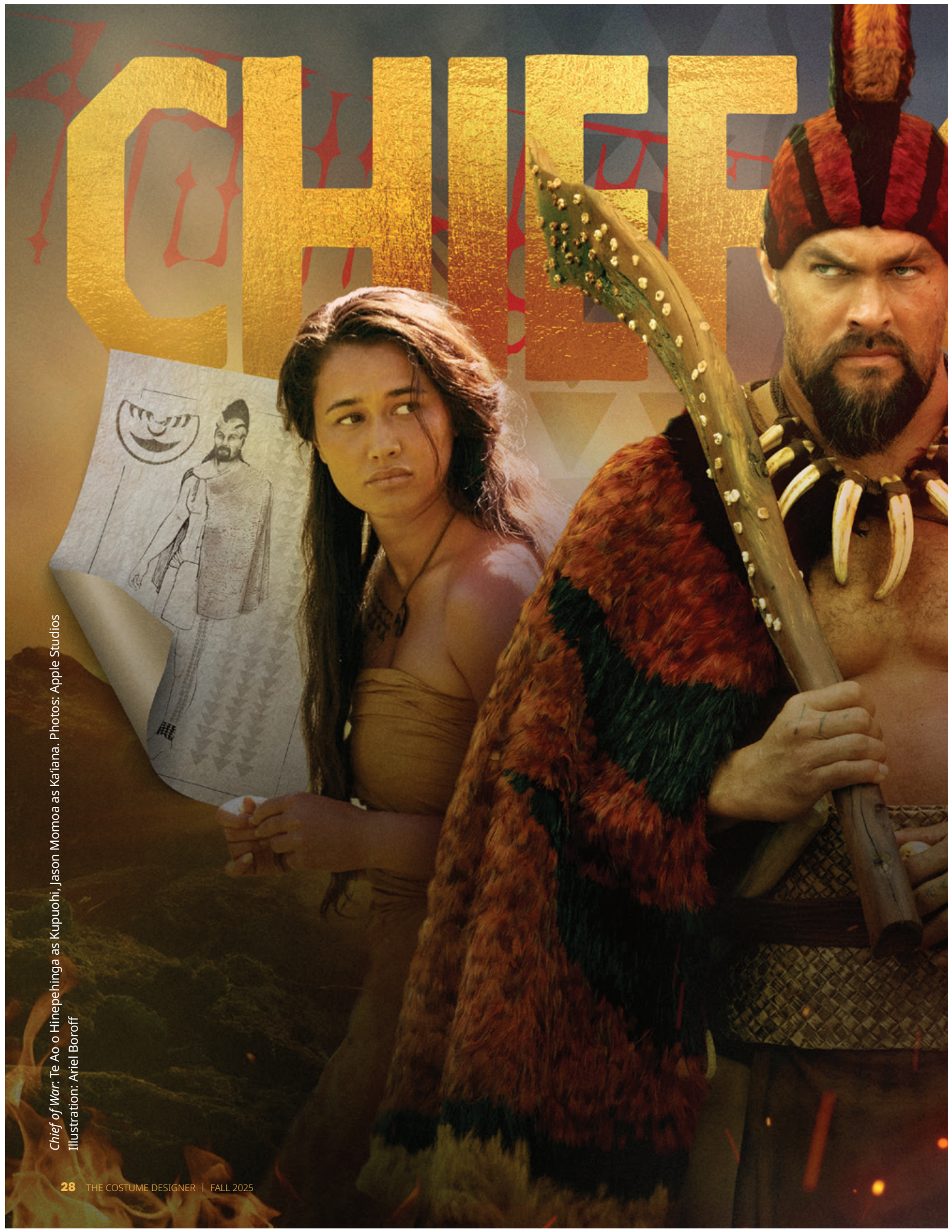




Chief of War: Te Ao o Hinepehinga as Kupuohi, Jason Momoa as Ka'iana. Photos: Apple Studios
Illustration: Ariel Boroff

OF WAR

Unprecedented Journey

BY FAWNIA SOO HOO

To depict the epic chronicle of the 18th-century unification of the Hawaiian Islands in the Apple TV+ miniseries *Chief of War*, costume designer Caroline Eselin faced an unparalleled challenge.

"None of this had been done before—and never on this scale," she says.

In the sweeping historical drama, cocreator, executive producer, director, and writer Jason Momoa leads a predominantly Polynesian cast as the former Maui war chief Ka'iana, who strives for unity amid impending Western colonization.

"It was such a great responsibility to do this as authentically, truthfully, and accurately, as possible," says Eselin, who previously built an expansive world in frequent collaborator Barry Jenkins's *The Underground Railroad*. "So research was first and foremost to honor Hawaii: the culture, the people, the history, and its customs."

Her monumental research endeavor began with studying *Arts and Crafts of Hawaii*, Sir Peter H. Buck's comprehensive, foundational resource on traditional Hawaiian craftsmanship and cultural practices. "That was our bible," says Eselin.

Chief of War: Brandon Finn as Prince Kupule. Photos: Apple Studios



In the beginning and throughout production, she and ACD Marina Reti immersed themselves in fieldwork at Honolulu's Bishop Museum, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, and the Merrie Monarch Festival, celebrating Hawaiian culture. Eselin also valued constant collaborations with cultural experts including aesthetics advisor Kauila Kawelo and the Bishop Museum's cultural advisor, Marques Hanalei Marzan. Eselin also worked closely with Huihui Kanahale-Mossman and Kaumakaiwa Kanaka'ole, members of the Kanaka'ole family, who are celebrated preservationists of Hawaiian culture and arts for generations.

In the late 1700s, the ali'i—men and women chiefs and chiefesses—and ali'i nui—the highest chiefs and chiefesses—wore bold and commanding 'ahu 'ula (capets) and mahiole (helmets) adorned with colorful patterns crafted with feathers from rare and now-extinct birds. The saturated red and yellow designs symbolized strength, power and divine bloodlines. To make upward of 155 capes for the series, Eselin and her team intensely studied the meticulous steps of cape making with renowned kumu hulu nui (master featherworker) Rick San Nicolas. With today's materials and animal byproducts, they developed a method to recreate the traditional bundling of precious feathers into sturdy olonā plant fiber netting.

Chief of War: Sisa Grey as Vai. Luciane Buchanan as Kalahumanu. Photos: Apple Studios
Illustration: Ariel Boroff

"We also had to give an identity to each island," which Eselin did by differentiating the royal feathered regalia of the represented islands—especially for high-octane battle sequences. Eselin assigned a dominant color: yellow for Hawai'i, red for Maui, and green for Kaua'i. "The ornamentation for each island was specific," explains Eselin, referring to regal accents, such as lei (necklaces) and kā'eī (belt). "If we could find a shell on Hawai'i, or a nut on Maui, that was taken into consideration."

She also needed to find authentic-looking but performance-ready material to emulate kapa, the bark cloth traditionally pounded into varying weights and consistencies for clothing such as the men's malo and women's pā'ū (skirts).

"It was months of R&D," says Eselin. She and her team discovered Evolon, a versatile, high-tech microfilament textile offering similar textures and weights as kapa. "It's dyeable, moisture-wicking, and washable. It truly was a miracle fabric for us," says Eselin, considering the maintenance required by extreme stunts and costumes for thousands of extras.

Simulating 18th-century weather and battleworn kapa demanded even more arduous efforts. Eselin worked with kapa advisor Dalani Tanahy to understand how ancient kapa was made and decorated—or not, depending on the wearer. She and her team then developed a multistep process including the ancient stamping methods but also adding texture, shellac, and aging to the Evolon to make it look authentic.

Symbols representing 'aumakua (family gods) adorn the kapa of the ali'i. For example, the pā'ū worn by chiefess and powerful politician Ka'ahumanu (Luciane Buchanan) features water motifs and "bird of feathers," the meaning of her name. Eselin and her team created around 350 stamps that simulated the traditional process of carved bamboo symbols pressed onto kapa. "I never stopped studying traditional printing on kapa," she says. "Everything was hand-stamped or hand-screened by our textile departments."

In precontact Hawai'i, women customarily remained bare-breasted, wearing only a pā'ū. Yet Ka'ahumanu's pā'ū resembles what today's eyes would see as a strapless, empire-waist dress. Eselin found evidence of the silhouette through the Kanaka'oles and by diving deep into historical paintings, manuscripts and translations of ancient chants. Eselin notes, "They were very fashionable."

As her influence rises, Ka'ahumanu's pā'ū evolve into elaborately detailed shapes, with intricate pleats and flourishes, such as asymmetrical bows and blooming flowers at the back. "The more kapa you have, the higher your status," explains Eselin, who with Heather Vandergriff (head pattern maker) perfected the art of wrapping, tying, belting, braiding and binding the material during fittings with Buchanan. "There were no precious metals on the island for sewing or fastenings. Maybe some bone needles, but everything had to be applied to the body and tied," adds Eselin, who did "rig" and secure the finalized pā'ū for filming. Looking back, she treasures the all-encompassing commitment essential to bring *Chief of War* to the screen—and the experience remains with her. "It was extremely deep, intensive and nonstop," says Eselin. "I am still researching."