

A Little Princess



Synopsis

A Little Princess is a novel written by Frances Hodgeon Burnett, in the late 1890's, in which a young girl, Sara, is taken by her father from her childhood home in India to a boarding school in London. She and her father have an extremely loving relationship, therefore the separation is seen as a hard necessity for both. A hardship that Captain Crewe (Sara's father) eases by gifting her with a doll (Emily) who acts as a surrogate friend, daughter and mother for the young Sara, as and when she needs an emotional supplement of any kind.

At her new school (Miss Minchin's academy for young ladies) Sara befriends girls who have a vital hole in their lives and fills these gaps with love, magic and storytelling. However, her salvation of these new friends is cut short when she discovers on her birthday that her father has died of shock and a fever in India – due to a friend persuading him to invest all his (and Sara's) money in the Diamond mines, and then losing it all; leaving Sara a penniless orphan.

To save face, the cruel Miss Minchin elects to keep Sara on as an underservant, where she is mistreated by the other servants in the school and treated with an awkward distance by her friends. Miserable and alone, Sara attempts to rekindle the magic in her life by pretending she is a princess, or a prisoner, but without kindness and love she collapses into heartache with only her doll for company.

However, one night, her friend Ermengarde braves the rules laid down by Minchin, and sneaks up to see Sara in her displaced and freezing attic bedroom. The two finally open up, and little by little, Sara's life and will to live it return to her (along with a stronger kinship with the servant in the attic next door, Becky).

Due to her vantage point on the attic, Sara spends her little free time watching the faces in the windows of the surrounding houses, and daydreaming about the people they belong to. When she sees the contextually unusual face of an Indian man she is surprised, and surprises him equally by conversing with him in his native tongue (when his monkey escapes to her attic room). This Indian man tells his employer (a sick, rich gentleman, who has returned to England from India for his health) of the little girl in the building next door. He is intrigued, and the two set up a fantastical plan to put food, warm clothes and beautiful things in her room while she is sleeping. Sara of course, believes that The Magic has come back to her.

The sick rich man next door (known to Sara as "The Indian Gentleman" has a parallel story in which he is desperately searching for the lost daughter of a friend whose money he has lost, and who died in the heartache of the struggle. This daughter is at a boarding school somewhere in Europe...

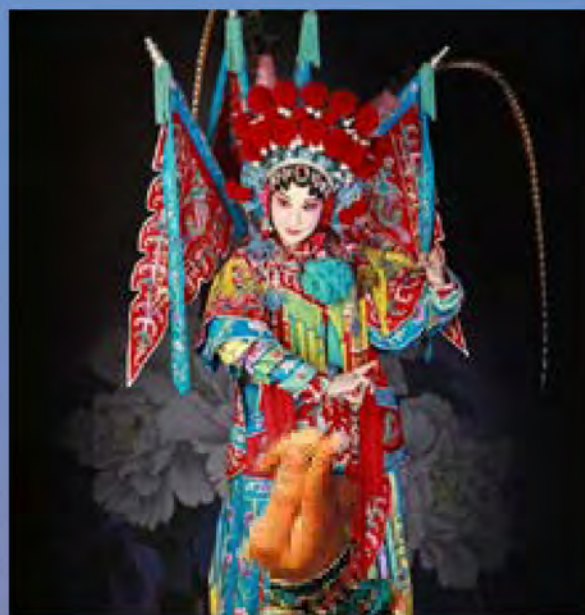
One night, the monkey appears again at Sara's window. She takes him to The Indian Gentleman in person this time, and indulgently, the Gentleman asks about her life (as he is curious to see how his scheme is paying off). When he hears her story he is overcome with emotion, and it finally comes out that Sara was there, his friend, Captain Crewe's daughter, just on the other side of the wall this whole time.

The story is revealed to the outraged Miss Minchin, who insists Sara continue to be educated at the school; returning to her previous position as a privileged student (as it turns out, the diamond mines were successful after all). However, The Indian Gentleman is more forceful, and Sara is allowed to live happily ever after, with a loving guardian and a litany of friends just next door.



Concept Statement

I will be framing the narrative of a little princess through the imagination of Adeline Yen Mah, when she read the book in 1940s China, and saw herself reflected in the character of Sara. I will keep the original timeline of the 1890s-1900s period that the book was set in, but place the characters in China. Therefore, the dresses of these wealthy young girls will be based on the outfits worn by concubines in Qing dynasty China. As Sara's role in the story is to bring enlightenment to those who have an emotional gap in their lives, I will be representing her as a Buddhist deity or prophet, pulling references from mainly Chinese Buddhist art and a little of Japanese and Korean as the aesthetic runs its course and develops. Adeline was living in a China that was on the brink of revolution, influenced by a cycle of fashion that began in Buddhist eastern art and faith, adopted and bastardised in the 1900s by Europe and America (as can be seen in a little princess by attitudes and relations with India), returning back to China in a new twisted form in the package of the American Saviours during her childhood in the 1930s and 1940s. I will explore this cycle and how it would affect the imagination of a little girl, reading a story about the magic of storytelling, positive affirmation and love, during a time of misery and conflict in both the lives of Adeline and Sara. I will explore this by providing visuals of the various fashion and art influences that are involved in the narrative of the project. For example, I will meld together styles and colours from 1900's concubines in the Forbidden City with western "oriental" dress worn by wealthy women in the 1900s - these will be worn by the wealthy, privileged schoolgirls, who are oblivious to the hardships of life outside of the walls they inhabit. Because Sara's father is a military man, I will dress him in soldiers uniforms from Qing dynasty China, although, as Sara thinks of him and his work as an omnipotent force, I may involve some elements of ancient Chinese warrior dress into his costume - as this is what Adeline would think of as an all-powerful soldier when she is a young girl. For Sara herself, she will embody the Buddhist deity's and prophets that bring joy and peace to their worshippers - the visuals of this will begin in the roots of what Adeline would have seen when she prayed with her grandfather and aunt, and the images described in the temple scenes from Wild Swans. But I will then add elements from Buddhist art from across Asia and the centuries to create an eclectic vision of what the west imagines the personification of enlightenment to be. With our current passion for yoga, meditation and all things "exotic", eastern philosophy and art is once again being bastardised. I have not test decided whether this will be a satirical critique, or a benevolent nod to the inevitable cycle of fashion. Although I do know, that the colour palette will be very gold and very pink.



Qing Dynasty

The Qing Dynasty inspiration for my designs sparked an interest in the huge wealth of art and design that came from this period. The amount of artistic inspiration that came from this place and me is overwhelming. Therefore I chose images specifically worn by rich women in the same rank (concubines and wives of emperors) within the colour palette that suited the characters within A Little Princess and what I believed their personality preferences would be. The concept of attaching specific animals and flowers to each person came from the poem written during the Qing dynasty about concubines of the emperor.

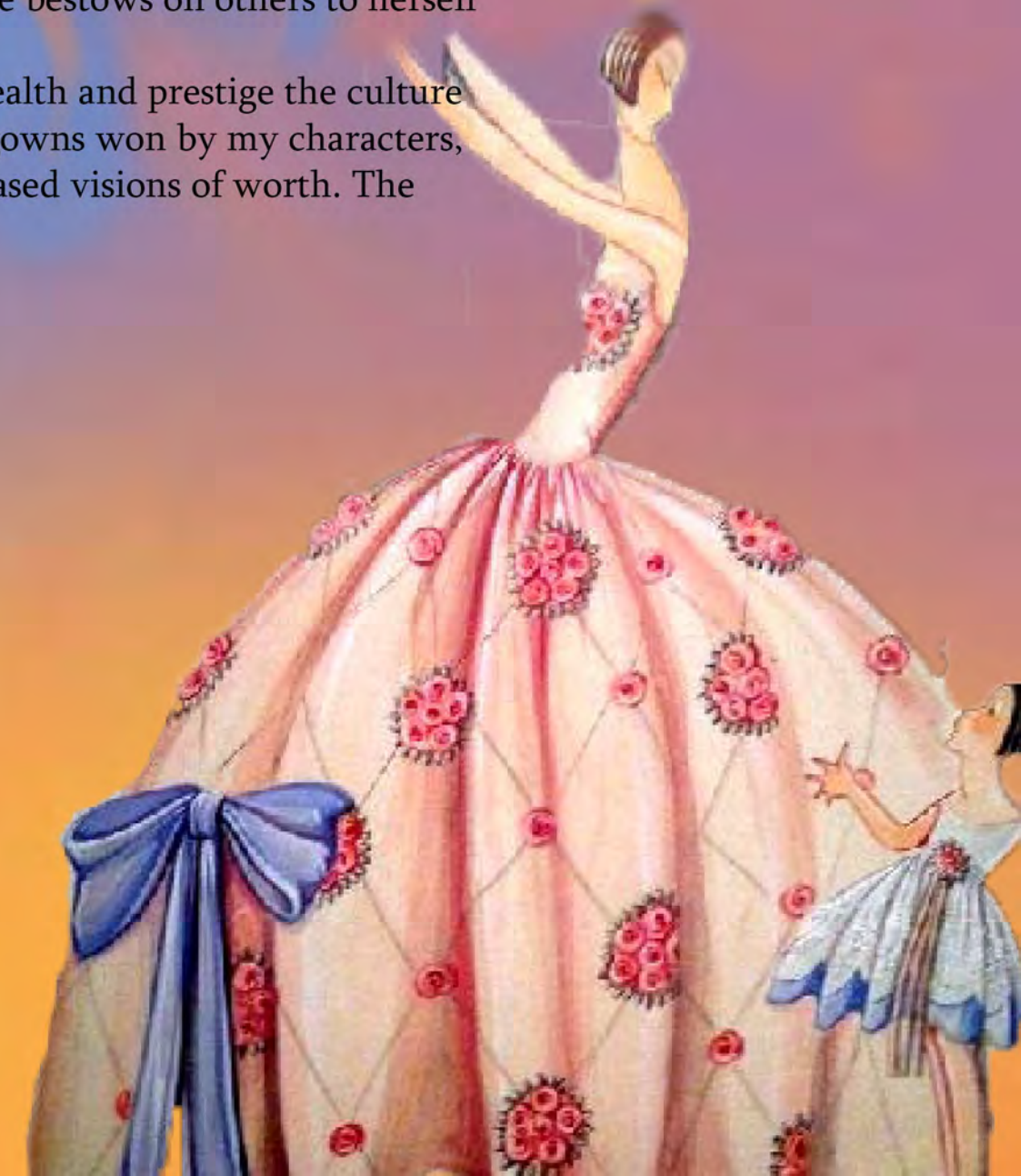


Jeanne Lanvin

Jeanne Lanvin was the inspiration for the western style of dress from the 1900's that I used to meld the western and eastern styles together and create the fantasy land of my production. This is because the ethos of her work sublimely fits with the initial aesthetic, creating a frilly and fanciful look that would have appealed to all of the pupils of Miss Minchin's select seminary for girls. At that time it was fashions like these that were inspiring Frances Hodgeon Burnett to dream up girls who dreamed of such frothy gowns.

The ethos of Lanvin's work was one of mothers and daughters dressing up together, and bonding over pretty things. This was created by Lanvin for her daughter Marguerite, so she could make beautiful matching outfits for them both. Within the story, Sara's propensity for motherhood is propelled by the absence of her own mother. She becomes a maternal figure for her doll, Becky, Lottie and even Ermengarde to an extent. As Sara grows up she teaches the skill of mothering herself – applying the same kindness she bestows on others to herself in times of need.

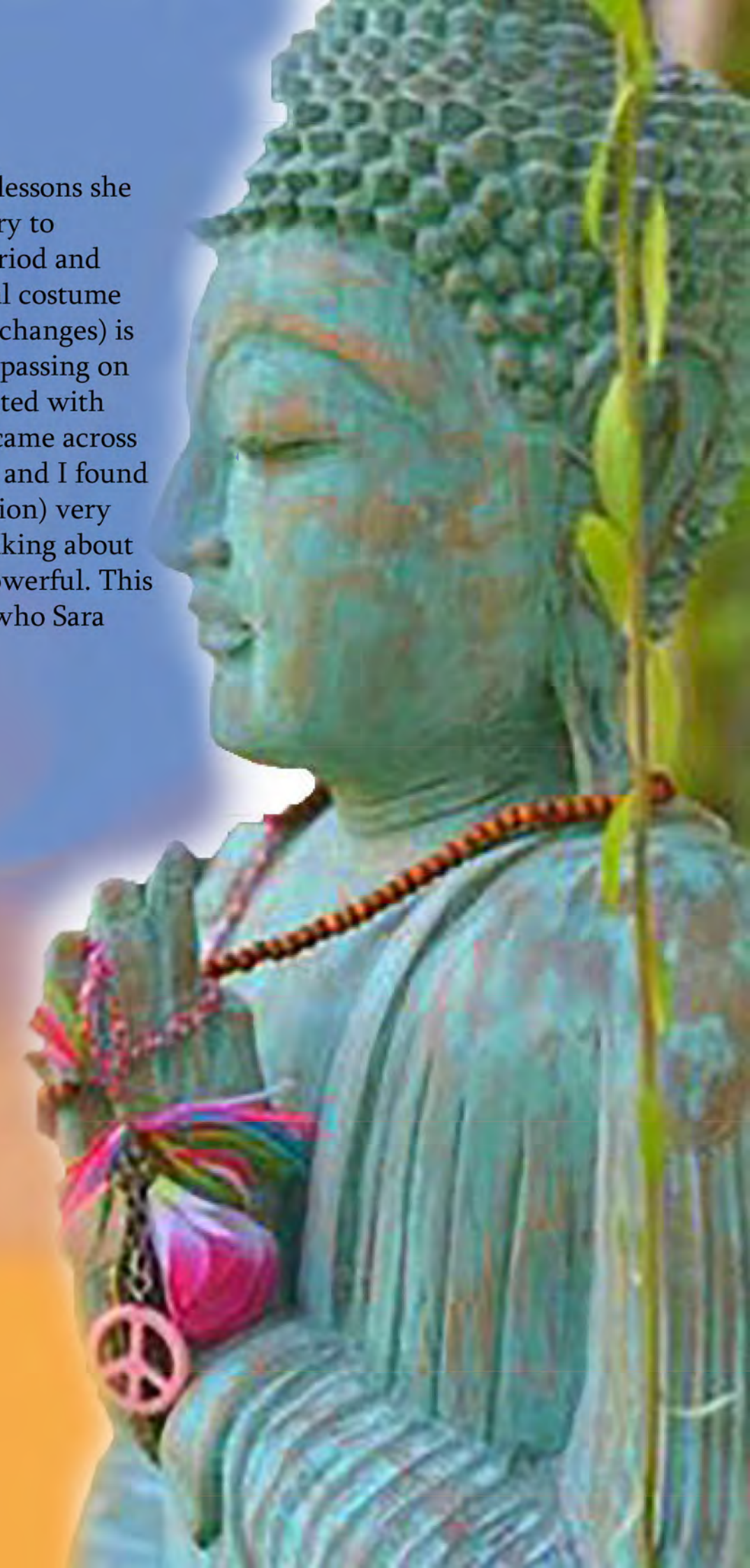
The silhouettes of these gowns demonstrate the wealth and prestige the culture at that time this will therefore be reflected in the gowns worn by my characters, and how much sore they set by this rank/wealth based visions of worth. The bigger the skirt, the bigger the ego.

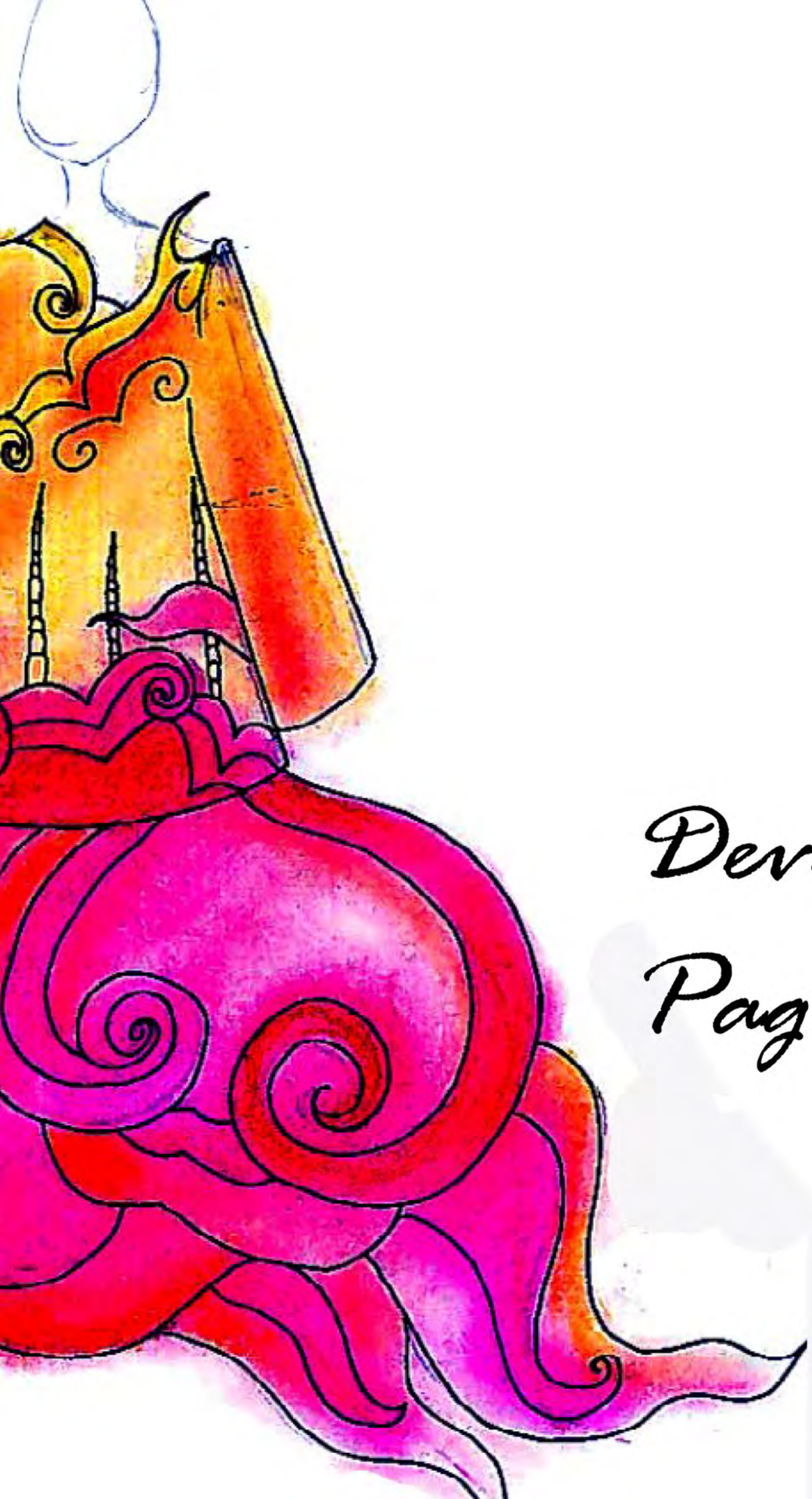




Buddhist Art

Eventually I wanted Sara to display the self-actualisation lessons she has learned by showing she has gone on a similar trajectory to enlightenment. The images of Buddhist art during this period and beforehand were my main topic of inspiration for the final costume that I am dressing her in which (of all her many costume changes) is so pivotal to explaining the powerful messages that she is passing on to Adeline, and by extension, every little girl who connected with this fairy-tale. To the left is a statue of the Buddha that I came across in the Honolulu museum of art. At the time I was very ill and I found seeing this statue (the pose, the way it was lit, the expression) very calming and peaceful. This is how I always felt when thinking about how Sara influenced people's lives. Calm, assertive and powerful. This pose is what I wanted to emulate in the final iteration of who Sara grows to become.



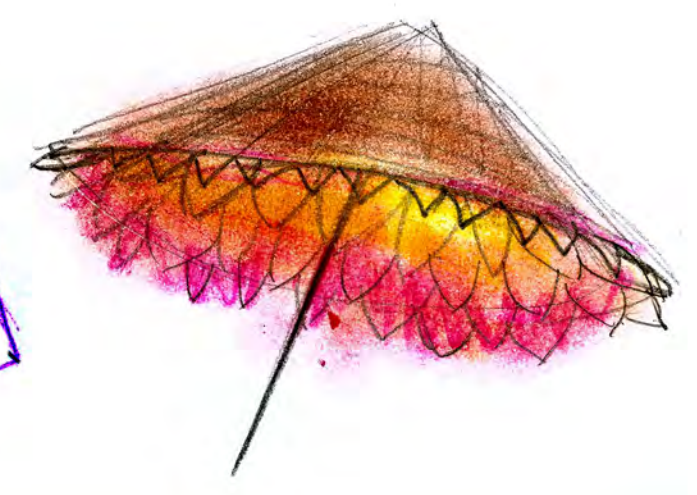


Development Pages

Becky



Rosa Sava
(Sava 1)



Lavinia



Miss Minchin / Nancy



Lottie



Emmargade



"The Indian Gentleman"



Poor to Rich Sava

(Sava 3a, 3b & 3c)



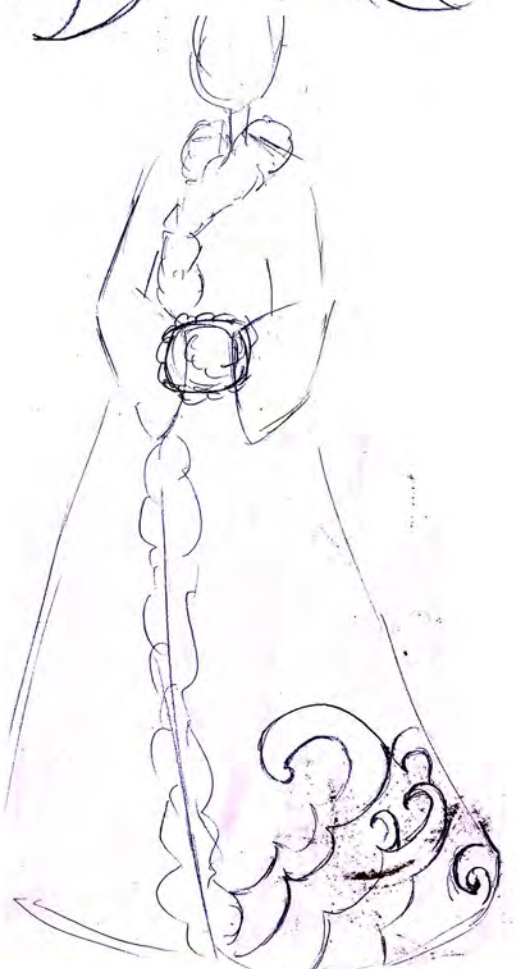
god Sava

(Sava 5)



Sava with the "Indian
Gentlemen" money

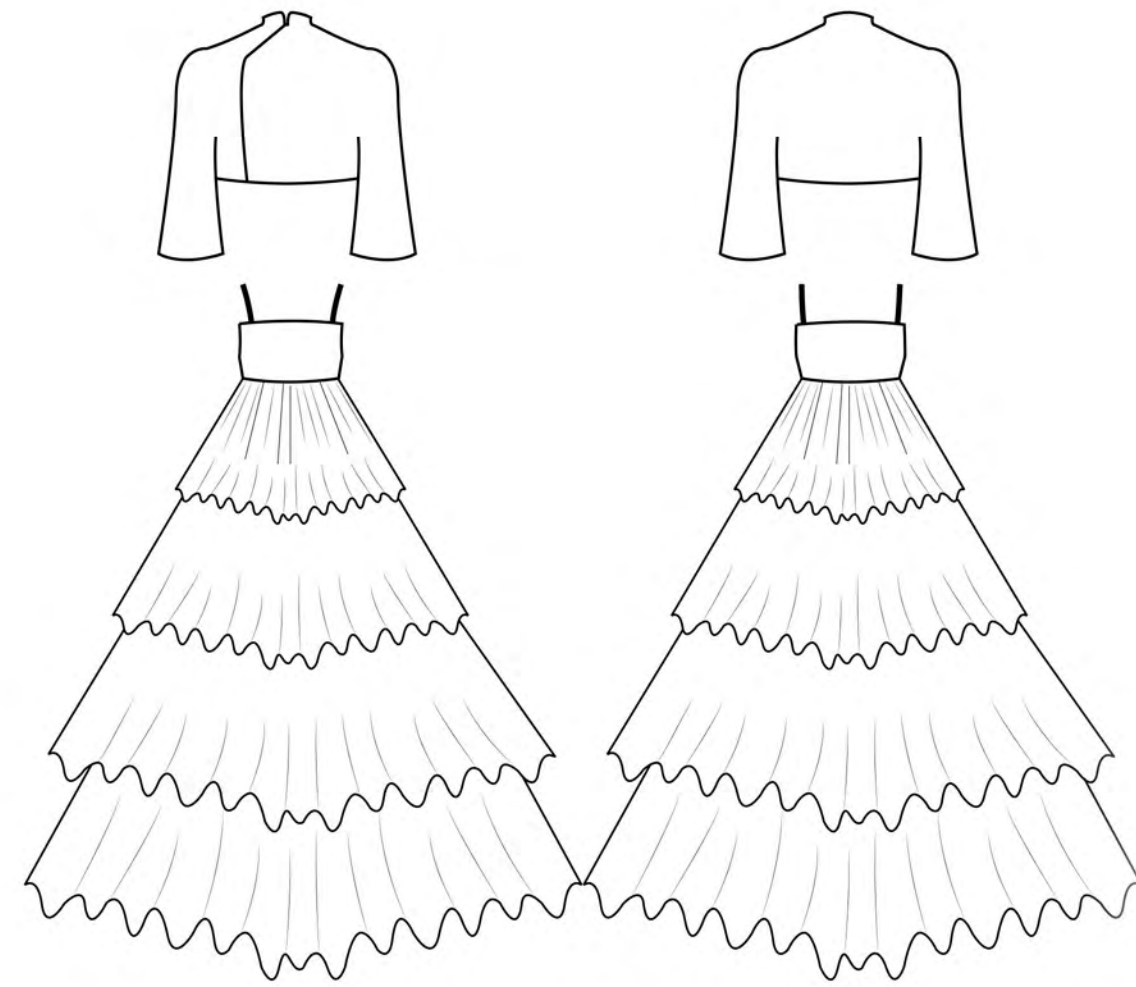
(Sava 4)





Final Illustrations





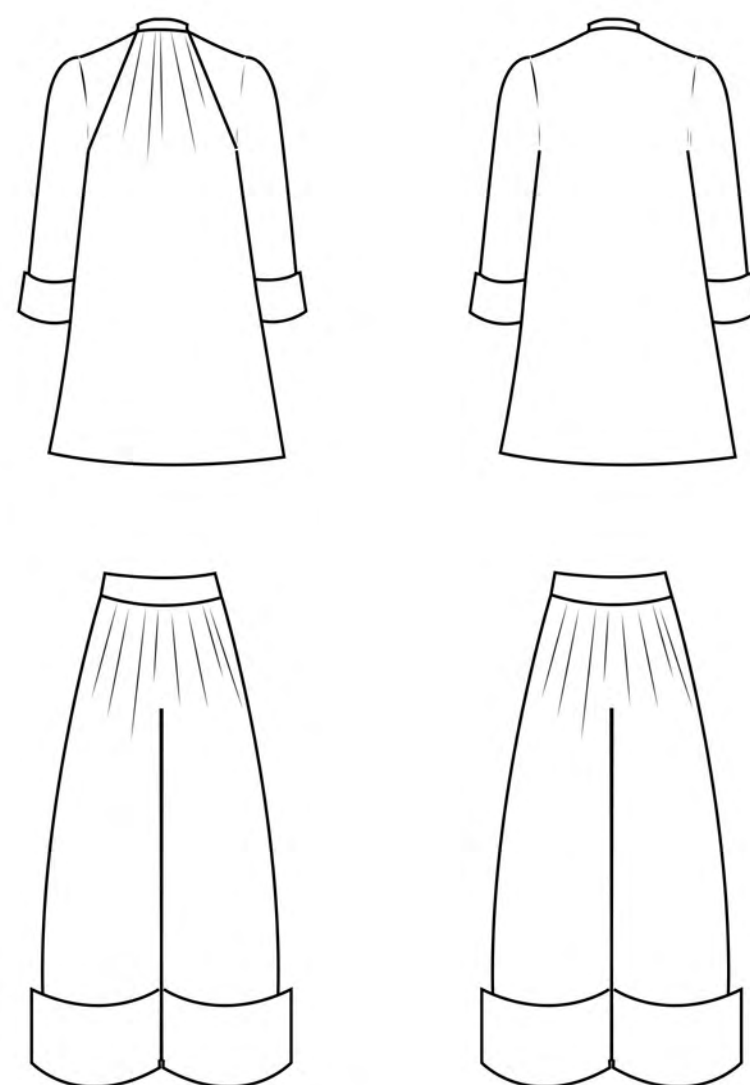
When Sara arrives at Miss Minchin's seminary, she is armed for "battle" with her finery and her doll, Emily. Although she has excellent intentions and is mainly focused on her love for her father, her wealth and status have shielded her from any experience of life which limits her empathy. For the dress that she arrives at the ceremony in, I have dressed her in the outfit described by Becky - the Rose dancing frock. After researching the symbology of roses in Chinese culture, I discovered that roses mean deceit and bad luck, due to their beautiful petals distracting from thorny stems. Therefore this adds to the mood that this first iteration of Sara is very influenced by money and privileges, distracting from the pain of missing her father. The layers of net in this skirt echo the layers and layers of lace petticoats alluded to in the book, when her wardrobe is enviously described. Her jacket is patterned with a tiger stripe inspired pattern that is emanating from a military pendent (with a tiger face painted on). This is because she is holding her father's image within her heart, and in the Qing Dynasty the tiger was a symbol for a brave soldier, which is how she thinks of her father.



Rose Sara (Sara I)



To my mind, Becky is the true Cinderella of this story, as she is rescued from her downtrodden life through her kindness and felicity for friendship. Therefore I placed symbols of pumpkins on the knees of her plain uniform, because this is where she kneels upon the hearth. This is clearly a call back to the western version of Cinderella, but also in China, pumpkins are a symbol of attracting wealth. The mermaid inspired robe is placed on Becky by Sara when Sara tells her a story about mermaids collecting deep sea pearls. This is because it is the moment when Becky realises the power of imagination and believing in fantasy. It is foreshadowing for how fantasy and love will affect her life.

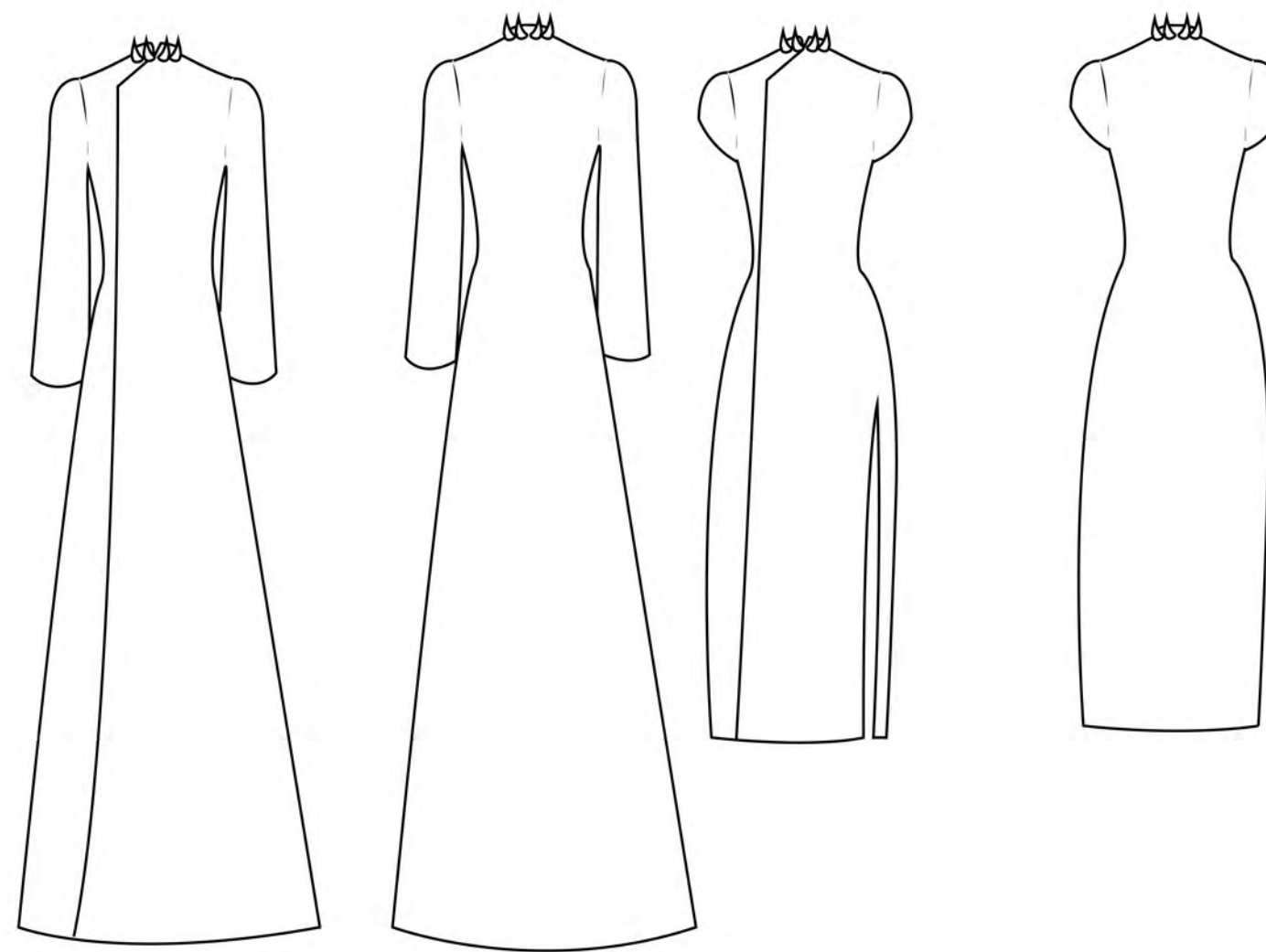


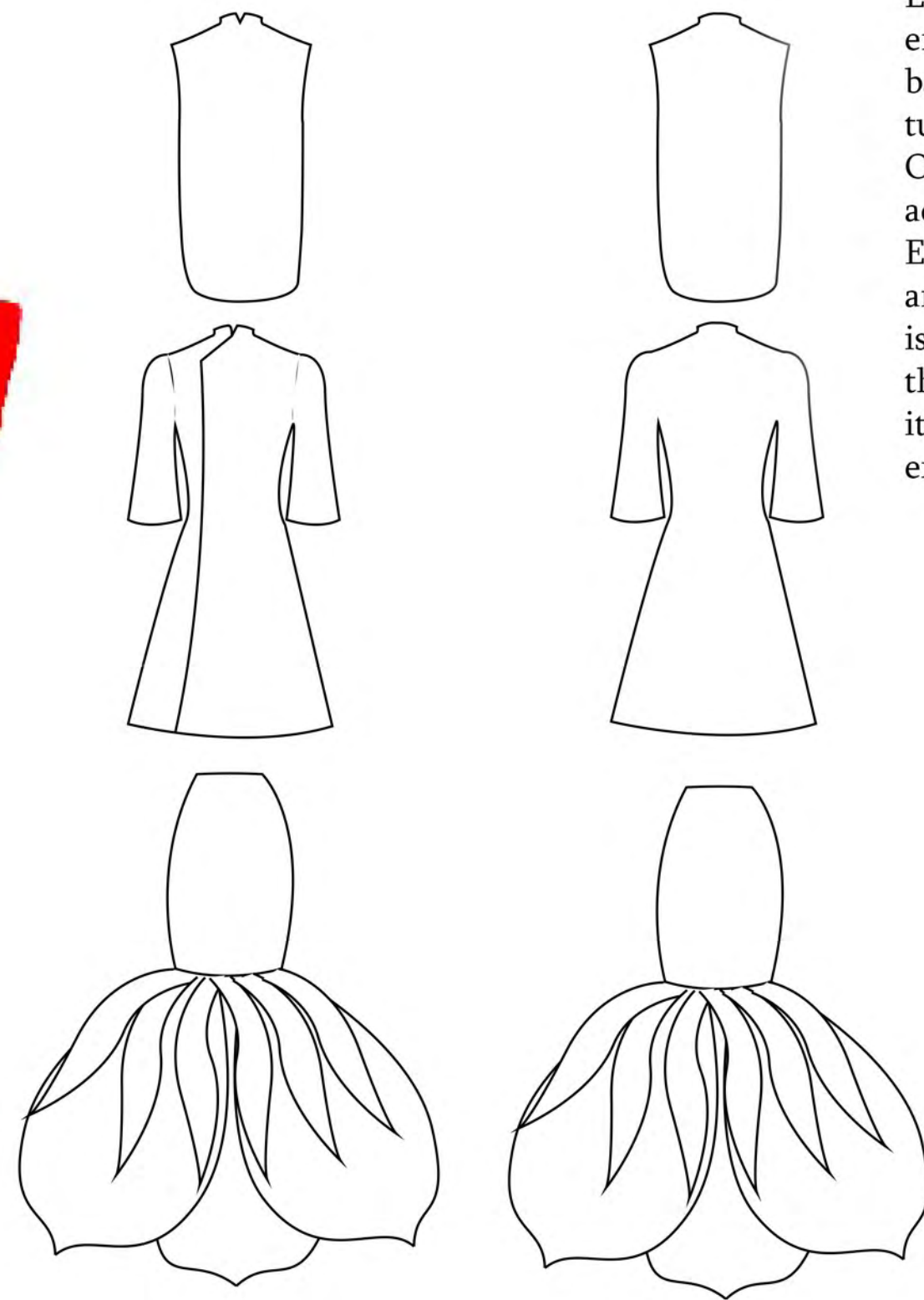
Becky



Miss Minchin / Niang

In this production, Miss Minchin and Niang will be played by the same actress as this is the same conceptual role - the evil stepmother trope. As *A Little Princess* is essentially a fairytale and has many folktale references, I used classic themes of fairytales for inspiration. In the original Chinese version of *Cinderella*, the evil stepmother eats Cinderella's pet goldfish (Cinderella retrieves the bones, which end up granting her wishes). So I have placed an appliqué goldfish into Miss Minchin's stomach as a reference to this, and a goldfish scale pattern around her neckline and cuff. The leopard print pattern is derived from Adeline Yen Mah's book, *Chinese Cinderella*, where she describes her cruel stepmother as wearing a brown spotted dress with pearls, and looking like a leopard that is about to pounce on her.



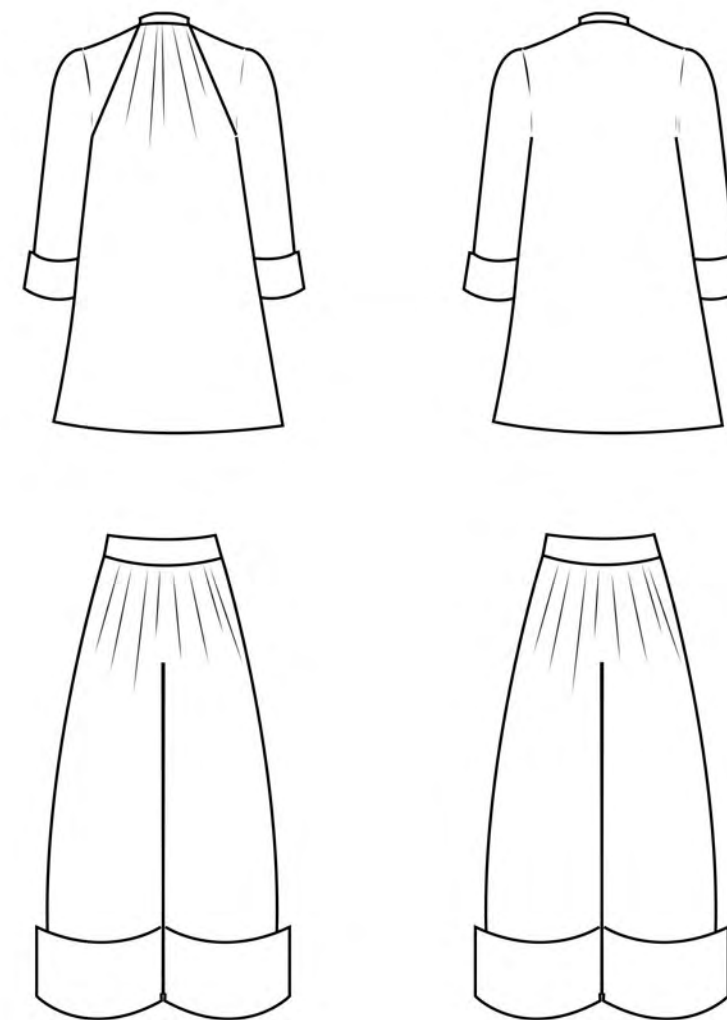


The lotus pattern on Ermengarde's over-tunic was developed from the lotus/tiger pattern I created for Sara. This is used to show her allegiance to Sara, as her best friend, and Sara's positive calming influence over her life. In Chinese art, the donkey is a symbol of stupidity. Ermengarde has been told she is stupid for her entire life, therefore I have given her a pattern based on donkey teeth around her headdress and tunic, as this worry is always biting at her. Orchids are a symbol of nobility through academic success, this is the mantle that Ermengarde's father has placed on her, so there are orchids adorning her headdress and her skirt is constructed from orchid petals. The overlay of the skirt is made of flames from Sara's fabrics, so it displays that Sara is burning up the unhealthy expectations placed upon her.





At first, Sara wears a plain uniform very similar to Becky, but with roses on her knees as a reference to her original rose dress. Slowly as she becomes healthier and rosier, the pink colour infuses its way up her tunic from the pattern of the clouds and London skyline that is a reference to the sunsets and clouds that she falls in love with when looking out from her attic window and coming to terms with her new life. The final iteration is expanded to say she has put on weight, and she is rosiness in the cheeks. The cloud pattern is followed on in the deity version of her costuming with the golden cloud headdress

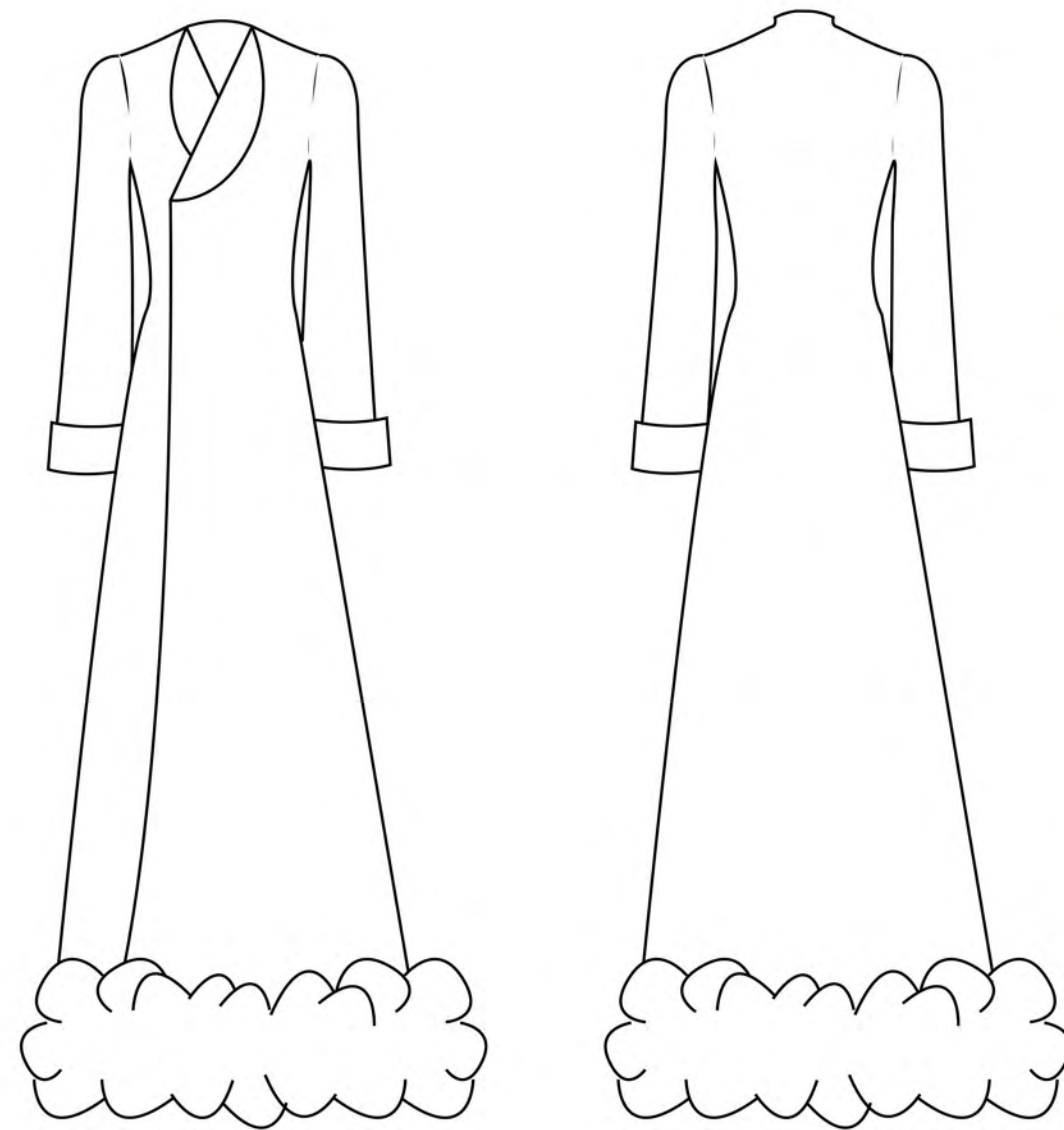


Poor to Rich Sara (Sara Za, Zb & Zc)

"The Indian Gentleman"



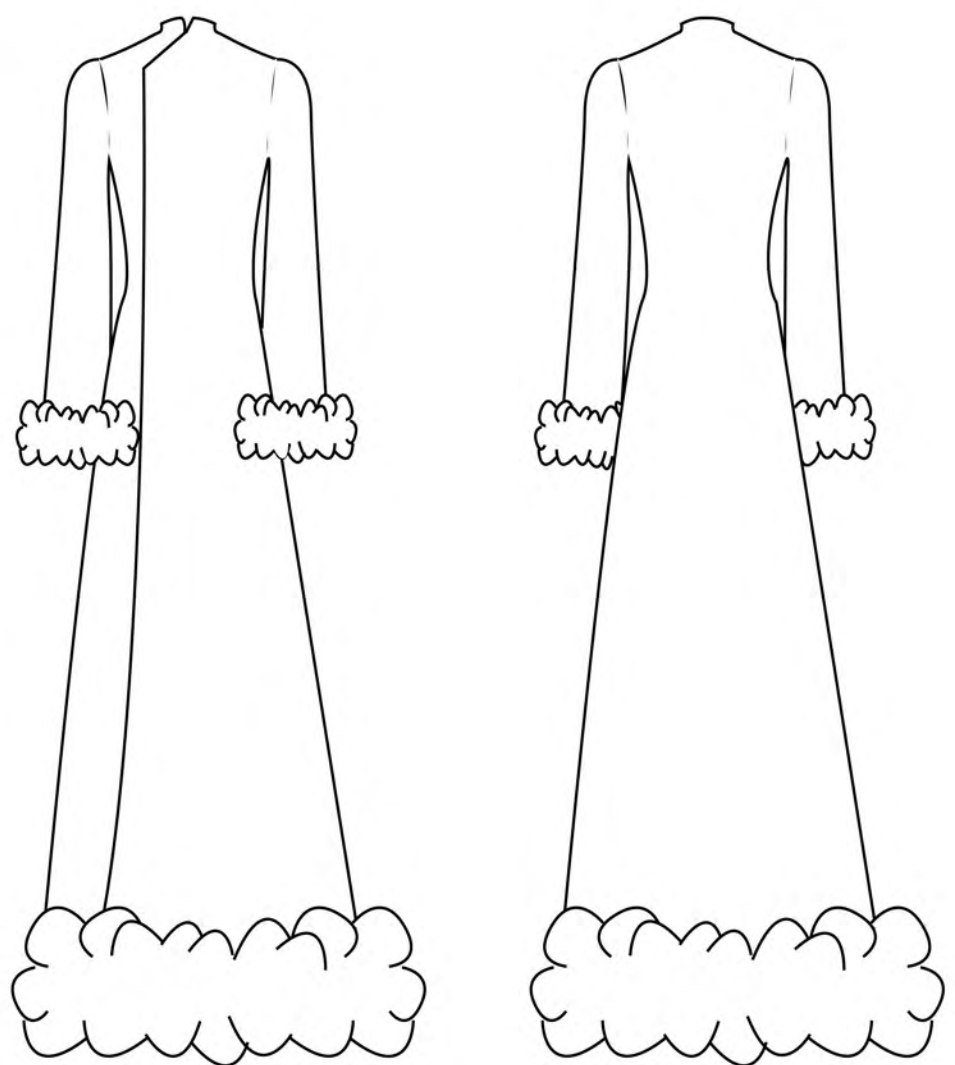
The Indian Gentleman (as Sara calls him) plays the role of the fairy-godmother in Sara's life, therefore I gave him a pattern made up of fish, to represent the magical goldfish from the original folktale of Cinderella from China. This robes shape is intended to be a cross between the robes worn by fashionable 1900s gentlemen and Qing Dynasty robes.

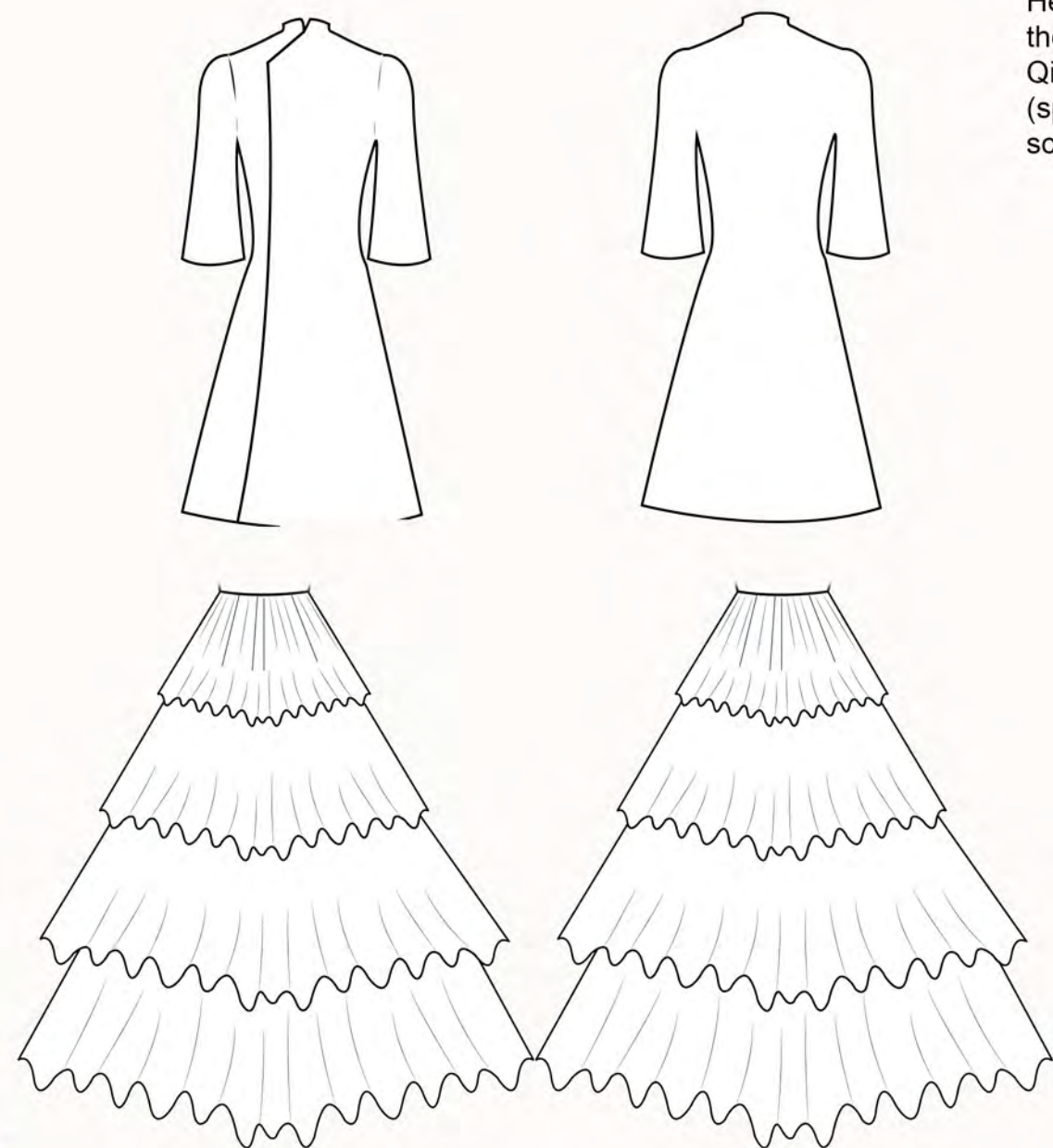




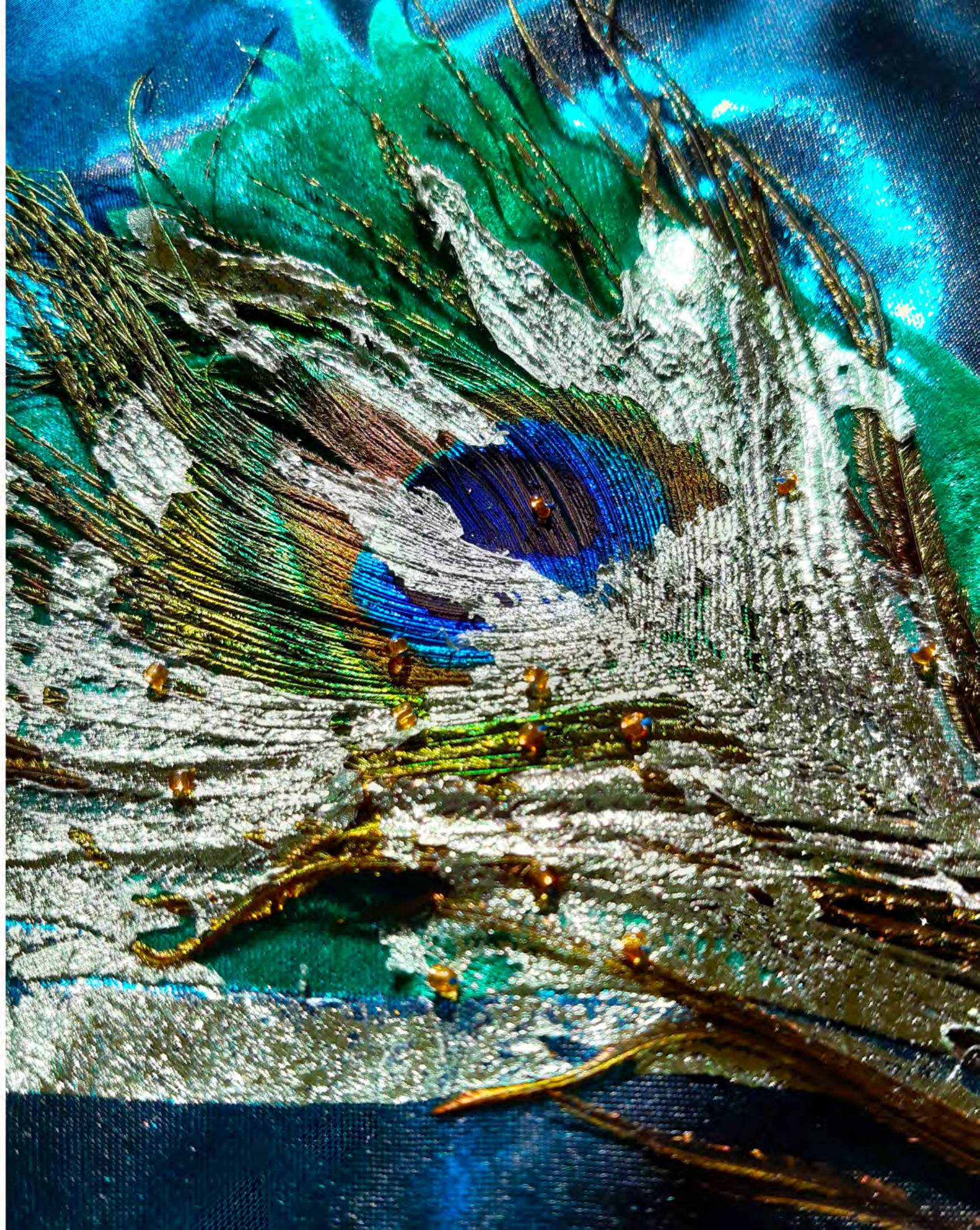
Sara with the "Indian Gentlemen" money (Sara 3)

The shape of this robe is identical to the Indian Gentleman because it comes from his money. The base is made up of pink fur which is beaded to make it look like the ermine fur which is described in the book (this fur is also on the Indian gentleman's robe). The wealth is demonstrated in the rich silk and fur. Her headpiece is a golden lotus to demonstrate the life lessons Sara has learnt, but it is glittering and decorated with the diamonds from her father's diamond mine, to show that she has the money and therefore the time and space to learn these lessons.

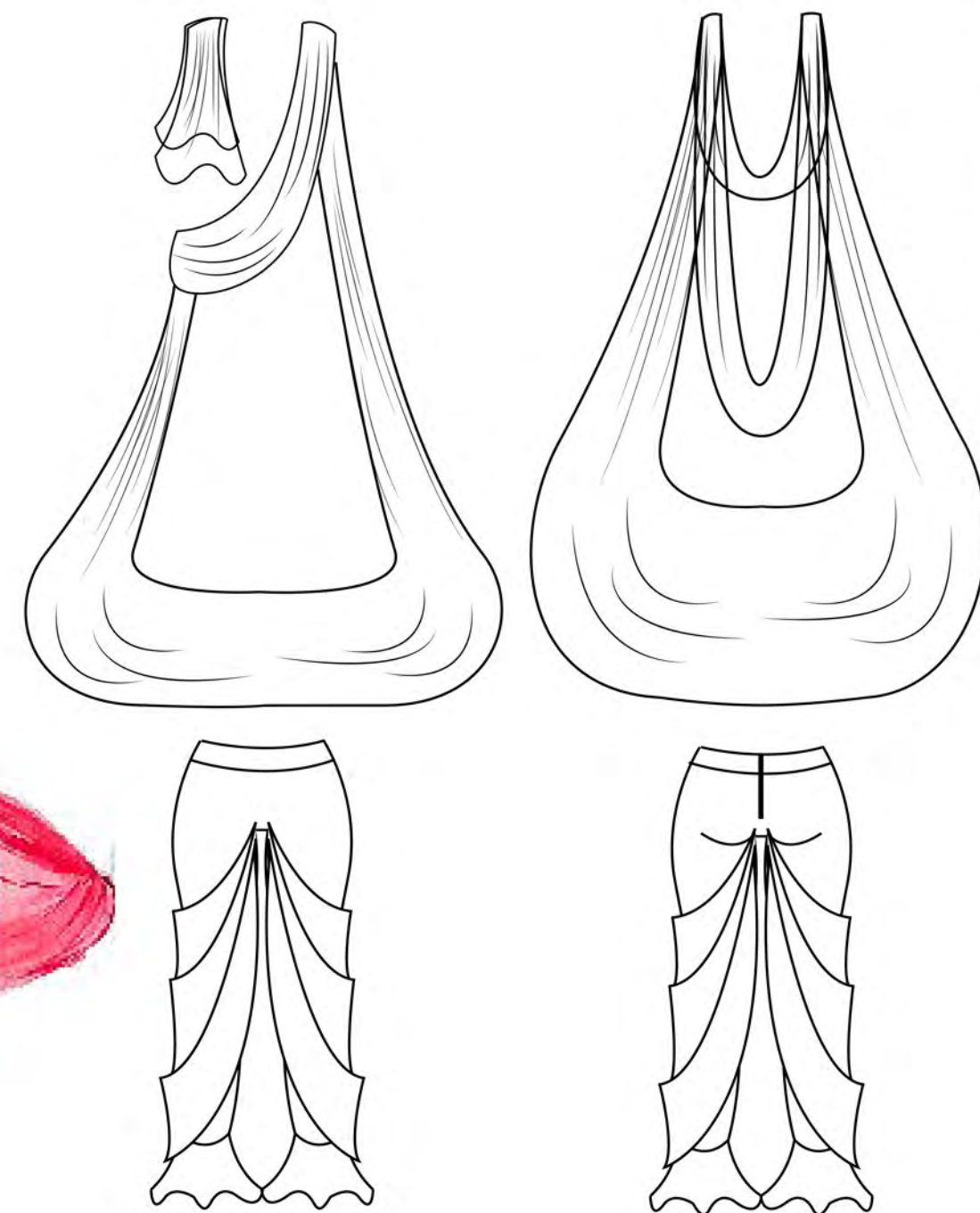




Lavinia is the resident “mean girl” of Miss Minchin’s select seminary. I based her costume on the moods created by poems about the rich concubines of the Qing Dynasty – they described golden peacocks and silver dragons and white unicorns embroidered into the shining silks of their robes. Lavinia is jealous of Sara because she was the richest, most favoured student before Sara came along. Her jealousy made it clear I should put her in mostly green, with purple accents to display her preoccupation with appearing royal (as purple is a colour of royalty across both eastern and western cultures). Her huge skirt and synthetic fabrics show that she is more heavily influenced by the show-off western fashions of Jeanne Lanvin from the 1900’s, and this pairs nicely with the ostentatious enormous fan that was used in Qing Dynasty courts. Her headpiece is another echo of the clear peacock theme, its shape and gold colour inspired by traditional Qing hairpieces. However the fabric of it will be straw (sprayed gold) to reminisce straw hats worn by 1900’s schoolgirls.

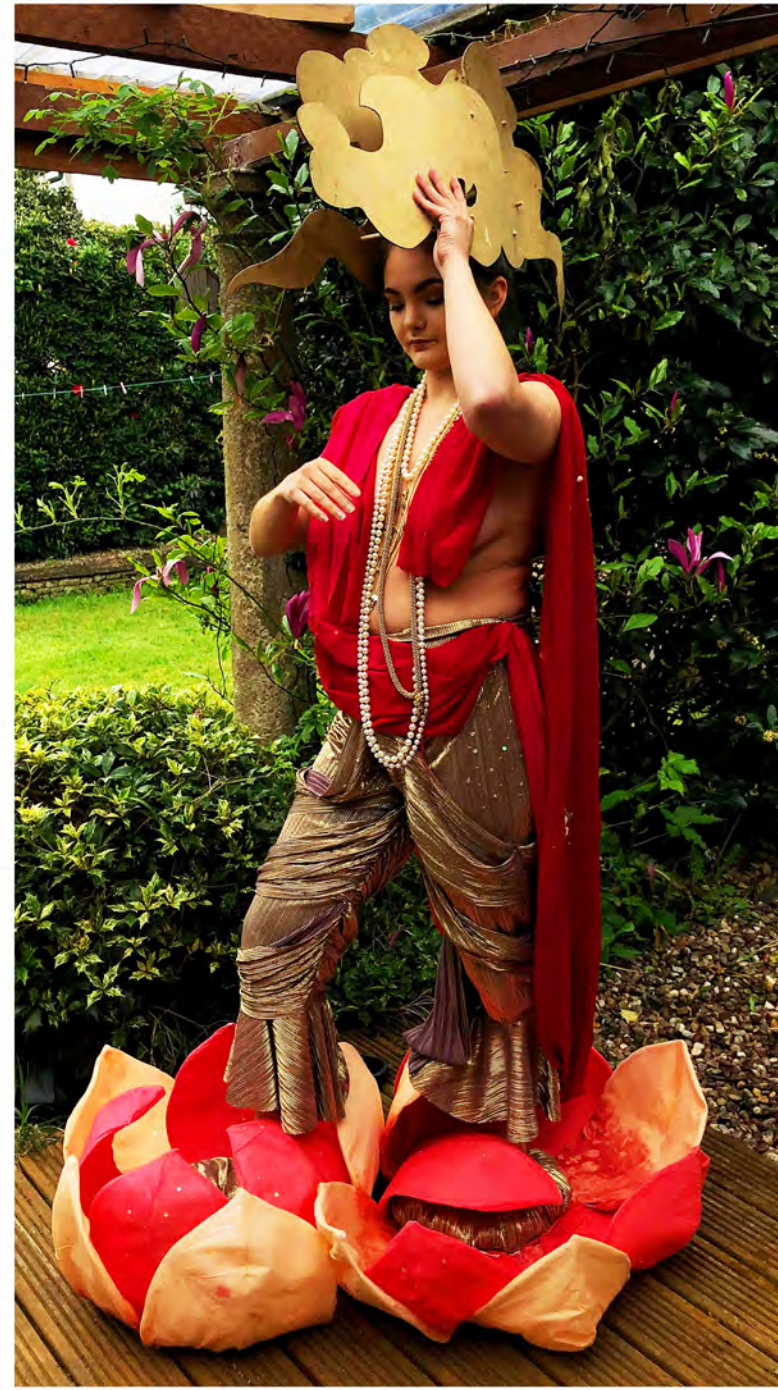


Lavinia



Monkeys are a symbol of luck and playfulness in Chinese culture, they represent finding your childlike joy, and this is what Sara means for so many people she comes across. Joy is a vital part of life and it is what Sara gives to Adeline when she appears in this costume at the end of this play to crown Adeline with the power of believing you're a princess to ward off peoples influences who make you feel terrible. This is why her drapery is decorated with golden monkeys and gold seed beads, to display the validity of joy. Clouds and sunsets are important themes in the book, as they show Sara the beauty and richness of the natural world, and how this can bring joy to her life even when she is being trampled on. The sunsets she sees from her attic window inspired the London silhouette and cloud skyline headpiece that Sara wears in this form, as it displays what is truly important to her. When Sara is transformed into the deity version of herself she combines her life experience with her good intentions and turns this into wisdom that she crowns Adeline with.





The Sedan Chair

In the part of the book when Becky and Sara get to know each other, Becky describes a prince that reminds her of Sara that she saw getting out of a carriage at Covent Garden. "She was gowned, and cloaked and flowers and all. She was a grown up young lady, but pink all over. You look like her" This inspired me to make a sedan chair instead of a carriage for Sara's grand entrance.

