



The Age of Ornament



VETERAN

I'm always on the hunt for 100-plus-year-old vintage French silk chantilly lace mantillas," says **Michael Stuart**, owner of New York City-based MS Designs Ltd. "In this black skirt panel, in a way I've resurrected the dead, since many of the French machines that did this work are gone."

Stuart, who thinks much of the lace produced today with recurring motifs is "boring," set out to create his own version of couture chantilly lace. First, he prints out lots of images of vintage lace motifs, and starts to reassemble his artwork on a half-circle skirt pattern. "After the layout is complete with a scalloped border, a grand master center motif and secondary grand motifs on the left and right, I fill in the fields with a gentler set of motifs," he says. "Lastly, I add fills, usually dots with a point d'esprit feeling." After the design has been digitized, Stuart prints it out again in full scale and then transfers the exact pattern in white chalk to a full-size skirt panel of silk tulle.

"All of that work was easy compared to what came next," says Stuart, whose design firm is housed in an 11,000-square-foot, all-white atelier, where he and his staff of 40 make original patterns, drape, do hand embroidery and sew finished couture and ready-to-wear designs. "With a single strand of silk thread, my workers crocheted a hand-embroidered chain stitch, both to outline and fill in the motif artwork. Finally we added French knots and silk organza flowers to crate a magnificent couture creation."

What are your inspirations right now? Eighteenth- and 19th-century French wallpapers and woodworking.

What's your design aesthetic? Having contributed deeply to Oscar de la Renta's runway collections for the past 25 years, my aesthetic is easy to describe: opulence with a sophisticated taste.

Why add accessories to your line now? I'm a child of the '60s: Jagger, Hendrix, Morrison, The Beatles - they all looked the part. They ornamented themselves. So, I've decided to create my own original rock-star looks, as shown in this metal-and-leather belt and wrist cuff.

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In a season celebrating rich textiles and luxe embellishments, two industry veterans and four Rhode Island School of Design-trained designers construct women's wear that flirts with texture, depth and movement.

By Nicole Rollender
Photography: Mark Pricskett

VETERAN

This organza dress's full body edged with embroidery is made for movement – and a dance down the runway. **Samanta Cortes**, founder and CEO of New York City-based Fashion Design Concepts, first selected black circular fabric from her collection. “Then, we edged each circle with machine-sewn satin stitches, along with some chain stitches for some fine detail,” says Cortes, who along with her staff in her 4,000-square-foot atelier, does a combination of machine and handwork, and creates couture-level embroidery, beadwork and fabric manipulation.

After the embroidery work, Cortes gathered strips of the organza material and sewed them (all aligned evenly to create texture and movement) on a full-circle skirt. “I felt like since things have been tough for a while, they do eventually come around – hence this inspiring circular design, which Oscar de la Renta used in his spring 2010 collection,” says Cortes, who favors tonal colors (think: black, ivory and white) for her garments since she wants her embroidery work to “talk” to the viewer.

Describe your creative process. I think about my embroidery work and textile before I think about the construction of the garment's body. I let the textile talk to me as I consider the embroidery design – the shapes involved – and then think about the stitch types I'll need to use. I sketch my embroidery design, and have my digitizer punch the basic shapes with the stitch types I want. Then, I go in and do lots of sewouts and digitize as I go to get the embroidery exactly how I need it to be.





STUDENT



hode Island School of Design **Helen Lee's** (2010 – BFA Textiles) work is tied together with a simple drop-tuck technique, and a play between sheerness and opacity.

The top (*left*) is a slightly iridescent, sheer bluish-green woven with a drop-tuck detail at the side and a machine-knit yoke that snaps closed. “I constructed the top from a drafted pattern, echoing the drape of the knitted dress,” Lee says.

The dress (*right*), which is a mesh knit with a drop-tuck detail in the front, started as 2 yards of machine-knitted material. “I used three different yarns to get the exact color and texture I wanted, and alternated from a lower tension to a higher tension, to create a semi-sheer portion, and a very thick opaque portion,” says Lee, who then draped the material until she found a form she liked. “Finally, I linked some of the opaque portions together.”



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Watch a behind-the-scenes video of the shoot.

What inspired these looks? This particular collection was inspired by Swiss surrealist artist H.R. Giger's landscape paintings, which are these sort of bleak, post-apocalyptic scenes. They're paradoxically very serene, almost delicate, and inexplicably alluring.

Why do you feel drawn to knits? These pieces were an exploration in a lot of ways, knits in particular being a major leap for me. Working with knits, especially machine knits, you're essentially creating your own fabric, which allows you more room to play and conceive your vision. I'm in a different frame of mind working with knits, as opposed to wovens. It's very freeing.

What's your biggest challenge as a designer? There's no room (or time!) for self-doubt. It's very difficult to commit to a design and see it through without wanting to change everything about it.



STUDENT

This wearable art takes eco-friendly to a whole new level. Rhode Island School of Design sophomore **Alexa Silva** (2012 – BFA Apparel) collected egg cartons from a dining area on campus for a project where she had to create apparel using only recycled materials.

“I started by cutting up the egg cartons into half-semicircles and flattening the pieces for the bodice, and then made cuts within those flat pieces and glued them together to make the lace over the shoulder,” says Silva, who then put the cartons in a blender to begin creating a pulp to place over the skirt’s chicken-wire under-structure. She colorized her eco-textile by hand-painting the top and spray-painting the skirt.

“As I started this piece, I used the Greek idea of creation, primordial chaos – symbolized by an egg – that says everything started as a single form, and then expanded out from that form,” Silva says. “My goal was to create wearable art: This piece is vibrantly colored, has a unique silhouette and is meticulously constructed.”

What was your biggest challenge in creating this look? After I blended the egg cartons, and then soaked it all in glue and water to create a pulp, I hit my biggest challenge. I had smashed the pulp into the chicken-wire skirt form, but it was taking much longer to dry than I expected; I was convinced for about two days that it wasn’t going to dry in time. I decided to take a heat gun and hair dryer to it (blew some fuses) and left it on the heater at night, and finally, it dried.



STUDENT



This coat, which Rhode Island School of Design graduate **Scott Stevenson** (2010 - BFA Apparel) collaborated with **Marta Maleck** (2010 - BFA Textiles) to make out of a hand-dyed silk organza and a silk-linen blend fabric, has a startling devoré effect (created by burning out the fabric with acid to leave behind just the silk threads) on the pockets. “We created curving shapes to highlight both the garment’s and wearer’s shape,” Stevenson says. After the devoré process, the designers embroidered ostrich plumes along the edges of the burnout designs and covered them with needle-punched silk noile. For the dress, Maleck hand-wove large sections of fabric that she bleached in areas (for a further devoré effect) and hand-painted with dye. Then, she appliquéd the woven pieces onto the neckline and back hip of the dress.

What is your design aesthetic? My collections are based around the ideas of space and time, parallel universes and anthropology - I love to blend these sci-fi ideas with romantic and minimalist ideas, usually within the confines of a loose narrative. Currently my favorite designers are Joop Wunderkind, Henrik Vibskov and Andrea Crews - they're creating beautiful, high-quality clothes in new, socially responsible and creative ways. - SS

Your work includes embroidery, feathers and fur. How does that evolve? I love texture and depth: These elements can change the entire garment. Also, the entire embellishment process has this duality of appearing very simple, yet being very complex. I use materials and techniques I haven't seen together; I like things that have some element of being both weird and inspiring. - SS