

Feature



Mardi Gras Presentation Gowns

Deborah Lynn Dixon

Designing Carnival presentation gowns for a Mardi Gras Ball lead to the development of a new technique for creating these richly embossed fabrics.

An unwritten motto of Mardi Gras is, “If it’s worth doing....it’s worth overdoing!” That includes everything from partying to costuming. The slogan reminds me of a Cajun recipe that reads “season with abandon.” As every good cook knows, if you can’t keep a secret, everyone can make your recipe. Instead, let me show you a sample of *Embella-Text*, a new process I developed for embossing textiles

This is my 23rd year of designing Mardi Gras Carnival presentation gowns for the Krewe of Contraband’s annual ball, which occurs on Saturday evening before Mardi Gras day. The themed tableau Ball

varies by year and is by invitation only. A dress code of Black-tie for gentlemen and floor length gowns for ladies is strictly enforced.

The court is comprised of Princesses escorted by Dukes, and a King and Queen. The Princesses are “Krewe” (a secret society) member’s daughters, who are sophomores in college, and a Queen is chosen from the daughters being presented in a given year. Dukes are chosen because of their friendship with the Princess’ family.

Lastly, the King is chosen from the Krewe’s membership. The roles of King and Queen are a coveted honor, as are their costumes.

My work for the Ball begins once the theme for the next year is determined. Then I begin my research, sketches, and fabric selections. My goal is to design a cohesive collection of presentation gowns within the theme. (I do not entertain opinions from Princesses or their Mothers, and my standard line is “Trust me.”) It is my responsibility to carry out the traditions of the Krewe and I take them very seriously. It all has to be done in secrecy.

After years of designs, I have established what I consider the perfect “blank” gown. It has a fitted bodice, and the skirt begins approximately 2 inches below the waist and sweeps into a court train. I needed a gown that was easy to fit because the Princesses are hard to catch in-town at the end of their spring college semester.

The problems: typical embellishments (sequins, appliques, and rhinestones) for Ball gowns are costly, and time-consuming to produce.



Details of embossed panels on this 2007 Faberge Silver Anniversary gown. There are 8 panels on the gown and the process including development of artwork took about 18 hours.

Once made, they must be applied to the gown. These heavy and stiff appliques also risk inaccurate coloring and pattern alteration when not produced in house. To achieve my desired look, I needed to convert inexpensive fabric into lighter-weight gowns to facilitate original and grand embellishments as well as reduce production time.

The answer: I have always been drawn to the elaborate handiwork of ceremonial robes and gowns for European Royalty, Italian brocades, Faberge, Lalique, and



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

Fortuny. The hand-printed fabrics produced by Fortuny inspired a new approach.

I tried embossing fabrics by stamping glue on to the fabric and dusting it with glitter (photo bottom left). What a mess!

I needed a product that gave “the look” without the mess, and so developed my own paste. While my first attempts still resembled a craft project, at least the glitter was contained. After a bit of trial and error, I developed Embella-Paste, and in that moment, I realized I could achieve my desired look.



2005 Around the World in 80 Days - Thailand detail. Gold pattern was embossed onto the green fabric before being added to the gown.



2005 Around the World in 80 Days - Coronation Robe. The silver pattern is embossed on blue velvet of this King's coronation robe.

I experimented with the new technique



2006 An Evening with Shakespeare - Beatrice gown detail. Silver embossing on green velvet used as applique.

a little more in the gowns for the 2006 Ball, *An Evening with Shakespeare*. I really liked the freedom it gave me in creating embellishments. Still nervous about “messing up” a gown I mainly created appliques and then mounted them to the gown.

But I did take a leap by creating a panel design of dragonflies on tulle for the Titania/Midsummer Night's Dream gown.



2006 An Evening with Shakespeare - Titania gown. Dragonflies and morning glory vines on tulle.

Then in April of 2006 I was enticed to continue when given my dream theme of Faberge, as I had always been fascinated with the goldsmith's work. With Embella-Paste, I had control of my embellishments, and the challenge of interpreting Faberge's Imperial Easter Eggs thrilled me. While analyzing the eggs, I became aware of the combination of patterns and layers.

The fabrics I had used in the past would not work for this collection. To achieve a specific color and luster, I layered sheers over satin to give the luster of the enameling as well as embossing on the base

fabric. This simulated the guilloche under the layers of enamel.

Pink dots embossed on lavender satin simulates the guilloche, a layer of pink/grey iridescent chiffon simulates the layers of enamel used by Faberge on the Danish Palace Imperial Easter Egg. The results recreate the ornamental elements of the eggs in trims and appliques.



2007 Faberge - Danish Palace detail.

I created sheer overlays that appeared seamless and allowed for an uninterrupted flow of the artwork, as demonstrated on the Twelve Panel gown.



2007 Faberge - Twelve Panel gown.

This technique was done by extending the embossed pattern of the skirt front so that it overlaps the side back. The two pieces are glued together under the embossing, then the excess fabric from the side back is removed.

The process, Embella-TEX, allowed me to recreate the Faberge's designs on fabrics. You can view the entire collection of gowns from the 2007 Ball on my, "[Jewels of Faberge](#)" Facebook album.

I reworked the formula for Embella-Paste to lower the cost, and unexpectedly, the resulting product came across with more depth and glow. I used the new formula for the first time on the Crescent City Celebration gowns.



2008 Crescent City Celebration - Street Car gown.

The embossing has more depth with the new formula. The panels were embossed then assembled so they appear seamless.

Embella-Paste is water based, and if it is not applied properly it can water-mark satin. To avoid this, I emboss designs on matching tulle and then apply them to the gown. The tulle disappears against the satin.



2008 Crescent City Celebration - Opera House gown details. Design embossed on tulle then mounted to bodice and bows appears to have been done directly on satin.

I have even attempted Trompe-l'œil in creating borders.



2008 Crescent City Celebration - Louisiana Purchase gown. Trompe-l'œil border using three shades of gold



2008 Crescent City Celebration - Gallier House gown. This process allowed me to reproduce the intricate ironwork design on historic Gallier House.

One of my favorite themes was in 2009, Great Composers. I based the gowns on Symphonies, using a combination of familiar works. Tchaikovsky was a challenge because I still dream of creating a collection based on Ballets. I chose the symphony, Manfred. There is a forest scene where a fairy appears to Manfred in a waterfall. The idea of a Woodland Fairy was very appealing, and I was inspired by the bows of weeping spruce trees on a trip to Ohio. Here is the design progression for 2009 Manfred gown.



Inspiration from weeping spruce tree.



Spruce bow pattern development.



Forest green sheer embossed with a gradation of color.



"Spruce boughs" overlap swirling rainbow to interpret the Woodland Fairy appearing in a waterfall.



Embossed pieces were attached at the top so that they hang freely

Ode to Joy gave me the opportunity to interpret the elements from the poem, a "star-canopy" of silver stars on ombre draping, gold stars simulate the "beautiful sparks of the gods" and a border with cherubs on lipstick red for a "kiss to the world".



2009 Great Composers - Ode to Joy gown.
Ode to Joy poem is interpreted in this gown

I began developing embossing patterns that could be used for applications other than presentation gowns with the 2010 embellishments for "Majesty of America." I developed Majesty of America's collection based on songs about states.

I was able to capture elements of Savannah's gardens on the Georgia gown. The Wisteria creating the bodice fringe was embossed on tulle then burned out and applied along the neckline. The Austrian drapes are separated by architectural "ironwork." A lattice "ironwork" pattern is the background for wisteria and vines at the bottom of the gown.



2010 Majesty of America -Georgia.

Colorado Rocky Mountain High used an intarsia of blue sky, snow capped purple mountains, and a border of columbine (the state flower), with a drape embossed with Fleur-de-Lis of wheat (the Colorado Plains were part of the Louisiana Purchase). The red detail was inspired by the Anasazi Indians' kivas and cliff dwelling.



2010 Majesty of America -Colorado.

The Tennessee gown, representing the Tennessee Waltz, has an art nouveau border framing iris, the state flower.



2010 Majesty of America -Tennessee.

New York's panels were inspired by the elevator doors of the Chrysler Building.



2010 Majesty of America -New York.

California was inspired by the Spanish Colonial architecture of historic California buildings at Balboa Park in San Diego, and by the colors of poppies and bougainvilleas.



2010 Majesty of America -California.

The theme for the 2011 Ball is “An Evening in Paris.” It will take place March 5, 2011. It is a tradition of the Krewe that the gowns remain a secret until the night of the ball. I will post pictures of “An Evening in Paris” gowns on Ides of March Design Group’s Facebook page after the ball.

The Krewe has granted special permission for *The Virtual Costumer* to publish pictures of the steps I used in creating a border for one of the gowns in advance of the event.

First, the pattern to be embossed is brought up to scale:



Second, a sample is made for colors. The pattern is placed on mounting board, covered with plastic to protect the pattern. Then fabric to be embossed is placed over plastic, and all layers are secured to board.



This is a 4 color design; 1st layer black over the entire design



This is the 2nd layer green leaf detail (not pictured 3rd layer pink tulip and 4th layer silver dot).



Third, the skirt of the gown is draped in plastic, and the pattern to be embossed is taped into position. Then the plastic is transferred to mounting boards, continuing with layers as in the second step. The fabric to be embossed is cut in lengths of 1.5 yards for skirt front and 2 yards each for skirt

back. The selvage is placed with 1” seam allowance on center back. Once secured to the boards the fabric is ready to be embossed.



Finally, after the embossing paste has formed a “skin” the fabric can be removed from the boards and hung to finish drying. The plastic layer protecting the pattern will adhere to the fabric. When the right side of the embossing is dry, the plastic is then peeled away to allow the wrong side to completely dry. The wrong side of the embossing will have a tack which can be removed by pressing with an iron and press cloth. The tack is helpful in positioning patterns on a gown.

Below is the embossed yardage draped on a mannequin. The smaller pattern on the bodice will be cut out and applied as appliqué to the bodice. The border has been placed on the fabric so that it can be stitched as a “cage” over the skirt.



Embella-TEX has opened an entire new realm of design for me. It gives me the creative freedom that I have always wanted and produces a gorgeous look for the price. The only way to get such detailed designs is by beading or embroidery, both time-consuming and costly.

I plan to market the product and offer embossing services, including yardage, borders, and appliqués. You may contact me at iom315@aol.com for additional information. For product updates, please follow my Facebook page at [Ides of March Design Group](#).

Anything worth doing is worth overdoing! All we need are a few more hours in the day. I look forward to hearing from you.

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.

All photos by Deborah Lynn Dixon.

