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Queen of Carnival dress deconstructed: Why Charlotte Lane Langenstein's custom-made dress wowed at Rex ball on Mardi Gras

Sue Strachan FEB 20, 2015 - 2:56 AM

One of the very first tasks faced by parents of the Queen of Carnival is finding the right couturier to fashion their daughter's gown. To be successful, a Carnival queen's dress must be a custom-made marvel of detailed elegance and expert engineering.

It is essential to find an experienced couturier, who knows the particular requirements of these dresses and has the time to properly make it.

"The Queen of Carnival gowns represent the height of custom dressmaking in New Orleans, and their supreme elegance is a testament to the importance of the honor of being chosen Queen," says Wayne Phillips, curator of costumes and textiles and curator of Carnival Collections at the Louisiana State Museum.

This season, Queen of Carnival, Charlotte Lane Langenstein, known to her friends as Laney, and her parents C.C. and Bill Langenstein, called upon Suzanne Perron St. Paul, one of the busiest New Orleans couturiers to queens and debutantes.

"I can do more with the dress if I know in March versus July," said St. Paul, who began receiving calls to schedule dress-making before the 2014 season ended.

A queen's dress can take eight to 10 months to complete. Laney Langenstein's dress took almost 10 months to finish.

St. Paul's credentials include time at Carolina Herrera, Anna Sui, Chado Ralph Rucci, Christina Perrin and Vera Wang, where she worked directly with the designer in development of ready-to-wear and bridal collections. St. Paul opened shop in New Orleans in 2006. Her first debutante dress was 2007 (for a Rex maid); queen's dress (Olympians) in 2009; first Queen of Carnival dress in 2012.

This year, in addition to the Queen of Carnival's dress, St. Paul was creating six of the Rex maids all-white dresses. And there were quite a few

more dresses: 2015 queens (Acheaens, Atlanteans, Dorians, Hermes, Mithras, Mystery, Osiris), debutantes, queens' mothers and regal consorts -- including the Rex ball dresses worn by C.C. Langenstein and Kia Brown, wife of Christian T. Brown, Rex, King of Carnival -- as well as Laney's suit she wore in the reviewing stand on Mardi Gras. It has kept St. Paul and her team busy.

"Most of my assistants are Louisiana State University design graduates," she said. My two original employees, Kelly Pourciau and Kelly Casey are still with me part time."

Such a busy schedule is not uncommon for popular gown-makers, who include Kathleen Van Horn as well as Ilaine Hartman, who is rumored to be retiring this year. Some Carnival organizations have their own modistes: The Original Illinois Club uses Marigold Hardesty, who designs the queen's and maids' dresses; Young Men Illinois Club turns to Jacqueline Forest for princesses and page attire.

For Laney and St. Paul, the process started in May 2014 when the queen-to-be and her mother went to the first fitting at St. Paul's

atelier, which takes up one half of the two-story home she lives in with her husband, William St. Paul, and two sons, Andrew and David.

While designers often recommend their clients bring in photos of what they like, Laney came in with definite ideas.

"I know what looks good on me, [particularly] after trying on white debutante dresses for other balls and presentations," she said. "I wanted it sculpted toward the waist, and not tight at the hips."

Another important element that the Langensteins wanted incorporated was a chevron pattern, reminiscent of the dress her grandmother, Dolly Ann Souchon Johnsen, wore when she was Queen of Carnival in 1949. The dress, now in the collection of the Louisiana State Museum, has a pronounced chevron in the design.

After the paper dress pattern was made, a muslin of the dress was created. The muslin is the first element of the dress, "a rough draft," St. Paul said. "Muslin is very malleable. You can still make major changes to the dress."

As she explained, "There is never really a point of no return with a dress, as over the months a client will gain weight, lose weight, so I am always doing slight adjustments to the dress up to the day of the ball; even at the ball."

At this first appointment, Laney chose the collar she wanted -- collars are used year after year - - and she debated with her mother about what style of shoe to wear. The shoes are dyed to match the dress, then have beading and fabric added, so when a style decision is made, it is often final.

Laney had to schedule her appointments early, as she was heading to study in Cape Town, South Africa, for four months, leaving at the end of June and returning early November.

With dress sketches and a photo of Laney's grandmother as Queen of Carnival as a guide, the dress construction started during her absence.

St. Paul is particular about the dress' beading. "I prefer a dress beaded head-to-toe," she said. "It's a cleaner look."

She designs with "a variation in beading so it doesn't look too uniform, it looks more organic. When looking from a distance, you want to see the pattern far away, and in the photos."

As beading is added, however, it weighs the dress down, requiring St. Paul to adjust the length. A client's weight gain or loss is a concern, so she leaves about a quarter of an inch not beaded by the zipper until January, just in case it needs to be taken in or out.

Laney's golden dress consists of layers; the underdress, originally an ivory silk lame fabric, was dyed to match the gold beading. Over that, St. Paul layered a blush ivory netting for a main part of dress on which beading and embroidery were affixed. Finally, Italian beaded tulle gold was added around the hem.

St. Paul pointed out the challenge of making the layered, beaded chevron pattern at the hem work within the curve of the hem. "It was a geometry challenge," she said. "I say if I wasn't doing this, I would be a geometry teacher."

Another consideration is that the ball floor is often covered with fabric, which creates a lovely look; however, if the dress is not hemmed

correctly, it can add to the already existing drag of the queen's mantle -- depending on the Carnival organization, that mantle can weigh as much as 58 pounds. A collar can weigh between 4 to 7 pounds; a queen's dress around 8 pounds.

The dress has to accommodate a corset-like harness that comfortably works when the krewe's collar and mantle are added. After relying on a converted orthopedic back brace for years, St. Paul created the less unwieldy and much more styled corset.

The dress designer also has to think about how the queen will sit, stand and walk. When the dress was almost completed, Laney practiced sitting on a piano bench, approximately the same height as the Rex throne.

She returned in November, only five days before her final fitting, which her parents as well as the captain of the Rex organization and his wife, attended. No one, except the queen's mother, had seen the completed dress yet.

When Laney made her appearance, her father said, "Obviously, she is beautiful, the dress is gorgeous."

"I am so happy to see images of her grandmother's dress in her dress," he added.

"You make it glow," said the captain of Rex, whose identity is kept a secret.

"So beautiful," said C.C. Langenstein, herself a first maid in Rex years before.

Like wedding dresses, the gowns made for the queens of the various Carnival balls are on view for just a few hours on one night. For Laney Langenstein, it was Mardi Gras 2015, where she was the literally queen for night.

Need more Carnival fashion in your life?

The Louisiana State Museum is opening, "**From the Big Apple to the Big Easy: Two Carnival Artists in New York**," at the Presbytere, March 21; on view through Dec. 2016.

The exhibit focuses on two costume designers: Helen Clark Warren, who designed from the 1930s to the 1950s, and John Scheffler, who designed from the 1950s to the 1990s. Both designers lived in New York while designing for New Orleans Carnival balls.

To reach Sue Strachan, send an email to socialscene@nola.com or call 504.450.5904. Find her on Twitter and Instagram as @suestrachan504, with the hashtag #nolasocialscene. Visit her on Facebook. And, come back to NOLA.com/society for more New Orleans area event and party news and photos.

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