

# DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

Marie Coulanges of Malden, Creative Fabric Designer

by Roanna Forman



She arrives with roses, wrapped in the beautiful fabrics she works with. The interview is half in English, half in French, the topics ranging from world cultural politics to the arts community in Malden. Marie Coulanges, a custom fabric designer with infectious vitality and rock solid determination, has just set up her business Rodié Designs at Ideas5 Artists Studios in Malden Center. She is an artist, a mother, and a community activist with deep commitment to progress in Malden. Here are her comments over Pinot Grigio and own home-cooked Haitian dinner.

Beginnings in Haiti

MM: Designing clothes and working with fabric -what led you to that path?

MC: I guess I got my inspiration as a little girl. My mother used to sell fabric, and I used to go with her, and I think that ever since then, it's been a part of me. I had the interest in different fabrics and I fell in love with fabrics and the sewing machine. I remember my mother had a sewing machine. Whenever she had some fabric left over, she would make some patch blankets and pillow cases. Another thing, I went to the nuns' school in Haiti, and my teachers helped us with embroidery and sewing assignments.

MM: What intrigues you about working with fabric?

MC: Everything. Whenever I see fabric, I get very excited. I will touch fabrics and I will get very happy, and whenever I feel blue and I feel a little sad, if I go to a fabric store, if I stand and look at my sewing machine, that really changes my mood...I think that fabric and design, color, seeing different patterns, it's a part of me.

Becoming a Designer

MM: That leads me to another question. How did you actually end up in design school?

MC: Growing up, I thought I wanted to be a nurse...even though I went to nursing school two or three times, I dropped out, and I think I wasn't interested. This was not me, and deep down, I felt that I had to be myself. I felt, yes, I am caring. I love people I want to take care of people, but in another way. I felt that I was more creative, I'm a designer, a fabric designer, I love to dress people. I love to send a message, tell a story through a dress. I love to help people make a statement about culture, about environment, about expressing yourself through a design. I define myself as a problem solver also for other women and other people. I think that's who I am. I cannot reject that part of myself – I cannot deny myself.

A psychological approach to dress design

MM: How do you help a woman bring out the best in herself?

MC: When a woman comes to me to make a dress or do some kind of design, I usually interview the woman first and see the woman's background, and determine who the woman is, and what message the woman wants to project. Some women tell me, "Oh, please, make me very beautiful. I want to be elegant." Sometimes, in a sense, when a woman says that to you, she doesn't really understand that she is saying something about herself. She just wants to tell people, 'I am here; you want to check me out. I may not be able to talk too much to you. I may not have a chance to say hello. You may not have a chance to talk to me, but if you check me out, you will know who I am, you will know what kind of statement I am making.'

MM: You've said that whether or not people know it, what they're wearing tells a story about who they are. And with your services, you hope to find that story and really help them tell that story. Can you give an example of a case like that?

MC: One recent story is of a woman who graduated with her Masters from nursing school, a wife and mother of two kids – a very busy lady. She felt that she had accomplished a great deal. She came to me and said, 'Can you design a nice dress for me? I really want it to be flared out and I want to look like a queen.' I said to her, "What do you really need?" She told me the color, the style she wanted. Suddenly I realized that this woman was very happy with where she came from and what she had accomplished. So I wanted the dress to show that she was a married woman of courage, and that hardship couldn't prevent her from climbing any ladder. She says simply that she wants to look pretty, but maybe she doesn't realize that she wants to celebrate her courage, her background, coming from a third-world country, coming from a poor country – coming to this country without anything. She accomplished that much. She wanted to celebrate her courage and show that she had a lot to offer. That's what she wanted me to show through the dress.

MM: So what did the dress end up looking like?

MC: She picked gold. The skirt was very flared, and she told me she wanted a lot of beadwork. She wanted to really "dress for success" that day.

## Rodié Designs at Ideas 5 Studios

MM: What is your studio at Ideas5 going to be offering? Alterations as well as custom design? Will you be putting out a line? How do you see that?

MC: Ideas5 is a great opportunity for me at this moment. I'm so grateful for the people at City Hall who put their heads together to help artists. My vision for Ideas5: I am a designer, and I am a custom designer...I'm looking forward to bringing my own line and designs and for people to bring me designs to help them solve their problem, and I'm there to serve.

MM: Are you going to design for men as well as women?

MC: Right now, I am designing for women only, but custom design can be for men and women, of course. I have plans for a line of leisure shirts for businessmen. For men who will be entertaining, I can make special shirts- with some matching garment for wives, because I really don't want the men to be left out.

## Fabrics from All over the World

MM: Where do you find your fabrics?

MC: I shop all over the world. Last year I even went to Korea to shop for a certain lace – embroidered cotton. It's very expensive, very elegant. I have fabric from Denmark, Europe, Australia, China, Austria – all over the world. I go there to shop, plus I have connections for ordering from the United States.

MM: So this must be double pleasure. You love fabric and just love looking at it, plus you're thinking what you can use it for. Another question – will you do alterations, or are you strictly a creative designer?

MC: I am a creative designer but I will alter for people, because I am planning to have a seamstress working with me just to suit people's needs. Because sometimes people will come to you with a nice dress they'd like shortened or altered. You really don't want to turn those people away – you want to help. You want to have a service for everybody.

MM: I know that you're very excited to be part of the arts community in Malden. What do you think is the role of art in your life? Do you define design as art and art as design?

MC: It's through art that we communicate, and if you think about it, everything you do in life is art. Everything. Sometimes you may not pay attention to it. Art is a form of relating yourself to anything around you – the environment, nature, and whatever you do in life. For example, you may sit down and have a thought process and think about something, perhaps writing your thoughts down. You read what you wrote, and transform it into art. Everything you do in life is art.

For an appointment with Rodié Designs, please call 781-605-1261, email [myrodiedesigns7@yahoo.com](mailto:myrodiedesigns7@yahoo.com), or visit [www.rodiedesigns.com](http://www.rodiedesigns.com). Rodié Designs is located at Ideas5 Artists' Studios, 183 Pleasant Street, Malden.