

# Multi-cultural, Multi-color Steampunk Costuming

By Jean Martin

When I first discovered Steampunk several years ago, I was excited to find a genre and subculture that combined my love for the Victorian era and my lifelong passion for science fiction and fantasy. I was already costuming at the time, mostly doing Victorian, Regency and Renaissance at historical events and balls as well as science fiction and fantasy Cosplay and masquerade entries for sci-fi conventions. Steampunk costuming became a fun activity for me as I put together existing pieces I already owned, and adding new items as I found them at conventions or online.

The one issue I had with Steampunk, though, is that most costumes I saw during the early days before Steampunk boomed into the cultural phenomenon it is now were in shades of brown. This is quite understandable given the historical and character inspirations for Steampunk. Explorers, military personnel, aviators, engineers and the like were dressed in a color that I personally do not like and rarely wear, predominantly due to the fact that it does not suit my Asian skin tone. Additionally, I am a heavy metal fan and I gravitate toward black versus brown.

So I decided that I would go ahead and use black as my base color anyway. Steampunk is an imaginary world after all, so why can't I use my imagination and create costumes that work for me but still have the same Steampunk aesthetic? Thus, most of my Steampunk costumes have pieces that have more of a Goth influence. It was not until much later that I came across a funny saying by Jess Nevins that said: "Steampunk is what happens when Goths discover brown."

However, I'm not truly Goth and I absolutely love colors... the brighter the better. Victorians, both male and female, were also known for their extravagant use of colorful fabrics, combining different styles and patterns in ways that we would consider loud and too busy in our modern era. So I didn't see any reason to exclude colors in my Steampunk wardrobe. I added red, blue, purple, and magenta as either tops such as blouses and jackets or accessories such as hip belts, feathers, hats, and gloves.

Still, there was one important and new avenue for Steampunk that I hadn't considered before. It only came to

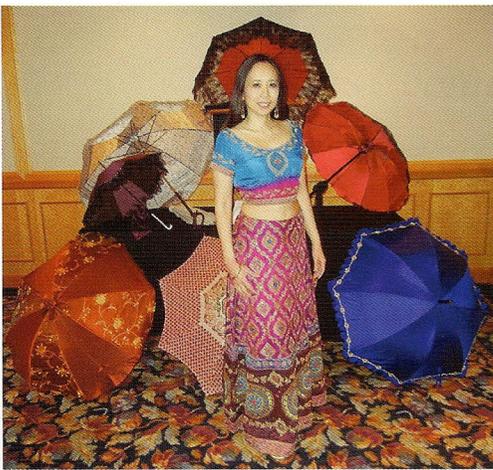
mind after the theme for the Nova Albion Steampunk Convention in 2011 was announced. It was going to be "Wild, Wild East!" Even though I'm Asian, I've always felt comfortable dressing in any type of costume, be it Eastern or Western. But since most of the activities I do require European and American costuming, that's what I usually do. It doesn't really matter to me that I look Asian and wear Victorian clothing and Cosplay caucasian characters. Unfortunately, Asian characters in Western literature and history are few and far between, and even sci-fi and fantasy movies, TV shows, and novels have very few Asians. I consider costuming as roleplaying for my and other people's entertainment, and so I don't want to limit myself to certain roles or just Asian characters. For the most part, people in the costuming community accept this. In any case, it was truly exciting for me to have the opportunity to combine my Asian background with historical and sci-fi/fantasy costuming and make it Steampunk.

Although I can sew, I usually don't have the time and patience for it. So I usually only create costumes from scratch for masquerade competitions where workmanship will be judged. For other events, I usually put things together that I find from eBay and thrift shops. eBay is such a great resource for costuming. There are so many vendors that sell all kinds of costumes from anime to historical, and vintage items that can be repurposed. If it's not on eBay, it probably doesn't exist. If I can't find something after an exhaustive search, then that's another time that I would make something myself.

So far, Steampunk items are quite easy to find. Nowadays, there are several online stores that are dedicated to Steampunk. The great thing about Steampunk is that you can get separate pieces from different places and you can put them together in unique ways that suit your personality and/or the character you want to portray. There are endless combinations that people can create out of their imaginations, and there is so much variety to be seen at Steampunk conventions and even at other conventions,



Japanese Steampunk with Jean Martin and Christopher Erickson. Photo by Pat Yulo.



Indian Steampunk with Jean Martin. Photo by Christopher Erickson.

fares, and balls.

For the “Wild, Wild East” theme for Nova Albion 2011, my idea was to pick one Asian

country per day to adapt, and since there were three days of the convention, I had to come up with three outfits. I wanted to do a Filipina costume, being that I’m from the Philippines, but Philippine costuming is hard to find and make – let alone convert to Steampunk. Perhaps this is a project for me for the future. On the other hand, I already had a Chinese cheong sam (a body-hugging one-piece dress), a Cyberpunk Japanese kimono and an Indian ghagra choli (consisting of a tight top, A-line skirt and wrap). I decided to wear Chinese for the first day, Japanese for the second day and Indian for the third. My fiancé, Christopher Erickson, joined in on the fun by wearing a Chinese Steampunk pirate costume with me on the first day and a Steampunk Samurai warrior outfit on the second.

For the Chinese ensemble, I envisioned my character to be a singer in an elegant Shanghai bar catering to wealthy businessmen from Europe and their local business partners. A bit stereotypical perhaps, but in keeping with possible scenarios in the alternate historical time period that is Steampunk. During the Victorian era in England, what could possibly be happening in the Chinese Empire, and what would steam power enable? To me, it would be increased trade between East and West, and there would necessarily be entertainers who, while keeping to their own culture would adopt certain aspects of Western dress. So I started with my black cheong sam that had circles and embellishments of gold and red. To that I added items I already owned: a red and black feather fascinator, black opera gloves and Victorian lace-up boots.

For the Japanese costume, I brought out my Cyberpunk black and royal blue kimono that I purchased on eBay several years before. Instead of wearing a regular obi, I found a leather wraparound belt that gave the outfit a more avant-garde look. To add some Victorian flavor, I wore my black Victorian riding hat with a veil that tied around the brim and hung at the back, and my black Victorian festoon necklace and earrings. Shoes are always an important element to complete a costume, and for this one, I wore my black Steampunk knee-high boots with buckles down the outer calves. My thoughts on the

character for this costume was a wealthy Japanese lady who is enamored of and adapts Western culture after Japan was made to open its doors for trade relations with the West in the 1850s.

Last but not the least was my Indian character, which I envisioned to be an adventurous Indian princess who tags along with a British explorer into the jungles of her native land. I used a blue and fuchsia choli I purchased from Shawna Trpcic, costume designer for the TV series *Firefly*. In fact, this choli was worn in the episode “Heart of Gold” by one of the girls in a house of ill repute. The costume was exactly my size. I didn’t have to make any alterations to it, which would have been impossible anyway because it is heavily embroidered with gold thread and beads throughout. It is a gorgeous costume and I always get compliments on it whenever I wear it. It also has the added cache and aptness of being from a Steampunk-style sci-fi TV show. I, of course, added an Indian gold bracelet and earrings to the ensemble. And to add the Steampunk explorer element to it, I donned a straw mesh pith helmet.

Throughout the entire weekend, I was amazed and in awe of all the Eastern-flavored Steampunk attire that everyone displayed. Everything looked so colorful, exotic and original, especially during the masquerade competition. It was great that the convention opened the Steampunk world to more than just Victorian England. It was also a great opportunity for me to represent my multicultural heritage and indulge in my love for colorful costumes.

Jean Martin is the editor-in-chief, writer and photographer for *Science Fiction/San Francisco* ([www.efanzines.com/SFSF/](http://www.efanzines.com/SFSF/)), which covers all areas of fandom in the Bay Area and beyond. She is also the SF Costume Design Examiner for *Examiner.com* ([www.http://www.examiner.com/costume-design-1-in-san-francisco/jean-martin](http://www.examiner.com/costume-design-1-in-san-francisco/jean-martin)). She is involved in costuming/cosplaying, dancing, singing and acting, and has won awards for costuming/cosplaying and as part of masquerade teams. She has a collection of more than 150 costumes spanning different genres and time periods. She is one of the Bay Area English Regency Society and Period Events and Entertainments Re-creation Society organizers. She is a member of the Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild, Rebel Legion, California Browncoats and Steam Federation, and participates in local *Lord of the Rings*, *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica* costuming groups. She can be reached at [jean\\_p\\_martin@yahoo.com](mailto:jean_p_martin@yahoo.com).



Vietnamese and Chinese Steampunk with Pat Yulo and Jean Martin. Photo by Christopher Erickson.