambria, who was the aunt of the seller.

American film and stage director, Vincente Minnelli began his theatrical career as a costume and set designer in Chicago. Minnelli recalls these early years in Chicago in his 1974 autobiography: "With singleness of mind, I called on Frank Cambria, the head man [at Balaban & Katz]. He looked at my portfolio, which included photographs as well as water colors. 'What do you have in mind, young man?' 'I think you should start your own costume department...and I should be in charge.'" After meeting with Cambria and A.J. Balaban, Minnelli was hired as their first in-house designer. Minnelli further explained "I designed for very elaborate productions, and I was soon accomplished in baubles, bangles, braids and spangles used in my craft. It was the hardest work I'd ever done."

Seeking even more dominance in film distribution and exhibition, in 1926 Paramount/Publix, a rival chain of movie theatres connected with Paramount Pictures in Hollywood, acquired Balaban & Katz. As a result, A.J. moved to New York City in 1929 to serve as vice-president of Paramount/Publix's presentation unit, which maintained creative control over the elaborate stage shows made famous by Balaban & Katz. Between 1929 and 1931, Minnelli split his time between Chicago and New York, but moved to New York to design for Paramount theatres full time in 1931.

Scope and Content Note

This collection includes original drawings and renderings for costume designs for various theatrical productions created by Vincente Minnelli for the Balaban & Katz and Paramount-Publix theatre companies, under the art direction of Frank Cambria. All designs are works on paper, in a variety of media. More than half the collection are finished drawings; the remainder are unfinished sketches. Only two productions are clearly identified: *Alice in Wonderland* (Chicago, 1925) and *Oliver Twist*. Additionally, there are two portrait photographs taken by Minnelli of Cambria family members and a 1928 letter from Minnelli to Cambria describing his proposed designs for a Paramount-Publix production.

Arrangement: Arrangement is by subject matter and therein alphabetical by folder title.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Costume design drawings
Photographic prints
Sketches

Subjects

Costume design -- 20th century
Costume designers
Theater -- United States

Names

Cambria, Frank, 1883-1966
Cambria, Sophie T.
Minnelli, Vincente
Balaban & Katz
Paramount Publix Corporation

Container List

Series I: Designs

Alice in Wonderland circa 1925 (12 items)

- b. 1 f. 1 Alice
- b. 1 f. 2 Carpenter
- b. 1 f. 3 Crown Bearer
- b. 1 f. 4 Dutchess
- b. 1 f. 5 Hatter
- b. 1 f. 6 Headsman
- b. 1 f. 7 King of Hearts
- b. 1 f. 8 Knave of Hearts
- b. 1 f. 9 Lobster
- b. 1 f. 10 Queen of Hearts
- b. 1 f. 11 Rabbit
- b. 1 f. 12 Walrus

Oliver Twist circa 1920s

- b. 1 f. 13 The Artful Dodger
- b. 1 f. 14 Bill Sikes
- b. 1 f. 15 Fagin
- b. 1 f. 16 Mr. Bumble
- b. 1 f. 17 Oliver
- b. 1 f. 18 Unidentified man in suit and top hat, with two women at lower left corner

Presentation designs circa 1920s

- b. 2 f. 1 Guitar player in black and white cloak and lady in black and purple cloak
- b. 2 f. 2 Soldier with black cloak with yellow lining, magenta jacket and white pants
- b. 2 f. 3 Soldier with green cape and orange pants
- b. 2 f. 4 Soldier with white cloak with black accents and pink pants
- b. 2 f. 5 Woman in black and white gown with green accents
- b. 2 f. 6 Woman in purple gown with white floral detail and orange cloak
- b. 2 f. 7 Woman in salmon red gown with gold overskirt
- b. 2 f. 8 Woman in turquoise, silver and purple gown
- b. 2 f. 9 Woman in white and lavender gown with wrap and hat

Sketches: Female characters 1927, circa 1920s

- b. 2 f. 10 Betty Knox - Lady in full gown with butterflies
 With textile swatches affixed.
- b. 2 f. 11 Ballet dancers and harpist circa 1927 April
 3 sheets
- b. 2 f. 12 Ballgowns #1-4 1927 March
 4 sheets

Series I: Designs (cont.)

Sketches: Female characters (cont.)

- b. 2 f. 12 **Correspondence from Minnelli to Frank Cambria, Publix Theatres Corporation, New York, N.Y 1927 March 28**
 Discusses the designs for the four ballgown costumes that Minnelli is designing for Cambria. On Balaban & Katz (Chicago, Ill.) letterhead.
- b. 2 f. 13 **Blue dresses with silver accents**
 5 sheets. Textile swatches affixed to each sheet. Signed Vincente Minnelli in lower right corner of each sheet.
- b. 2 f. 14 **First, second and third ladies**
 3 sheets. Includes textile swatches and notes affixed to versos.
- b. 2 f. 15 **Lady "Milbrath"**
 Includes textile swatches and notes on verso.
- b. 2 f. 16 **Miss Rudolph**
- b. 2 f. 17 **Soprano, 1st scene**
 With textile swatches affixed. Typed notes on verso.
- b. 2 f. 18 **Woman in blue, red and purple dress, with wrap and parasol 1924**
 Sketches: Male characters circa 1920s
- b. 2 f. 19 **Harlequin boy in purple and pale green**
- b. 2 f. 20 **Soldier with white and gold cape with green jacket and boots, with sword**
 With manuscript annotation "First tenor scene."
 Sketches: Mixed group characters circa 1920s
- b. 2 f. 21 **Carnival characters - Harlequin and four others**
- b. 2 f. 22 **Dutch characters circa 1920s**
 Contains four sheets: 1 of three boys, 1 of 2 girls, and 2 sheets each with 3 girls.
- b. 2 f. 23 **Gentleman in top hat and cape and Lady in full gown with bonnet**
 2 sheets.
- b. 2 f. 24 **Five preliminary sketches of figures and partial figures**

Series II: Family Photographs

- b. 3 **Claudia E. Cambria portrait circa late 1920s**
 Photograph taken by, mounted on gold paper, and framed by Vincente Minnelli.
- b. 3 **Sophie T. Cambria portrait circa late 1920s**
 Photograph taken by, mounted on gold paper, and framed by Vincente Minnelli.
- b. 2 f. 25 **Vincente Minnelli with Cambria family at their home in Westport, Connecticut circa early 1930s**
 2 black and white photographic prints.