

Frank Billecci:

An Inventory of His Collection of Irene and Other Costume Designers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Billecci, Frank
Title:	Frank Billecci Collection of Irene and Other Costume Designers
Dates:	1926-1967, undated
Extent:	9 document boxes, 3 oversize boxes (osb), 1 bound volume (bv) (5.53 linear feet)
Abstract:	Frank Billecci's collection of materials relating to Irene and other film costume designers consists primarily of original costume design drawings of Irene's designs illustrated by artist Virginia Fisher from 1944 to 1962, along with some illustrated by Kathryn Bill in 1943. Also present are Billecci's research files of film stills, publicity photographs, wardrobe continuity photographs, notes, and paper materials relating to work by Irene and other designers, including Edith Head and Vera West, from the early 1920s until 1967.
Call Number:	Film Collection FI-54198
Language:	English, Danish, and Spanish
Access:	Open for research. Researchers must create an online Research Account and agree to the Materials Use Policy before using archival materials.
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Sketches

Irene

American fashion and costume designer, silent film actress, and entrepreneur Irene (also known as Irene Jones, Irene Lentz, and Irene Gibbons) was born on December 8, 1901, in Brookings, South Dakota, to Emil F. and Maude (née Watters) Lentz. Irene's family later moved to Baker, Montana, where she worked in her family's general store until moving to Los Angeles after her 1919 graduation from high school.

In Los Angeles, Irene attended the University of Southern California and while working in a drugstore met F. Richard Jones ("Dick"), a film director and production manager for Mack Sennett; the two married in 1929. Irene acted in silent films and shorts, mostly in Mack Sennett productions, from 1921 to 1925. After graduating from the Wolfe School of Costume Designing in 1926, she opened a dress shop on the USC campus. Two years later she relocated to a larger location on North Highland Avenue. Following Jones's death from tuberculosis in 1930, Irene closed her shop and spent time in Paris before returning to Los Angeles and opening the salon Irene Limited on Sunset Boulevard in 1931. Clientele attracted to Irene's custom designs included Dolores Del Río, Lupe Velez, Joan Bennett, Claudette Colbert, Carole Lombard, Ginger Rogers, Loretta Young, and other personalities from the film community. Leading actresses wore her clothing onscreen, and she also was commissioned by production companies to design film wardrobes. In 1933, Irene opened a custom French-style salon in the luxury department store Bullock's Wilshire, becoming the first American designer to have a boutique in a large department store. Her designs continued to be used in films and were worn by Dolores Del Río in *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), Mae West in *Go West Young Man* (1936), Ginger Rogers in *Shall We Dance* (1937), Marlene Dietrich in *Seven Sinners* (1940), Claudette Colbert in *Arise, My Love* (1940), and Carole Lombard in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (1941), among many others. Irene married screenwriter Eliot Gibbons in 1935; they had been introduced by Dolores Del Río, who was his sister-in-law at the time.

In 1942, Louis B. Mayer offered Irene the position of executive director in charge of costume at MGM, and she closed her couturier, although she continued to design for personal clients. Irene continued as head of the MGM costume department until 1949. During that time, she usually designed wardrobes for leading ladies, rather than serving as a film's total costume designer. She specialized in sophisticated costumes, particularly skirt suits and evening gowns, and for menswear and period costumes she collaborated with designers such as Walter Plunkett, Irene Sharaff, and Helen Rose. Many films featuring Irene's designs influenced fashion trends; examples include Lana Turner's all-white wardrobe in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and the bolero-style jacket for Esther Williams in *Fiesta* (1947), as well as that actress's bathing suits in *Bathing Beauty* (1944) and other films. The costumes for Barbara Stanwyck in *B. F.'s Daughter* (1948) earned Irene an Academy Award nomination for Best Costume Design (Black-and-White) in 1949, the first year the award was given. While at MGM, Irene also created designs for other projects; for example, she designed Judy Garland's wedding dress in 1945, and Marlene Dietrich wore Irene's designs while touring in a USO troupe during World War II.

In 1947, the same year she received the Neiman Marcus Award for Distinguished Service in the Field of Fashion, Irene created Irene, Inc. to manufacture and sell a line of ready-to-wear women's clothing in high-end department stores. The company was financed by twenty stores, including Bergdorf Goodman, Marshall Field, and Neiman Marcus, in exchange for the exclusive rights to sell her designs of women's skirt suits, dresses, and formal evening clothes. In 1949, Irene left MGM and concentrated on Irene, Inc., although she later designed costumes for Doris Day in *Midnight Lace* (1960) and *Lover Come Back* (1961) and for Mary Peach in *A Gathering of Eagles* (1963). She received her second Academy Award nomination, for Best Costume Design (Color), for *Midnight Lace*. Irene died by suicide on November 15, 1962. Her company, Irene, Inc., continued to operate under designer Hubert Latimer until 1971.

Virginia Fisher

Virginia D. Fisher was a fashion design artist who worked under Irene at MGM from July 1944 until Irene left in June 1949. She was first hired as Irene's personal sketch artist following the departure of Kathryn Bill (née Kathryn Brinkman, also known as Cassie Bill and Katy Bill) and later held the titles of assistant designer (1945) and designer (1946). Fisher then worked for Irene's successor Helen Rose until January 1951, and she also worked for Irene at Irene, Inc. Fisher was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1916, and in 1947 she married Thomas R. Fisher, with whom she had two children. Virginia Fisher died in Long Beach, California, on November 19, 2013.

Frank Billecci

Frank Billecci is from Martinez, California, and was educated at the University of California, Davis (1967-1969) before earning a master's degree in education from San Francisco State University in 1973. While teaching at Charles L. Sullivan Middle School in Fairfield, California, in 1969, Billecci formed a school drama club and then started the nonprofit theater company Young Actors of Fairfield. He headed the theater group for a decade until moving to Los Angeles to work as a costume designer in theater. As a freelance costume designer from 1984 to 1992, Billecci designed for stage, independent film companies, and television productions. In 1994, he was costume designer for episodes of the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* television show and also worked on the video productions *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers Karate Club Level 1* and *Alpha's Magical Christmas*. Billecci later returned to education, teaching writing classes at UC Davis and writing curriculum guides and other educational materials. Along with Virginia Fisher's daughter, Lauranne B. Fisher, Billecci authored *Irene, a Designer from the Golden Age of Hollywood: The MGM Years 1942-1949* (2013), using Virginia Fisher's costume sketches, photographs, diaries, and personal recollections, as well as interviews and materials from Irene's assistant Chrys Carter. As a fashion historian, Billecci also authored *Lost Facts of Hollywood: A Report Series by Frank Billecci: Part 1- 'irene': From a Big Sky Girl to a Hollywood Designer* (2014).

Sources:

In addition to obituaries and genealogy websites, the following sources were used:

Billecci, Frank and Lauranne B. Fisher. *Irene, a Designer from the Golden Age of Hollywood: The MGM Years 1942-1949*. Schiffer Publishing, 2013.

D'Ambrosio, Brian. "Designer 'Irene,' Raised in Baker, Wowed Hollywood." *Last Best News*, 24 October 2017, <https://montana-mint.com/lastbestnews/2017/10/designer-irene-raised-in-baker-wowed-hollywood/>.

"Fashion: Irene, Inc." *Time*, 25 August 1947, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,798103,00.html>.

"Irene (1901-1962)." Encyclopedia.com, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/irene-1901-1962>.

Irene Scrapbooks #1-4 from Irene Scrapbook Collection (Collection #316), Margaret Herrick Library Digital Collections, Academy of Motion Pictures, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll23>.

Jorgensen, Jay and Donald L. Scoggins. *Creating the Illusion: A Fashionable History of Hollywood Costume Designers*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2015.

Sestanovich, Nick. "Ex-Hollywood Costume Designer Directs Spiritual Play for Crossroads." *The Reporter*, 5 April 2019, <https://www.thereporter.com/2019/04/05/ex-hollywood-costume-designer-directs-spiritual-play-for-crossroads/>.

Wade, Tony. "Young Actors of Fairfield Left a Legacy." *Daily Republic*, 31 May 2012, https://www.dailyrepublic.com/lifestyle/young-actors-of-fairfield-left-a-legacy/article_41fc0e85-6cf7-53bc-ad2d-e27f6e62cfb7.html.

Scope and Contents

Frank Billecci's collection of materials relating to Irene (known mononymously as Irene but also known as Irene Jones, Irene Gibbons, and Irene Lentz) and other film costume designers consists primarily of Virginia Fisher's original costume design drawings of Irene's designs, dating from 1944 to 1962, along with a few made by Kathryn Bill in 1943. Also present are Billecci's research files of film stills, publicity photographs, wardrobe continuity photographs, notes, and paper materials relating to work by Irene and other designers at MGM, as well as by designers such as Edith Head at Paramount and Vera West at Universal Pictures, from the 1920s to 1967. The collection is arranged in two series: I. Costume Design Drawings for Films and Fashion Drawings, 1943-1963, undated, and II. Research Files, 1926-1967, undated.

The physical arrangement of the collection reflects Billecci's own organization. Before the materials were sent to the Ransom Center, sheet protector pages containing Billecci's research files were removed from their binders and placed in envelopes. Most of the envelopes were labeled, and those labels have been retained in the Container List; content descriptions of unlabeled envelopes are indicated by brackets. Materials have been kept in their original binder pages except in instances where multiple photographs or clippings were within a single page or where photographs, publicity captions, or other identifying notes were obscured; in those instances, Ransom Center staff placed the materials in new page sleeves. Some binder sleeves contained construction paper inserted as a support or for decoration; these papers were removed due to their acidic nature.

Series I. Costume Design Drawings for Films and Fashion Drawings (1943-1963, undated) consists of three oversize boxes of original women's fashion and costume sketches. The costume design drawings primarily date from Irene's years at MGM (1942-1949) and are presumed to be by artist Virginia Fisher, other than drawings by Kathryn Bill (later known as the cartoonist Cassie Bill) that were probably given to Fisher as training materials when she began work at MGM in 1944. Other designs date from Irene's work after leaving MGM, including designs for Doris Day in *Lover Come Back* (1961) and Mary Peach in *A Gathering of Eagles* (1963). Some designs were never used; examples include Lana Turner's clothing for a baseball scene in *Cass Timberlane* (1947), a green dress meant for Judy Garland in *Easter Parade* (1948), and costumes designed for Claudette Colbert in *State of the Union* (1948) before the actress was replaced by Katharine Hepburn. Some unidentified sketches could have been made for films or for Irene, Inc. A design for a dress and beaded jacket worn by Irene for her 1947 press conference in New York City announcing the formation of Irene, Inc. is present, as are assorted early fashion sketches by Fisher.

Costume design drawings are described in the Container List alphabetically by film title, followed by Fisher's early fashion sketches, the design for Irene's beaded jacket, and the unidentified designs for films or for Irene, Inc. Most are graphite and opaque watercolor on paper, and most are signed by Irene. Descriptions provide the name of the actress that the costume was designed for and a brief description of the costume. Handbags, hats, gloves, or other accessories included in the designs are not usually noted in descriptions. The text of any label on a costume sketch is transcribed and indicated by single quotes, but any notations or approval initials and signatures (usually by the film's director and producer) are not included in the descriptions. Additional small pencil sketches are present on a few drawings but not listed in their descriptions.

Series II. Research Files on design work by Irene and other designers from 1926-1967 is comprised of film stills, publicity photographs, wardrobe continuity photographs, and photographs of costume sketches, along with Billecci's handwritten notes and printed paper materials such as clippings, sheet music, postcards, collecting cards, and other items. Among the numerous actresses depicted are June Allyson, Jean Arthur, Mary Astor, Lucille Ball, Virginia Bruce, Constance Bennett, Joan Bennett, Nancy Carroll, Claudette Colbert, Lili Damita, Dolores Del Rio, Marlene Dietrich, Hedy Lamarr, Carole Lombard, Myrna Loy, Patsy Ruth Miller, Marie Prevost, Ginger Rogers, Rosalind Russell, Ann Sothorn, Barbara Stanwyck, Lupe Valdez, and Loretta Young.

Billecci's chronological files relating to Irene's work through 1942 are located at the beginning of the series and are followed by an alphabetical arrangement of files relating either to the type of work depicted, such as Appliques, Scallops, Sleeves, and Stripes, or to the actresses Dolores Del Rio, Lupe Velez, Claudette Colbert, and Mae West. Files of materials relating to work by other designers, some associated with Irene at MGM, complete the series. Billecci dated his files according to the dates that the costuming work was done, not the film's release. In the Container List, dates refer to film release dates and are placed in brackets when they vary from Billecci's.

Photographs of the designers John Harkrider, Edith Head, Omar Kiam, Jean Louis, Kay Nelson, Walter Plunkett, Helen Rose, and Vera West are present in the files relating to their work, and the Kathryn Brinkman file includes a photograph of Irene with Paulette Goddard. A reproduction of a photograph of Virginia Fisher at age sixteen is in the Line Movement file.

In addition to the film production photographs, other photographic materials include negatives of publicity photos of Claudette Colbert for *Arise, My Love* (folder 1.4) and *Skylark* (folder 2.4), Marlene Dietrich for *The Lady Is Willing* (folder 1.10), and Loretta Young for *Bedtime Story* (folder 1.9). Snapshots taken on the film set of *Something for the Boys* (1944) are located in the file on Kay Nelson (folder 6.7), and candid photographs taken by Peter Warrack of Claudette Colbert are located in folder 2.5.

Notable among printed materials in the research files are European postcards of Nancy Carroll (folder 4.1), Claudette Colbert (2.5-6, 4.1), Lili Damita (1.1, 4.6), Dolores Del Rio (2.5, 4.1), and Billie Dove (3.4). Also present are collecting cards, including advertising cards from the Spanish chocolate company Zuricalday, of Nancy Carroll (3.3, 4.1), Claudette Colbert (2.4, 4.1), June Lang (5.5), Loretta Young (3.2, 4.4), and a scene from *The Little Colonel* (5.5). A hand painted copy of Marilyn Henry's paper dolls of Lana Turner, presumably by Virginia Fisher, may be found in folder 4.2.

Of note in the research file on Edith Head (folder 4.9) is a wardrobe plot, with fabric swatches and photographs attached, for actress Arlene Dahl in *Caribbean* (1952).

A copy of the book *Irene, a Designer from the Golden Age of Hollywood: The MGM Years 1942-1949* by Frank Billecci and Lauranne Fisher is located at the end of the collection. Many of the costume sketches present in the collection were used as illustrations in the book.

Related Material

Irene Scrapbooks (Collection #316); Costume Design Drawing Collection, 1924-2003; Adele Balkan Costume Design Drawings; Greg LaVoi Collection of Irene Costume Design Drawings; Leonard Stanley Collection; and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production and biography photographs at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Irene Lentz Gibbons Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California.

Fashion and Costume Sketch Collection, 1912-1950, Brooklyn Museum.

Index Terms

People

Bill, Cassie, 1910-2001.

Billecci, Frank.

Del Rio, Dolores, 1905-1983.

Fisher, Virginia D., d. 2013.

Irene, 1901-1962.

Organizations

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Subjects

Clothing and dress in motion pictures.

Costume design--United States--20th century.

Costume designers--California--Los Angeles.

Fashion--United States--20th century.

Fashion designers--California--Los Angeles.

Fashion in motion pictures.

History of fashion.

Motion pictures, American--20th century.

Motion pictures--Costume.

Women fashion designers--United States.

Places

Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.).

Document Types

Advertising cards.

Collecting cards.

Costume design drawings.

Electronic records.

Film stills.

Negatives.

Photographs.

Postcards.

Sheet music.

Sketches.

Series I. Costume Design Drawings for Films and Fashion Drawings, 1943-1963, undated

- B. F.'s Daughter (1948). Barbara Stanwyck brown skirt and brown and white lace top. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 2.12
- Cass Timberlane (1947). Lana Turner jeans and tight top (unused design for baseball sequence). 'Change #1.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 1.11
- Easter Parade (1948). Judy Garland green dress. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 2.13
- Fiesta (1947). Esther Williams black dress with stole. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 1.7
- Gaslight (1944). Ingrid Bergman dress with fur-lined bodice jacket later re-used for Ava Gardner in The Great Sinner. Irene (costume designer), Kathryn Bill (illustrator) **Container**
osb 2.19
- A Gathering of Eagles (1963). Mary Peach pink dress. 'Victoria / 402 – Finale.' Irene (costume designer), (unidentified illustrator) **Container**
osb 3.20
- Holiday in Mexico (1946)
- Jane Powell green dress. '7 with jacket / yellow.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
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- Jane Powell yellow dress and jacket. '#7 / jacket for over bow knot dressed,' 26 July 1945. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
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- The Hucksters (1947)
- Deborah Kerr blue dressing gown. '#10.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 1.18
- Deborah Kerr rust suit. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 1.15
- Deborah Kerr '#5 / evening gown for Kimberly Apt Beach.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 1.16
- Deborah Kerr floral dress. '#7.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 2.11
- [Deborah Kerr or Ava Gardner] white and green dress. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator) **Container**
osb 1.14

If Winter Comes (1947)

Deborah Kerr black evening gown. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.7
Deborah Kerr green skirt, top, and sweater. '4 picnic.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.8
Deborah Kerr green skirt and plaid vest. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.9
It Happened in Brooklyn (1947). Kathryn Grayson green suit dress. 'Kathryn Grayson / baseball / Triple / 2 for Grayson / 1 for stunt double.' Irene (costume designer), [Virginia Fisher] (illustrator)	Container osb 3.13
Lady in the Lake (1947). Audrey Totter black suit with black and white check vest. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 3.22
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Marie McDonald white and brown check dress. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 1.13
Marie McDonald white dance costume. 'Change 4 / 1 / jersy [sic].' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 1.12
Lover Come Back (1961). Doris Day tan gown with beaded top. 'Change 16.' Irene (costume designer), (unidentified illustrator)	Container osb 3.19
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Greer Garson blue bustle dress. Irene (costume designer), [Kathryn Bill] (illustrator)	Container osb 1.2
Greer Garson '#3 / 1902 / yacht dressing gown.' Irene (costume designer), [Kathryn Bill] (illustrator)	Container osb 1.3
Neptune's Daughter (1949). Betty Garrett brown geometric dress, 1949. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 1.17
[No Leave, No Love (1946)]. Pat Kirkwood white 'bed jacket and nightie' with red hearts. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 3.16
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Cyd Charisse yellow skirt and top. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.5
Esther Williams brown one-piece swimsuit with red halter tie and initials. 'Rehearsal.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 3.17

Esther Williams coral dress with black check skirt and front for unidentified film. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 3.18
The Secret Heart (1946). Claudette Colbert tulip dress. '#10 / Farm / Chris at Supper.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 1.9
Slightly Dangerous (1943). Lana Turner brown and blue gown (planned, not used). '#1 / rush.' Irene (costume designer), Kathryn Bill (illustrator)	Container osb 1.1
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Myrna Loy black dress. 'Montage 4 C.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.1
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Myrna Loy blue 'housecoat for breakfast scene.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator). With an unidentified pencil drawing of a dress on verso	Container osb 2.2
Myrna Loy pajamas and dressing gown. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator). With an unidentified pencil drawing of a dress on verso. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 1.20
Myrna Loy pink nightgown. '#9 / nightgown conversation in bed.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.4
Myrna Loy white gown. 'Black lace.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.3
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Claudette Colbert (originally cast actress) black gown. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.16
Claudette Colbert (originally cast actress) copper gown. '#4 / ship's deck [crossed out].' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.14
Claudette Colbert (originally cast actress) green dress with jacket. '#5.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.17
Claudette Colbert (originally cast actress) grey dress. '#7.' Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.18
Claudette Colbert (originally cast actress) white and gold gown. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 2.15

Katharine Hepburn black skirt and top with scallops. Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)	Container osb 3.21
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- Brown skirt and sleeveless top with red waist, undated. [Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)] **Container**
osb 3.6
- Jade dress, undated. [Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)] **Container**
osb 3.3
- Teal dress, undated. [Irene (costume designer), Virginia Fisher (illustrator)] **Container**
osb 3.5

Series II. Research Files, 1926-1967, undated

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Kiam, Omar, 1934-1940	Container 5.3
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Rose, Helen	
'Early 40s,' 1943	Container 7.7
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West, Vera	
1931-1940 (including Irene)	Container 9.2-3
[1938-1948]	Container 9.4-7

Container 9.8 Irene: A Designer from the Golden Age of Hollywood: The MGM Years 1942-1949 by Frank Billecci & Lauranne B. Fisher. Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., 2013