

# FALLING IN LOVE WITH FASHION

MARY ANNE VACCARO THE E STANDS FOR...

By Timothy Schaffert

prOfile

On the designer Mary Anne Vaccaro, even the tape measure dangling from her neck becomes a fashionable accessory.

Note that that's Mary Anne with an "e" on the end. "Excited. Eccentric," Vaccaro said, as a way for me to remember...

But to be honest, I can't quite recall what Vaccaro wore the recent afternoon that she took me for a tour through her studio, past the hundreds of yards of fabric, of silks, wools, cotton, laces, of beaded and sequined pieces. For its Vaccaro's warmth and vibrant personality that makes the boldest statement when you meet her; in Vaccaro's philosophy, what you wear should gracefully complement who you are.

EXCITED.

"Too many people restrict themselves too much because of insecurities they have about the way they look," she said. "They should be comfortable with themselves, then do whatever makes them feel and look their best. We've become a very sloppy society, and sloppy doesn't make you feel good." And while some see Sarah Jessica Parker as a fashion icon, Vaccaro sees her as someone without an individual sense of style. "Everything out now, all that jibber-jabber and commotion that you see out there— I'll wear this, and have that, and carry this— that's hodgepodge to me. I like simplicity, beauty, timelessness."

So a Mary Anne Vaccaro label sewn into the back of a dress serves as a kind of finishing touch, an artist's signature; as a result, she's designed Ak-Sar-Ben Coronation Ball gowns, had her dresses exhibited in gallery shows, and recently designed a gown for Miss Nebraska for the formal competition of the Miss America Pageant. "The fabric has to speak to me," Vaccaro said as she ran her fingers over an intricate piece of embroidery. Later, she picked up a square of shimmering fabric, a piece of scrap seemingly too small for much fashionable innovation. "People say make a camisole, and I say 'Camisole? Oh come on.'" She then showed me a sketch of an elegant gown, the dress artfully designed around the scrap, something far more ambitious than a camisole.

When asked if she has a favorite piece from her years of design, Vaccaro said, "I have a few favorites, but it's usually what I'm waiting to do next. ... It's like constantly falling in love."

ECCENTRIC.

## FASHION HISTORY EXCEPTIONAL.

Her petite frame and her attention to fine, delicate detail belies Vaccaro's powerful and energetic presence. It's the combination of that lively personality and her knowledge of fashion that has earned her a new opportunity in 2005: cruise ship lecturer. Vaccaro's friend, travel agent Mary Ann Strasheim, introduced her to the distinguished Silversea Cruise line; Vaccaro will be boarding one of the cruises in May to present talks on fashion and art history based on the cruise's various stops between Barcelona and Rome.

What has made this particular cruise down the Mediterranean so enticing to Vaccaro, has been the opportunity to research an area of Europe rich in fashion history. "In fashion you see constant change," she said. "You think you're seeing things that are new, but it's just a new twist." This is particularly so with shoes, a subject about which Vaccaro has much passion. So when she learned that the family of famed designer Salvatore Ferragamo would be on board for part of the cruise, and that the cruise would be offering an exclusive excursion that could be purchased separately, Vaccaro realized just exactly how extravagant this assignment would be.

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EXTRAORDINARY.

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"In Florence," she said, "you can go to [the Ferragamo] villa and their vineyard, and have dinner at their villa, and the next day you go to the shoe factory and the shoe museum." And though this brush with fame clearly excites Vaccaro, it's the genius of Ferragamo himself that truly animates her. She spoke of how Ferragamo first designed shoes at the age of 9, for his sister's first communion. By 14, he had a staff working for him. "There's nothing new in shoes today that he didn't do: the first platforms, the first cork soles, the very first spiked heel, the very first steel arch; all those things were Ferragamo's."



Photos by Jim Scholz

ELEGANT.

## THE SHOE FITS

Vaccaro actually has a kindred spirit in Ferragamo; she too has shown some invention in shoe design. A zeal for design that she's had since she was five years old led her to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Dissatisfied with the program, she switched to University of Nebraska Omaha's fine arts program. "My major was in pottery," she said. "Instead of making pots, this was in 1971, I did a whole collection of porcelain shoes. ... They brought national attention to me, like from ARTnews magazine, Mademoiselle magazine. Even for my thesis show, I wore clay shoes that I had designed and high-fired not to break; trust me, they were not flexible."

But one could never accuse Vaccaro herself of inflexibility. When people visit her studio, they often remark that she clearly thrives on challenge. "When people come in here," she said, "they don't see a line of little black dresses. They don't see a sportswear line. They see somebody who works with beaded metallic lace, and wool boucle, and who sometimes puts sequined lace over cotton batiste."

Though the cruise presents an opportunity about which she's enthusiastic, Vaccaro recognizes that it's design that will always tug at her heart. "I always want to go just make that dress. ... When I'm making the dress, I'm home."



EXQUISITE.

For more information about the cruise, see the Travel section in this issue of OmahaStyle, or call Mary Ann Strasheim at Custom Cruises LLC, 393-3436; when booked through her, several exclusive packages are available.