

# Painting

# with

# Fabric

## The Fashions of Kristi Smart



“I see designing as painting with fabric,” says Kristi Smart, a creator of custom coats with a fantasy flair. “I pull from my sketchbook filled with motifs that I can appliqué. I have shelves of fancy fabrics separated in colors. A cabinet of trims. Boxes of buttons. These are my paints and color palates.”

When you put on a Kristi Smart coat and look into the mirror, you'll find yourself transported to another time or place. Depending on the garment you chose, you'll find a pirate, a vampire, a Civil War soldier or some other fanciful person looking back at you from the looking glass.

“Halloween was my favorite Holiday,” says Smart. “It is why I got into fashion school.” Which is probably why she

describes her work as “wearable fantasy.” “Rich Hippie meets Sci Fi,” she says. “My goal is to take you out of the everyday world and make you feel like you are someone else and somewhere else. If you put on my coat and look in the mirror with a gasp of glee, I know I have done my job.”

Most of her work is in coats, which is ironic since coats were her challenge in school. “At Trade Technical College, I was easily able to make just about everything, but coats and jackets intimidated me. If I could make a coat, I was really accomplishing something.”

Smart started with a basic frock coat in the 1980s. “Costumers have called it ‘The Little Black Dress For Men’,” she says. “It is a tasty looking cutaway coat

that works equally well on women. I expand on that coat to make one of a kind and limited art coats."

You can choose a ready-made Kristi Smart coat of the rack, or you can have one custom designed to your unique tastes. "When filling a custom order I talk to my clients," she says. "They give me an idea of their favorite colors, textures and motifs. What event will they be wearing it to? How would they like to portray themselves? I take it from there and create a one-of-a-kind garment for them. Quite often they have only a vague idea of what they are getting. I am grateful that they trust me. It gives me an opportunity to really create. I always tell them if they don't like it I will make another. So far that has not happened."

## *A Customer's Palate*

When she begins to design a new coat, she goes to collection of fabrics, trims, buttons and more. "Everything gets pulled out onto the worktable," she says. "It gets matched up and mulled over. The unusual trim or odd piece of fabric that no one would ever pick out quite often becomes the thing that pulls it all together. What ever I do I try to put a twist on it. Anyone can make a skirt. What can I do to make it unique?"

Her inspiration is a mix of Hollywood and historic fashion. "I stay away from fashion magazines," she says. "Anytime I've tried to follow fashion trends, I failed miserably. When I made things I liked, people would buy them off my back."



However, much like the Michelangelo, who said his job was to chip away at the marble until the statue inside was revealed, Smart's coats are inspired by the fabrics she finds. "Finding the right combination of fabrics and trim makes its own coat," she says.

"Or finding the really odd piece of fabric.

How can I make a coat if the fabric is only twenty inches wide? What are

the possibilities if it

is 120 inches wide? Must try! Its all got to come home with me and get sewn up. I make a lot of one-of-a-kind pieces this way."



## *When Inspiration*

## *Walks In*

"People also inspire me," says Smart. "I would see one particular woman at shows who was five foot two, adorable and quite round. She always wore red and green with sparkles. She inspired me to make my gnome-sized coat."

Smart makes her coats fit people of all sizes, from petite to plus. She prides herself in being able to create fun, well-fitting coats for everyone. "Sometimes, there is a man hovering around my booth clearly not even wanting to look," she says. "He wears a two to four extra large. He is six foot four. He has never been able to buy anything off the rack. He says he can guarantee that I do not have a coat that fits. I guarantee that I do. Whether or not he buys it is beside the point. I just like the look on his face when I put him in coat and hand him the mirror."

Recently, she faced the challenge of making a coat for a women with unique measurements. "Her proportions were so different," she says, "I had a hard time looking at my pattern pieces knowing that they would fit. It was the most fun I have ever had making a pattern."

When the coat was complete, both client and Smart jumped "up and down in glee," she says. "Making this coat was exhilarating. She looked great, the coat looked great, fitted great, I still get a high thinking about it. I am anxiously waiting for photos to put on my website."

Continued on page 19.