



a language of ribbon

historically, there has always been a relationship between design for costume and interiors. john fowler, co-founder of colefax & fowler, studied and often drew from its rich vocabulary of detail.





Flounces, ruched bands, ruffles, bows, scalloped and pinked edges, rosettes and contrast edgings found their way into John Fowler's designs, re-scaled for interiors. Sharing and exploring that same vocabulary of detail is Candace Kling, author, teacher, ribbon artist and documentarian. Whether sculpting with ribbon, creating a language of ribbon widths, or photographing trim in museum collections, Candace's love of the form is obvious. We asked her to tell us more about it.

Ribbonwork intrigues me—the play of light on the folds, the geometry of trims, the repetition. Like paper for origami, ribbon starts out flat but can be manipulated into marvelous forms. This transformative quality is what interests me most. I've read the history of the weaving of ribbon many times, but never retained it. I can't tell you about weave structure, or the various innovations in loom construction. I leave that to someone else. I was never academic about it, I just loved the form. When viewing in museum collections, I might see a certain zigzag ruche on a petticoat from 1870, then again on a shoe from 1810, and again on a stomacher from 1790. It's of interest to me that a particular way of stitching or manipulating cloth goes back that far—or, conversely, that a trim or rosebud might suddenly appear for the first time in 1900. Through training and by reflex, my eye will deconstruct an item, the shape and size of the ribbon or fabric used, and the sewing or embroidery techniques employed.

I'll understand the how-to of it pretty quickly because of my background in sewing, and because I studied and taught flat pattern drafting in college.

Drafting made no sense to me at first, the idea that rounding a dart one way would make it poof out another way. It took a long time—twenty hours a week for two years—for those concepts to gel. But I wanted the knowledge because I wanted to design clothing. By the time I taught the flat pattern, it had become my own.

Learning to draw was essential in mastering the analysis of ribbonwork. It's said, 'It's not the drawing, it's the seeing.' Seeing is a process of slowing down your eye.

I studied a 19th-century style of portraiture with Thomas Leighton, a descendent of British Victorian painter Frederic, Lord Leighton. Thomas Leighton's teaching method involved drawing a twelve-hour portrait in charcoal. When you spend twelve hours looking, your eye completely slows down to look at every single eighth-inch. This training enabled me to see incrementally.

Now, when I analyze ribbonwork, I see every fold—how many? How big? I see the straight and cross grains. Having learned drafting, I recognize the degree of each angle of folded fabric, and whether fabric or ribbon has been cut or folded on the true bias.

When I began to teach and write about the ribbonwork, I wanted to make it as simple as possible to understand and translate. My students had a myriad of applications for the work—doll house interiors, bridal dresses, stage set and costume design, jewelry, hats, and sachets, just to name a few. The scale was often radically different from one application to the next.

In my research, I'd found a text from the 1920s that referred to cutting ten widths of ribbon to make a particular bow. I formalized that reference into a language for my students, and in my book *The Artful Ribbon*. In all my formulas, ribbon width (RW) is the proportional element. Instead of inches and centimeters, everything is measured in widths of ribbon.

For example, when analyzing a bow, be it in my hand or in a photograph, I look for the ribbon width first, then for the size of the loop in relation to it. Is it one ribbon width (1 RW) or two ribbon widths (2 RW)? If the bow has triple loops, are they a third of a width ($\frac{1}{3}$ RW) or a half a width ($\frac{1}{2}$ RW) apart?

Since it doesn't require measuring in fractions of an inch or converting for different sizes of ribbon, this method greatly simplifies formulas. The same formulas can be used no matter the size of ribbon.

Studying portraiture and drafting gave me the foundation to create this language, but my interest has always been in the engineering and construction of things. In junior high, I took homemaking because they wouldn't let me take mechanical drawing. In sewing, I saw the opportunity to have more clothes. I used Vogue patterns, and they were my sewing education. Each one explained a different way to do a placket, set in the sleeve, or some little extra detail. Over time, I chose more complex patterns and by the time I got to college, I was ready to learn even more.

After studying pattern drafting, I made my own wedding dress, and then began making wedding dresses for a living. I did that for eight years, designing each dress exactly to the woman's shape and desire.



These were for Berkeley brides in the 1970s, so they were playful and fun, using bright colors, ribbon, and a lot of embroidery. I remember finding skeins of embroidery floss from the 1930s; each one had a little tag that said, 'Wash with Ivory Flakes.' I used this silk floss mainly for satin stitch and chain stitch embroidery. I wish I'd known more about silk ribbon embroidery at the time. You can cover ground much more quickly with it, and it has such pretty dimensionality.

Working in a vintage clothing store in the 1970s, I would often have to deconstruct a dress to alter it for a customer. Dressmaker-made dresses were always so amazing in their commitment to perfection—down to the eighth or sixteenth of an inch, with perfect stitches, even on the inside. They were just so beautiful.

I got my courage there. I became fearless, unafraid to cut—we had to bring old girls back to life, so people could wear them.

I remember, in particular, a Victorian dress with a ten-foot train and twenty-inch waist that needed to be made larger to fit the customer. Using two feet from the train, I made a pin-tucked, V-shaped, six-inch panel, added it to the center back of the dress, then re-gathered the back into the panel. I felt as if I'd made the dress, but didn't have to work quite that hard. I just did one small part, yet there was a certain ownership to the dress, having done that.

The vintage clothing store was like a fashion parade—hats and dresses flying out the door to a villa in Italy to get married, or to some crazy Halloween party on Castro Street. It was fun.

By contrast, studying trim on a dress in a museum is a more rarified experience. It's very quiet and you're very respectful, wearing gloves to protect and carefully handle items in the collection. Assisted by a curator or member of the museum staff,

it's also a slow, deliberate process. It can take half a day to get a Victorian dress out of a box, lay it out, and look at or photograph its detail.

The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has over 75,000 items, with many dresses stored on fifty-foot long racks. When there to view the collection, I'll go down the racks, just like you do when shopping, and earmark items with trims.

I could easily get sidetracked—not that it wouldn't be lovely—but I've become single-minded. Sometimes, in pursuit of thoroughly understanding the trim, and especially when time and access are limited, I don't get a full picture of the garment, only the ribbonwork and embellishment it offers. Ribbonwork alone is such a huge area, I've never felt a need to go beyond it.

I've viewed collections at museums all over the country, and have taken photographs of some extraordinary and exceptional items. Typically, I'll be looking for the oldest example of something I have already seen, or an item that I have never seen before. If I'm lucky, I'll find the most beautiful example of a certain type of fold or flower—one I want to photograph, one I want to immortalize.

When I began to include these images as slides in my lectures, people would respond with, 'Oh, ribbonwork, that's what it is! Would you do a workshop?'

Twenty years ago, ribbonwork was very hard to defend. Nobody knew what it was, but that didn't deter me in the least, I was utterly enchanted—and the slides were quite helpful in introducing people to the work and providing a way for them to experience it.







When I give a workshop, it's hands-on—students folding ribbon from Point A to Point B, and making samples of each technique I demonstrate. There isn't time to show all the historical work, though I may allude to it. But when I give a slide lecture, a number of students will have an epiphany about the level of dedication it's possible to have. Perhaps they've made a little corsage, a bias rose with two leaves, or a pansy; but after making fifty, they're bored. They start to wonder how much deeper they can go.

I'm always on the lookout for dresses with trims and flowers. There isn't much historic ribbonwork that's on view or readily accessible to my students. Some museums will let you see what's behind closed doors, and if you live in New York, exhibitions at the Costume Institute will sometimes have stunning examples on view. If you live in Los Angeles, you'll find ribbonwork among the 50,000 items in the Costume and Textiles collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Current fashion offers some really wild stuff and books on historic costume can contain some extraordinary beauties. But mostly, it's catch as catch can.

When I lecture and students see a dress from the 1890s, covered head-to-toe in trim, lace, and flowers, it's like a revelation—they get it, they understand how it's possible to spend six months working on one beautiful piece. They make the connection between the historic item and the present in terms of their own individual imagination, creativity, and skills.

I wrote *The Artful Ribbon* to share knowledge with my students. It's not a history of ribbon or an encyclopedia of techniques. Deeply researched, it's a how-to book about the art of ribbonwork—flowers, especially. We worked very hard on the instructional text to give readers the information they would

need. But just as importantly, the book is full of images of contemporary and archival ribbon and flowers that can simply be enjoyed for their extraordinary beauty.

In my own artwork, I use cloth and ribbon sculpturally. Right now, I'm working on a series of large freestanding sculptures of waterfalls. Ten to fifteen feet tall, their primary material is yards and yards of pleated and stitched bridal satin. Attached to a freestanding thermoplastic armature, the satin spills onto the floor, forming a swirling pool.

I continue to make candy boxes and an occasional teapot. Though in scale they couldn't be more different than the large work, the techniques used in both are quite similar and are often inspired by the historical research I've done.

The puffed sleeve of a Victorian gown or the ruches on a turn-of-the-century baby bonnet become the roiling foam in my newest waterfall, or the daintiest ruffled confection.

I'm more pleased by the action of making than by the result. I don't make sculptures to have a **headdress**, a waterfall, or a candy box; for me, it's the making of it. The being in it. I pet the cloth, I stroke it, I pull the stitches, I straighten them out. The cloth talks back, and there is a deep pleasure in turning it, watching it, bending it, and seeing what comes up.

The finished piece is witness to what I did, it's evidence of what I did, it's the only thing someone else will see of what I did—and I understand their pleasure in it—but my pleasure was in the making.





cover: Cloche hat with boldly pleated ribbon flowers. c. 1918–1922. Collection of The Oakland Museum of California, History Department. Textiles courtesy of Ana Lisa Hedstrom. page 2: Vintage fan purse decorated with clustered baby rosettes. c. 1915. Collection of The Oakland Museum of California, History Department.

page 3: left inset: Detail of child's dress with cabochon roses worn by Elena Grimes to perform in a musical trio with her mother and older sister. c. early 1930s. Collection of Holly Gallup. right inset: Detail: A shower of ribbon and fabric blooms nest on a bed of vintage ribbon skeins. c. 1930. Collections of Carole Sidlow of Romantic Notions, Ruban et Fleur, and Zenaida Cosca.

page 5: Collection of vintage and contemporary textured ribbons cascading from an Italian floral ceramic container onto a Victorian petticoat. Collections of Constance Meeker, Zenaida Cosca, and Alex Bergeron.

page 7: Detail of contemporary pansies highlighted by Victorian woven pansy ribbon. Collection of Auralie M Bradley.

page 8-9: Dresden ballerinas dance with ribbon. Collection of Candace Kling.

opposite: Candy Sampler: Eat Tout de Suite, by Candace Kling. Textile, mixed media
Courtesy of [Mobilier Gallery](http://MobilierGallery.com) · www.mobilier-gallery.com

View headdresses by Candace Kling at FiberScene · www.fiberscene.com/galleries/gallery13.html

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