Many of you may recall Mary Demnere’s breathtaking graduation dress that was designed by her mother Martha and not commercially available. Sensing a demand, I decided to create a teen pattern to our Sew Beautiful Collection. I began, as I do with most patterns, by sketching several different gown designs. Ultimately, I engineered a way to merge multiple dress options into the same pattern—a smocked skirt and a fit and flared skirt to combine with a variety of bodices.

Once I was satisfied with my designs on paper, I selected my favorite version and explained that I wanted a smocked silk chiffon prom dress that was heavily beaded with crystals. Just as I turned to Janet, she turned to the book, Bridal Couture, by Susan Khalje for advice on working with specialty fabrics and boning. Between the three of us, we came up with this magnificent prom dress that does the unimaginable—has your teenage daughter begging to wear smoking again.

I was so pleased with what Janet created, I’m also having the pattern graded in girl’s and misses sizes offered in separate envelopes—girl’s sizes 8-14 and Misses sizes 2-14. All three patterns will be available no later than March 2008.

Consider our featured dress a “sneak peek” sample to inspire your prom planning. It is the Morgan half of what will be called “Morgan and Mary;” the Mary half is in the process of being test sewn, as are the girl’s and misses sizes. The instructions below are to be used in tandem with the pattern instructions to create “Morgan’s Prom Gowns.” In future issues, as the inspiration hits us, we’ll share different ideas for using “Morgan and Mary” in casual to heirloom styling.

DRESS DESCRIPTION

NOTE: A complete list of materials and yardage will be included in the pattern directions.

The dress is made with three different fabrics and uses boning supports and foam bra cups in the bodice for a smooth and wrinkle-free fit. The bodice is made of silk dupioni interlined with cotton broadcloth and lined with acetate lining fabric or another layer of silk could be used instead). Boning is inserted into the cotton interlining and attached to the silk outer shell. This keeps the stitching that secures the boning from showing on the outer silk bodice. The skirt is made of a silk chiffon outer layer and a silk charmeuse under layer with an acetate lining. Silk organza is used behind the chiffon on the pleated and smocked area.

SEAMLESS PLEATING METHOD

The silk chiffon overlay is pleated with a seamless pleating technique with silk organza behind it to give the pleats fullness. This is a great way to work over a seam in the middle of a pleated panel so that it aligns perfectly and does not get caught in the needles. It takes a few extra steps and a little patience, but the results are well worth it.

1. Thread 12 half-space rows on your pleater with very long threads (enough to accommodate both front pieces spread flat).
2. Cut two panels of silk chiffon from selvage to selvage the length of the “Morgan” front skirt piece. NOTE: The curved hem and the sides will be cut after pleating. It is important to use the selvage edges during the pleating process so that the edges feed into the pleater evenly.
3. Cut two 2-1/2-inch-wide strips of silk organza from selvage to selvage along curved hem and side edges. There will be some fabric waste on the sides for smaller sizes as not all chiffon is needed for smocking (fig. 1).
4. Place “Morgan” skirt front pattern piece on top of chiffon fabric so top edge and center front selvage edge align. With a blue wash-away marking pen, make a dotted line outlining the pattern (you cannot drag a marker on chiffon) along curved hem and side edges. There will be some fabric waste on the sides for smaller sizes as not all chiffon is needed for smocking (fig. 1).
5. Cut two panels of silk chiffon from selvage to selvage the length of the “Morgan” front skirt piece. NOTE: The curved hem and the sides will be cut after pleating. It is important to use the selvage edges during the pleating process so that the edges feed into the pleater evenly.
6. Place silk organza strip on a separate dowel.
7. Slowly start pleating fabrics together as one. Notice the direction each skirt block feeds into the pleater is different; the left skirt feeds right side up from the side selvage and the right skirt feeds right side up from the center-front selvage; refer to figure 1.

TIP: This is a good time to invite a friend over to help guide one dress while you guide the other. NOTE: The bottom layer will not be moving at the same pace as the top layer.

Cut two 2-1/2-inch-wide strips of silk organza from selvage to selvage. The organza and the chiffon will probably NOT be the same width; this is okay, as it will be trimmed after pleating.

Cut one 2-1/2-inch-wide strip of silk organza from selvage to selvage showing on the outer silk bodice. The skirt is made of a silk chiffon outer layer and a silk charmeuse under layer with an acetate lining. Silk organza is used behind the chiffon on the pleated and smocked area.

Figure 1
8. When entire left piece is pleated, carefully remove the really long guide threads from all needles.

9. Pick out guide threads 3/4-inch past center-front chiffon selvage edge to create a seam allowance. Be sure that tail threads remain on right side of skirt. If organza is extending past chiffon selvage on left side, lift guide threads out of the way and carefully cut organza even with chiffon; do not cut chiffon or guide threads. This will be center front edge of left skirt panel (fig. 2). Set aside left skirt.

10. Do not rethread pleater.

11. Prepare right front skirt in same manner as left, rolling fabrics on separate dowels. Feed center front edge of right skirt with right side facing up into pleater and roll fabric through until 3/4-inch has cleared the needles, not just the bars (this creates the center seam allowance). Take pleated left piece back to pleater and rethread the same 12 needles with guide threads extending from center front of left skirt piece (fig. 3). Be sure that you thread needles above fabric and not below it (fig. 4).

12. After pleating entire front skirt. Push center fronts together and stitch a 1/2-inch center front seam from top to last row of guide threads. Press seam open (fig. 5).

13. Remove guide threads from each side selvage edge leaving a 1/2-inch seam allowance from blue marked pattern line. Excess will be cut after smocking.

14. Carefully spread skirt completely flat and roll and whip top edge with a zigzag going through both fabrics to reduce fraying.

15. Pull up pleats so that front skirt fits bottom edge of front bodice from side to side (fig. 6).

16. Smocking using design provided or another design of your choice.

**SMOKING PREPARATION**

- Design on dress covers 294 pleats. More or fewer pleats may be used for a different size or if more fullness is desired. (See construction notes for seamless pleating.)

- All smocking is stitched with two strands of white Madeira silk floss.

- When working with a garment that has been pleated with the seamless pleating technique (skirt, romper or bishop) the seam allowance is behind the pleating and is not caught in the pleating or smocking threads (be sure to keep the center seam completely free). For added strength to the center seam line, limit the number of smocking thread tie-offs and start-ups on the center line.
INSTRUCTIONS
Row 1 – 2-1/2: Begin on Row 1, eight pleats to the left of center and load needle with a glass seed bead; stitch an up cable. Stitch a six-step trellis down to Row 2-1/2. Load needle with a glass seed bead and stitch a down cable. Stitch a six-step trellis back up to Row 1. Continue this pattern of trellis stitches across row. There is a glass seed bead stitched in each up and down cable. Turn smocking over and continue trellis pattern.
Row 1-1/2 – 3: This row is a mirror image of the above row accept there are no beads stitch to the down cables on Row 3. The trellis stitches cross over each other or intersect at Row 2. Row 3 – 5: This row is a mirror image repeat of Rows 1 through 3. Row 5 – 6: This row is a six-step trellis with beads at each cable.
FINISHING
1. After all smocking is complete, cut out skirt on marked pattern lines.
2. Center “dangle” combination has a 9 mm teardrop and a seed bead added to the bead pattern and is stitched in the same manner as the other “dangles.”
3. Once smocking is complete, cut out skirt on marked pattern lines.
4. Finish center front raw edges by hand with a double-turned 1/4-inch narrow hem. Start at top of center seam behind smocking and work all the way to bottom. Sew crystal beads along hemmed edges.
5. Join smocked front to back skirt along side seams.
6. Construct charmeuse underskirt according to pattern instructions.
7. Place skirts together and baste top edges to join as one.
8. Secure top of skirt on a hanger or body form and allow grain of fabric to “rest” for a few days. This allows fabric to fall into its natural state. Adjust and even up hem if necessary, as some spots may droop lower than others (this is a task for the eye and the scissors). Once you are satisfied with lines of the hem, hem chiffon with a double-turned narrow hem (See hem sidebar for instructions). Repeat for charmeuse underskirt.
9. Follow pattern instructions to construct lining and complete dress.
10. After skirt is sewn to bodice, stitch 4 mm round crystals in the trellis valleys on Row 1. (Crystals will be in the way of the sewing machine presser foot if done before.)
11. Hem lining with fishing line. (See sidebar for instructions.)
HEM TECHNIQUE
Janet felt the prom dress hemline needed a little flair. Instead of adding horsehair braid to the lining, she added 30-lb test weight fishing line to the hem. She says her husband has still not noticed it missing from his tackle box.
2. For chiffon and charmeuse layers, press hem under again 1/4-inch. Place another layer of stabilizer under fabric if needed and hem along fold edge (previous stitching line will be on fold edge). For lining hem, insert fishing line in fold as you press.
4. When hem is complete, check to be sure it did not gather onto the fishing line while sewing. If so, smooth out hem and cut fishing line to overlap slightly, then stitch hem closed.

About the Designer
Janet Gilbert is a smocking designer from Vienna, Illinois and an active member of SAGA (the Smocking Arts Guild of America). She is a commissioned designer for Sew Beautiful and often shares her own designs in the magazine. Look for more of her creativity in 2008. Kathy Barnard is Editor of Sew Beautiful magazine.