

## Threads of elegance win scholarship to Paris

Teresa Tobat, CT Features Reporter

It took Mariah Clarke her entire senior year of high school to create her first gown.



"I began sewing my senior year of high school. My first dress was an Elizabeth dress, which I made from a Simplicity pattern. It was not the easiest dress to start with, but I learned so much from the process," said Clarke.

Four years later, the gown has really paid off.

Clarke, a senior apparel, housing, and resource management major, was awarded a full scholarship from the International Textile and Apparel Association to study at the Paris American Academy this summer for her latest creation, "Victorian Rose."

It took Clarke a little over a month to finish the formal gown which is made out of 50 yards of material, 11 of which are Dupioni silk.

The dress was part of an assignment for a Costume class. The assignment: take something historical and make it modern.

Clarke drew her inspiration for the gown from the Victorian Bustle period. A "bustle" essentially makes the end of a skirt more pronounced. Clarke said that some bustles are extremely "shelf-like." Her bustle is

made entirely out of material and does not contain wiring that helps support the bustle as some of the historical counterparts did.

To modernize the Victorian Era dress, she scrapped the traditional long sleeved version in favor of revealing more skin, while keeping the traditional collar — hers is made of out of a sheer pale pink silk.

"It has so much impact, with deep burgundy colors and the rosette motif on the tail. It looks like Chanel-level couture," said Jihyun Kim, Mariah's adviser since her junior year and a past recipient of an award from the ITAA, said of Victorian Rose. "Mariah doesn't just copy designs from the past, she understands them."

Kim went on to comment that Clarke not only has a deep understanding of design but that her professionalism and diligence in finishing her creations will take her far in an "industry that does not wait."

Head of the AHRM Department, LuAnn Gaskill said she thinks Clarke's win is "fantastic and just excellent. This is the highest award for design recognition ... Some of the schools there were big design schools and ours has a small apparel area and for one of our students to win is just wonderful. There are broad aspects to winning this award," Gaskill said.

The ITAA is an internationally recognized academic association for members of the textile and apparel field. Both Gaskill and Kim are members.

Clarke received her scholarship at the ITAA's Annual Conference in November.

Clarke's favorite dress is her "Victorian Rose." "It's also my most recent piece. All of them were my favorite after I finished them," she said.

"All of them" refers to her other formal gowns. The inspiration for one, titled "Basket of Elegance" occurred to Clarke on her way to Christiansburg and started with a two-toned '50s dress that belonged to her grandmother. She used the two-toned idea to create a pink and green dress with a "basket weave" bodice that flows into the skirt. Clarke studied abroad in Europe and was so taken by the beauty of Lake Como, Italy that she decided to create a dress inspired by the water.

The common thread in Clarke's work is that of elegance and devotion to history. "With the exception of bridal gowns, most of the formal wear on the market is either for prom or the mother of the bride. My goal is to create formal wear, which is elegant, sophisticated, and mature without being juvenile or matronly," she said.

Clarke graduates this May and plans on running her own business where she designs one of a kind elegant gowns. She will tailor each gown to suit the needs of her clients and design them based on the customers' personality.

This will be Clarke's second time in the "City of Lights." She hopes to learn haute couture (or "high sewing" in French) techniques during her four weeks in Paris this July, as well as experience the French culture. She has even taken up learning French.