

# Springfield's Ruth Carter talks designing 'Black Panther' costumes

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"Black Panther" is a change of pace for Springfield-born costume designer [Ruth E. Carter](#), who is best known for her work on such real life dramas as "Amistad," "Malcolm X," and "Marshall."

The film, which opens nationwide on Thursday night, is Carter's first time working on a Marvel superhero flick, but she told [Slate](#) she approached it as if it were a historical epic.

"I feel like I have been doing superhero movies all along. It's the same thought process," she said. "You know, Thurgood Marshall was a superhero. So there really is no difference in terms of the thought pattern. But I get what you're asking me. You know this is a guy who could have, you know, exceptional powers who wears a skin suit, a cat suit, and he is the king of a fictitious country. So how do you how do you prepare for that? And you know I feel like it's the same, it's the same. You do a lot of research. The team at Marvel were already well into what they call visual development so they had images that they showed me my first day of, you know, the new Panther suit and of the, you know, (warrior) Dora Milaje.

As costume designer, Carter had to dress the citizens of the fictional African nation of Wakanda.

"I didn't have like visuals of a photograph to look at (for reference)," she told [TooFab](#). "What I looked at for Wakanda was the ancient African tribes. We sectioned each part of Wakanda by what tribe inspired that particular area's look. So that kind of informed me. Then, in pop culture right now, there is a movement called Afropunk. And Afropunk really celebrates dark skin, creative expression."

['Black Panther' groundbreaking superhero film \(review\)](#)

[Director Ryan Coogler delivers a film that fulfills the most rote demands of superhero spectacle, yet does so with style and subtexts that feel bracingly, joyfully groundbreaking.](#)



Carter graduated from Technical High School and Hampton College and apprenticed with the former StageWest in Springfield and the Santa Fe Opera before beginning her professional career in Los Angeles in 1986. She met director Spike Lee while working at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and he hired her for his second film, "School Daze."

Carter has twice been nominated for Oscars in costume design - in 1993 for Lee's "Malcolm X" and in 1998 for Steven Spielberg's "Amistad."

Despite her decades of experience and work on 40 films, Carter told [The Fader](#) that making the costumes for a blockbuster superhero franchise wasn't easy.

Producing the first design of a costume like T'Challa's suit costs approximately \$500,000, and subsequent iterations were not much cheaper. Costs that high don't leave a lot of room for trial-and error, so Carter looked at years of superhero costume design in order to find a unifying feature in designs that worked.

She described Marvel Studios to TooFab as being "very hands on" through the creative process, adding, she operated with a lot of freedom, "until I had to do a show and tell."

"I presented illustrations, they presented illustrations from their in-house visual development team led by Ryan Meinerding and there was so much to do," she said. "They had a core that they cared the most about that they wanted to see, like Nakia's (Lupita Nyong'o) costume or the Dora, obviously the Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman) and Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan). Those are the things that they wanted to see, so I did lots of presentations. I just had to keep moving and when they asked for show and tell, I was like, OK, open the door. Let them in. Let them see what you're doing. And then when they're done looking and they give you a nod of approval, close the door, get back, keep it moving."