

13 joyful designers
and decorators show
off their wearable art

work of the body

By Nicole Rollender
Photography: Mark Pricskett

We're closing out 2009 with a spectacular fashion spread – we went on location in a luxe Philadelphia penthouse to shoot the best-of-the-best couture, rockabilly, vintage and exotic decorated apparel and home décor items from a very diverse group of designers and decorators from across the country. Prepare to be inspired.

The Architect

In the late '70s, Michael Stuart, owner of New York City-based MS Designs Ltd., studied architectural drafting in college, but due to a recession, couldn't find a job. So, he joined a New York-based embroidery firm as a designer. "Instead of skyscrapers, I was drawing elaborate embroidery – my architecture," says Stuart, who bought the company in 1981, and has continued to create crème de la crème embroidery and design work for Calvin Klein, Oscar de la Renta, Tommy Hilfiger, Vera Wang, Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan.

In Stuart's 11,000-square-foot, minimalist, all-white atelier, he and his staff of 40 make original patterns, drape, do hand embroidery and sew finished couture and ready-to wear designs. "We've formed a team that can do anything," says Stuart, who doesn't use computerized design and embroiders on Cornelli machines. Stuart is busiest in the weeks leading up to the runway shows; he also does a lot of bridal work and some ready-to-wear pieces, which he collaborates on with his wife, designer Geri Gerard.

For Stuart, and others working in the Garment Center, a big challenge is overseas competition. "These companies offer five to 10 times the amount of labor we offer for the same price," he says. "I stay ahead of the design curve, though. I try to create trends. We're working on the embroidery of the future – it's textile without threads: linking materials like latex and metal foils."

On Abigail, this is one of Stuart's signature pieces – a tulle ball gown skirt. "If you throw this piece into the air, it takes its time hitting the ground. Those are the best embroideries, the ones that catch a lot of air," Stewart says. "This piece is about fabric manipulation and layers. Tulle is my fabric of choice; it's the lightest and most romantic."

HOW THIS TULLE SKIRT WAS MADE



Michael Stuart used more than 40 yards of silk tulle to create this breathtaking skirt:

1. Stuart first chalked two half-circles with a degreé (degrees of concentration that lighten up as the pattern extends) grid design.
2. Then, he followed each one of those stamped lines with a single-needle, hand-operated machine and turned them into the tiniest of pin tucks.
3. After he constructed and joined the two half-circles, he fitted the entire skirt to a mannequin.
4. At that point, he attached hand-formed tulle bows to the lower grid at each intersection to make a finished hem.
5. He then constructed 10 layers of silk tulle in a petticoat fashion to layer up the volume of the skirt.
6. Finally, he attached the hand-shirred top and, voila - a \$20,000 dress (at retail) is ready to market!



All of Stuart's work is done by hand.

The Collaborators

For 22-year-old Rachel Ross, a fashion-design major at the University of the Incarnate

Word, a chance meeting with Robert Young, president and head digitizer at San Antonio-based Volant Fine Art, sparked a fantastic fashion collaboration. Young, whose business does work for interior designers including custom fabrics, embroidered art, ceiling medallions and draperies, offered his digitizing and embroidery services to the design students, and Ross took him on up it.

During her senior year, Ross, who graduated in May, created a six-piece collection called *Tchaikovsky's Swans* - three all-white and three all-black looks modeled after *Swan Lake*. She showed Young her theatrical collection, made of organza, dupioni silk and feathers, and asked him to create designs based on Islamic art she liked. "To differentiate myself, I hand and machine embroider in metallics, so that's where I went with this," Young says.

Ross, whose work took second place in construction in the university fashion show, was thrilled with Young's elaborate embroidery. "My model wore black embroidered hot pants," she says. "The silver and white metallic embroidery caught the light on the runway and made the apparel look so much richer. This was definitely a great collaboration."

Young embellished Ross's layered organza skirt that ties in the front (so shorts or leggings can be worn underneath) with a customized design made of silver and white metallic threads.



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The Crystal Queen

Any girl (or guy in a rhinestud tee or tie) is ready to shine in Swarovski crystals. “I’m just attracted to sparkle – diamonds, sequins, crystals and rhinestones – but not all at once, of course,” says Lee Romano Sequeira, the effervescent owner of Philadelphia-based Sparkle Plenty Designs (*asi/88444*), which has been a preferred crystallized branding partner with Swarovski for 10 years. “Don’t say everything about your business on the front of a tee – just enough to spark a conversation about you and your brand,” she says.

Sequeira has created custom crystallized apparel for NASA, the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, the American Red Cross, *Mexico’s Next Top Model* and even Norwegian Cruise Line. “Sparkle-wear works for any business or brand, promotion or event,” says Sequeira, who rocks out to anything ’80s (think B52s and Flock of Seagulls) while she works.

Bling does have its more serious side, though: One of the collections closest to Sequeira’s heart is in memory of Katelyn Joy Derstine, a 20-year-old girl who was recently killed in a car accident. Sequeira and Derstine’s mother collaborated on the Fly High Tee collection; Sequeira converted Derstine’s art (a butterfly and the words “Fly High”) into Swarovski crystals. Profits from shirt sales go to the Katelyn Joy Derstine Scholarship Fund. And, Sequeira donates a portion of each 25-piece-plus custom order to charities, including Make-A-Wish Foundation and Defenders of Wildlife.

In 2010, Sequeira will expand her crystal kingdom: She’s decorating leggings and experimenting with decorating high-end table cloths, napkins and towels with lotus flowers and monograms.



This fitted fashion bomber jacket (Brooke) is made out of New Zealand lamb leather that comes with hand-tipped antique highlights, from Beardmore Leathers (*asi/39275*, Circle 138 on Free Info Card). Underneath is a rhinestone-decorated shirt from Sparkle Plenty Designs (*asi/88444*, Circle 139 on Free Info Card).

The Rockabilly Rebel

The under-30 decorator crowd has a star in Desiree Contreras: The Orange County, CA-based designer has already created a “Chopper Cutie” design for West Coast Choppers’ girls’ line sold in retail stores and is head of her own eclectic design house, Chopped Up Cherries Clothing. Plus, by day she works at an EmbroidMe (*asi/384000*) franchise.

Contreras is immersed in (and designs for) the rockabilly scene. Think ’50s nostalgia, vintage cars and motorcycles, curvy pinup girls and the raw-beat music: Jimmy & The Mustangs, The Bartel Brothers, Levi Dexter. Chopped Up Cherries sells rhinestone-studded, embroidered and screen-printed far-out designs on beater tanks, hoodies and bikinis. From a racy Bride of Franky full-back hoodie design (the Bride’s gone topless, and coyly plays peek-a-boo with you over her shoulder), to the throwback Chopped Up Cherries logo (two guns crossed over a winged heart, yellow carnations and two cherries) in appliqué and rhinestones, Contreras experiments – and shakes decoration up.

And, her clients love it. “I sell to punk rockers, cougars, teeny boppers, pyschobillies, rockabillies, the girl next door, even bingo-dabblin’ grannies,” says Contreras, who’s worked with artists Emily Thomas from Mummy’s Little Monster and James Stuart (a.k.a. Sweet Baby James) from La Rouche MC.

This Bling Skully Hoodie from Chopped Up Cherries has a 12-inch rhinestone skull on the back and a smaller rhinestone skull on the front left chest. It comes with a satin silver lining in the hood.

These fit-for-a-rocker-girl blinged-out jeans from The Stitchin’ Chicks pair embroidery with crystals.

The Dallas Chicks

Native Texans and best friends for 25 years, Lynda Morgan and Penny McClurg founded The Stitchin' Chicks in 2007. They've excited clients ever since with blinged-out apparel and accessories decorated with crystals, metallic threads, lace and open work. "Dallas residents are flamboyant. They're more open to sparkle," McClurg says. "We have diamonds and jeans parties. When we represent our business, our whole shirt-backs are done."

The Chicks combine their skills to produce higher-end, one-of-a-kind work for clients such as Mary Ann Staubach, wife of Dallas Cowboy legend Roger Staubach. Morgan, who works part-time for Bernina of Dallas, has been sewing since she was 5 years old, and has made costumes, wedding gowns, bags, pillows and quilts. She chooses unique color stories and combines elements from different designs and patterns to create specialty items. While teaching preschool, McClurg purchased a single-needle machine to do crafts. Now she works in the embroidery business full-time using a multi-needle machine.

The partners, whose business is 25% corporate logo work, spend the rest of their time designing personalized wearables, including jackets, jeans, purses and shoes. "We seek out buyers. We go to boutiques. We do home and school shows," Morgan says. "Most of our clients are excited about what we do and will pay for it. For us, it's just confidence. A lot of decorators don't go where we go."



These denim high-top sneakers from The Stitchin' Chicks have 150 Swarovski crystals on each shoe.



From Chopped Up Cherries, the twin embroidered bluebirds on this tank were inspired by Contreras' friend's tattoos placed near her clavicle bone.

From Eileen Roche, these whimsically embroidered jeans mix embroidery with nailheads.



The Artisan

Embroiderer to top interior designers such as Michael K. Smith and Thomas Pheasant, Michael Savoia is also an avid textile collector: He scans eBay regularly for vintage embellished fabrics, from Arts and Crafts to Art Deco to modern. “We can learn a lot from the past. I tap into the ethnic design traditions of many cultures,” he says.

Savoia, owner of West Hollywood, CA-based Villa Savoia Inc., is painstakingly precise in his high-end embellishments on his custom decorative furnishings, predominantly curtain borders, pillows, table and bed linens, and slipcovers for chairs and couches – even huge monograms on leather armchairs. He uses natural fabrics, linens and wools, and combines hand and machine embroidery to create lavish, ultra-luxe home décor pieces that incorporate beads, appliqué and other embellishments. “My end-user clients love to personalize their interiors, and embroidery can do that in an important way,” he says. “Their designers know that I can help them achieve great results.”

Savoia based the flower-design pillow (back) on a vintage pattern from DMC Corp., a provider of needlework thread and printed fabric for home décor and apparel since the 1700s. For the appliqué and embroidered pillow, Savoia hand-cut each appliqué piece – the effect of dragonflies and birds flying in opposite directions is reminiscent of M.C. Escher’s work. Each pillow took 12 hours of production time to complete.


TECHNIQUE TIP

One of Michael Savoia’s favorite techniques is *trapunto* – this allows a decorator to create relief patterns on fabric. The traditional way to create *trapunto* is to top-stitch a pattern onto a textile – either by machine or by hand – using a secondary fabric underneath so the two fabrics are stitched together. Then, once the decorator determines the relief areas, he cuts the backing, stuffs the area with fiber and then sews the cut.

Savoia, though, has discovered a much better way to create *trapunto*. “When you combine a hollow needle with an air compressor, you can pierce the backing and shoot fiber, or string, into the pocket created by the double layer of fabric and produce the same effect with much less effort and a much cleaner look,” he says. “The needle is a bit flexible and allows me to get into the corners and tight spots.”



Bullard was inspired by 1930s and 1940s women’s trouser styles that were paired with bomber jackets. She updated this wool/cashmere blend red bomber jacket by giving it an asymmetrical shape, a large collar and structured, but still “notice me,” embroidery.



In 2005, Bullard was diagnosed with lymphoma cancer; she became bloated while going through chemo, so she created a black embroidered roomy jumpsuit that she wore to sewing shows. "I'm an entrepreneur, so I was still trying to make a living," she says. When she recovered, she wanted to discard the jumpsuit. She removed the embroidery (which had taken 40 hours to complete) and appliquéd it onto this wool shawl, also of her own design.

The Sensualist

Each geek and embroiderer Bobbi Bullard really found her groove in her 40s with the advent of computerized embroidery. "Suddenly I had control of the embellishments I could add to my own garments," says Bullard, owner of Garden Valley, CA-based Bullard Designs. "For years when I sewed, I followed patterns. Then, I became enamored with digitizing and machine embroidery. I didn't have to follow the rules anymore."

Bullard loves designer Emanuel Ungaro's work because "He was a master at letting a woman look feminine," she says. That's not too far off from what Bullard tries to achieve in her own collection: She creates well-cut, unique apparel patterns and artistic stock embroidery designs for home and commercial embroiderers. "I help people feel comfortable with their own creativity," she says. "I work in decorated garments because I love the idea of helping women find their natural beauty."

Bullard has two sources of inspiration: "I love studying the natural grace and balance in nature and interpreting that for clothing and embroidery," says Bullard, who also gives historical styles (her faves: Renaissance and Art Deco) a modern twist. "I'm a little bit of a fabric slut," Bullard says coyly. "I'm aroused by the feel of fabric, especially silk and wool." And, she follows her own best advice: Take joy in the tactile experience of embroidering on fabric.



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The Professional

“All I do is think about embroidered apparel,” says Eileen Roche, who’s carved out an amazingly full career for herself in embroidery. She’s founder and editor of Dallas-based *Designs in Machine Embroidery*, an in-demand educator, author of *Contemporary Machine Embroidered Quilts* and *Contemporary Machine Embroidered Fashions*, and a regular guest on PBS TV’s *Sewing With Nancy*, *Sew Much Fun*, *Martha’s Sewing Room* and HGTV’s *Sew Much More*. Roche has also created numerous designs and tools for embroiderers.

Roche’s career evolved from hobbyist to expert: Amazingly, she didn’t learn to sew until she was 27 and newly married with a house to decorate. Then she took a basic sewing class and watched *Sewing With Nancy*. “I became passionate about sewing, and eventually embroidery, and then turned that passion into a career,” she says.

Roche’s favorite fabric to embroider is silk because “It’s luscious and very forgiving to embroiderers,” she says. “I also live in knits and denim and love to decorate them.” For years, Roche focused on severe blacks and brights, but has turned to grays, browns and tans, since she designs for her readers, who are 45 to 65 years old and avid embroiderers. “I offer them ideas that are trendy, yet traditional, and always on the cutting edge of technology,” she says.

And, Roche encourages other decorators not to be afraid of contrast. “Show your work by selecting thread that’s a different value than the base fabric,” she says.

Roche incorporated Zundt Designs Ltd. embroidery patterns into this stunningly delicate blue lace jacket.

LESSON LEARNED

When you’re designing embroidery on a garment, use a dress form and look at it in the mirror. What looks like perfect placement on a flat surface can look terrible on-figure.

The Recycler

Susan Day is a decorator who's managed to find that perfect balance: She runs a St. Paul, MN, home-based business that produces both commercial and custom decorated apparel. Day's partner is her son Damian Day, an artist/digitizer and a professional hip-hop dancer who's sponsored by Red Bull. A computer systems analyst in a former life, Day was bitten by the entrepreneurial bug seven years ago. "I come from a long line of business owners," she says.

Day creates structural shapes that are functional and beautiful. "I also enjoy working with recycled garments," she says. "I think beyond their original purpose and reinvent them." In 2006, Day created a piece for the Red Bull Art of the Can Contest. "My piece is a recycled and restyled vintage wedding gown embellished with trim, beads and flowers made from Red Bull cans," she says. The Red Bull Bride was one of 50 pieces selected to be exhibited at the Weisman Art Gallery, and this year was also selected to be part of the juried "Nothing New" exhibit at the Textile Center of Minnesota.

Since Day had worked in other embroidery shops where it was all "dollars and deadlines," she wanted her business, Designs by Day Custom Embroidery, to have a good mix of corporate and fashion accounts. "I've structured my work life so I can spend my time in areas I enjoy, such as neighborhood identification and sports teams, patches and gear for motorcycle clubs, the hip-hop dance community and my original wearable art," Day says. "And by keeping my overhead low, I can make a living doing what I love."



Day's custom Asian-inspired vest made of a lightweight nylon quilted fabric has peacock embroidery on the back and on the front pocket, and is trimmed with an ethnic fabric and real emu feathers.



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The Old Master

Edward Matalon's body of work is a stunningly executed collection of digital prints on the thinnest silk. "I use color and pattern to create vibrant wearable art," he says. "I mix art from different periods into complex new images that celebrate women and the body. My work in photography and mixed media has concerned itself with looking at image-making as a poetic process."

Matalon first encountered digitally printing on silk and other organic fabrics at an atelier that was in the early stages of experimenting with the process. Since then, he's made many improvements to color control and the application of color on silk. "I've loved silk scarves since I was a child and my mother had an extensive collection of work by Hermès," says Matalon, owner of Art Scarves.

Matalon's work is chiefly on silk, which vary in their transparency, weight and application. "I'm attracted to silk because of its iridescence and the very soft and gentle feel it has against the skin," he says. "The habotai silk I prefer for scarves is very light, and it has a great ability for the dyes I use to penetrate and read well on its surface." His business also prints men's ties, pillows, table runners and banners.



Matalon's recent scarf design, *Abundance*, is about harvest and love; it celebrates Van Gogh and La Tour's use of flowers, a soulful still life from Caravaggio, and elements from Botticelli; the center drawing is Klee's *Fantastic Island*.

This Fire Blossom Phoenix showpiece of Vietnamese silk and Cambodian organza was made to honor villagers in Vietnam who've been hand-weaving textiles for more than 1,000 years. The focal point of the front vest is a Mandela at the solar plexis, made of an embroidered flower that's stretched around a stiff backing and edged with cording.

HOW IT WAS MADE

Kayla Kennington made the over-vest sleeves from orange Cambodian organza, textured with rows of double-needle stitching; she then digitized and embroidered flowers and swirls of cording that she created with a bar-tack stitch and a tailor-tacking foot. "The sleeves are each three strips of two-layer organza attached in various places to create a fire-like effect," she says. "I finished the six points of every sleeve with a handmade tassel using rayon thread." And, Kennington sculpted the vest and collar with layers of two-tone jacquard silks covered with iridescent organza; then she layered on thin cotton batting and embellished the piece with embroidery, beading and cording.

The Showstopper

Kayla Kennington is so full of an earned calm, that it's hard to believe such extravagant, fiery, embroidered showpieces start so close to her spiritual center. "I choose a theme, and then let my mind ponder ideas for a few months," she says. "I find fabrics and trim that seem to call out to me; whether I like them or not is irrelevant. I trust my intuition and listen for the instructions as to what I need to purchase, then what I need to do, step by step."

For more than 30 years, the Portland, OR-based designer has created one-of-a-kind silk clothing, her clientele list is eclectic: She's done hand-embroidery work for Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks and Christine McVee, and sold her work through San Francisco-based boutique Obiko to a collection of women writers, including Isabelle Allende, Alice Walker, Amy Tan and Shakti Gawain. "My market is generally creative women over 40, who want to look beautiful and sensuous, and project a confident, 'I'm a one-of-a-kind' image," she says.

Kennington, who quit her day job as an integrated circuit layout design specialist in the high-tech industry in 1985 to study fashion design, has created more than 3,000 pieces sold at retail, along with her showpieces that show in galleries. Now, her pattern company, Modular Design for Couture Artwear, translates her garments into an accessible pattern collection that have no facings, zippers or buttonholes.

Though she has such a cohesive body of work, Kennington's dream is to one day design a collection for Cirque de Soleil. "I'm grateful for what I do," she says. "If you're going to be a Buddhist monk, you're going to sweep the floor along the way. I just keep working, letting magic happen." ■

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