

# How designers justify those huge price tags

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Special to The Plain Dealer

**Dear Marylou:** I just can't get it through my head that any woman in her right mind would spend \$5,000, \$10,000 and up for a dress. Well, maybe a wedding gown. Can you justify such prices? How? — R.T., Staten Island, N.Y.

**Dear R.T.:** Many of the women who wear four- and five-figure dresses don't spend any money at all on them. If they're famous enough, they are often given the dresses by designers. Or they're lent the dresses for special occasions such as red-carpet appearances.

For those who actually purchase these luxury clothes, the one current fashion phenomenon that helps to explain — if not justify — such prices is what I call topography. Through fabric manipulation and surface interest, clothes are given an intrinsic value beyond their fashion worth. And they also make knockoffs more difficult to achieve. (It doesn't take a lot of work or ingenuity to copy a dress, suit or jacket made of a plain-surface fabric with minimal construction.)

For example, New York designer Kenneth King, who created the dress illustrated here, cut by hand the 1,200 leaves that make up the bodice. As he says, "Each leaf is cut individually and sculpted into a shape that makes a garment that is seamless." (It also makes the garment — or, in this case, the bodice — fit precisely the individual it was created for.) The fabric is a polyester microfiber that is sheer until the light hits it. "It creates an optical illusion of sorts," says King, "because it looks like you can see through it, but you can't."

As a professor in the haute couture program at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, King also runs a successful custom-order business. His designs are truly museum-worthy, appearing in the permanent collections of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and San Francisco's DeYoung Museum. He estimates that the dress here took him nine 10-hour days from drafting pattern to finished garment. The woman who buys it will get however many fittings are necessary for a perfect fit, and she will know that the dress is truly one of a kind. The price: \$5,500. For more information, write to Kenneth King, 30 E. 18th St., Third Floor, New York, N.Y. 10003.

**Dear Marylou:** I'm nervous about sending my never-before-dry-cleaned, beaded evening dress to the cleaners. What if the beads disintegrate? Do I have any recourse? — E.Q., Birmingham, Mich.

**Dear E.Q.:** If your beaded dress says "dry-clean only," you can assume that the beads will survive. If they do not, the manufacturer is liable. Return the dress to the store where you bought it, and ask for a refund. The store will get the refund from the manufacturer.

style preferences than retail stores. In one instance, Eileen Fisher, there are both stores and catalogs. To receive a catalog, call toll-free, 1-866-512-5197. Here are other catalog sources for clothes you might find suitable: Appleseed's, 1-800-767-6666; J.C. Penney, 1-800-222-6161; Spiegel, 1-800-253-4742; TravelSmith, 1-800-950-1600; and Old Pueblo Traders, 1-800-362-8400.

**Dear Marylou:** Does any source other than Style.com measure the number of "hits" a fashion designer or manufacturer receives online? — V.P.L., Glenwood Springs, Colo.

**Dear V.P.L.:** Yes, America Online. According to Regina Lewis, AOL consumer adviser and trend analyst, Louis Vuitton maintained its No. 1 rank as the name drawing the most inquiries. The second-most inquiries were for Coach, followed by Dooney & Bourke, Baby Phat, Nike, Lacoste, Uggs, Steve Madden, Bebe and Juicy Couture.



New York designer Kenneth King, who created the dress illustrated here, justifies its \$5,500 price tag with the 1,200 hand-cut leaves that make up the bodice.

KENNETH KING