La Traviata: Set and costume design for London Park Theatre

Gareth Bowden, April 2025

Verdi’s La Traviata opera re-interpreted for London’s Park Theatre

The themes of La Traviata centre on a world of contrast and change. Giuseppe Verdi’s original story was based in 19th-century Paris, centred around the courtesan Violetta and her love affair with nobleman Alfredo. The tragic opera continues to resonate today with themes that highlight contrast amongst peer expectation, divergent realities in pursuit of pleasure, and the price of presenteeism that the characters experience through the story.

The set and costume design was conceived to explore these themes: as fashions evolve. expectations change, private spaces like the boudoir become more public as people constantly perform for an audience - constructed snippets projected to a digital audience. An image of the self, however perfectly portrayed, is inevitably shattered by the ultimate contrast of life and death. These themes are reimagined for a modern audience, rooted in the spirit of art nouveau Paris.

Libretto analysis - what is the cultural context?

A number of rich strands are evident from the original Parisian story including art, social life and city culture that resonate with a modern audience.

- The opera is originally set in a bustling, industrial period where industry is heard, smelt and experienced up close
- Women across society engage in a love of pleasure and fashion at varying degrees - from courtesans to the emboldened working class ‘midinettes’ giving a boisterous societal backdrop. Protection from witnessing the full spectre of 19th century life remains (e.g. the veil).
- Elegant furniture and decorative patterns, often using organic forms, give a distinctive backdrop to bourgeois life
- A key undercurrent to the story is the superfluous pursuit of pleasure as an escape from the fragility of life. This theme can be traced through to modern social exchange, where smart phones and social media act as evidence and arbiter of fashion and fun.
- The idea of the mirror as allegorical for social media exchange influencing the performance of its subjects was a focus of the research, including printed media of the period.



Set and situation research

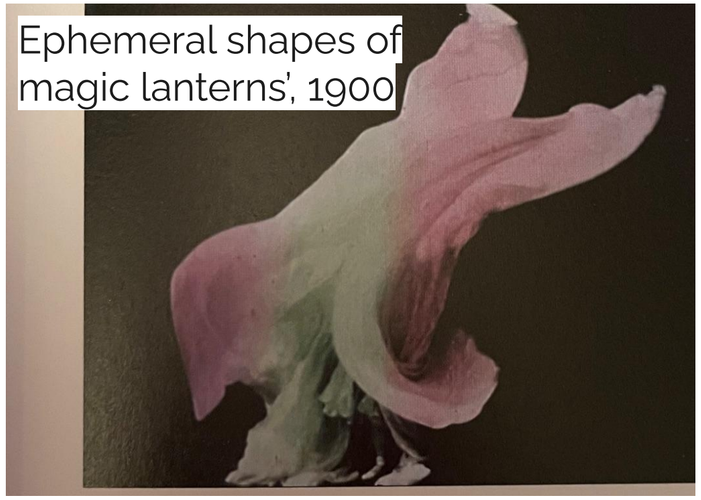


Gustav Klimt portraits, 1901

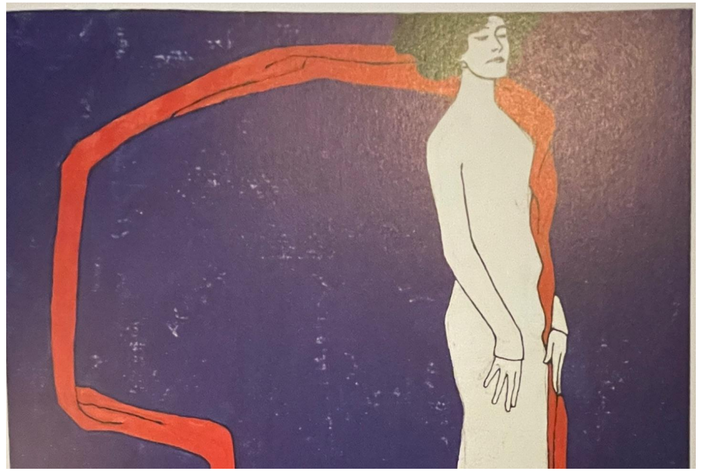




Exotic materials and styles given elevated display in arcades



Ephemeral shapes of magic lanterns', 1900



Cabaret Fledermaus cover illustration, 1907



Shadow Theatre Chat Noir, c.1896

Establishing the concept and setting the scene

Defining the narrative using theme research

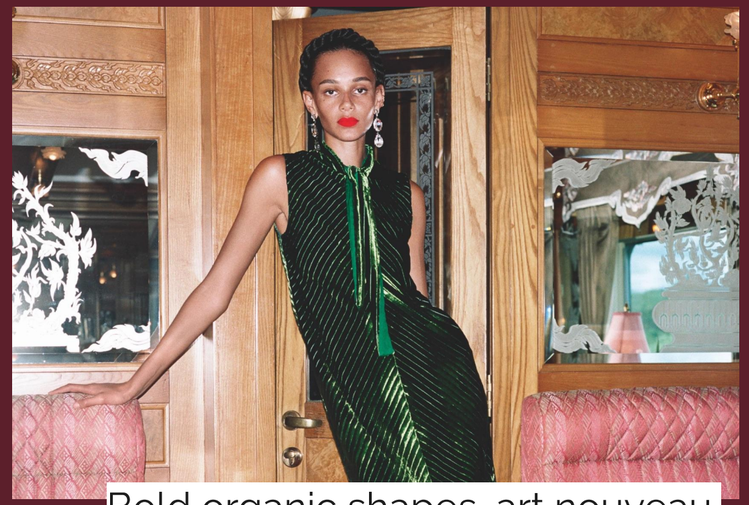
Amongst the interstices of Soho nightlife

The story centres on Violetta, a prominent character in decadent Soho, London, somewhere between the glitz, glamour and trash culture in the plentiful speakeasy bars. High society and shady night-time characters here rub shoulders in pursuit of the same things - pleasure, glamour, status, and belonging.

The basement bars and Soho nightlife provide a setting for the relationships of Violetta, some-time lover Alfredo and his father to flourish, flicker and fizzle amongst the noise, chatter and clatter of the buzzing social scene. A flirt and occasional performer, Violetta, is admired from afar by the well-to-do Alfredo, though who lacks the social gravitas. Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father, is the nightclub baron who keeps order and respect amongst revellers.



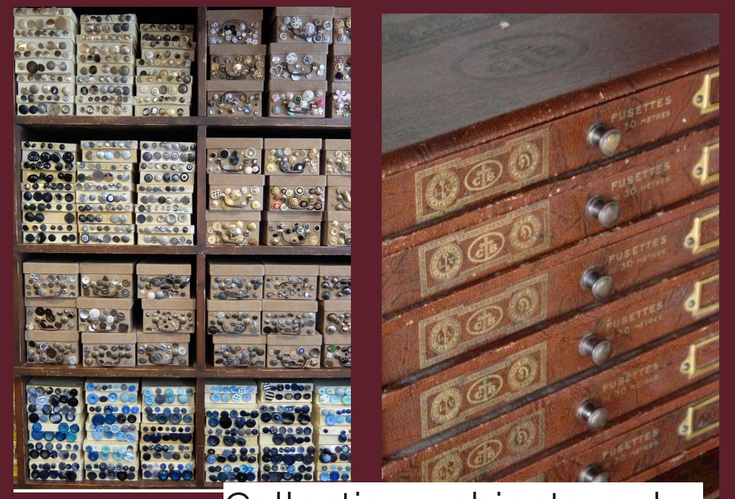
Concept research



Bold organic shapes, art nouveau, social liberation of women

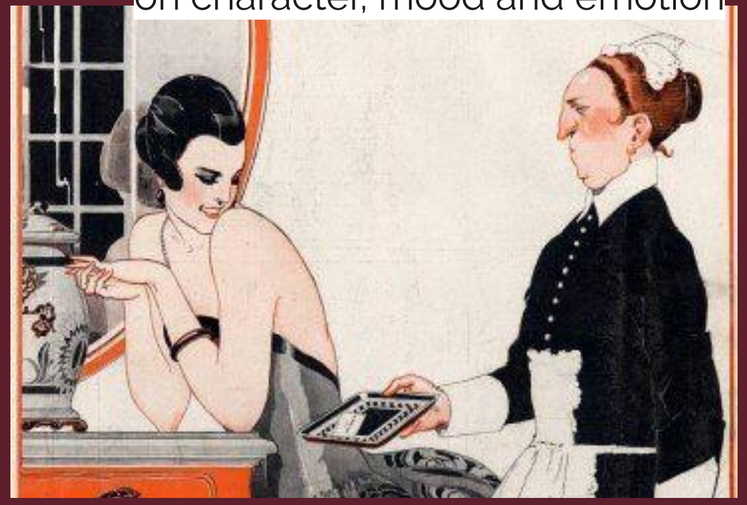


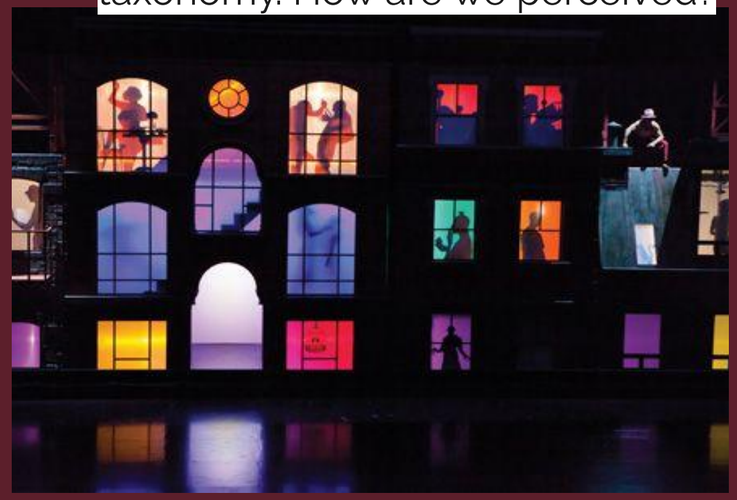
Reflection, veil, partition, spotlight on character, mood and emotion



Collection, cabinets, order, taxonomy. How are we perceived?



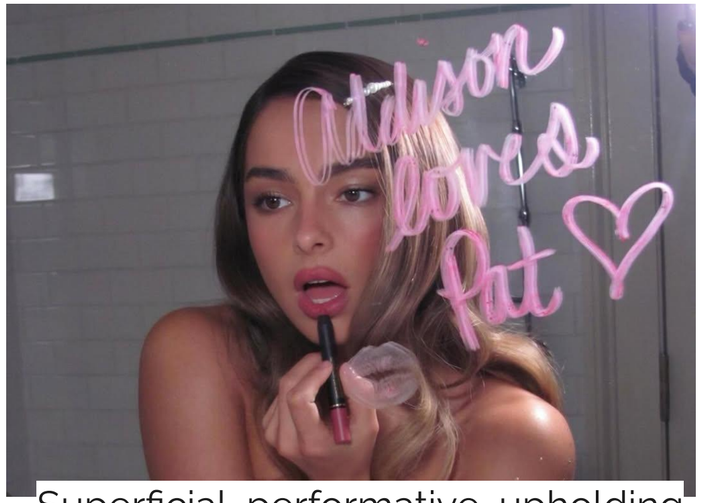




Theme development



Individual fashion identities combine for disjointed decadence

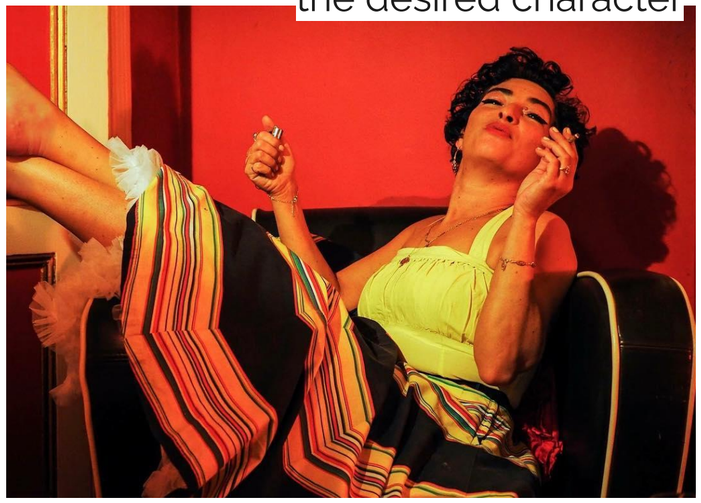


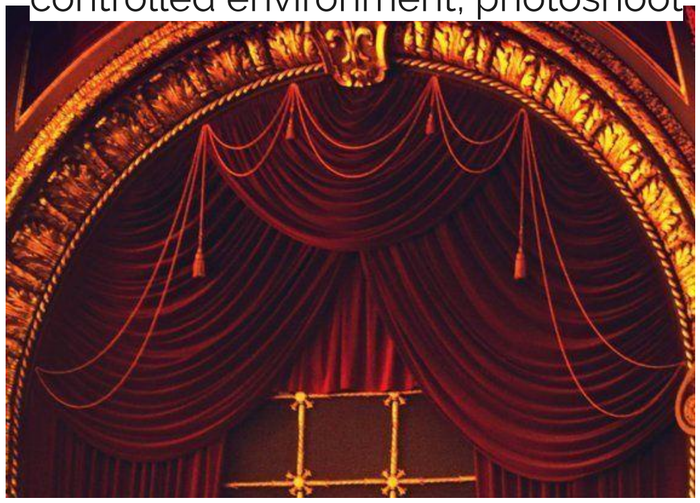
Superficial, performative, upholding the desired character



Portals, transitional spaces, spotlight, controlled environment, photoshoot







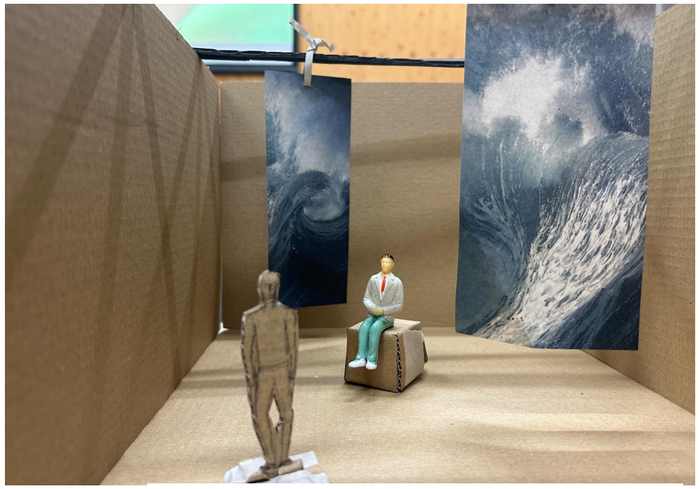
Exploring themes using a scale model box



Contorted forms

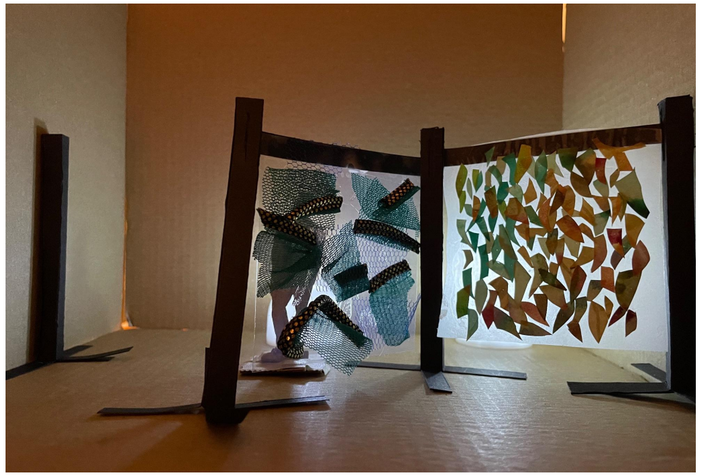


City as character



Scene depth and perspective







Light and material interplay… partially hiding and revealing characters

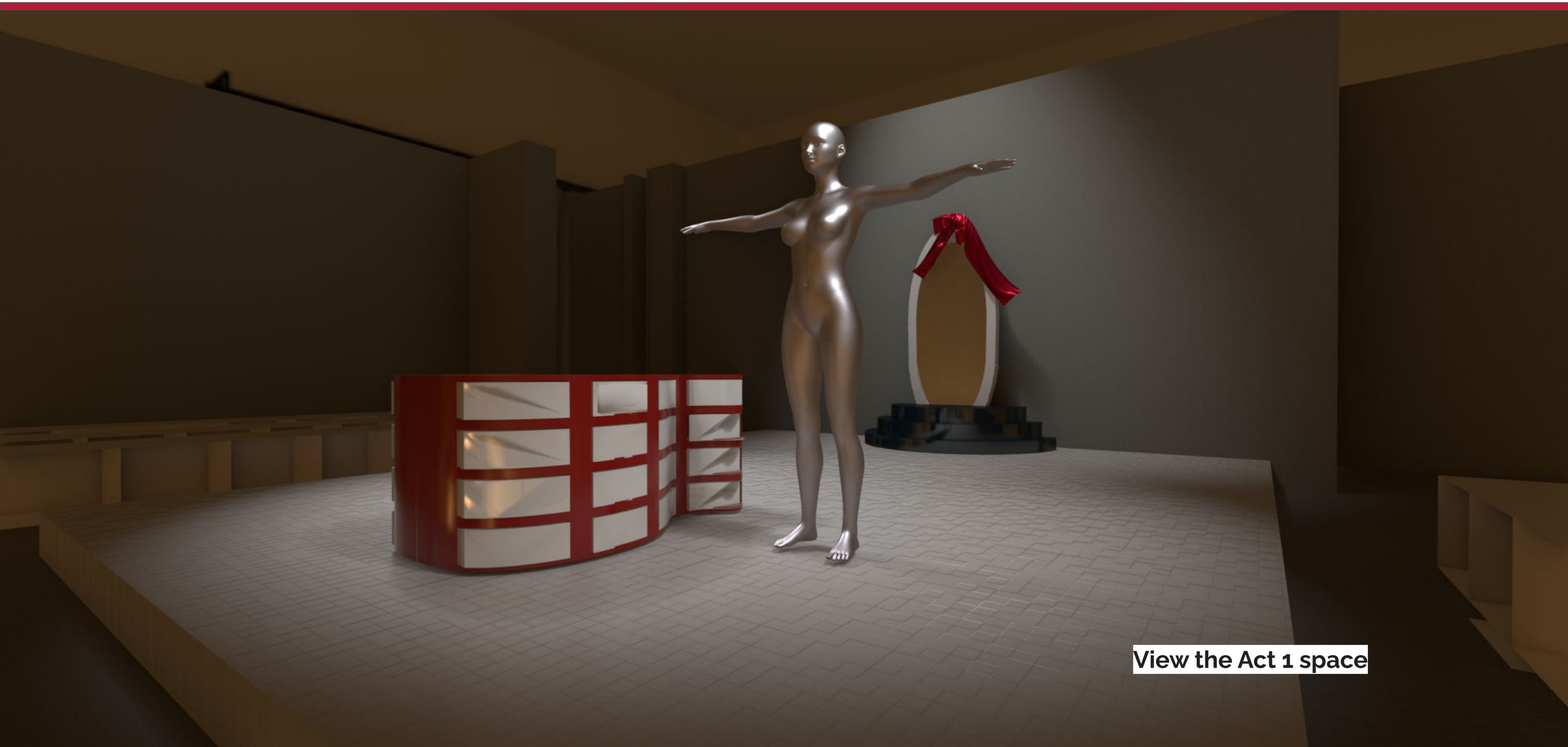
Set and costume designs for Act 1, 2 and 3

Act 1: The Soho speakeasy

Image-obsessed characters indulge in laughter and merriment, with carefully choreographed social exchanges all witnessed by a centrepiece mirror. Its watchful gaze ensuring performative subjects who aspire to high society, fashion and material success. Who ultimately must reflect on their own deterioration as the story develops - starting out as self-obsessed, self-anointed fashionistas; though with greater audacity than disposable income.

Themes:
The edgy, fashionable, decadent, DIY, low budget, exclusive. Aspiring to the rich, opulent, luxury styles, an uneasy, contrasting, dissonance, slight trash vibes.

Act 1 - set design



View the Act 1 space

Act 1 - costume design principles



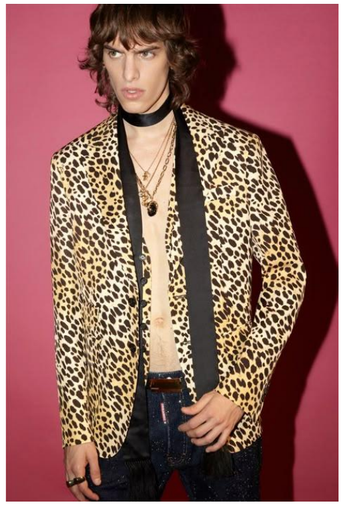
Flamboyant dress, statement prints



Bold, attention-seeking fashion



Decadence and accessories







Historic Soho club hierarchy



Act 1: Costume designs

Fabrics






Colour palette

Violetta

Options include statement print dress with accent scarf and belt, or full claret silk alternative for maximum elegance in the scene.




Act 1: Costume designs

Barone Douphol



Alfredo



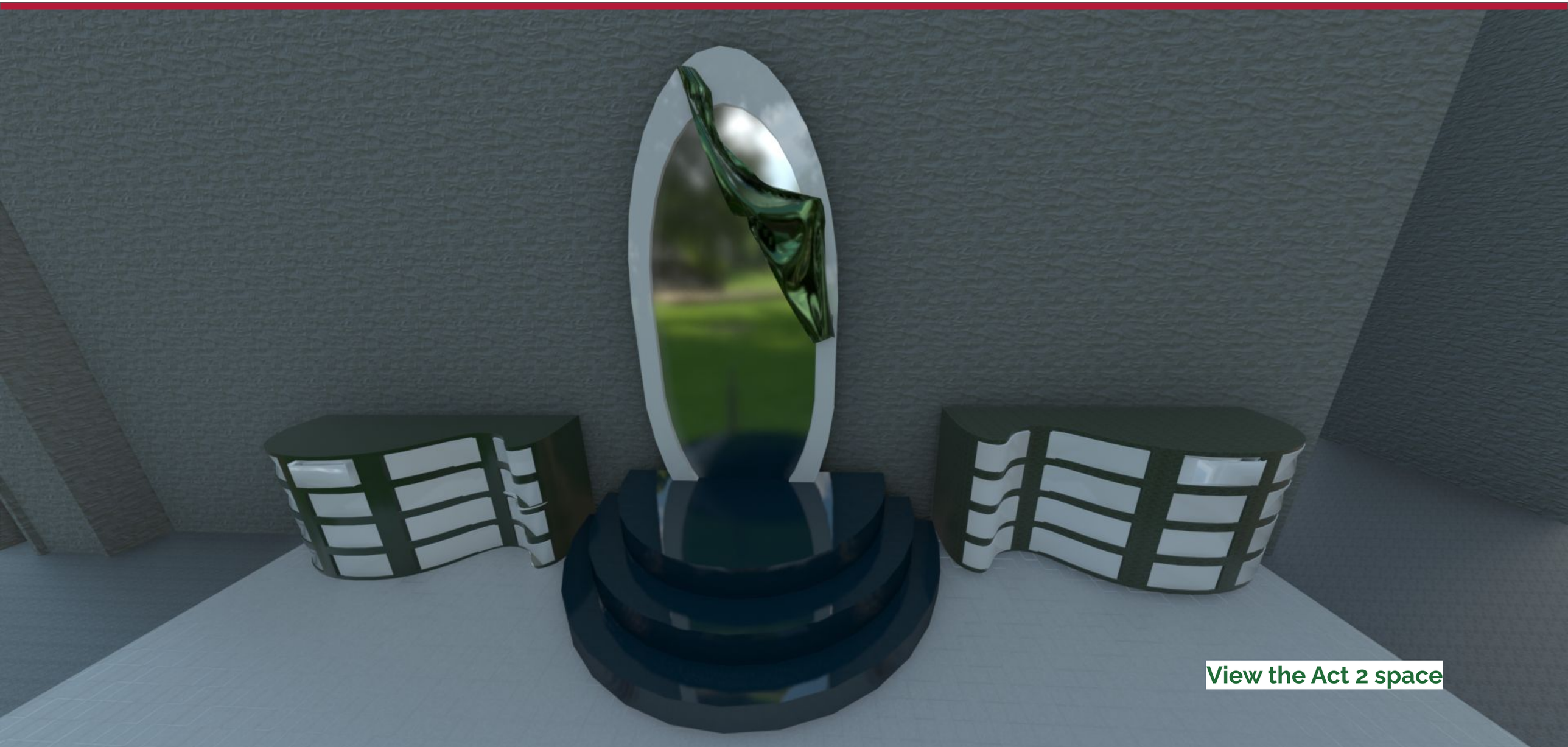


Act 2: Upmarket cocktail bar

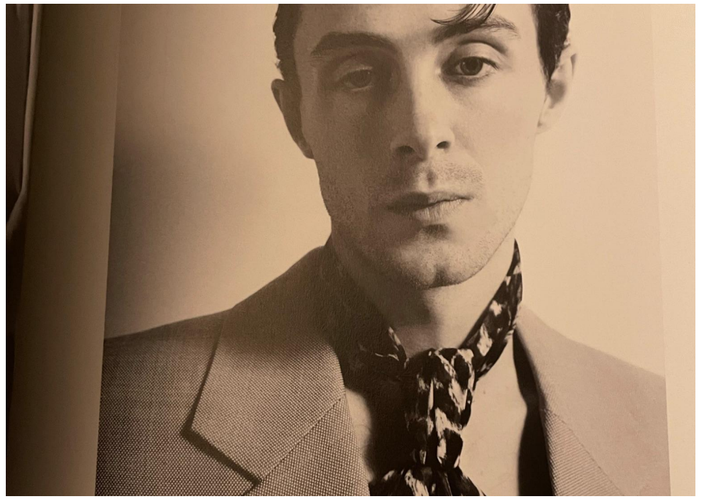
By now with more disposable income, and a little more social decorum, the characters graduate to a desirable cocktail bar. Greater sophistication and maturity demanded in more critical reflection amongst peers and the outside world.

Themes:
Salon, seasoned fashionistas, disassociation with young, throw-away fashion, portraying timeless classic, haberdashery feel to represent the detail and class of the characters

Act 2 - set design



Act 2 - costume design principles













Act 2: Costume designs

Fabrics



Colour palette



Violetta



Alfredo



Annina



Professional and trying to be a little bold, using pattern fabric and loose shirt options

Act 3: Violetta’s boudoir

A largely barren and dour backdrop as sparse shelves and storage reflect the deteriorating situation.

Theme:
Cold, sterile, convalescence

Act 3 - set



View the Act 3 space

Act 3 - costume design principles

The costume needs to be a medical or night-time style robe, that retains a commitment to fashion. Silk fabric, ornate edging. Must have signs of distress and dour colour to reflect the mood, with a minimal splash of red as both a reminder of past days of opulence, and of blood and nearing end of life









Act 3: Costume designs

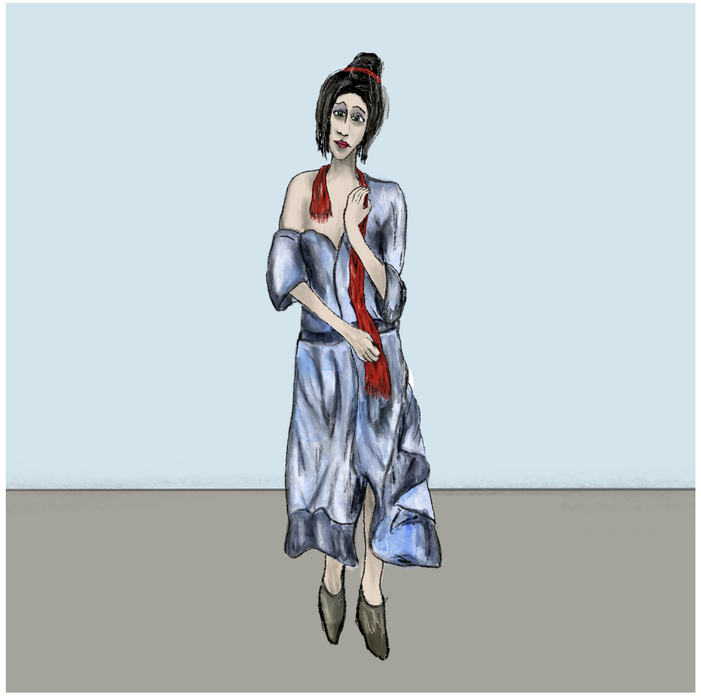
Fabrics





Colour palette

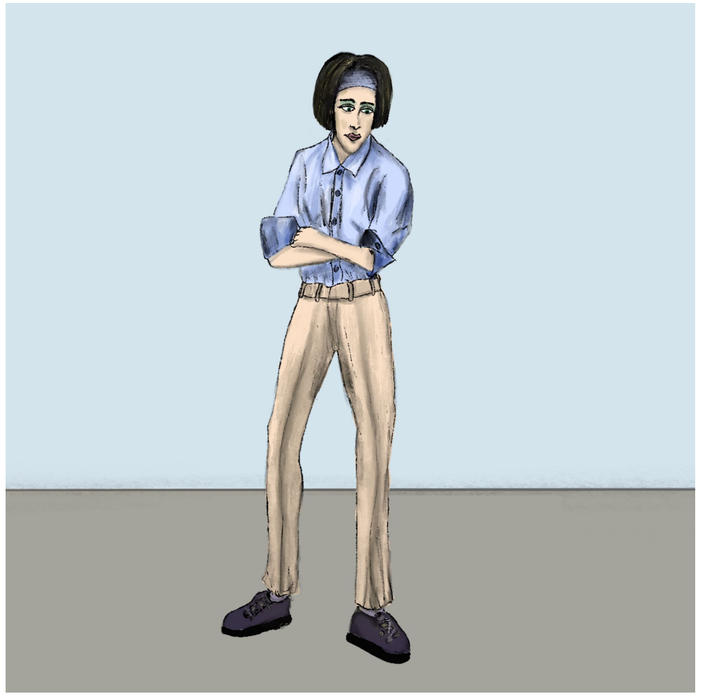
Violetta





Option for distressed vest beneath robe

Annina



Annina: more sober colours, same style