

# DRESSED to SMILE

by Elizabeth Lopeman

With a nod to traditional German peasant dresses, Olga von Moorende breaks through the mundane with wild prints and carefully structured patterns.

One of Olga von Moorende's greatest influences is the German artist Oskar Schlemmer who painted, sculpted, and designed architecturally complex costumes while teaching at the Bauhaus school in the 1920s. "I believe that essential and new things can only be represented by means of pure abstraction," he said. "But at the same time I still believe in the necessity of (or necessary connection to) the figure, of what is human." Like Schlemmer, von Moorende pays close attention to the architecture of her dresses—as they challenge and reflect the human form. But unlike Schlemmer, who worked under the dark cloud of the impending Second World War, von Moorende's work, primarily produced after the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall, bursts with life in bright colors and happy patterns. Her motto is "Dressed to Smile."

A graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts, Nuremberg, in 1987, the designer notes that her oil paintings usually evoked the decorative patterns of large carpets and rugs. "At the end of my studies I realized that working with textiles, making art to wear, was exactly the right way to express myself." Because of her background in fine arts, von Moorende wasn't afraid to push the limits of her craft, developing new forms and shapes in each unique design. She lives in Kleinsendelbach, a small town in southern Germany, but most of her fabrics are



printed cottons from the United States that are wild and colorful and normally used for quilting. "Every dress should tell a story and the patterns can be helpful for this job," she says. Von Moorende establishes a playful narrative about luck in love with her dress *Lucky*. Three-dimensional clover-like shapes form the short, flirty skirt, while appliquéd hearts circle the waist under a bodice constructed from heart-printed jersey.

Von Moorende experiments by placing layers of three or four fabrics, one on top of the other, and sews over them, which she says is like drawing. She also cuts out a lot of holes, which she feels is more like painting, to see how the prints

ABOVE: Nontraditional, 2010; cotton, borders, laces, buttons, beads. Model: Olga von Moorende. All works are machine-stitched. Photos: Klaus Ritter.

work together and to inform her process for making a dress pattern. The atelier, where she designs and constructs all of the dresses herself, is filled with neatly packed shelves of colorful fabrics and large spools of thread that she has collected for over two decades. The iconic cone-shaped pockets that appear on many of her pieces were inspired by cone-shaped market bags for fruit. She always chooses fabrics that are easily washed and comfortable to wear and believes that her dresses both require and reinforce a sense of confidence in the wearer. She often wears the designs herself, and most of the reactions she encounters are cheerful, friendly, and curious. “I get compliments for the quality of craft and design,” she beams. “Some people laugh behind my back,” she admits, but true to her joyful nature, she adds, “That’s also okay.”

The prestigious Bavarian Arts and Crafts Association, based in Munich for over 150 years, honored von Moorende’s work in a twenty-five-year retrospective last spring. And there’s more work to come. “I only have two hands,” she says. “Everyday I have to decide on one idea.” Oskar Schlemmer once said how “criminal it is to deaden the joy of creation and artistic freedom in the artist.” Von Moorende definitely takes his sentiment to heart as she breaks boundaries and creates new forms. 🍷



ABOVE: Lucky Dress, 2007; cotton jersey and fleece fabrics, zippers. BELOW, LEFT: Peacock, 2010; patterned cotton, elastic cotton; partly quilted. BELOW, CENTER: Thirty Pockets, 2008; cotton, jersey, zippers, buttons. BELOW, RIGHT: Butterfly, 2007; cotton, cord, jersey, elastic lace. Photo of floor ©iStockphoto/flyfloor

