

# 'Hot Couture:' It ain't heavy, it's aluminum

By Sue Mason  
staff writer

Let's face it. Metal has never been to get a too-hold in the fashion scene. Sure, there were brief brushes — those clanky suits of armor and tacky chastity belts of the Middle Ages and the tasteless Iron Mask. Oh, and don't forget the what-a-drag ball and chain that went so nicely with black and white stripes.

Couture has done quite nicely without heavy doses of metal. Sure, there's been the obligatory metallic thread, buttons and belts, but for the most part, metal hasn't been used as a fashion statement.

Well, heads up, Coco Chanel: take a look out, Oleg Cassini. A bunch of budding "designers" have added a category to couture — clothing and accessories made from decorative aluminum.

Tibetan jackets, a tuxedo, a wedding dress, a banana dress. Nine students at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit spent a semester working on fashions and accessories, using the textured aluminum Northern Engraving manufactures for industry.

Actually, that's "Hot Couture." That's the name given to the class by instructor Jaymes Leaky and Gerry Craig. Working artists and graduates of the fiber program at Cranbrook Academy of Art, they challenged their students to use non-traditional and unrelated materials together in a garment in a competition that included \$2,500 in prize money.

IT WAS no easy task.

"The aluminum is kind of difficult to work with," said Kaiser Suldán. "Either it doesn't move enough or it moves too much."

Move and not move? Aluminum? Now, before you begin conjuring up images of clothing designed with the Tin Man and Robocop in mind, harken back a few paragraphs. See where it says unrelated materials? That's the key to the class and the student projects.

The aluminum was used with fabrics. Knits, tulles, silks, even fur were put together with samples of Northern's aluminum products.

The Sparta, Wis., manufacturer has a library of some 50 types of aluminum — simulated textures, jewel-like finishes and organic materials like onyx, marble and wood grains (and you thought it only came in silver) — that the students used for their projects.

Suldán used Northern's perforated aluminum to trim the lapels and cuffs of his oversized tuxedo. The lines in the played off the pinstripes in the pants and showed up in the bow tie and cummerbund.

The 31-year-old Birmingham resident started making the tuxedo the semester before Hot Couture and finished it up with the aluminum accents.

IT WASN'T a prize winner in the design competition, but it went nicely with Linda Blondy's mini-skirted wedding gown that featured a aluminum bra, silk organza, sheer tulle and industrial parts used as studs.

Suldán found the project frustrating and at one point had decided to drop out of the competition because he didn't think his work was "good enough." An encouraging word from a Northern Engraving representative was enough to change his mind.

"I tried to stress the craftsmanship," said the ceramics major. "It's really a minimal use of aluminum; it's kind of a 'Star Trek' type affair."

Like Suldán, Blondy didn't win anything for her wedding gown, but she did walk away with second-place honors (and \$750) for her Tibetan jacket, entitled Tibetan Teng go.

She used a combination of jacquard wool, silk and aluminum for the jacket, which had shoulders embellished with \$80 worth of beads and gold

thread.

A weaver by penchant, she took out the east-west threads of wool and replaced it with stripes of aluminum, using tweezers to do the weaving. The trick, according to Blondy, was to get all of the materials to have the same character as the aluminum.

"IT WAS all an experiment not to be repeated," the Huntington Woods resident said. "I spent eight hours a night for 2½ months on it."

Why? Blondy used a rotary razor to cut the aluminum into strips and then hand filed the rough edges of the metal. She figures she used more than 500 pieces of aluminum in the jacket.

"I experimented and played with the material and found I could use my sewing machine," she said. "I had to put masking tape on both sides and use a fine needle. It worked, but the machine moaned and groaned."

Janice Samoray-Haddad of Farmington also focused on fashions in the contest. Her "Venus Envy" dress featured a silver knit dress from the '70s, embellished with aluminum facet covers and a facet with silver tinsel coming from its spout at breast plate.

Her third-place (\$500) winner, "Carmen Banana," played up the tropical theme rampant in Carmen Miranda films. In fact, Samoray-Haddad researched the dress's design by watching old films.

Starting with a vintage '30s-'40s dress, she dressed it up with silk black and gold colored bananas and other fruits. And used the aluminum as ruffles at the hem line and on the shoulders. A basket, sewed to a turban and filled with matching fruit, served as the hat.

SAMORAY-HADDAD is in the process of a career change. A former jewelry maker whose works were sold at places like Saks Fifth Avenue and Jacobsons, she found the challenge to be getting the metal to fold like the material.

"It was really time intensive," she said. "We didn't have the tools or the experience to work with the metals so there was a lot of frustrations at the beginning. It was also one of the more demanding classes, but it was also one of the more rewarding ones I've taken."

Twenty-year-old Adam Shirley of West Bloomfield didn't walk away with a prize in the competition, but he already has a buyer for his piece.

Shirley blended the aluminum with sterling silver and dyed deer fur to create a shoulder belt. The piece took some 100 hours to create and is both a wearable piece of art. The sash comes with its own stand.

Shirley had to resort to an assembly line process in making the belt. He also fabricated the entire hinge mechanism for the belt. "The process opened his 'eyes to the applications of the metal," but it made him mad when he had to redo problem pieces.

ANN SCHNEPP of Birmingham used the aluminum to create those things she loves to collect — purses. She came up with five designs, some resembling houses, some meant for special occasions. One used aluminum, embellished with an ultra pseudo print, and featured drawstrings and dangles.

"Women basically hold their lives in their purses," she said. "A lot of things revolve around the purse and wherever a woman goes she has her purse with her."

A former flight attendant who is majoring in fiber at CCS, Schnepp found she had to adjust to the idea of using something other than a sewing machine in her work. In her case, it was a drill.

As for the top prize of \$1,250. That went to Shawn Caldwell of Union Lake for her Silverwear, a halter top and pleated skirt made of aluminum. As for doing something like that again, Samoray-Haddad is up to the challenge.

"I'll render anything except a bikini."



Cover and back page photos by BILL HANSEN

Kaiser Suldán of Birmingham opted for a mannequin to show off his oversized tuxedo with aluminum accents on the lapels and cuffs.



Linda Blondy of Huntington Woods makes final preparations on her wedding gown, modeled by Keren Smereck for the competition judging, at the 1940 Chop House in Detroit.

## STUDENT SHOW AND EXHIBITION

### What:

The 65th annual Student Show and Exhibition is a multi-media exhibit featuring more than 2,000 works created and crafted by graduating seniors and students. It is the largest and most comprehensive showing of student work in the country.

### Where:

Center for Creative Studies - 201 E. Kirby, Detroit

### When:

Now through June 2, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Monday through Friday and 11 a.m. - 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.



Janice Samoray-Haddad adjusts the aluminum shoulder ruffle on her "Carmen Banana," third-place winner in the Northern Engraving competition and modeled by Susan Kenyon.