

## World-class handiwork inhabits outrageous Fiesta garb



PHOTO BY BRYAN RINDFUSS

The edge of a dress embellished with paillettes

SHARE   

BY SCOTT ANDREWS

"I have tried to explain this in Paris, in London, but no one understands. Nowhere in the world is there an event like this," says Xavier Castillo, San Antonio's master of *haute couture* embroidery and beadwork. He is referring to the Coronation of the Queen of the Order of the Alamo during Fiesta. It's an anachronism, the court of 24 duchesses, the Princess, and the Queen. The high-society Fiesta bows trace back to 1909, when royalty was added to the Battle of Flowers Parade, which itself began as a mock fight between San Antonio society ladies tossing flowers at each other at the Alamo on San Jacinto's Feast Day in 1891. ("A strange thing, celebrating the defeat of Mexico in a city that is mostly filled with Mexicans," says Castillo.) But the tradition is a boon to local artisans, as it provides an unusual opportunity for local dressmakers and their crews to practice their art at the very highest level.



PHOTO BY BRYAN RINDFUSS

An embroidery sample designer Xavier Castillo plans on framing

In preparation for the Coronation, Castillo spends eight months on the dresses and trains, working full-time with assistance from ten artisans, each with their own specialty. Some do handiwork, stitching the parts together; others make the intensely intricate beading, or work on jewelry and crowns, in which the sculptor's skills of casting and metal chasing are employed. Still others do feather work and painting. A master tailor is also part of Castillo's extended workshop, which keeps up to three artisans working in his *atelier* at any time, while others toil away in their own studios.

There are five other dressmakers working this year, but few match Castillo's rigorous skills. Three of the ladies in SA have been making the dresses for 35 years, Castillo says.

He began only in 1992 as an assistant to one of the dressmakers, later going on to make Coronation crowns. His first commission for a complete dress and train, replete with jewels, came seven years ago.

Born in Tampico, Mexico, Castillo began studying fashion design while spending a year in Paris during his youth.

After taking several other paths, he returned to his initial interests, visiting Paris seven times in the 1980s to study the arcane art of beadwork at the Paris American Academy.

There are few beading centers left in the world; the craft is now practiced mainly in a few small towns in Northern Italy, Paris, and the French town of Lunéville, situated between Nancy and Strasbourg. In England, London's Royal Academy maintains the British Royals' costumes, though the British style of beading is very stiff, used on the velvet-backed military bucklers of the Beefeaters and the like, but not incorporated into gowns.

In Castillo's exacting *haute couture*, everything is made from scratch. His clients prefer exclusive designs; evening gowns predominate — many made for daughters of the Coronation court families. No bought assemblies are incorporated into his works, which utilize precious elements like Swarovski crystals. "They think I'm arrogant," Castillo says, "insisting everything be made in our studios. But my client doesn't want to see her design on another woman's dress."

The process of making the Coronation gowns begins more than a year prior to the event. Two artists are contracted by the Order to design the court's regalia. While the designs are rigidly fixed, the creators are able to exercise their creativity through the materials chosen, which are rich. Even for Coronation, all Castillo's work keeps up with new couture trends, incorporating new materials, sometimes in novel ways, like placing silk toile on the background instead of velvet.

This year Castillo is making four dresses and trains for duchesses, and the jewelry and crown for the princess, as well. For one of the trains he has sourced spangles from a family-run fabricator in Italy that also provides materials to Versace. While the fabricator has practiced their craft for generations, they remain adamantly off the grid, disdaining contact by email or even telephone. And his purchases from Swarovski must be made at least eight months in advance. Though their crystals are the finest garment elements in the world, Castillo demands his be covered in 24-carat gold, a special and costly order.

Themes for the dresses change every year and are supposed to be a secret until they are unveiled, so don't ask us. Though the designs tend towards historic citations, one year the theme focused on movie-land; last year, the works of famed jewelry designers were featured.



PHOTO BY BRYAN RINDFUSS

Castillo in his studio