

Feature



Costuming a Mardi Gras Ball from 1300 Miles Away

Deborah Lynn Dixon with Terry Banker

The costumer to the Royal Court of the Krewe of Contraband describes her amazing year-long project to create over a dozen fairy tale costumes for their Mardi Gras ball, from her home in Colorado, over 1300 miles away.



Introduction

I just completed my 25th Ball for the Krewe of Contraband in Lake Charles, Louisiana, one of over fifty Krewes that participate in the annual Mardi Gras carnival in Southwest Louisiana. While the majority of Mardi Gras costumers are used to creating large-scale productions over the course of a year, the difference is that I do it while living 1300 miles away. One question I'm often asked: How? In the last decade, the process has evolved in many ways.

The History

Carnival or Mardi Gras begins with Twelfth Night on January 6th and ends at 12 pm, Mardi Gras Day, the day before Ash Wednesday. The early settlers along the Gulf Coast were generally fun loving and devoutly Catholic people of French and Spanish decent. They used the time between Christmas and Lent to empty their households and souls of temptations in preparation for the forty days of fasting and prayer. Mardi Gras Day, or Fat Tuesday, is the last day to use up all of the stored fat. Without refrigeration, 'fat' would not keep for the next forty days. The best way to use the fat? Throw a party.

The Ball

The Mardi Gras Ball I design for occurs on the Saturday evening before Mardi Gras Day, each year. The invitation-

only, themed ball is formal: black-tie for the gentlemen and floor-length gowns for the ladies. A court is comprised of Princesses escorted by Dukes, and a King and a Queen are crowned. The Princesses are Krewe members' daughters or granddaughters, and sophomores in college. While the Queen is chosen from the Princesses, Dukes are Krewe members chosen based on their relationship to the Princesses' families. Finally, the King is chosen from the Krewe's membership.

As you might expect, to be chosen King or Queen is a coveted honor, as is the production of their costumes. Once the court is selected, the remaining work — costume design, creation, construction, fitting, and re-fitting—will take the next ten months to complete

Preparation

Years ago, I began working with the Krewe as a volunteer when Founder and Captain Sammy Navarra asked me to "help with the Princess gowns." Helping with the Princess gowns led to designing Princess gowns and a couple of Queen gowns, and by 1999, I was working full-time for the Krewe. The problem? I was no longer living in Louisiana. By moving, I had taken a complicated project and made it even more challenging.

Fortunately, my daughter lives in Louisiana. I could work from her home. But how could I simplify the process? By 2003, I altered the way I constructed the gowns to accommodate two teams: one in Louisiana and one in Colorado. If you've ever been in Louisiana in August you would understand.

My teams

With so many tasks to accomplish, I do not work alone. In Louisiana, I have a team of three experienced seamstresses, two Krewe liaisons (Krewe members' wives who coordinate my work with the Krewe Board of Directors and the Princesses' families), and one assembler. In Colorado, my team includes one seamstress, one embosser, and one assembler. Until 2009, I did all of the sewing, fitting, and embossing. Now I concentrate on the embossing patterns and perform the overlay draping and bodice detail placement. Yet when necessary, I recruit my beautiful, multi-talented, and generous daughter, Amanda, (and her friends) to assist.

To make the gown creation process more efficient, I developed a basic skirt-with-train-pattern that would accommodate 60-inch wide fabric. I removed the side back seam of the skirt to reduce cutting and stitching time. The pattern has a pleat at the side back so that extra fabric can be let out or taken in. The skirt is flat lined and has a modified faced hem. The bodice has

princess lines and thin straps instead of a shoulder seam. The bodice is underlined with crinoline, boned at the side seams, utilizes a waist stay and is lined. The waist seam lines are stitched for the front and back respectively, and then the front and back are stitched together at the side seams, matching the waist seam lines. This allows most alterations to be easily made at the side seams.



Invitation to 2009 Crew of Contraband Royal Brunch. Design by [Alexa Pulitzer](#).

Complications

Because the Princesses have hectic schedules, it's difficult to find workers who are flexible and who can commit to stitching and fitting the gowns. Fortunately, I have been lucky. I found the perfect combination of alterations specialists in Louisiana and Colorado. The Louisiana ladies do the alterations. The Colorado lady does the

basic construction and performs the finish work.

Organization of Workspace and Materials

With numerous tasks to complete in a complicated timeline, organization and mobility is key. There was a time when my Father was ill that I had to be ready to load of the car and head to Louisiana at a moments notice. That is when I started my box system. Everything for a gown goes into a 10 x 12 x 4 inch-deep box that is labeled with the gown's name and contents. The boxes are stored on a 72-inch-high rolling 5-shelf unit. Each shelf is designated for specific items: the top shelf is for odd size things; the second shelf is for the Queen; the third shelf is for the Princess gowns; fourth is for miscellaneous items; and the fifth is for patterns, personal fabrics, and projects.

These boxes can go straight from the shelving unit to the back of my car at a moments notice. I can pack up my studio and be on the road in 4 hours.

Every season, I produce between 6 to 10 gowns, featuring unique color combinations. To maximize efficiency, I organize my fabrics after I purchase them. This helps avoid confusion, as I won't begin building the gowns for several months.

The fabrics for the season are hung from binder rings on heavy-duty clothes

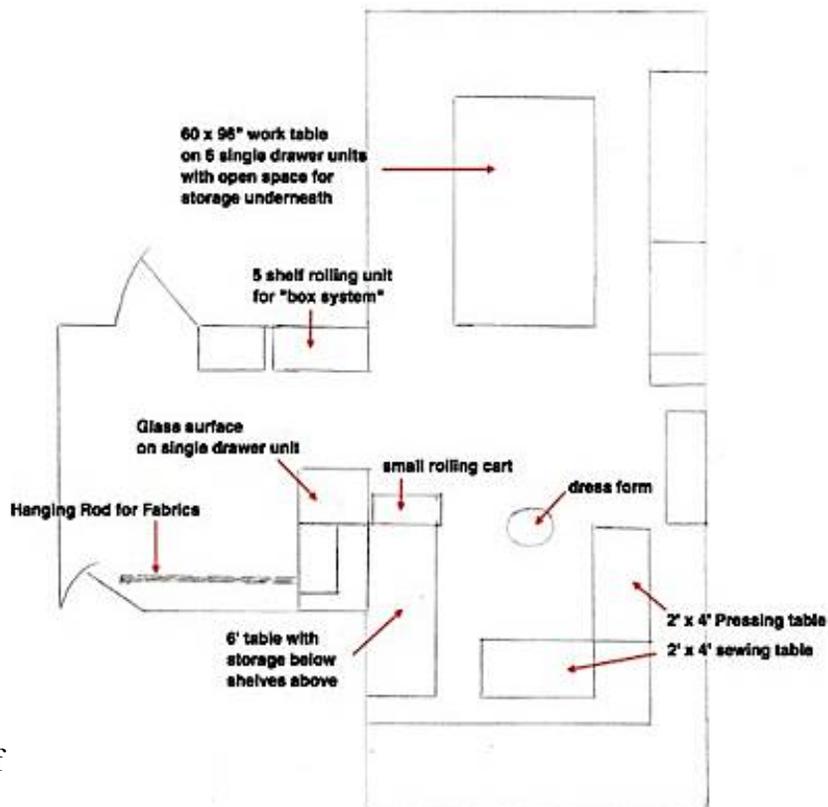
hangers. To prepare the fabrics for hanging they are accordion-folded every 18 inches along the selvage and secured with safety pins. A card with the name of gown, yardage, and date is attached to the loose selvage cut edge perpendicular the head of the safety pin. When I cut off yardage I know every fold is about 1/2 yard. I snip the loose selvage, tear or cut the fabric up to the other selvage, snip the pinned selvage, open the safety pin and remove the cut yardage, usually without even moving the coat hanger from the rod. Lastly, I note the yardage cut, its intended use and date on the card.

My studio is divided into three workstations: a wet/messy station, a worktable, and a sewing station. My wet/messy area is where I mix glitters, embossing paste and clean stencils. The glitters are in drawers under a glass surface for cleaning stencils. A rolling cart to the left of the glass surface and holds assorted tapes, embossing reference books, and ingredients for mixing the embossing paste. I developed a process for embossing textiles, emBella-tex™, that uses emBella-paste™.

In 2002, I began experimenting with different ways to embellish fabrics. My first attempt was to stamp glue onto fabric then sprinkle it with glitter. As you can see from the photo of the “Fireworks” gown (far right) from the 2002 “Festival of

Louisiana” collection, the result was beautiful, but what a mess! Then in 2007, a Faberge-inspired theme gave me the opportunity to put emBella-tex to the test. By utilizing the new process and paste, a new world of color and texture combinations opened up when applied to sheer fabric over satin or taffeta. Without the new process and paste, I would have never attempted the Faberge theme.

My worktable is 60 inches wide and 96 inches long. It has open storage underneath and sits on single drawer units where I store embossing patterns from previous seasons as well as current season designs.



2002 Festival of Louisiana, Fireworks. Gold pattern was stamped after the gown was constructed.

The sewing area consists of my machine and a pressing table with the dress form in the middle of the L. It is easily accessed from the sewing area and the worktables.

After my workstations are prepared, I set up my Embossing Log, which is a record for each embossed gown that includes color formulas, production times, and amount of paste required for each pattern. Additionally, I use the Log to track cost.

Beginning of New Season and The Work Begins

February. Within a week after the Ball, I meet with liaisons of the Krewe to review the feedback on the recent Ball and to formulate plans for next year. I have worked with one of the ladies for the past 17 years and the most recent addition to the team for 3 years. We are all very dedicated to keeping the traditions of the Krewe. Each of us has a daughter who has reigned as Queen of the Ball.

We brainstorm over a theme for next year's ball, hoping to avoid past themes or ones used by other Krewes in the Lake Charles area. Contraband is the last Ball of the season and is the only Ball where debutantes make up the court. Our goal is to create Presentation Gowns that illustrate the theme without appearing overly costumey. Once consensus is reached, the theme is presented to the Board of the Krewe for approval. This process can take up to a month.

March. While waiting for the Board's approval, I organize my workspace and try not to invest my heart in the theme—which isn't always approved. After approval, I



Princess in sample bodice, color coded for sizing (above). Each Princess is asked to send a photo of their favorite formal (below).



research the theme to find inspiration for the gown and embellishment designs. This is one of my favorite parts, second only to designing the patterns for embossing.

April. After I have my gown concepts, I take my inspiration pages (notes) and go on a shopping trip to downtown Los Angeles. My husband's family is in Southern California so it is a wonderful visit for us as well as work for me. I have vendors that I return to each year. The gowns are made of satin and taffeta with an overlay of a sheer so that I am not totally limited to the colors in the market place. Helpful Hint: The use of the sheer overlay allows me to tweak a color so that I can create a harmonious color palette for the gowns.

While purchasing fabrics for the Princess gowns, I usually shop for something special for the Queen's gown. I overnight samples to the family, and we make a decision within 48 hours. I purchase the fabrics and bring them back with me to Colorado. With

the fabrics in hand, I organize the fabrics, create a cutting/basic stitching schedule while the Princesses are being measured and fitted in the bodice samples (top left). This takes place over Easter Break.

Each princess is asked to email a picture of herself wearing her favorite dress or formal. I use the pictures to match designs and colors to each Princess (bottom left). While the colors of the gowns are determined by what is available in the market place, I also utilize my existing inventory. I avoid repeating color combinations or embossment patterns from the previous year—some people really do remember.

Helpful Hint: The colors for the 2013 Ball were determined by the seven prettiest velvet colors I could find at a price point that didn't wreck the budget. For the Krewe's 50th Anniversary, I used velvet accents I hadn't used in 7 years.

Croquis

I have developed a Croquis that works well for me and can easily be converted to life-sized patterns. If the proportions work in the sketch, they generally work on the actual gown. The front view of the Croquis is with the train sweeping around and a back view that shows the train extended (next page).

After fabrics are purchased I finalize the sketches and create combinations of fabric swatches. I give sets of these to my two Krewe liaisons, keeping a set for

#4 Aumiller
Velvet accents
bodice center
skirt side drape



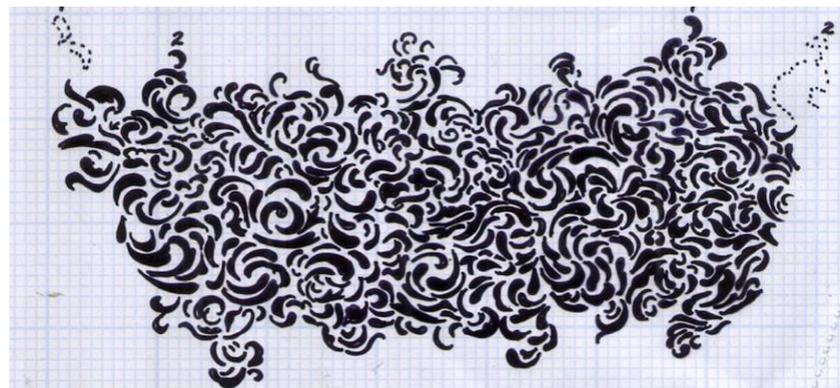
Croquis that works well for me and can be converted easily to life-sized patterns.

myself, which I keep in an 8 ½ x 11-inch portfolio binder. The binder holds the inspiration pages, sketches, scaled patterns for embossing, the measurement worksheet with pictures from sample bodice fittings, along with a composite of the Princesses favorite dress pictures.

With all of this information, I finalize the matching of the gowns to the Princesses. After all these years I have only made a few mistakes where I misjudged their personality and put them in the wrong gown....

May-June. With the gowns assigned and the fabric cut, stitched, and prepared for

the first fitting, I travel to Louisiana to meet with each Princess and her mother. The design presentation is a much-anticipated meeting. There, I explain the theme, how it will be carried out by the gowns, present fabric swatches, and review the sketches and inspiration page for each gown (below).



Line drawing of pattern repeat for Brocade pattern. From this line drawing I produced a stencil to emboss the organza.



Inspiration Page. Background: Dining Room of The Breakers, Newport, RI. Bottom left to right: fabrics from Worth Gown, brocade, lace, beaded border Cartier Collection Diamond Stomacher, and Worth Gown on mannequin.

June-July. The alterations begin with the Louisiana seamstresses. While we hope to only alter the side seams, sometimes we must nip at the Princess seams and shift the pleats to take in or release extra fabric at the waistline seam.

July-August. While the alteration phase of the gown is under way in Louisiana, I bring the embossing patterns up-to-scale, create pattern layouts (borders, scatters, appliques) and make stencils. Helpful Hint: I try to stay at least one or two gown designs ahead of the embossers. It usually takes a week per gown to develop the patterns and emboss the fabrics. When planning the embossing I have to include any additional embossed parts for the bodice. It only slows the process down if we have to go back and repeat a pattern (above) .

Once the stencils are made I create a sample of the pattern, much like a color strike off in printing textiles. This gives me another opportunity to double-check color relationships and scale. I create at least three



Tone on tone embossed brocade pattern, to be used on bodice and as trim between lace ruffle and velvet on skirt

repeats of a pattern, which I time and weigh the paste to know how much the design will cost to produce.

I mix and label the emBella-paste for the embosser and prep the fabric for embossing. The embossing is piece work and done at the home of the embosser. If I give out the work on a Tuesday it is scheduled to be back in the studio by Friday, and work going out on a Friday returns on Tuesday. Generally, the embossing takes 6-8 hours of laying paste per gown. An embosser has to “work smart” to figure out how to keep the work flowing yet allow it to dry sufficiently to repeat the pattern. Once you get into the rhythm of embossing the work flows easily. Everyone has to find their own groove.

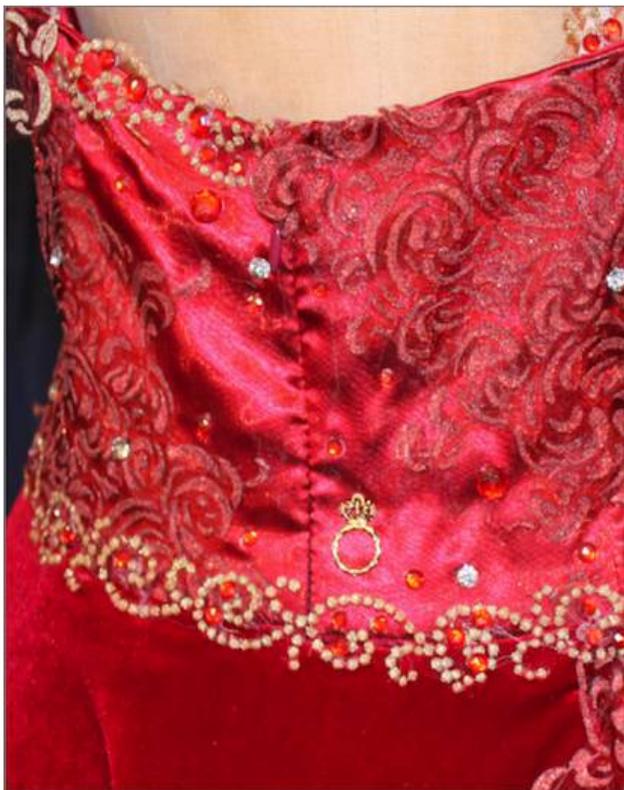
When the embossed patterns are returned to the studio I inspect the work and mark any places that need to be cleaned up. Helpful Hint: It is much easier to clean up a design on yardage before it is applied to the gown. Once the mistakes are corrected the embossed fabrics are hung until the gowns are assembled. If portions of a design are to become appliques or trim I will schedule them to be burned out.

Helpful Hint: Instead of cutting away fabric we use a burning tool, which is more efficient (above). After alterations are completed, the gowns return to Colorado where I oversee the lining of the bodices and the insertion of the bones in the side seams. Straps are secured and the seam allowances finished.

October. As the embossing process winds down, the final gown assembly gears up. The sheers are attached to the skirts. Some require that the lower part of the zipper be removed and the sheer inserted into the zipper, while others can have a placket over the zipper as an overlay conceals the zipper. The sheer is zigzagged over the waistline seam with a straight stitch above and below it to keep it from raveling, and then the seam allowance is trimmed away. A combination of trim and stones camouflage the seam line (below).



Sheer overlay The tone on tone brocade pattern was embossed on the organza. Then the sheer was applied to the skirt of the gown.

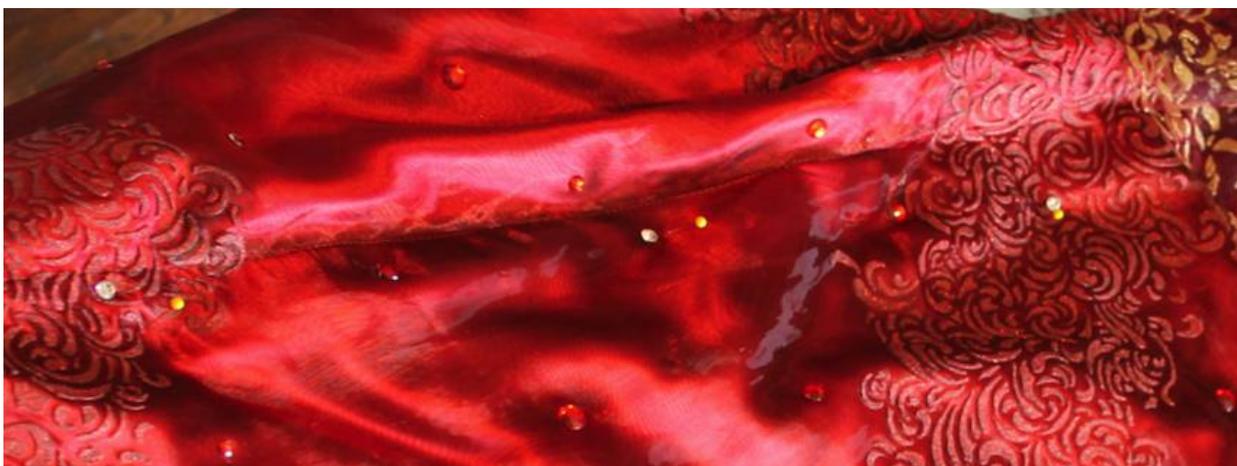


Bustle Ring is sewn through the waist stay, just to right of zipper, to keep the weight of the train off of the shoulder straps when bustled.

For the last ten years, I have worked with a lady in Colorado, who works magic with hot glue. I design the borders so that they overlap and appear seamless. It is similar to putting a puzzle together but every bit worth the effort (below). After all of the sheers are applied to the skirts, the bodices are trimmed out with embossed parts, sequins, colored acrylic and crystal rhinestones.

Each gown has a waist stay that keeps the weight of the skirt from pulling at the shoulders. A bustle ring is sewn just to the right of the zipper through the waist stay. A hook is stitched just below the end of the zipper to bustle the skirt when hooked to the bustle ring (left).

December-January. The reveal! Finally the gown is ready to be photographed and privately revealed to the Princess and her family — well intentions and planning aside — often just in time for the Ball (right and next page).



The embossed patterns are designed to overlap at a seam so the pattern is not interrupted.

Conclusion

What begins the week after the Ball sometimes doesn't reach completion until the day before the next Ball. While no plan is ever designed to finish late, we all know how issues tend to crop up along the way. It is quite a journey. I have repeated this process for 13 consecutive years. As I write this I can honestly say I am emotionally



The big reveal -- a finished ball gown read for viewing.



Formal introduction at ball (left). Princesses with Dukes stage left – Queen seated far right (center). Princesses with Dukes, stage right (right)

exhausted. The pressure of creating for such an event is great, and this year’s Ball was more demanding than most. I never want to disappoint anyone.

Fortunately, this year’s gowns were some of the most beautiful we have ever created... and they will never be repeated. Such is the artist’s palette... or maybe I should say... the gowns will never be repeated because we did not use one sequin to hide anything, and the rhinestone stomachers were more work than I ever imagined.

I am truly grateful to everyone who helped make it an evening to remember. After 25 years of creating the gowns, I am often asked how I remember one from another, or more often, who wore which

gown. My answer is simple: “Could you forget your children?”

Deborah Lynn Dixon was born in Louisiana on a March 15th, which inspired the name of her company, “[Ides of March Design Group](#).” Her mother taught her to sew and she was tailoring by age 13. She later studied Interior Design and Home Economics in Business in college. While on business trips to New York City, she spent evenings at museums taking in costume and decorative art exhibits. She also traveled in England, France and Italy, exploring the decorative arts, architecture and costuming. She now lives her dream life with her husband in the mountains near Bailey Colorado, and “commutes to work” in Louisiana.

Terry Banker is the author of a dozen books (“Underdogs of the Caribbean,” “Orange Blossom Mambo”), a ghostwriter and creative consultant (“Spinning,” “Flash & Dazzle”), and the author of over a hundred technical articles. His memoir, “Conquering Cancer, My Wife Our Love” won the Colorado best new nonfiction award in 2004. When not lecturing students on how to follow their dreams AND make money, Terry divides his time between Atlanta, Denver, and Key West with his wife and two Old English Sheepdogs, Fitz and Zelda. Visit his [website](#) for more information.

All photos, unless otherwise noted, by Deborah Lynn Dixon.