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SoundLife

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CUSTOMIZED CLOTHES

Design consultant

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Tailoring triumphs

Designer helps women discover individual fashion sense

By Kathleen Merryman
The News Tribune

The fashion industry works backwards when it comes to clothing women, according to Helen Villa Connor.

Hotshot designers create the clothes and then demand that women achieve the bodies to fit them. They assume that any woman who doesn't fit the clothes is flawed, unworthy, unmotivated.

Connor maintains that every woman is beautiful — and that she can use specific skills to make her clothing prove it. She starts with the body, then moves to the clothes.

It's a hard sell — to both the women and the fashion bigwigs.

"Beauty belongs to all women, but not every woman believes that," said Connor, who is one of the featured presenters at the Sewing & Stitchery Expo running through Sunday at the Western Washington Fairgrounds.

For Connor, the trip is a homecoming. Born in the Philippines, she moved to Tacoma as a child and graduated from Clover Park High School. She was an outstanding musician and scholar, a member of the school's Daffodil Court and a commencement speaker. She lives in Menlo Park, Calif., and writes columns for "Face," a magazine for Asian women, and "Extra," a magazine for plus-size women.

While she's here, she'll retrace the familiar steps to the fairgrounds, where she'll present seminars at 12:30 and 4:30 p.m. today and Saturday. She will also be available at the Expo's presenters' booth.

In the demonstrations, she'll be telling women that one way to take back the power of defining their own beauty is to make their own clothes. She'll tell them how to choose patterns wisely — or make their own. She'll show how alterations to ready-to-wear clothes can transform an OK outfit into a triumph of tailoring.

Marysol Chico Robles helped her prove that point with an off-the-rack makeover at The Bon Marche on Tuesday.

Robles, a secretary at Bates Technical College, single mother of three teenage children and custodial grandmother to a 3-year-old toddler, is low on time, money and energy to spend on personal style.

She's just the woman Connor wants to reach.

Connor started with Robles by sharing the three principles that underlie the mechanics in "The Triumph of Individual Style" (\$28.95, Timeless Editions), the book she co-wrote with Carla Mason Mathis.

"A woman has to believe that beauty belongs to every woman. She has to believe that she can have a style that is recognizably hers. When she has a sense of beauty in her life, at those moments, she is at her most



Geff Hinds/The News Tribune

Marysol Chico Robles takes tips from Helen Villa Connor on how to find fashion in off-the-rack fare.

BILLBOARD

What: Sewing & Stitchery Expo.

When: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. today through Sunday.

Where: Western Washington Fairgrounds, Puyallup.

Admission: \$5 in advance, \$6 at the door. Seminars are \$2 each in advance.

Information: 840-4776.

creative, and when she is creative, she is most healthy," Connor said.

To illustrate the point, she and Mathis turned to Edgar Degas, Albrecht Durer, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Paul Gauguin, Amadeo Modigliani, John Singer Sargent, Thomas Gainsborough and Leonardo da Vinci.

The artists looked at women of all shapes, shades and ages and saw beauty. They painted the women clothed and nude — and celebrated their curves and angles.

To put it bluntly, they painted women they thought were babes.

Connor uses their art to show women how to look at their bodies, facial features, complexion, hair and personality as an artist would, to see their balance and harmony.

She uses paintings and sculptures to define five body types: skeletal (with bones showing at, say, the knee or the breast bone), moulded (with luxurious, curved lines), muscular (with curves created by taut muscle), skeletal/moulded (skeletal above the waist and moulded below, or vice-versa) and moulded/muscular (a combination of soft and muscular curves).

She matches the body types to fabrics. For example, a person with a moulded body would look best in fabrics that fall in a medium-drape such as cotton jersey or wool challis for a fluid line. A muscular person would want medium-taut fabric, such as wool crepe, flannel or gabardine; medium-weight cottons or light lines; or medium drape fabric to accent the curves of the muscles. A person with a skeletal build would choose fabrics with body, such as gabardine, heavy cotton, worsted wool or linen to hold the body's lines.

Then Connor moves on to the six basic body shapes: the rectangle, hourglass, oval, figure-eight, triangle and inverted triangle. Women look best in clothing with the same silhouette as their body.

Connor uses her head to adapt artistic principles of proportion to clothing styles. First, she measures the head length. Ideally, the body measures three head lengths to the

waist and five below. Most bodies aren't ideal, so Connor suggests tricks to fool the eye. Bangs, belts, jacket lengths, necklines and skirt lengths all fall into that category.

She took Robles to The Bon to put together three looks — casual, business and formal.

Connor analyzed Robles' body as moulded above the waist, muscular below. Overall, her body is shaped like an inverted triangle. Her eyes and brows are mysterious, her nose and chin beautifully curved, her hair an aura of curls, and her skin tones cool with lilac undertones.

Big pearl earrings emphasize the drama in her eyes. Reds, cool blues, lavenders and black accent her skin and hair. Curved necklines, jacket hems and collars, even the curved line of a pump, repeat the curves of her face and body. Soft fabrics hint at the curves above her waist, and tighter lines can accent the muscles of her thighs and legs.

Robles was transformed — and delighted — with the results.

Connor has helped that happen hundreds of times before, and sees the concept catching on with women everywhere she goes.

"If you don't love your body, how can you be a real person? I think it's a movement through the whole country," she said. "You can't be self-actualized if you hate your body."

Nothing so-so in sewing expo

The sergers will be surging and quilters will cover whole acres of space as the 11th annual Sewing & Stitchery Expo proves once again why it's the nation's largest sewing event.

Organizers from the (say this all in one breath, but, if you value your brain, don't try to decipher it) Washington State University Pierce County Cooperative Extension and Conferences & Institutes, predict 20,000 people will attend.

"We view ourselves as the premier sewing education event in the nation," said Joanne Ross, the Pierce County Cooperative Extension agent who chairs the event.

To keep the show sharp, Ross and her staff have scheduled 275 seminars, each of which runs 45 minutes and costs \$2 with preregistration.

To keep it fun they've arranged for McCall's style shows at 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 and 3:30 p.m. each day. Linda MacPhee, a Canadian who makes outerwear using blankets, beach towels and even doilies, will present style shows at 10:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. daily. The students in Valley 4-H will stage their "Wardrobe on a Budget" show at 4:30 p.m. daily.

To keep the show solvent, organizers have rented space to more than 200 vendors selling everything from computerized sewing machines to drapery systems to books on crafting and sewing for profit.

To keep attendance up, the program is packed with ideas for the home ec expert as well as the person with a deep and abiding fear of bobbins. MacPhee, for example, shows how to use glue, staples and Velcro to keep her creations together. Maggie Backman will demonstrate "Dyeing in a Teacup," and Jan Janas will show how to paint on silk. Michele Shoemsmith will plan an organized sewing center, and Donna Fujii and Judith Rasband will explain the art and science of color. Winky Cherry will give tips on teaching children to sew.

— Kathleen Merryman