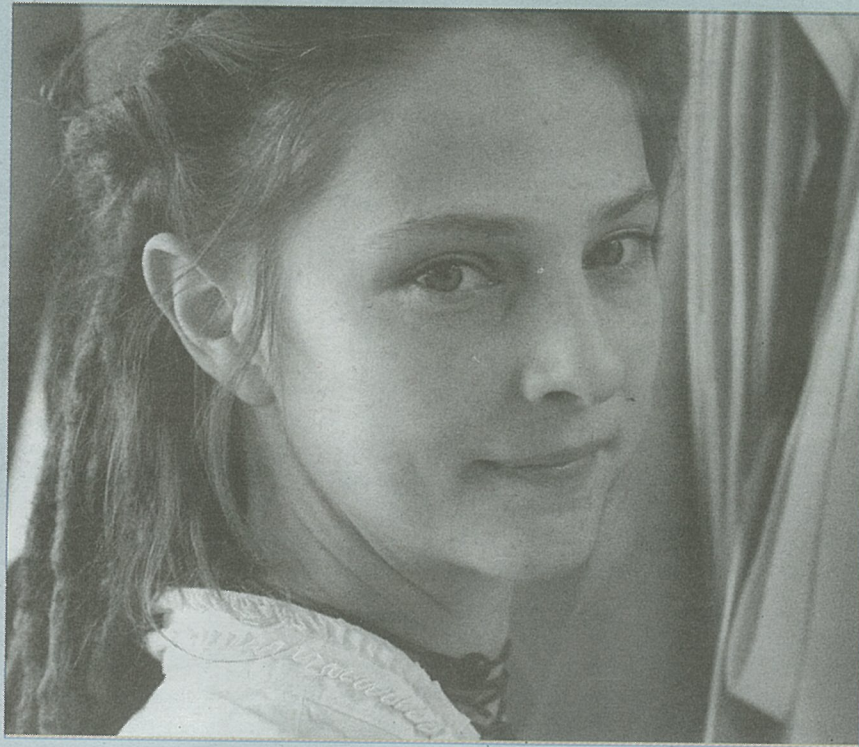


From this day forward



Idealism pays: that is the message of today's green revolution.

Some of those who have—in the immortal words of Marie Osmond—been country ever since country wasn't cool are reaping rewards today that they never dreamed of when they committed to lives and businesses of social consciousness. Dress designer Crystal Miller is one of those. With her sweet smile and prodigious head of dreadlocks, the Santa Fe mother of two has become a rising star in the world of "green weddings." Her hemp-silk wedding dresses were first featured here in *localflavor* in 2002 when her atelier in the back of Santa Fe Plaza was just taking off; then in subsequent years her fine tailoring and unique designs were covered by socially conscious magazines such as *Organic Style*, *Lavender*, and *Vibrations* magazines, among others. But as this country has become more eco-conscious in recent times, her label, Conscious Clothing, has gained mention in such mainstream media venues as *Newsday*, the *Boston Herald*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Wedding Resource*, and the *Minneapolis/St. Paul Wedding Guide*. Her latest coup is coverage in the March issue of a wedding planner's bible: *Bridal Guide*.

The idea of promoting ecological consciousness as part of a couple's big day is becoming more and more popular in the main stream of society, where knowledge of global warming and other environmental issues is becoming more widespread. So when the invitations are made of recycled paper, the cake is baked with organic flour, and the bouquet is indigenous to the region, the wedding dress must also make a statement for a sustainable future.

Says Miller, "Most people don't think twice. They spend \$450 on something made in China in a sweatshop and don't think about it at all. But being eco-conscious is starting to appeal more to the masses. As it gets more mainstream, I am having some people call me who would have gone to David's Bridal if they didn't somehow stumble across Conscious Clothing and say, 'Oh that's an interesting idea' and have a second thought. Maybe they would have spent \$500 at David's Bridal but I have one that's \$650. They can stretch [the budget] just enough, and they start to think about it and feel good about it and oh, its eco-friendly and it's made in the States and it kind of sparks a little social consciousness in people. That's why I'm so excited about *Bridal Guide*, because to me it's the most mainstream of the wedding dress magazines. Everybody getting married goes and picks up a *Bridal Guide* or a *Brides*, so it's interesting to me that they're even doing a green issue."

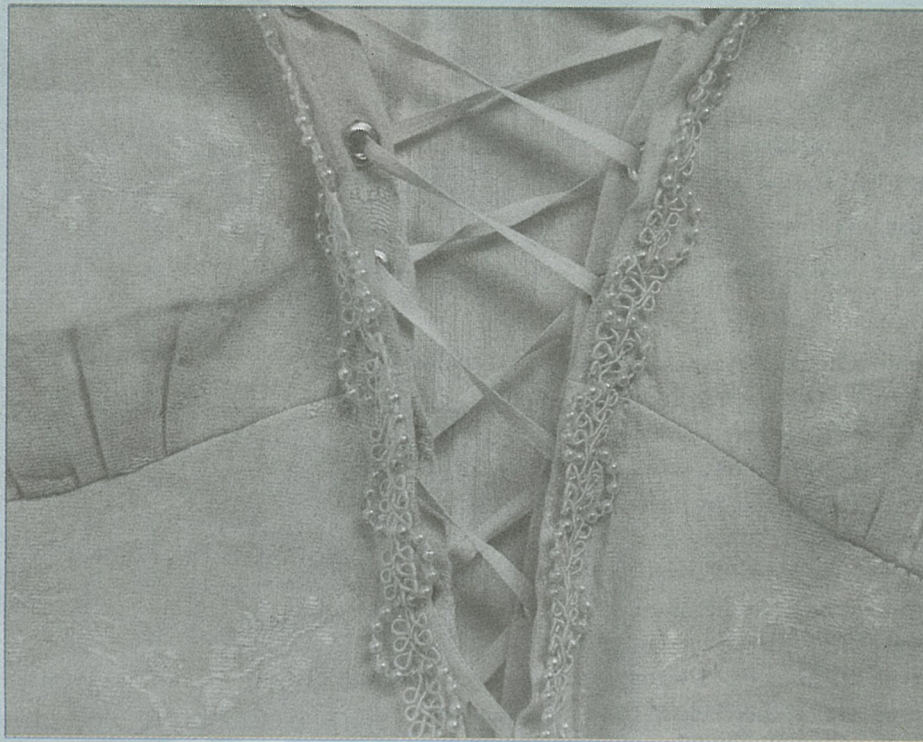
Hemp fabric has long been known for its strength and beauty, and when blended with silk or tencel the textile takes on a lustrous sheen and luxurious drape unequalled by any other fabric. Perfect for a dress that can be passed down through the generations, hemp is known to be naturally resistant to rot. Today, industrial grade (non-toxic) hemp is considered by many to be a much-overlooked resource in a troubled world. The hardy plant is seen as a potential solution to everything from global warming to world hunger to the housing crisis. In fact, many see laws against its cultivation as the ultimate green issue. Known widely as the most useful and beneficial plant in nature, hemp provides abundant nutrition and can grow practically anywhere in the world without the use of chemicals. Naturally acid-free and with a cellulose level almost three times that of

wood, it makes superior paper, rope, and particle board utilizing less energy and fewer chemicals than tree pulp. Hemp's high cellulose level also makes it perfect for ethanol fuel production, plant-based plastics, and a superior type of concrete.

Miller's use of hemp emphasizes a visually delicate and truly sensual quality for which the fiber is seldom known. Her current line ranges from a simple bias-cut sheath to a flamenco-inspired vision in ruffles to a highly adorned multi-layered dress that can only be described as deliciously baroque. But among the twelve to fifteen styles that are currently displayed beneath the romantic trellis in her shop is one that stands out as ultra-traditional. With its puffy skirt and tightly fitted bodice, this dress, not her usual style, serves an important purpose here at Conscious Clothing. You could call it a gateway dress. Says Crystal, "I made that as a super-traditional, princess-

story by KATIE MEHRER

photos by ANNE HAYUNGA



like, every-mom-dreaming-of-her-little-girl's-wedding type dress. It's for those people whose moms are buying their wedding dress and the moms are thinking, 'Hemp! Oh my God!' I keep one sample here, and it's hilarious because a woman comes in with her mom and the mom sees this dress and says, 'Look at this!' And the daughter rolls her eyes. Then after the mom is here for a little while, she feels the fabric and she sees that you can do a traditional corsetted-type fitted look and she sees that the fabric is okay. Then she can start dealing with looking at different styles."

Miller is in a unique position these days, as she is the only known high-end wedding dress designer working exclusively in hemp blends. Says she, "There are others who are doing hemp bridal. Not too many though and not on the same level. They're a little hippyish . . . kind of where I was six years ago." The new level of interest in her work has enabled Crystal to begin wholesaling her line. Her first store in San Francisco will soon be carrying five designs out of her current line of 12. This is a very exciting move for the entrepreneur, whose hemp-silk satins

and hemp-tencel blends will hang beside many more traditional wedding dress options. In the new venue, the unique sheen and playfully elegant styles of her Conscious Clothing line will offer a welcome change for many. Miller sees other wholesale opportunities on the horizon in both Vancouver and Hawaii. Having these representatives will allow her to get out of the business of sales, which she admits is not her strong suit, and to delve more deeply into the world of design. She plans to spend her time furthering her couture line, which features more detailing and a lot more of the symbolism that inspires her work. Says she of her new direction, "Some people wouldn't even think of buying a dress that costs less than \$2,000, so I might as well cater to that.... Also, I want to let go of what I know is selling—the simpler styles—and really enjoy the design side of things."

One of the dresses in her new higher-end line features a beaded snake motif that winds down the front of the dress in a manner reminiscent of a Celtic knot and extends down the dress' dramatic detachable train. Says Miller, "I am a big snake fanatic. The symbolism of snakes shedding their skin...in certain thought circles they are thought to be a symbol of transformation and change. I just thought for a wedding dress, what a huge moment that is in a woman's life, and that symbol is really appropriate." She calls another design "the African Fertility Goddess Dress." It is an elaborate moss green garment adorned with small shells. Says Crystal, "The shells are a symbol of fertility in a lot of cultures. That one I wouldn't really want anyone to buy unless they particularly wanted to have children at some point. You just need to be a little aware of what you are wrapping yourself in, because symbols are important—at least to me.... To me that's what the wedding dress comes from—that place of a wedding being considered ceremonial. So that's kind of where I'm designing from."

Summing up the inspirations that keep her focused on her work, Crystal cites social consciousness and a love of design, but she also notes, "To me it's a really big deal to be asked to make someone's wedding dress. I feel really honored to do that."

Find Conscious Clothing online at www.getconscious.com.

Hemp—did you know?

- Thomas Jefferson drafted both the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution on hemp paper.
- Henry Ford manufactured the body of a 1941 automobile from hemp-based plastic that was ten times stronger and much lighter than steel. It was fueled by clean-burning, hemp-based, ethanol fuel.
- Christopher Columbus' ships were fully rigged in hemp rope and sails.
- In both ancient Egypt and modern-day France a hemp concrete that is stronger, lighter, and more flexible than cement is used as a revolutionary building material.
- Industrial Grade Hemp, or Cannabis Sativa L. comes from the same plant genus as broccoli and cauliflower and contains a negligible level of the intoxicating substance known as THC; thus, hemp is not the same as marijuana.
- Food made from ground or pressed hemp seeds are one of the best sources of vegetable protein and amino acids known.
- Hemp can grow with little care in regions as diverse as Africa's Sahara Desert and the frigid soil of Scandinavia.
- During World War II, the USA used hemp fabric for military uniforms.
- Hemp plants are particularly useful for preventing topsoil erosion, produce their own pesticides, out-compete most weeds, and are known to leave the soil more nutrient-rich than before planting.
- In the early 1900s, the invention of nylon and other chemicals brought about the end of hemp's common use for rope, paper, cloth and other products due to government and corporate support of the "chemical revolution" of the time.