

Fashion designer Mary Anne Vaccaro has designed everything from Ak-Sar-Ben gowns to wedding dresses to sportswear, all out of her Omaha design studio

To hear Lisa Yanney Roskens describe her first trip to see a fashion designer as a teenager, you'd think she was being sent to the dentist to have her wisdom teeth removed.

Roskens' mother had made arrangements for her to have something nice made for a special occasion. Roskens reluctantly complied.

"I went with great attitude and great disdain," Roskens recalls.

That attitude changed, however, Roskens says, mere minutes after she arrived at fashion designer Mary Anne Vaccaro's mid-town Omaha studio.

Vaccaro greeted Roskens with a smile on her lips and a white tape measure slung around her neck. The next thing Roskens knew, she was being draped in fabric and having her entire look, not to mention her attitude, transformed.

"I felt this incredible connection,"

said Roskens, President and CEO of America First Companies. "It goes way beyond a professional relationship. I was terribly anxious to get back, and now she's designed my wedding dress and something important for every important event in my life."

Over some 30 years of designing in Omaha, Vaccaro has designed everything from wedding dresses to Ak-Sar-Ben gowns to sportswear. Most recently, she had one of her red dresses featured and displayed alongside those of prominent designers Oscar de la Renta, Donna Karan, Carmen Marc Valvo and Bagley and Mischka at the Red Dress Ball in May. She also designed the headed lace cocktail dress worn by chairwoman Dr. Theresa Hatcher (see page 20).

It's not only the style of Vaccaro's garments that makes them unique, but also the fashion in which they're made. Each piece is carefully crafted by hand.

"People think this is like a factory and that the dress goes through this speed process of construction," she says. "That is not it at all."

Instead, it takes about six weeks to take a dress from design to production to completion.

"It's very labor-intensive," she says. "That's why people don't make clothes this way anymore."

But Vaccaro does. And that's why having a garment designed by Vaccaro, her client says, is as much about the experience as it is the garment. And the makeover often goes beyond fashion. Vaccaro has been known to provide a sympathetic ear to clients as well as pass on interesting advice and recommended reading lists.

"It's like counseling," Vaccaro client Annie Morgan says. "She enriches your life as well as your wardrobe."

Like her garments, Vaccaro is an original herself, with a story as unique

as her clothing.

As Roskens says, "She's a real inspiration."

Vaccaro began designing clothes at an age when most kids are learning the alphabet and figuring out how to count. She did it out of interest – and necessity.

Too chubby as a child to fit into store-bought clothes, she described the clothes she wanted to her grandmother, who sewed them for her. One of her first creations was the dress she wore for the first day of kindergarten.

"It was a blue nylon plisse with a big square collar with lace trim and a variety of buttons on the color," Vaccaro recalls. "And the buttons didn't match. They were just the buttons I liked."

By grade school, Vaccaro was not only designing her clothes, she was sewing them, too. By eight years old, she was collecting fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *Bazaar* and *Town & Country*.

"I lived in a fantasy world, where all I did was look at pictures of women in fashion magazines who looked the way I wanted to look when I grew up," she says.

Vaccaro attended Catholic school in Omaha, where she had to wear a uniform, except on holy days. Vaccaro treated those days like her personal fashion show. Her creations drew quizzical looks from the boys, she recalls, but admiring glances from the girls.

She answered any critics by crying. "I'm not finished yet!"

Her parents and teachers provided the supportive words and encouragement that spurred her on.

Vaccaro was so dedicated to her

Story by
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Photos by
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Passion for FASHION

"I love beautiful clothes, beautiful cars, beautiful houses, beautiful music. I just enjoy beautiful things." ∞ Mary Anne Vaccaro



attending trunk shows at local department stores by herself. She remembers sneaking samples into dressing rooms and trying them on.

"I was training for my destiny," she says.

After graduating from Central High School in 1969, Vaccaro attended the Minneapolis College of Art & Design on full scholarship. A year later, she transferred to UNO and made plans to transfer again to the Fashion Institute of Technology. Instead, she got caught up in her studio work and in studying art history and remained at UNO, graduating with a fine arts degree in 1973.

The design work she did at UNO brought her national recognition in several publications, including *Mademoiselle*.

After graduation, Vaccaro worked locally and nationally as fashion illustrator and copy writer. In 1978, her focus shifted to the fashion design business she runs today.

Vaccaro spent much of the next decade expanding her

business and raising her only son, Dominic, who dubbed the ever-present tape measure around his mother's neck as "mom's working necklace."

Bridal wear provided Vaccaro one of her biggest breakthroughs. In 1986, she brought the idea of bridesmaids separates to Bill Levkoff in New York. She was hired to design and produce the first collection of bridal separates ever done in the U.S.

By 1990, Vaccaro's work had become so highly regarded that several garment industry friends in New York convinced her to open a showroom there. She did, but it exhausted her.

She kept the custom business in Omaha, with eight full-time employees. She returned to Omaha one week per month, but she found herself spending most of that time taking calls from New York. Deciding she was spreading herself too thin, Vaccaro closed the showroom after a year.

"It was too difficult to live here and work there," she explains. "You can only be one

place at a time."

Now Vaccaro's work focuses almost entirely on Omaha. She has a wide range of clients of all ages, wants, needs and body-types. The one thing they all have in common is an appreciation for quality, design and the designer.

Though Vaccaro occasionally makes luxurious silk shirts for me, she almost exclusively serves women.

"I really understand women," she says, "and there isn't anything I make that I haven't personally tried in some way. My design is as much feeling as seeing."

Roskens says Vaccaro has a knack for making clothes that suit her mood and personality.

"She figures out what you like and what makes you tick," Roskens says. "She designs clothing that truly reflects who you are."

Roskens jokes that Vaccaro is almost too good at what she does.

"The bad thing is when I see her, I'll have something in mind and end up getting something else, too," Roskens says, with a laugh. "She's a very effective saleswoman."

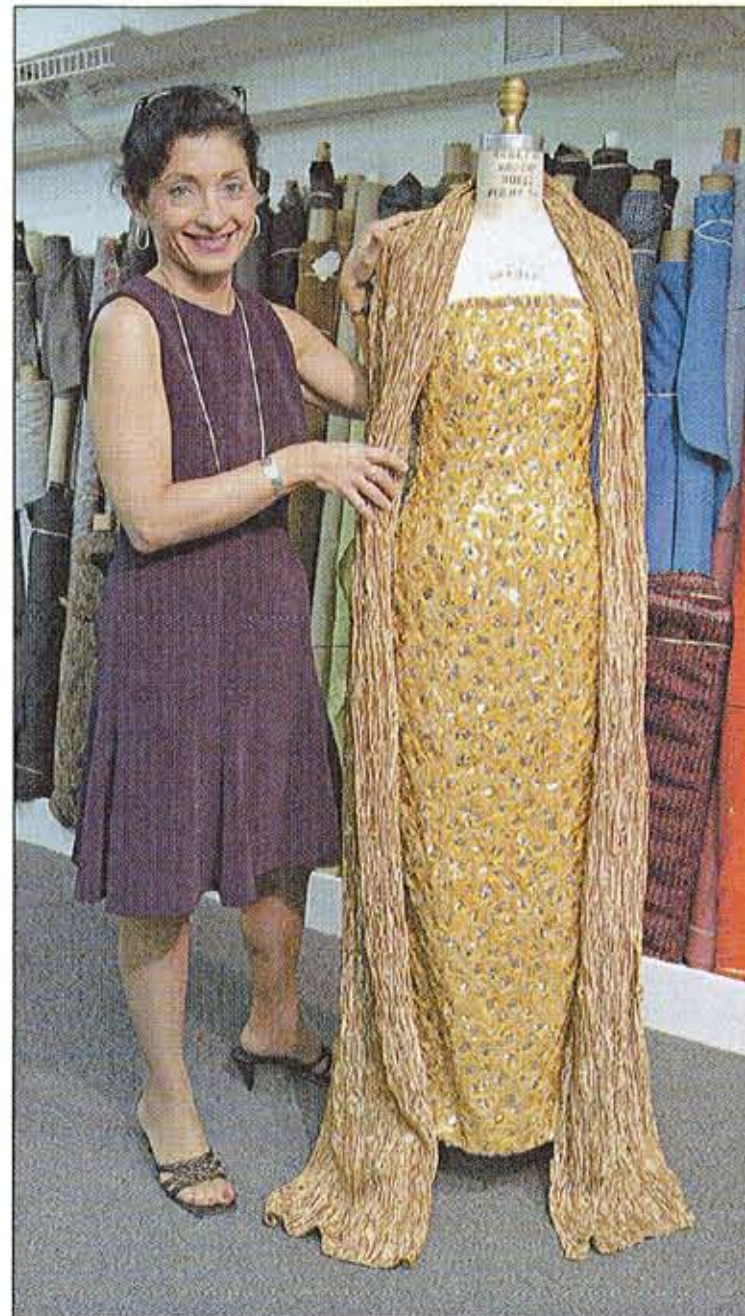
Vaccaro's design process begins with an individual meeting her client. This is when Vaccaro plays a role that she kidding refers to as "the dress psychic." The client describes the event she's going to, what role she's playing in the event and what she'd like to wear. It's Vaccaro's job to envision the outfit.

From a room full of fabrics and materials, Vaccaro then has her clients select what appeals to them most. Vaccaro makes suggestions and sketches a variety of designs.

This is all done under one simple rule: "Don't say no until you know," which is Vaccaro's motto for keeping an open



Top: Vaccaro sketches a dress. Left: Vaccaro works with assis-



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mind throughout the creative process. Once the design has been made, Vaccaro takes measurements and then personally creates a pattern of the design customized to the client's measurements.

"We have no sizes because we fit all sizes," Vaccaro explains.

Once the pattern has been completed, a muslin fabric version of the garment is cut and sewn. The client returns for a fitting. The muslin is marked with fit and design alterations. Another pattern is made from that, then the actual garment is cut and sewn.

With the help of her 20-year assistants Janelle Schell and Patricia Morris, Vaccaro sees the garment through every step of production in her studio.

Client Annie Morgan is among those who likes have a say in her style, right down to helping choose the fabric. But perhaps the best thing about Vaccaro's gowns, Morgan

says, is that their quality and affordability.

"You can shop out of town and spend more money and have it not be as nice," she says.

Working with the finer things is what gives Vaccaro the greatest joy. And her appreciation of those things goes far beyond fashion and fabrics.

"I just enjoy beautiful things. I love beautiful clothes, beautiful cars, beautiful houses, beautiful music," she says. "It's a sense of appreciation I have for the design and all the people it took to make it work."

When it comes to clothing, beauty, in Vaccaro's eyes, is a garment that combines quality, fit and timeless elegance.

"It's important for me to give the client the look of the times with a timeless attitude of quality." ❏

