

# An Image-making Collaboration: Drawing in the Design of Stagewear

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The paper describes an investigation of a collaborative commission involving two people, a client who is a singer and a fashion designer who has extensive experience of designing stagewear. The commission was for a garment that was to be an important part of a promotional video, tour and press campaign, and the client wanted it to be based on a theme involving the style of iconic female singers whom she admired and project an image of a strong, confident performer. Face to face meetings between client and designer were impossible for much of the period of the design process, but the designer was able to use her command of various drawing techniques to support informative and appropriate communication with the client at each step of the process, and it was evident that traditional, paper-based drawing was an ideal medium for achieving close, careful collaboration. The decision was taken to base the garment on a classic trench coat design, an emblematic garment with both utilitarian and high fashion connotations. During the investigation five sequential steps were identified as being significant in the collaborative process and indicative in terms of distinctive uses of drawing. These steps have been termed briefing; collection of visual reference; concept exploration; concept development; and specification for making. Moreover, five distinct types of collaborative communication were also identified in the use of the drawings included in the analysis namely, to suggest; to inform; to persuade; to demonstrate; and to instruct.

Keywords ***designer client collaboration, bespoke stagewear design; drawing for design; cultural resonance***

## 1 Introduction to the investigation and methods of research

The topic of this paper is an investigation of a collaboration between two people, a client and a fashion designer. This type of collaboration can be seen to represent an important aspect of contemporary design practice, where close cooperation between a designer and client forms the basis for the initial brief, after which the client continues to participate in the ongoing decision-making process. In this case, an articulate client with very specific and exacting requirements is working with a fashion designer with many years' experience of working with similar clients.

The commission that formed the subject of their dialogue was for a garment that was to be an important part of a promotional video, tour and press campaign, the type of garment that

is generally known in the fashion industry as 'stagewear'. The client and designer were geographically separate for much of the progress of the design process and, because of this, email messages and attachments of drawings became a very important part of their collaboration. Drawing not only played a significant role in the conception of the design, it also informed that process by facilitating feedback and interaction between the protagonists. The very limited opportunity for meeting seemed at the time to cause additional problems, so good visual communication became an essential aspect of their dialogue, and considerable effort was put into gauging the expressive and informative value of the drawings used. Subsequently, because of this, the drawn record and the emailed commentary relating to it were both detailed and thoughtful, thereby forming a readily verifiable testimony to the collaborative exchange.

The research on which this investigation is based involves a different kind of collaboration, one between the designer in the above partnership, namely Theresa Coburn, and a design researcher, Pam Schenk, whose aim was to support the designer in an examination and analysis of the details of the collaborative exchange between designer and client. In this way, the authors were able to explore the synergy which could result by a detailed exploration of the drawn record of practice from different points of view, one in which the fashion designer re-evaluated her erstwhile tacit understanding of her own drawing-based practice and the experienced researcher extended her own knowledge of the role of drawing in design. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018 443) have described this sort of critical collaborative enquiry by reflective practitioners, self-evaluating their practice and thus contributing to their continuing professional development. Earlier investigations conducted by the authors had already led to a review of the effective utilisation of drawing in the design of stagewear, (Coburn & Schenk, 2017), and to a study of the capacity of drawings to depict the materiality of cloth and garments, (Schenk & Coburn, 2018). In preparation for this present paper, attention was focussed on the functionality of the drawings in the collaborative process, with the aim of achieving a greater understanding of the singular efficacy of drawing in facilitating a responsive and reflexive reaction from the designer to the client's wishes.

Early stages of the investigation had begun in a relatively informal manner, with regular discussion to identify key aspects of designerly drawing as the authors jointly examined Coburn's portfolios of recent work and selected commissions for further scrutiny, with that discussed below chosen for particular focus because of the completeness of the retained record of collaborative communication. More formal discussions and email queries then led to a structured evaluation of the range of drawings observed, with identification made of key types of drawings and of the tasks they performed, where necessary with reference to the literature (see, for example, Schenk, 2016 174-179). At this stage, having made herself aware of the key issues in the design process, investigation continued with Schenk, interviewing Coburn and putting questions to her about her recollections of the experiences of collaboration. Next, following 'the path laid out by the interviewee', as Moore and Williams (2014 58) describe it, drawings from each stage of the design process were matched up to this commentary, and selection made for in-depth analysis on the basis of demonstrating different forms of designer/client collaboration, the particular characteristic of drawing activity that the authors intended to examine (Silverman, 2013 146). Where applicable, Coburn's comments from the email record and interview transcript, and the client's from the email record and transcribed phone calls, are given verbatim in the discussion below.

The early theoretical models of the design process emphasizing formal phases of 'analysis', 'synthesis' and 'evaluation' (Lawson, 1983 17) have been more recently replaced by operational models with their identification of sequential steps or procedures (Newman & Landay, 2000 264; Staples, 2001 8; Aspelund, 2006 xiv; Amy, 2011). Here, the work of the fashion designer constitutes an example of such an operational model and the drawings generated during the design process can be considered in terms of such sequential steps and procedures. During the investigation five such sequential steps were identified as being significant in the collaborative process and indicative in terms of distinctive uses of drawing. These have been termed, respectively, as the briefing; collection of visual reference; concept exploration; concept development; and specification for making.

As with many design professionals, in addition to drawings produced for the client, a fashion designer also generates many drawings purely for their own use, drawings depicting a kind of private conversation with themselves and, as these form an important part of the successful realisation of an effective design, they cannot be ignored here. Therefore, the types of drawings discussed below display a kind of 'evolution' from private early scribbles into the presentation drawings of a professional designer (Rosenberg, 2008). Five distinct types of collaborative communication were identified in the drawings analysed, namely communication to suggest; to inform; to persuade; to demonstrate; and to instruct, and are respectively discussed below.

## **2 The client, the commission, and the designer**

The client, an up-and-coming singer, who had adopted the stage name 'LAW' had very clear ideas as to how she wanted to develop the LAW persona. As she explained to the designer:

'I like to exude a powerful image - a clear image on stage sticks with people. Your image should be a recognizable statement...I like androgynous clothes. I like different genders wearing the same clothes...being able to express themselves, blurring boundaries and combating stereotypes. Its empowering to challenge peoples' perception.'

She wanted to feel like a performer on stage, 'stepping up and being dressed up for performance' and she also wanted her clothes to be unique and memorable and engender curiosity in the audience. 'The clothes [have to be] special and make you feel more confident' she claimed. 'Your own unique statement; your songs, your voice, your image.' To achieve these goals, it was important to set up an image-making collaboration with a skilled and sympathetic designer. As mentioned, the actual commission described below was for a bespoke stagewear garment for use in a promotional video, tour and press campaign and, at the client's request, various twentieth century historical influences had to be considered in establishing the 'theme' for this garment, including the influences of various subcultures of fashion design and the style of iconic female singers LAW admired.

The designer herself is a fashion designer whose area of specialization is stagewear for musicians, an area in which she has worked for many years. In her experience, many pop stars and musicians regard their 'image' as almost as important as their music, a phenomenon evident in the work of an artist like David Bowie. Therefore, design of stagewear is about the image that the performer wants to achieve to represent themselves to their audience. Coburn's designs have been popular with avant-garde performers in the music industry since the 1980s and have played a significant part in counter-cultural and

underground movements, for which reason they have been featured in a major international exhibition on street style in the 1980s (V&A exhibition, 2013).

When working with an individual client the garment is technically 'couture', that is made to a client's specific requirements and measurements, so collaboration is inevitable. 'There has to be a dialogue with the client – that is the reason they employ a designer in the first place'. It is also important that the client participates in the design process and that the final garment is an authentic interpretation of their wishes. The designer is not styling the client but working with them to achieve an image collaboration, so 'the stage is a catwalk and...the performer a muse'. By exploring notions of gender and nonconformity, she is working with the client 'in a symbiotic relationship which facilitates exploration of their own psyche and their own relationship with their body and clothes'.

It is of the utmost importance that the garment design underpins the image that the client wishes to project to the world. However, although her clients want the creation of a stage presence, that is to say an image wrought with exaggerated features and cultural allusions, they still need to understand the function and wearability of the garment, and how it will support and not detract from their performance. The image-making activity starts with a discussion with the client about how they think the bespoke garment will help project the image they are trying to portray. Firstly, the designer makes herself fully aware of the personal and practical aspects of the client's work, identifying personal constraints which can take many forms, from body-image to politics, and fabric types to colour. There will also always be practical restraints, like freedom of movement, the heat of venues, use of musical instruments, etc. Then, she will try to ascertain what the client is particularly interested in, what their own inspirations and influences are, and thereby establish common cultural reference points from which to start to develop ideas.

### **3 Collaboration in the design of stagewear**

Turning now to the aforementioned five sequential steps in the collaborative design process and the associated drawn record of the mutual collaboration between client and designer, the designer (Coburn) had been working collaboratively with musicians since 1983 and was strongly of the view that the design process within that genre had to be collaborative, otherwise, as she said, 'they may as well buy clothes off the peg'. The initial stage when discussing key characteristics in a participatory design exercise is iterative, with both knowledge and understanding emerging as a consequence of the exchange of ideas (Luck, 2003 524), and so there needed to be a dialogue with the client to achieve both understanding of the purpose and form of the garment, and to underpin the brief and set the parameters for the design. Thus, drawing activity began during the initial conversation with the client, when the designer started to rapidly scribble down her own responses to the client's key fashion themes.

#### **3.1 Briefing**

The client had spoken of her admiration for the style of the singers Nina Simone and Billie Holiday, and of the activist Angela Davis, before the commission was initiated, and the designer had prepared mood boards and collages to inspire fashion design ideas for their first and, indeed, as it turned out, only meeting during the design phase. Figure 1 shows one of the mood boards, with photographic material brought together to capture the visual aesthetic of women the client admired. Figure 2 depicts a type of adaptation and transformation created in collage combining disparate visual sources to represent the type of

powerful, yet glamorous, image the client seemed to be aspiring to, a collage created using the designer's visual 'repertoire' developed through experience and exposure to many sources (Petre, Sharp & Johnson, 2006 189). The designer continued to use these types of boards for her own reference when designing, consulting them mainly for styling ideas for hair, make up, accessories, etc., to underpin the image-making process.



*Figure 1. Mood board showing stylistic references. Theresa Coburn, photographic collage, 2016.*



*Figure 2. Photographic collage. Theresa Coburn, 2016.*

It is vital for a specialist stagewear designer to have the skill and experience to use drawing as a means of providing cues for creative thinking (Bildla, Gero & Purcell, 2006), and from the initial briefing at the beginning of the design process the designer was able to access at will her own established range of drawing techniques. The ability to represent design intent through sketching is important in providing support for reasoning between problem definition and generative resolution ideation (Self, 2017 317), and her initial sketched ideas were deployed to explore the client's theme and play with the silhouette, proportion and balance of the proposed garment. Whilst speaking with the client, rough notes and drawings were produced in a sketchbook in the manner Pigrum (2010 4) defines as 'provisional' modes of drawing. Figure 3 shows a double page spread from the sketch book. The notes of course were mostly meant for herself, as the beginnings of concepts formed whilst talking with the client. The designer recalls the initial discussion at the time, when exploring her theme by referencing androgyny and male/female crossover, and contrasting youth culture with the endurance of classic garments

During this first conversation the decision was taken to focus on just one garment and base this on a trench coat design, an emblematic garment with both utilitarian and high fashion connotations (Rodriguez McRobbie, 2015). The choice of the trench coat, with its martial heritage as the main reference point for the commission, is indicative of the importance of the 'materiality' of garments in fashion design. These material qualities externalize certain kinds of cultural categories (Woodward & Fisher, 2014), with the distinctive shape of military garments contributing to the association of masculinity and power (Peoples, 2014). Pass

(2014 31) describes the rationales of fashion designers like Jean Paul Gaultier, Alexander McQueen and Olivier Theyskens who design women's clothes with a militant, masculine quality as a way of 'arming' their wearers.

### 3.2 Collection of visual references

According to Garner (1999 110), observational drawing heightens a designer's abilities for exploring, understanding, remembering and critically judging visual information. Much of the designer's work here had its roots in 'classic' garments, with the analysis of details conducted through drawing from observation, and she describes drawing parts of a classic Burberry trench coat 'from life' (from an actual trench coat), for example the epaulettes, cuffs, fastenings, seams, topstitching, buttons etc. Drawing from observation in this way enabled the designer to further understand the construction of the garment and engender ideas for the repurposing of garment detailing, for example through exaggeration and changes in juxtaposition. Figure 4 shows examples of such drawings.



Figure 3 Early concept drawings in a sketchbook. Theresa Coburn, 2016.

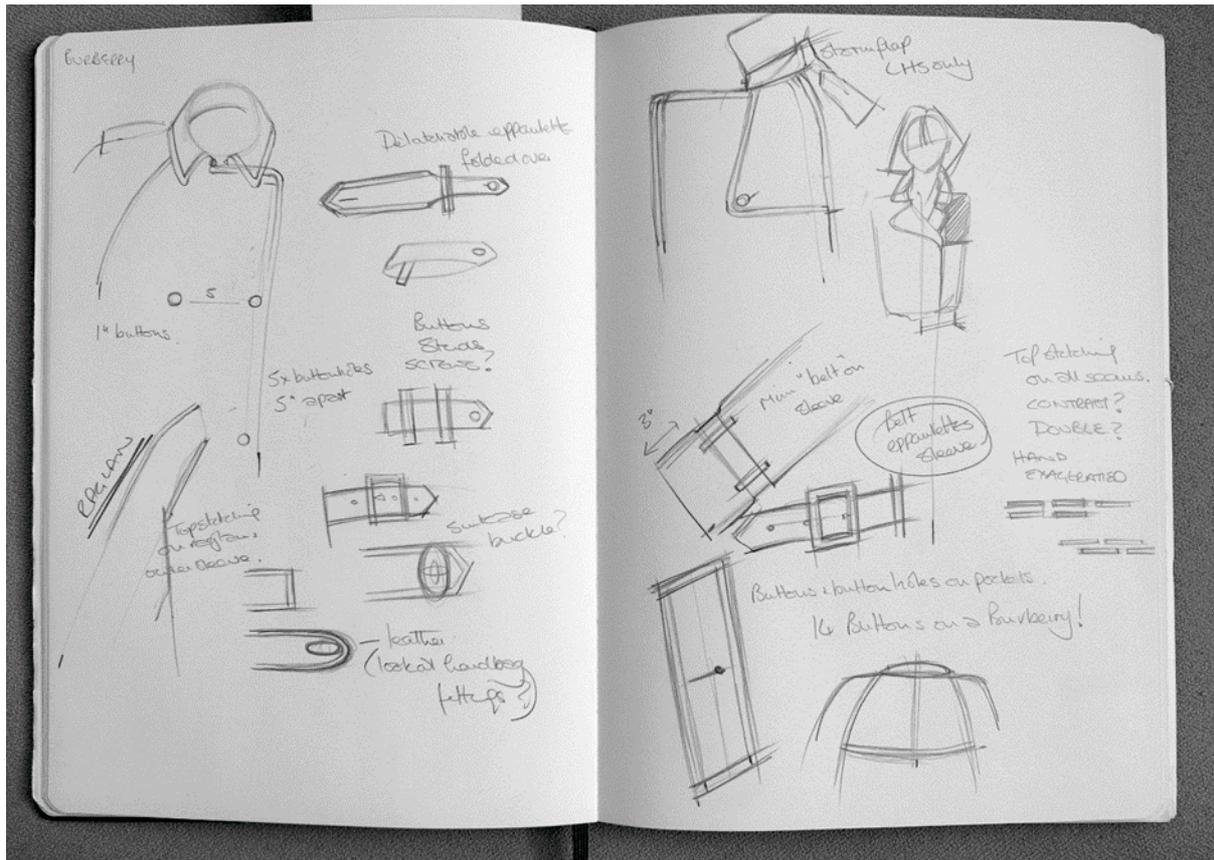


Figure 4 Details of a classic garment drawn from observation. Theresa Coburn, 2016.

### 3.3 Concept exploration

The designer explained how, when initiating concepts, drawing was very quick and spontaneous and, essentially private, for her own use only. She was exploring ideas with, apparently, simple sketches that were still capable of expressing form, detail, scale and other information quite readily (Garner, 1992). However, although she could herself visualize finished products from these drawings, they were not types of drawing she could show to a client unused to 'reading' drawings, unless she was herself also present to verbally support and explain them. Working freely to establish the silhouette, proportion and balance of the main features within the garment, the act of drawing at this stage was very much concerned with establishing the overall 'look'. Moreover, because of their ambiguity, the 'unfinished' nature of the drawings produced could also facilitate further interpretation and the emergence of new ideas (Oxman, 2002). However, in the designer's own words, this kind of drawing remained a 'suggestion' of a garment. Van der Lugt (2005 2) describes the distinction between the role of designers drawing for their individual thinking process and drawing in a collaborative activity, and this distinction between conceptualization on the one hand, and visual representation on the other, is important, in that a drawing may be both part of a private process of designing in an ideational sense and a public image to be shared in an interpersonal sense (Cikis & Ipek Ek, 2010 333). Early concept drawings allow the designer speed and spontaneity, but the client requires more self-explanatory drawings and it is important that they can imagine themselves in the outfit. The drawing could, for example, communicate fashion, fun and excitement, but it must also present a realistic potential outcome.

### 3.4 Concept development

It was, of course, important to both designer and client that effective collaboration was maintained, and, as soon as the designer had developed several promising ideas, she shared them with the client through drawings intended both to inform and persuade, first sent by email and then picked up on in conversation via Skype. Figure 5 shows one such set of drawings annotated to record the commentary of their on-line discussion. This kind of annotation was particularly pertinent when numerous initial ideas were being explored, with comments being added by the designer to copies of drawings already sent to the client, thereby creating an 'aide-memoire' for agreed changes.

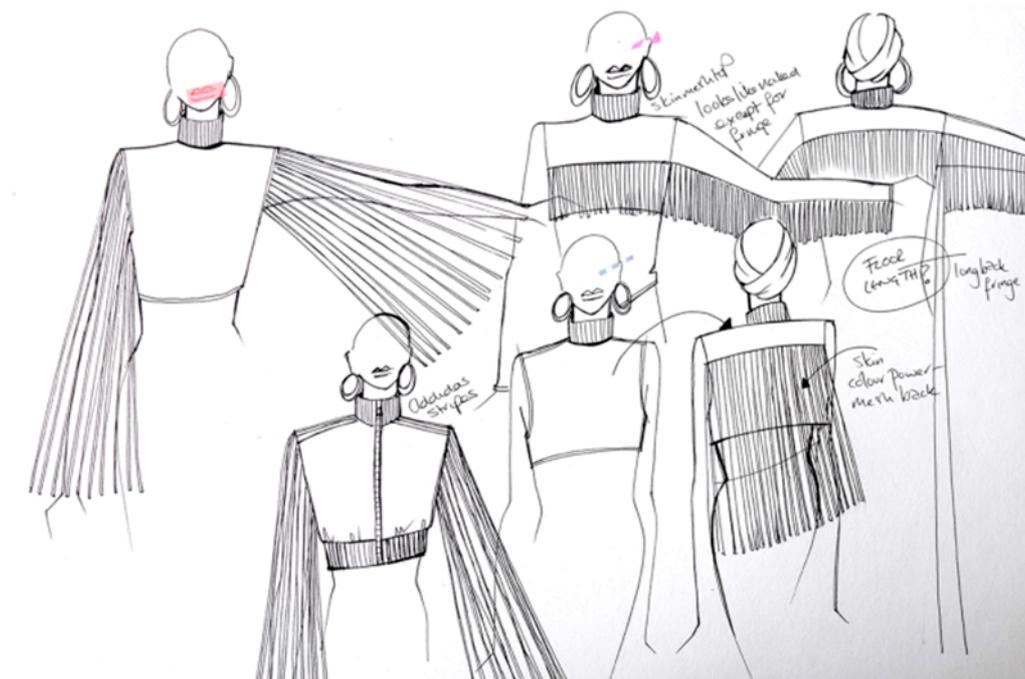


Figure 5. Annotated early presentation drawings. Theresa Coburn, 2016.

As both the design process and the collaboration process progressed, proposals for the garment became increasingly resolved, and it was necessary for the drawings that represented these proposals to be similarly resolved. They had to become precise, detailed and informative, easy for the client to visualize, and thus persuasive. They became an essential form of expression in creating the overall stage personality of the client. A drawing featuring a garment could also include the type of footwear to be worn with, for example, 'Dr Martens' confirming a hard-edged androgynous aesthetic and evening sandals implying a more feminine aesthetic. By citing the trench coat and its military heritage, the designer's drawings here eloquently depicted garments that, while evidently for a woman, still evoked a feeling of strength and power. The designer has recorded the client's actual reaction from a telephone call made on her first receiving the drawings featured in Figure 6.

'I loved that the drawings looked like me. It was like seeing myself in a comic book and added an extra layer to the dialogue. I could see that the outfits were going to suit me. The drawings helped me think about the styling and how it would work on me, and the drawings that I thought I would love to look like were the designs I chose. I realized I became persuaded by the drawings.'

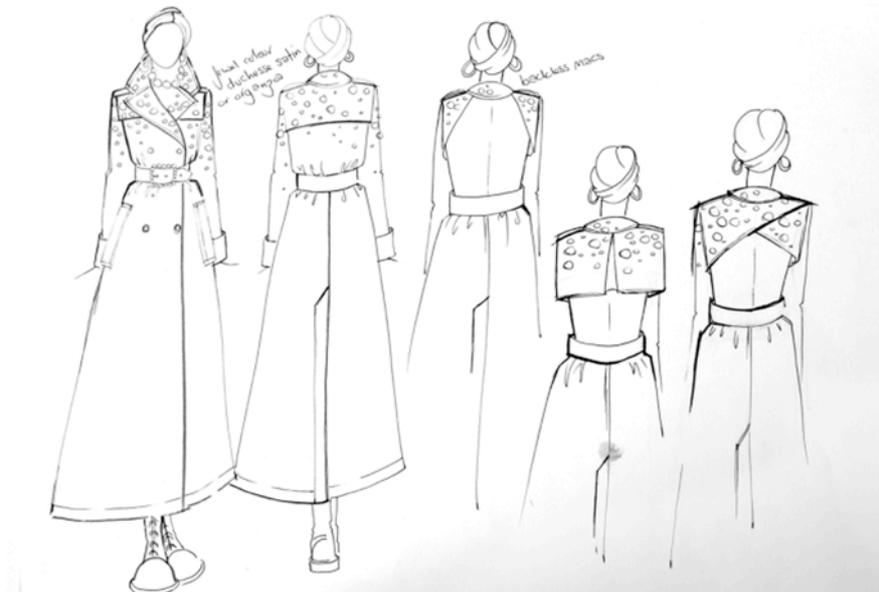


Figure 6 Client-readable drawings with explicit design detailing. Theresa Coburn, 2016.

With further development and the synthesis of several design concepts prompted by the requests of the client, a definitive set of drawings were then sent to her from which to make a final selection. (While colour is never depicted in the drawings, swatches of the proposed cloth were also sent to the client.) As shown in Figure 7, the drawings depict individual garments drawn with clarity and precision and demonstrating the development of a particular design concept, with attention also given to design and construction details so that they also include suggestions for topstitching lines around the collar, as well as pockets, pleats and the depth of hem. They detail both front and back views and are drawn in a way that realistically depicts how the final garment will look, showing a variety of ideas around a 'total look' which takes into consideration styling and accessorizing. The designer confirmed that through this type of drawing she aimed to capture an image that the client could identify with based on their ongoing dialogue. The drawings had to be a clear representation of what the client could expect to receive, that is to say 'they had to be able to envisage themselves wearing this garment on stage'. It is important in presentation drawings for stagewear to capture the visual style of the stage persona'.

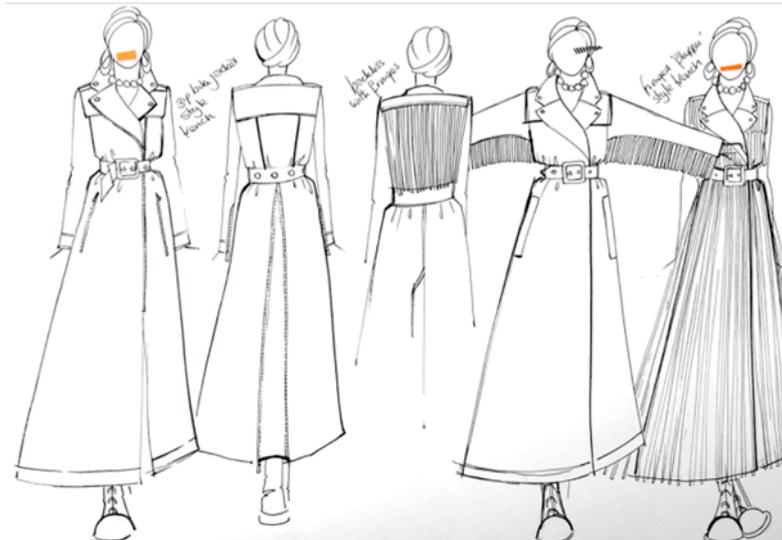


Figure 7. Client-readable drawing capturing client's overall 'image'. Theresa Coburn, 2016.

### 3.5 Specification for making

Once the main creative stages of the design process were complete and the client had made her final selection, the drawing activity became 'private' once more, underpinning the thought processes that the designer embarked upon in considering the production of the garment. Drawing was employed as a form of shorthand instruction or specification to work out how details and features within the garment might be constructed. Thus, in Figure 8, the process of overdrawing and annotating a photocopy of the final design can be seen. The designer explained how, when working out a production technique, she always had to draw it, this being the only way that she could problem-solve when planning the making of the actual garment. Even when used solely for the benefit of the designer herself to envisage the process of making, drawing remained the best and, sometimes, the only way to proceed, as it linked directly to the visual manifestation of the product being assembled. Hence, the detailed and accurate presentation drawing of the garment (shown in Figure 7 above) was repurposed in Figure 8 to help inform the construction of the garment through the production of relatively informal but nonetheless accurate specification drawings.

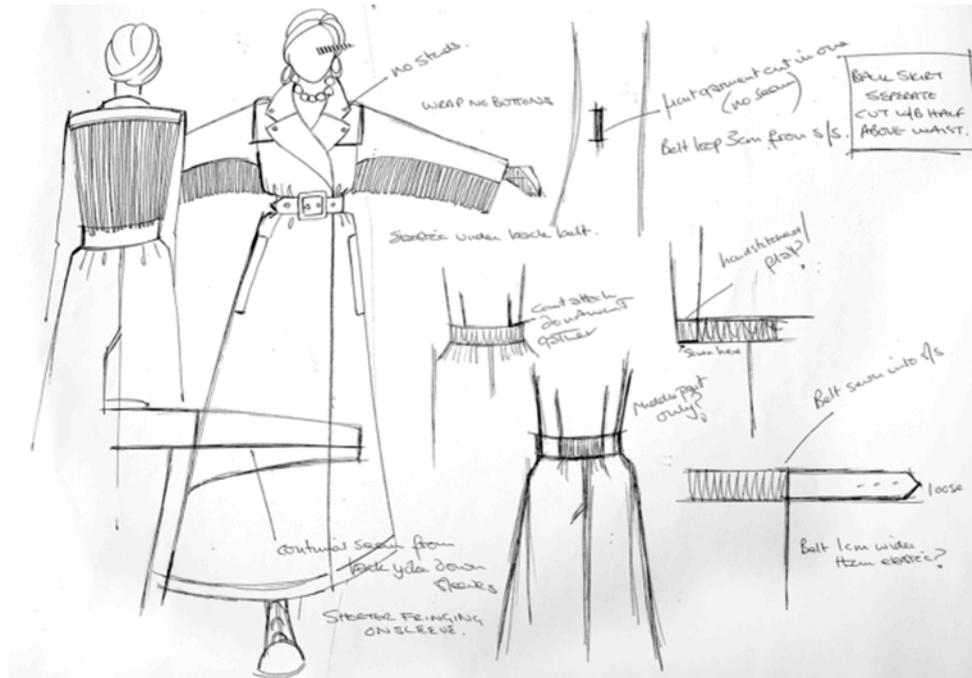


Figure 8. Drawing used as a template to work out production specifications. Theresa Coburn, 2016.

The designer and client concluded that the limited opportunity for them to meet did not seem to have had a detrimental effect on either the progress or the success of the design process. Indeed, the distance might actually have helped as it had pushed the designer to develop more ideas, and to present them through more explicit types of drawing, than was usual.

#### 4. Conclusions

It is evident that traditional, paper-based drawing is *an* ideal, perhaps even *the* ideal, medium for collaboration between client and designer in areas of bespoke fashion design, given that in this digital age long-distance communications are facilitated by electronic means. As has been demonstrated, there are many reasons for this. Having firstly gauged the client's capacity to 'read' drawings, the designer was able to ensure that only appropriately resolved concept exploration or development drawings were shared with the client to demonstrate a potential design. Paper-based drawing techniques were readily adaptable for this purpose and, as the design process progressed, the process of adjustment and development could be communicated to the client electronically using different drawing styles. Finally, highly finished presentation drawings could both be shared with the client to demonstrate the appearance of the chosen solution and also be readily repurposed to instruct accurate specification for garment-making. During the design process, other types of drawings were created by the designer herself, without necessarily being shared with the client. Observational drawing facilitated and recorded visual enquiry in the concept initiation and concept development steps, and helped to inform design details. Gestural drawing could help demonstrate the behaviour of fabric in drape, or the nuance of silhouette in a proposed design. However, more than any of these applications, the capacity of hand-made drawings to evoke the complexity and individuality of a stage persona and persuade a client of the effectiveness of that persona was unparalleled. Thus, the drawings that formed part of the collaborative stagewear design process could be either private or shared, they could be quickly scribbled or carefully rendered, but in the repertoire of an experienced fashion designer they were essential in the creation of a bespoke solution.

The client's concluding reaction was very revealing:

'I found this a very personal and emotional process. The fact that [the designer] drew things opened my mind to possibilities. I wouldn't have liked [verbal] descriptions but I loved the drawings and each discussion around a drawing became a decision.'

At the end of the analysis of her own drawn record, the designer concluded that 'this process has made me reflect on much that I have previously taken for granted in my design work'. While in many respects, her approach to the commission corresponded to that observed for other designers with well-established specialist and professional drawing skills (Pipes, 1990 6; Ferguson, 1992; Van der Lugt, 2005 2), some specific characteristics could be identified. In particular, the intention to work collaboratively with the client, albeit from a distance, made her produce more clearly defined and more individualized presentation drawings than might otherwise be typical. However, the limited opportunity for face to face meetings was not, of course, the only distinct feature in a commission that was concerned not just with the design of a simple garment but one that would also play a significant part in the projection of a stage persona. Evidently, the client's intense interest demonstrated her own professional determination to witness the melding of cultural influences in a fashion garment that would not only enhance but also help to define her stage presence. Although the persuasive effects of drawings are invariably put to good effect by designers, the client's own comments here described the distinct impact that the drawings had on her, i.e. 'I loved that the drawings looked like me', and 'I realized I became persuaded by the drawings'. Evidently, not only did the drawings help to sell the design ideas to the client but they also engaged her in the design drawing process. The use of hand-made drawings in this way made the client more of a participant in the design process than if the designer had simply described concepts to her, or employed soulless computer-generated drawings, and so created a bond of visual language between them both.

Drawings became a physical record of the designer's analysis of an actual classic garment, a trench coat, and thereby informed the chosen solution. Drawings informed the client about the visual impression that several concepts would create and persuaded her to select the concept most appropriate to her needs. Drawings demonstrated how she would look and finally became instructions for the designer to achieve that 'look' in reality.

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