



## **PHOTOS:** Behind the beads: Fiesta dressmaker weaves raves



Credit: Martha Cerna / KENS 5

"Show us your shoes!" the crowd yells. As the Fiesta queen raises her bejeweled gown, everyone cranes to see her sneakers, cowboy boots, or slippers. Then they cheer long and loud. From their perspective along the crowded downtown streets, several feet below the colorful Battle of Flowers floats, the queen, the ride, and the shoes seem quite the spectacle. But they may only get a fleeting glimpse of the real pageantry.

by Martha Cerna / KENS 5

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**"I thought I would make costumes for the circus!"**

Dressmakers like Javier Castillo have a deeply intimate connection to that scene. He is one of seven designers who create the extravagantly ornate gowns worn by Fiesta royalty each year. Castillo and a staff of about 14 workers are busy bees for several months leading up to the moment the royal court is revealed.

"It runs in the family," says Castillo. He says his grandmother used to make costumes for the circuses. "Barnum & Bailey - It was Barnum back then only, it wasn't Bailey. We just grew up around all that atmosphere. I thought I would do the same thing."

So, while Castillo received his informal training from his grandma, he got his formal training in England at Esmond, reportedly one of the first and oldest fashion schools in the world. After returning home and traveling about, Castillo says he got the bug to do more beading and embroidery after admiring work being done in Laredo.

### **Employing Elizabethan-era techniques**

He spent time studying technique in Paris before he began working on Fiesta gowns about 8 years ago. He started out by working with established Fiesta dressmaker Ardyce Erikson. Castillo merits Ardyce and other dressmakers for advancing and nurturing his skills - skills that former duchess, mistress of the robes, and scriptwriter, Helen Eversberg, says is comparable to the great French embroidery designer, François Lesage.

Castillo is also one of the few who specializes in "couching," a type of stitchery and embroidery made popular in the Elizabethan era. It involves laying down an intricate, flowing pattern onto a base and then stitching over, or wrapping the design with a spring or special thread, thread that used to be wrapped in flattened gold. Castillo picked up the antique technique while studying in France.

### **Where it all begins**

Castillo says each of the gowns takes about two months to complete - if he were working on a single gown at a time. That is not the case when it comes to Fiesta. This year he has been working on four gowns simultaneously. So, though he has the help of trained assistants, with all the fabric preparations, fittings, consultations, etc., the process can stretch out to 8 months long.

For the court of the Order of the Alamo, who have been selecting Fiesta royalty since its 1909 inception, the process actually originates on the desk of the mistress of the robes. She works with the court artist to come up with the court's Fiesta theme. The artist puts the designs on paper and then the drawings are presented to the Order and the designers at an August "sketch party."

Then the individual dressmakers are selected.

"Techniques are different," says Eversberg. "They are the artists who take it from the flat paper and give it their artistry."

### **It's a heavy load**

Inexpensive muslin mock-ups of the gowns are then assembled and fitted to the future queens, princesses and duchesses. Beading and embroidery designs are sketched directly onto the fabric as a dressmaker's study of the final raiment. Yards of fabric are ordered or created, the beads and stones are imported.

A finished gown with beads and embroidery can weigh from 15 to 20 pounds - depending on fabric - velvet is pretty heavy - and the types of stones used. Then, there is the long train. On top of that, is the hefty crown.

Castillo designs the prototype crown first, and then the real thing.

"We put padding on it, so, it's pretty comfortable," says Castillo.

A queen will wear that crown and the rest of her extensive outfit from about 5 p.m. to midnight on the night of the coronation. Then again from about 7 a.m. to late afternoon on the day of the Battle of Flowers Parade. The difference is that at the coronation she wears her train buckled to her waist. But at the parade, the train is lifted onto the float and attached to a bar, then the queen or princess is raised into position via a cherry-picker.

Eversberg says the trend is toward sheerer and lighter gowns. That's understandable given the kind of heat and humidity one can expect during Fiesta.

### **A "Texas dip" is no small feat**

The gowns themselves are kept under wraps and are not seen by anyone other than the young woman it is made for, the dressmaker and dressmaker's assistants, and the mistress of the robes. It is taken from the dressmaker's studio to the photographer's studio for the official portrait some time between January and March. Then it is delicately tucked away until the big reveal on the night of the coronation.

Prior to the big night, the women of the court must practice their bow. It's an ordeal to

carry that much extra weight: the gown, a crown, a train and on top of that, to make what the NY Times referred to as the "Texas dip." <BR><BR>

That Texas dip, or full court bow, is a carry-over from years of tradition. Eversberg says even in NYC every other debutante does a curtsy, but the Texas girls are stand-outs there as they gracefully perform a full court bow.<BR><BR>

The one-of-a kind, hand-beaded and delicately embroidered costumes finally see the light of day during the Battle of Flowers Parade. And while the crowd "ows" and "aahs" at the sight of the finery, dressmakers like Javier Castillo can take only a moment to sigh before they cast their focus on the next court of San Antonio royalty.

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If you want to know more about Fiesta gowns, stop in at the Witte **Museums' exhibit "Designed for Royalty: Staging the Coronation."** There you can get a closer look at gowns worn through the years. The exhibit is open from April 19 through August 26, 2012.

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