

Bark and Swagger



Fierce Fashion for Fido

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Exquisite Fashion For Impeccable Canines: Chien Coature on Bark and Swagger

By Jody on March 24, 2014



Hot Pink

Heavy Metal Harness w/ silver Diva Dangle

Rebecca Bissi has a lot of energy. In our interview, we talked talked talked for over an hour, the passion for what she's doing apparent in her enthusiasm. To look at the designs for her brand, *Chien Coature*, is to be in awe. The creative and often complex pieces, the craftsmanship, her aesthetic...many of her designs look like you'd find them in *Bergdorf Goodman*. Ultra luxe. Bissi falls into that category of a small handful of pet fashion designers who I think are really gifted, and who turn out work that is exceptional. Her ambitious design for this year's *New York Pet Fashion Show* – a stunning and very intricate royal blue gown worn by her very beautiful client, Millie LaRue – confirmed that I wanted to highlight her work on *Bark and Swagger*. *Chien Coature* is truly exquisite fashion for impeccable canines. Discover Rebecca's story with me.

That's a lot of traveling...

Rebecca Bissi was an art school kid who grew up all over. Denver, Albuquerque and Atlanta, for a start. Then, it was college in Athens, GA, where she secured a degree in textiles, hence her gift for selecting and creating very interesting and beautiful fabrics. And, after moving to Chicago with her husband, Bissi got another undergrad degree at the *Art Institute of Chicago* in fashion design and did her apprenticeship in New York City. Are you exhausted yet? Then, her career really began. Rebecca worked for a women's wear company where she designed sweaters

that featured a lot of beadwork and embroidery. The sweaters were produced in Hong Kong, and for ten years, she would go to there every month to edit the line. That's a lot of traveling.

It was the Yorkie's fault!

Need often produces action, and such was the case with Rebecca. She retired from her career as a designer when she had her children, and moved with her husband to Racine, Wisconsin. With her kids in middle school, it became less fun for them having the quintessential school volunteer as a mom. "I would show up everywhere," she admits. After some pleading for space, Bissi got the message and decided that some of her attention might be better appreciated elsewhere. So she got a dog.

Her first Yorkie, Baby was, unfortunately, sickly, and would get cold during the Racine winters. Rebecca went shopping for a coat and didn't like anything she saw. So she made one and friends started asking her to make their cold doggies a coat, too. *Chien Coature* grew out of that. But it was a television appearance on Channel 7 News in Chicago that really kick started it. They had asked Rebecca to participate in a piece on great Christmas gifts. She brought a little dog model and mannequins with her, and that segment put her out there as a bona fide business. Some trade shows exposed her designs to retailers around the world, and she soon had her pieces in Russia, Spain, London and Germany, which actually put one of her pictures on the side of a bus to advertise their store. Over time, her business started growing in the U.S., but with custom clients. The only online store who carries *Chien Coature* is [BitchNewYork](#). I told you I love that place! 😊

"My custom clients come from all over," Rebecca explains. "The furthest away is Germany, London and Spain. But, I have a client who lives in Michigan, which is fairly close. She has 5 little dogs. She's an amazing woman. She rescued a dog who weighed a pound and a half. She had to stay up all night to give that dog a shot every two hours for 5 days. But, it survived and is doing well. I was so moved, I named one of my harnesses after that little dog...Bella. I gave her that harness because, what a wonderful person to rescue a dog and save it's life! So she's the closest, but we've never met."

Bonkers for beads!

Those first coats featured little crystals, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. Rebecca credits a good deal of her inspiration to [Funky Hannah's](#) beads, a local bead store where she's taken many classes. One in particular, where she learned how to make a beaded ball, started her off on everything...the technique of using crystals with beading, using the right kind of thread, and the lovely [Diva Dangles](#) that come with every *Chien Coature* design. Intricate beading and crystals are Rebecca Bissi's signature.



**Hand-screened painted leather Sweet Pea Coat
w/matching leash**



**The Diva Dangle
to match the Sweet Pea**



The Royal Gown

Behind the scenes of that amazing dress...

Bissi's *Royal Gown* creation for the *New York Pet Fashion Show* was just indescribable. Check out the woven strips of silk duchesse, making up the underdress. Rebecca actually built a loom with stretcher boards to do this. See the pearl and crystal cascade down the skirt, which she hand sewed. The chantilly lace she hand dyed using 50 tea bags.

Millie's mom, Darsey, had a matching gown, made by Bissi. "It was the first human gown I'd made in a long time," she revealed. "It took a month and a half of my life to do those two gowns. Darsey's overskirt is made up of 4 yds of cloque, and there's a 2" grid with a progression of flat back crystals that stagger from 5mm down to 12mm. There are literally thousands of crystals on that skirt, all hand sewn. Even down to the lining and lingerie straps I made for it, so no bra would ever show...all done by hand. When I went to the hotel that night, and I saw Millie walk in her gown for the first time, I just wanted to cry. She looked so beautiful."

Rebecca also does her own quilting for certain garments, her own hand screening for the painted pieces, her own leather dyeing, and uses so many Swarovski crystals, she's actually a licensed partner of Swarovski. Every garment she sells has a Swarovski tag on it, along with her *Chien Coature* hang tag. Her basement studio is truly an artist's workshop. She has a 10'x 6' work table, 2 industrial sewing machines, an industrial serger, yards and yards of fabric, and bags of embellishments.

I'm not a stalker, really!

Her pup, Baby, didn't like modeling and having her picture taken. "It was torturous for her," Bissi explained. So, she had to find other models for her shoots. Client's dogs partially filled the bill, like Chicago-based 3 lb Maltese, Joy and Millie La Rue. But sometimes, it takes a bit of moxie (guts) to get what you need. "The model for my aviator jacket I saw in a doctor's waiting room," Rebecca reveals, chuckling. "I said to the owner, 'You're going to think I'm a stalker, but I want to use your dog as a model for one of my coats.' And I do that all the time. I was driving down the street and saw a naked Chinese Crested. I pulled over and said to the owner, 'I'm not stalking you, but would your dog model? Everyone was pretty willing.'" Unfortunately, Baby passed away at 9 from her health issues. A while later, Yorkie Nina came into Rebecca's life. While Nina doesn't mind the camera, Rebecca is waiting for her coat to grow in properly before she becomes an official *Chien Coature* model. You can catch a sneak preview of Nina modeling a *Chien Coature* design. She did a screen test for Bissi at 6 months old, modeling her *Noir Heavy Metal Harness*. Nice.

What inspires you?

"I'm inspired by everything I see," she exclaims. "For my *Tropical Garden* collars, I took a class at Hannah's called *The Glass Garden*. We worked with czech pressed glass flowers and leaves for a bracelet, and inspiration came from there. A lot of my early inspiration came from beading, looking at beading books, going to the bead store. For next winter, I have a client who ordered snowflakes, which have a lot of 3D work on them. I got that from looking at a necklace in the bead store.

"Then, of course, there's history. I love to look at historic costume. One of my favorite things to watch is *Downton Abbey*. I love that whole period; the beadwork and the feathers...beautiful! I would be happy to just sit on my studio floor with 80 lbs of crystals and play!"

How do you work with your custom clients?

“When a client orders something, I take the idea and do what I call a ‘canvas fitting sample’ which, in essence, is a muslin sample,” Bissi describes. “For out of town clients, which many of mine are, I include a self addressed envelope and send the muslin sample off. They put it on their dog and mark it, tear it, tape it, whatever they have to do, so that it fits their dog. My clients are generally savvy, so they are pretty accurate. If someone needs to, I’ll do two fitting samples. Then I take the muslin apart, make a pattern and I have a folder for every client. I take poster paper and all of the info on that dog is labeled and stored. If they order something else, I have that baseline. I have a dog that was a pound and a half as a baby, when I made that first garment. Now, the dog weighs 8 lbs, and I have 4 different patterns for that dog.”

“I really love when I finish something and it looks beautiful,” Bissi enthuses. “I can’t wait for a client to put it on their dog, and enjoy aspects of it, like when the sun shines on it and makes it sparkle. That’s why I do this. The products I’m using are so beautiful, when you mix them up together, if it’s done correctly, the results can be extraordinary.”

What about your gorgeous sweaters; do you knit them yourself?

“No, I buy my fabric and I have a master knitter who lives in Milwaukee,” explains Rebecca. “I string the crystals on a very strong thread I use for leather sewing. My knitter then takes that, and she’s amazing. She’ll attach them to the sweater, and get it done much faster than I could. I get them back with the crystals on and then make any embellishments like flowers and leaves and put them on.”

“Nina tests all of these designs, wearing them to daycare, and they come back with all of the crystals still on. So they wear well, and that’s really important to me.”



**Cream Bubbles
Hand Knit Sweater**



**Tropical Garden
Collar & Leash Set**

What’s next?

“Last year, I purchased some silk charmeuse floral prints and didn’t use them,” Rebecca describes. “For spring/summer, I’m excited to take the concept of the woven strips that I did with Millie La Rue’s gown but, in this case, it will be of silk, and make the body part of a dress or harness in that. Then, there’ll be a floral skirt that goes with it. A lot of my gowns have removable skirts, so you have a choice.”

“I’ll also going to be doing woven Italian lambskin harnesses for spring in hot pinks and lime green. I follow what’s going on in trends from interiors and from the fashion runway, so these colors will reflect that.”

She adds, “And, this has nothing to do with dogs, but I’ll also be doing lampshades with Swarovski crystals on them. I’m not sure how I’m going to get them out there in the marketplace yet, but I’ll use my *Tropical Garden* technique on a chandelier lampshade. I’m excited to try that!”

What are the most important aspects to be able to do what you do?

“I think knowledge and technique are the most important things, and applying whatever creative sense you have to that,” she shares. “I learned what I know over time. I’m taking a class right now at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design, it’s called MIAD, in oil painting, because I want a picture of a pear on a black field for a design, and no one will paint it for me. Both of my kids could do it and they’re like, ‘Mom, don’t tell me what to do!’ So, I’m taking a class and I’m going to paint myself a pear.”

‘Nuff said. Rebecca Bissi does have a lot of energy. And I marvel at what she’s able to do with it.

All *Chien Coature* fashions above and more available on BitchNewYork.com.

Do you have any favorite dog designers? Share!

Until next time...

(Disclosure: I am a BitchNewYork affiliate, so if you choose to purchase something I recommend from a link on my site, I will get a small commission, which goes towards keeping Bark and Swagger running and towards the animal shelters and rescue organizations I regularly support. Thanks for helping!)



Spring Daffodil hand knit sweater w/glass flower & crystal embellishments



Azure Cha Cha Gown w/crystals & an ostrich feather detachable skirt



Water Lily Gown

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