

One-of-a-kind

Designers' work on display at UNL

BY KATHRYN CATES MOORE
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In a fashion world filled with mass-produced GAP fleece vests, Mary Anne Vaccaro's one-of-a-kind garments stand out.

They are distinctively cut, made from vibrant and luxurious fabrics and, most importantly, stitched and designed for a single, specific person.

More than 30 of these couture ensembles, covering a variety of styles, are now on view in the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's College of Human Resources and Family Sciences.

This is the first time Vaccaro has gathered up a collection of her work and shown it in one place. Ranging from former governor Kay Orr's 1989 inaugural gown to three-dimensional dress sculptures, the exhibit presents a better picture of what couture designing really means.

"It is the art of the dress and the collaboration with the client," Vaccaro says.

Vaccaro knows more than her client's dress size. She knows that one hip is just slightly lower than the other; that she likes her silk, sleeveless shell a little loose around the waist; and that a rounded collar isn't very flattering.

Custom-designed clothing isn't like something that is purchased off the sale rack. It fits, really fits, like it was made for a specific person — because it was.

Vaccaro came to this level of dress-making through the ranks of design and art school. Her college degree is from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, with a major in art and minors in art history, theater costuming and apparel design.

She has been sewing and designing since she was 5 years old and she glibly describes the process in her resume. "June,



ROBERT BECKER/Lincoln Journal Star

■ **At UNL:** Omaha couture designer Mary Anne Vaccaro sets up the exhibit of her one-of-a-kind garments at the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln East Campus.

1951 — First word: **BUTTON**;
1955 — Designed kindergarten wardrobe for grandmother to sew;
1962-64 — Designed new habits for Mercy nuns. Started going to trunk shows with my mother; then I'd return alone to play dress-up in the fitting rooms until asked to leave."

Even though she has a sense of humor about the learning

process, she says, "I am very serious about my work." The resume also lists accomplishments such as two-time Ak-sar-ben ball couturier, costume designer for Opera Omaha and the creation of her own business.

Vaccaro lives in Omaha because it is where her main client support is and because "it

continues to call me back." She has worked in New York several times, as a fashion illustrator, bridal designer and an entrepreneur, offering her own ready-to-wear separates and dresses.

Right now, she focuses on design and pattern work. It is the pattern that makes the difference in custom work, she

If you go

- **What:** "The Many Sides of Mary Anne Vaccaro"
- **Where:** Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery, Room 11, UNL College of Human Resources and Family Sciences, 35th & Holdrege streets
- **When:** 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday; through March 3
- **Cost:** Free

said. The right measurements and fit are what needs to transfer from a pattern to a finished garment.

The other noticeable difference in custom clothing is the fabric. In this exhibit Vaccaro uses a one-of-a-kind silk scarf that she incorporates into an asymmetrical evening dress. Another gown uses a Middle Eastern fabric that isn't even made anymore.

It's a misconception that couture wear is limited to evening wear, she said. "I make hundreds of different items, from silk T-shirts to ball gowns."

Most of her clients come to her through word-of-mouth, and all by appointment only. She admits the business has its ups and downs, but "an artist's life is always like that."

Included in the exhibit is Mary Daub's wedding dress from 1996 and the Ak-sar-ben queen's gown from 1991. Many of the garments are Vaccaro's own clothes.

"Everything I wear is my own," she said, "except jeans."

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