

FASHION

Dressed for Dialogue

Can an article of clothing bridge the gap between cultures? Artist and fashion designer Madonna Cole-Branch thinks so. "My designs are so different that when you are wearing one, you must be prepared for people to talk to you about what you are wearing," says this 40-something resident of North Bellmore and native of the West Africa's Sierra Leone. "This starts conversations between people and we can learn things about each other".

Don't expect Americanized African clichés from what Cole-Branch calls her "wearable art." Classic African silhouettes — caftans, tunics, lappas (loose, long, wrap-around skirts) and tamulays (fitted peplum tops) — are turned out in richly colored silk charmeuse, silk jacquard, satin organza and burnout silk velvet. Cole-Branch likes to mix it up: "I might hand-stamp an African-inspired print on Irish linen. I call that marrying cultures."

Years ago, Cole-Branch sold her designs to Manhattan boutiques and stores as large as Bonwit Teller, but today, she does custom work by appointment only. Her designs run from \$175 for a basic tunic to \$700 for a silk velvet, hand-dyed gown. Beyond that, hand-sewn, one-of-a-kind bridal gowns may cost as much as \$4,000.

She has developed a loyal clientele that includes a small percentage of men. For Kay and Hugh Dickenson of Uniondale, she designed his-and-hers outfits based on Nigerian formal attire for a cruise ship captain's ball. "It was a very formal outfit and quite sophisticated," says Hugh Dickenson, 59, a mortgage broker who owns three Madonna Cole ensembles. "We looked like we were the king and queen on that ship".

Says his wife, Kay, 52, a payroll supervisor who owns two outfits, "I tend to be conservative, but Madonna's clothes are elegant and not just making a big, loud statement. Here I am wearing African attire, I feel closer to my heritage and I'm dressed like my brothers and sisters around the world".

