OVERVIEW: In 1997, American designer Arnold Scaasi donated 17 garments from both his couture and ready-to-wear lines dating from 1969 to 1994 to the Textiles and Clothing Museum. The purpose of this project was to analyze the garments and research Scaasi’s career. The results were presented in the museum exhibit, “Scaasi: American Couturier, The Iowa State University Collection”, on display in the Mary Alice Gallery from November 4th, to December 10th, 2010.

PROCESS: Garments were analyzed in terms of design, fabrication, function, and era. Didactic panels were created from research and analysis. The exhibit layout was planned around the garments and didactic panels. The garments were prepared and installed in the gallery and didactics arranged accordingly. Lastly, postcards and flyers were created in order to promote the exhibit.

Designer Arnold Isaacs, later known as Scaasi, is renowned for his luxurious materials, exuberant colors, and refined yet groundbreaking silhouettes. He was born in 1931 in Montreal, Canada. Scaasi studied fashion in Paris at the Chambre Syndicale. He then worked for American designer Charles James. In 1957 he opened his own ready-to-wear business designing for socialites and celebrities. In 1964, he closed his ready-to-wear line and opened a couture salon. However in 1984, Scaasi Boutique, a ready-to-wear line, opened due to demand for his evening looks. Over his lifetime, Scaasi designed for a multitude of celebrities including Lady Bird Johnson, Jacqueline Kennedy, Barbara Bush, Mary Tyler Moore, Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Streisand, and Joan Crawford.

THE BIRTH OF SCAASI

In 1954, Scaasi’s dresses were featured on models in GM automobile ads. A friend working on the ads changed Arnold’s last name from Isaacs to Scaasi (Isaacs spelled backward) without asking him, because it had an Italian flair and Italian designers were popular. After sleeping on it, Scaasi decided the name was catchy and has used it to this day.

1970s Fashion

The silhouette in the 1970s was long and fitted. Clothes were fit from the shoulders to the hips then flared out to wide a-line skirts. Scaasi was considered New York’s only couturier in the 70s. He designed evening dresses with small waists and full skirts. Scaasi had his own vision of how women should look, as opposed to the prevalent narrow silhouette of the 1970s.

1980s Fashion

Fullness was in vogue during the 80s. The reigning silhouette was a slim fit through the bodice with a wide, poufy skirt. Shoulder pads were used to give the illusion of broad, squared shoulders. Bold and exotic uses of colors and fabrics were common, with glittery embroidery, sequins, and beading. Extravagant parties called for extravagant dresses, and Scaasi provided just that.

1990s Fashion

A more slender silhouette was seen in the 90s. Simplicistic and minimalistic styles were sought as opposed to the extravagance of the 80s. However, many garments still contained puffed sleeves or shoulder pads. Scaasi used intricate cutting and construction details to follow and enhance the shape of the body.

A PEAK INSIDE A COUTURE GARMENT

This is a 1990s women’s strapless velvet evening dress from Scaasi’s couture line. It is a showroom sample meant to be tried on by a potential customer then remade and finished to her measurements and specifications. As a result, the dress is unlined and raw edges are unfinished for ease of fitting, providing us with a rare peek inside a couture garment. When lined, none of these interior structural details will be visible to the wearer.

WHAT MAKES COUTURE SPECIAL?

Couture garments are made from the finest luxury fabrics, exclusive patterns and color ways. These garments fit flawlessly as result of multiple fittings. Incredible craftsmanship, detail, and time goes into each couture garment. Lining, hems, and buttonholes are done by hand. Approximately 120 hours goes into each dress. Today, couture garments cost between $15,000 to $250,000 or more.

Corselettes: Corselettes are built into evening gowns to provide shape and support to both the garment and the woman’s body. They can either be a separate piece attached to the inside of the dress or built into the dress between the lining and shell fabric, as seen in this dress. The corsette is reinforced with boning inserted into stitched channels.

Support materials: This dress is underlined with black silk basted to the wrong side of each velvet section. This provides stability for the velvet and prevents seams from showing on the right side of the dress. The neckline is interfaced with stiff hair canvas to maintain its shape. Catchstitches are hand stitches used to hold one edge flat against another. Here it is used to attach the canvas to the satin.

Hems: This is an example of a lined interfaced hem. A stiff synthetic canvas is placed in the hemline of the shell fabric. This provides support for the heavy velvet, creates a smoother hemline, and keeps the hem edge from showing on the right side of the dress. The canvas is catchstitched at the top to the dress and then the hem is catchstitched to the canvas. When completed, the lining will fully cover the interfaced hem.