

STITCHED IN TIME HISTORY, STEAMPUNK AND BEYOND

Inside the time travel adventures
of Alexandra Chambers

When Alexandra Chambers tells people she works full-time as a fashion and costume designer, they often look at her oddly as if to say 'is that a job?'. With her successful Melbourne-based fashion business, Clockwork Butterfly, this one-time Blue Mountains resident has combined her passions for history and design to create striking neo-Victorian outfits for men and women. Launched at the Melbourne Fringe Festival in 2010, the Clockwork Butterfly brand has built a loyal following, particularly among devotees of steampunk, the seriously playful retro-futuristic aesthetic that fuses 19th century style and steam-powered machinery with contemporary fashion and technology.

In recognition of its public profile, Clockwork Butterfly was invited in 2012 to be part of The Antipodean Steampunk Show, a travelling exhibition of 21 leading Australian steampunk artists. In 2013,



*Right: Alexandra as a child (photo Joan Chambers)
Opposite: White Dress (photo Teardrop Studios)
model Natalie Calafiore, hair Kamil Jreich*



An early love

Though Australian-born, Alex Chambers was raised and schooled from a young age in England. Her mother Joan was a school art teacher as well as the educational coordinator of a costume museum and later a prolific writer of art books for primary teachers. Her father Doug was a professional actor and singer with whom Alex performed Victorian Christmas shows as a child. She proudly acknowledges the formative influence of her British childhood and both her parents on her own love for history, art and performance. She recalls many weekend visits to stately English homes where she fell in love with historical buildings and artworks and what she calls 'the aesthetic of things being used and worn'.

'My love was really early,' says Alex who always drew, painted and made things. At the age of eight she wrote down that her life's ambition was to be 'an actor and a costume designer' and even confesses to organising fashion parades with friends. She attributes her 'strong voice as a designer' to her parents' unstinting encouragement of her creative individuality and freedom as a child.

On their return to Australia in 1995, the family moved to Leura, where Alex and her brother Stephen enrolled in Korowal, a Steiner-based school with a major focus on arts and drama. Aged thirteen, she also joined a local medieval society, the Blue Mountains branch of the international Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). With 30,000 members worldwide, the SCA is dedicated to researching and recreating arts and skills from pre-17th Europe—including handcrafted clothing techniques.

Researching, making and wearing period clothing offers 'a new contact between you and the past' argues Alex. 'You stand the way they stand in portraits. It changes your awareness of how people lived.' Alex found this community generous with their knowledge and time and makes special mention of mentor and tutor Deb Leake, an ex-TAFE teacher from Katoomba, who inspired her to start sewing and to buy her own machine.

Made for performance

Throughout high school and her tertiary studies Alex designed and made costumes for local and regional theatre companies including outdoor Shakespeare by the River productions at Penrith: an *As You Like It* directed by her father and performed in medieval dress and a gypsy-style *Much Ado About Nothing*.

In 2001, she moved to Sydney to study a Diploma of Costume at Ultimo TAFE, a skills-based course for costume-makers working in film, TV and theatre.

The other most striking effect of Chambers' training and experience is how richly her garments express the personality of the wearer...

'Even though I loved all the practical knowledge, I ended up doing more of the design element,' says Alex. 'I've always been interested in design and not just the making.'

From 2001 to 2005, Alex was also employed as a cutter, grader and sales assistant working on tailor-made fashion for the Smooth Clothing Company in the Rocks, Sydney. She later added the skills of fitter and pattern-maker in a similar role at Thredz fashion in Glenbrook. During 2007 and 2008, Alex pursued a career in theatre costume, working on major stage productions in Sydney including drama, opera, dance and musicals. She climbed the ladder from alterations, construction and maintenance to wardrobe supervisor and assistant designer.

Theatre productions threw her into the deep end of acquiring practical skills, 'learning with your hands' as well as from wonderful on-the-job teachers and feedback from actors. 'You're always learning, always,' says Alex, who says the only downside is stopping herself critically analysing costumes in theatre productions she is trying to watch for enjoyment.

From the start, Alex has maintained an interest in the parallel worlds of fashion and costume. As a result, the skills, experience and ideas she has developed in each arena have cross-fertilised each other. The result is her capacity to custom design and hand-make beautiful and unusual garments that are also robust, wearable and functional for the rigours of performance or everyday wear.

The other most striking effect of Chambers' training and experience is how richly her garments express the personality of the wearer. That personality can be a 'character' portrayed by an actor, dancer or acrobat or the 'secret self' that is revealed in a customised fashion outfit for a private client.

In 2009, Alex decided to concentrate on work that allowed her to focus on design. This took her in a new direction, designing and constructing costumes for circus and burlesque performers as well as actors and dancers.

Opposite:

Top left: Olegin (photo 3 Fates Media) model Lauren Halstead, hair Niki Giannakaras

Top right: Lady in Red (photo Teardrop Studios) model Eloquent Mx Loki, hair Emma Johansson Taylor

Below: Light Project (photo Teardrop Studios) model Silhouette d'Amour





This page: Female Sherlock (photo Mercury Megaloudis) model Lauren Halstead, hair Emma Johansson Taylor, make-up Dominique Weir

Opposite: Birdcage (photo Mercury Megaloudis) model Tahlia Celenn, hair Emma Johansson Taylor, make-up Dominique Weir

(including lute, harp, violin, mandolin, banjo and bodhran) with a background in classical, folk and medieval music. He performs with Spooky Men's Chorale, the Blue Mountains-based but world renowned acapella choir, and Melbourne-based bands, The Bon Scotts, Anne of the Wolves and Dane Blackrock and the Preacher's Daughter.

Marvellous Melbourne

During an inspirational six-month overseas trip together in 2009, Alex and Stirling decided to take the plunge and relocate to Melbourne. While Stirling established himself in the music scene, Alex found a studio in Collingwood before moving to Coburg and began building up her business, making contacts with local performers. While she kept her theatre clients in Sydney, Alex found that Melbourne offered a larger experimental performing arts scene where 'I could go down lots of different paths and explore designs for myself... putting on shows and exhibitions.'

Many clients are now performers, each with their own peculiar costume needs, especially in terms of enhancing gesture and movement. She has designed outfits for magicians, circus performers (Circus Oz, Long Shadow Stilt Theatre and pole-dancer/aerialist Missy), dancers and burlesque performers (Kerry X and Sarina del Fuego). 'The challenge is exciting,' says Alex when confronted with their unusual demands. 'How am I going to make that come off? It's always such a buzz seeing it on stage.' She enjoys the fact these specialised costumes are used for years and give pleasure to many audiences.

A new clientele has been music groups and bands with several commissions for styling and clothing design for CD cover art and magazine photoshoots including for well-known electronic dance band Art vs Science in 2012. Another unusual and ongoing commission in her first year in Melbourne was researching construction and designing 18th century replica costumes for the volunteer staff at Captain Cook's Cottage in Fitzroy Gardens. This period 'is full of detail and it's beautiful but you have to make it wearable for people in a modern context.'

As her reputation grew, Alex was approached by well-known Melbourne sculptor Louis Laumen who asked her to design clothing as references for his public sculptures. His first commission was for costumes for all three figures in a trio of Mary McKillop and two children outside St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. Most recently he asked Alex

to design a plain, late 1850s/early 1860s dress for another Mary McKillop statue as a young woman, commissioned by the Australian Catholic University for the St Mary of Cross Square in Melbourne.

Alex was thrilled at how all the subtleties of her soft fabric design were translated into bronze in the final work. 'You can see how he did all of the pleats, every button. It was magical.' Alex explains how she anticipated the sculptural qualities of the finished work. She also designed a corset for the model to ensure an authentic profile of ripples and folds.

She cherishes collaborations with other artists and has managed to establish a close community of like-minded creative people including fashion models, film-makers, performers and musicians. 'A lot of my models are also my best friends. Having that pleasure and that friendship [means] you are able to create things that are coming from a place of real energy and excitement... that melting pot of different people's skills.' Alex is thrilled that her brother Stephen has done all the recent music for her fashion parades, blending swing with modern beats and quotes from TV and radio.

Brave new world of steampunk

While still a student, Alex enjoyed exploring the fusion of the historical and new in costume with an early design for a medieval dress that used modern PVC fabrics but with an historical silhouette. At the end of her Diploma course, she also made a Henry VIII outfit, modelled on the famous Holbein portrait, with padded materials and screen-printed fabrics to simulate cord.

'I've always been interested in history and combining it with now,' says Alex, whose focus shifted to the Victorian era with waistcoats and bustled dresses. She was making neo-Victorian clothing when she arrived in Melbourne and stumbled on the steampunk movement: 'Oh, so that's what I'm doing!' She had discovered a vibrant and growing subculture with its origins in 1980s literary science fiction that in turn paid tribute to Victorian visionaries such as H.G. Wells and Jules Verne.

The steampunk scene was still small but active in Melbourne when Alex arrived. In March 2010, she announced her presence felt with a bang, launching her Clockwork Butterfly brand of steampunk fashion with a quirky entertaining show, Steampunk Extravaganza, as part of the Melbourne Festival Fringe. Alex's formidable talent for organisation and passion for theatre produced a memorable night of entertainment that included illusionists, stilt walking, pole-dancing, belly dancing and burlesque. The audience of 600 at the Thornbury Theatre was entranced by female models parading neo-Victorian finery and resplendent uniformed men brandishing surreal antique weaponry.

Melbourne art critic Mark Holsworth praised the show as 'a beautiful visual circus of theatrical clothes... [what]



I imagine an Alexander McQueen fashion show would have been like.'

It was a triumphant debut. Later that year Clockwork Butterfly appeared at Lunarmorph, an alternative fashion show at the Enmore Theatre in Sydney featuring leading goth, fetish and steampunk fashionistas from Sydney and Melbourne. Alex's creations shared the catwalk with well-known Sydney-based alternative clothing shop, Gallery Serpentine.

Over the next four years, Clockwork Butterfly's steampunk and neo-Victorian vision became the dominant flavour of both Alex's costume and fashion work. She costumed two steampunk vaudeville nights at popular music venue Red Bennies in Chapel Street, South Yarra. In 2011 she was a consultant for Circus Oz's travelling steampunk show Steampowered with its trademark mix of slapstick, circus and political theatre. Australian Stage singled out the 'sartorial weirdness of steampunk... the perfect dress-up for the circus because the circus, in the end, is about having fun.'

Alex continued to organise fashion parades in Melbourne, characterised by their original and theatrical presentation.

Productions included Balls, Hoops and Fruit Loops circus and performer Sarina del Fuego in the London Burlesque Festival at the Sydney Opera Bar. She worked on two Rafael Bonachello dance works at Sydney Dance Company. That year also saw Alex take an important step in another new direction: she began designing her own custom fashion garments out of a studio in Lawson in the Blue Mountains.

She was not alone in this adventure. Alex met Stirling Gill through the Blue Mountains SCA – 'he was carrying a lute'—and they married in 2003. It was a 'full-Tudor' wedding. Their 150 guests dressed in period costume and attended a feast in the hall next to a Gothic church in Newtown. Alex designed eleven outfits for the bridal party including her own dress that boasted some 20,000 beads. 'The costume aspect we both love. Stirling really supports what I do and knows how much work is involved.' Tall, lean and sporting a rakish beard, Stirling also makes a convincing gentleman model for Alex's fashion shoots.

The couple share the goals of an artistic life. A multi-faceted musician, Stirling plays eleven instruments

Steampunk is a self-conscious reinterpretation of the Victorian era as opposed to a historicist recreation...



This page: Family Portrait
(photo Mercury Megaloudis)
models Tahlia Celenn and Chris Bennet

Opposite page: Couple in Red
(photo Mercury Megaloudis)
models Ayr Lox'ide and Stirling Gill-Chambers

Clockwork Butterfly embraced new audiences in the goth, fetish and steampunk communities and featured in articles in the mainstream press. As her reputation spread Alex was even approached to send costumes to a fashion parade in Belgium.

A new direction took Alex's garments and parades into art galleries. As part of L'Oreal Fashion Week's Cultural Program in 2012, she organised the Steamscape exhibition in collaboration with Post Industrial Design gallery in West Footscray. Alex sourced all the artists including neo-industrial tinkerer Mad Uncle Cliff, neo-Victorian jeweller Abigail Antares, silhouette artist Fyodor Krasniy and antique book sculptor Chanelle Collier. Artists collaborated to create a series of furnished and wallpapered rooms, fantasy mock-Victorian parlours that featured the full range of steampunk themed artworks on display. Alex estimates some 500 people turned up for the opening where magicians, two fashion parades and live mannequins having a tea-party in the window entertained the crowd.

On the strength of this show, Alex and several other artists were invited to contribute to the Antipodean Steampunk Show, a major travelling exhibition of 70 works by 21 steampunk art practitioners, curated by the Queensland craft and design peak body and gallery Artisan. Alex contributed guest spots during the three-year tour around NSW and Queensland galleries including a kids' art workshop with her mother Joan at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery last year.

From subculture to mainstream

Steampunk is a self-conscious reinterpretation of the Victorian era as opposed to a historicist recreation. It acknowledges, at times with a strong dash of whimsy and irony, that we see the past through a distorting modern lens. Alex points out, for example, that the muted tones and dominant palette of browns in steampunk costumes reflect the sepia of Victorian photography rather than the Victorians' own enthusiasm for bright fabric colours in a brave new age of chemical dyes.

The Victorian era also had its own cultural tensions and contradictions, of course. A general optimism about the future was based on a belief in the progressive potential of technology, science and social reform to bring about a better world. But there were cultural currents that expressed anxiety and doubt about this future and reclaimed the virtues of the past such the Gothic revival in architecture and the pre-Raphaelites and Arts and Crafts movement in decorative and fine arts.

Apart from the inherent sumptuousness and romanticism of Victorian fashion, the aspect that appeals most strongly to Alex is the commitment to the beauty of the hand made. This echoes the Arts and Crafts idealism of resistance to industrialised manufacture and championing of artisanal skills. In Alex's view, artisanal





This page: Lady Adventure (photo Mercury Megaloudis) model Lauren Halstead, hair Emma Johansson Taylor, make-up Dominique Weir

Opposite: Gallery Serpentine launch (photo Abe Bastoli) model Karla Scerri

Like many in the steampunk subculture, she rejects the 'throw-away' basis of modern consumerism and embraces the values of upcycling and recycling.

'There's a bit of rose-tinted glasses,' Alex admits about steampunk's love affair with the past. 'I don't think I'd want to live in the actual Victorian period. I probably wouldn't be alive to be honest as a woman.' Even so, she believes it is worth celebrating and preserving aspects of Victorian aesthetics, in particular their predilection for detail and decoration in everything they made—even a sewerage pump was beautiful—as opposed to the 'form follows function' aesthetic of modernism.

While there has always been a darker dystopian streak in steampunk from its sci-fi literary origins in the 1980s, Alex refuses to countenance despair and identifies with steampunk's more optimistic view of a future served by technology rather than threatened by it. 'I love technology and use it all the time,' she says. 'As long as the technology finds a way to retain our humanity.' Harking back to the Victorians' own "sense of wonder and possibility", Alex says 'I think there is a sense of hope in steampunk. The Victorians weren't afraid of technology, they were excited by it.'

Steampunk's influence has grown steadily in the last decade, moving from a marginal subculture to a more readily recognisable aspect of mainstream culture. While purists may argue about what constitutes a truly steampunk aesthetic, elements of the vision have emerged in films such as *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), *The Prestige* (2006), *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Hugo* (2011), video games such as *Myst* (1993) and *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) and TV series such as *Doctor Who*.

Regular live events that encourage steampunk enthusiasts to show off their inventive gadgets and lush and eccentric outfits now include the annual Ironfest weekend at Lithgow. For the last few years June 14th has even been declared International Steampunk Day—apparently in honour of Charles Babbage proposing plans for his 'difference engine'—a proto-computer—to the Royal Society.

'Steampunk is a good aesthetic for different ages,' says Alex, attributing the widespread appeal of the travelling Antipodean Steampunk Show to the fact that 'kids and adults love it'. 'Whether it be the ray guns and gadgets or the bustles and corsetry, the invention, style and beauty that is in steampunk appeals in different ways.'

Sex: burlesque, bustles and swish

Eroticism and illicit pleasure are pronounced accents in

neo-Victorian fashion. Alex applauds the rise of burlesque theatre as a revival of playfulness and fun in public attitudes to sex. 'We can do things that the Victorians maybe only dreamed of.' She believes that the erotic allure of her neo-Victorian clothing is still clothed in a sense of the 'forbidden' and 'hidden' with glimpses of neck, leg and cleavage, reflecting her love of subtlety in detail, texture and the unexpected in design. 'It's the way the clothes display, how they conceal/reveal. And the way the person feels in it.'

She acknowledges women's historic struggle to escape the strictures of clothing but insists 'now we have the choice'. She is particularly impressed by how her male clients and models love the feeling of wearing neo-Victorian waistcoats, jackets and frock-coats. The clothes 'change the way you move. Men 'swish' when they walk. They make you feel attractive, you feel good. And that's sexy.'

Like many designers Alex uses 'Patterns of Fashions', the reference volumes of pattern-making by Victoria and Albert museum costume historian Janet Arnold, based on extant garments. These include 'grave goods', explains Alex, whereby 'they take the dress out of the grave and make a pattern'. Looking back on her British childhood, she realises how lucky she was to see many real historical garments, a resource that is less available in Australia in terms of permanent collections.

Alex uses fabric suppliers in Australia as much as possible but also orders materials from England and America as needed. 'A lot of fabrics I dye or print the design on, it's all part of the customisation [of the design],' says Alex. Part of steampunk's celebration of the past is taking pleasure in the look and feel of pre-synthetic materials such as wood and brass. The same kind of pleasure applies to clothes. 'A beautiful fabric feels good on the body,' says Alex. 'It explores all the senses not just the visual.'

'I never felt limited by the past. There's always exciting elements that are being reinvented,' says Alex. Her garments perfectly merge the historical and the contemporary, referencing historic silhouettes but utilising modern materials such as leather, stretch synthetics and studs, making the items more comfortable, temperature friendly and easier to take on and off.

In March 2013, Alex unveiled her ready-to-wear neo-Victorian range of one-off pieces produced from her own imagination, taste and sense of design. She is curious to see how people respond, 'what makes them want to touch it, take it home and love and wear it'. Designed as 'separates', these pieces are intended to be combined with the wearer's own wardrobe rather than full outfits.

'The full designs that I do that are totally my own are usually for fashion parades,' explains Alex. 'And they're usually sold as a complete outfit to someone, often the models!' Accessories—gloves, parasols, jewellery—are an



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garments reflect individual creativity in their exquisite detailing and the imperfections of the human-hand in contrast to soulless machine precision. 'Time is money. But time is also beauty. If someone spends time on something and puts love into something, you see it.' Alex's customised hand made garments stand in opposition to modern day, off-the-rack, mass-market clothing made from cheap fabrics that are not intended to last. 'People are out of touch with what they are wearing. If you understand how much work goes into things, you appreciate the making of it differently.'

important aspect of a full outfit and were highly valued in the Victorian period. Clockwork Butterfly has partnered with specialist suppliers for a range of accessories.

Alex has a sewing team she has hired to meet her orders and also takes on selected work experience students from colleges and schools as she 'likes sharing knowledge', repaying her own debt to teachers and knowing how hard it is to get experience in such a specialised field. None of her success has come without long hours of work, typically ten to twelve hour days, six days a week. She manages all aspects of the business including promotion. She has learned to be flexible, turning her skills to different creative challenges and engaging with different clients and audiences.

Dressing-up

A large part of Alex's clientele are people hosting their own dress-up weddings and parties. With the disappearance of formal occasions such as debutante balls and dances, people are inventing their own reasons



This page:
Jane Eyre (photo 3 Fates Media) model Silhouette D'Amour,
hair Niki Giannakaras, make-up Alex Jones assisted by
Brittany Leathem

Opposite:
Top: Louis Laumen statue (photo Louis Laumen) model
Isadora Diaz
Below: PVC Tudor (photo Abe Bastoli) model Laura Steele

to 'dress up.' People have this need to explore another side of themselves, argues Alex. 'I make stuff I would never make for myself. I love it.'

While she is best known for her steampunk and neo-Victorian clothing, Alex has decided to make the other side of her creativity and business more public with a social media presence and branded website in the wings. Under the name *Alexandra's Dressing Room*, she has for a long-time been designing costumes across many genres and period styles for private clients.

Fantasy collections include super heroes (or should that be heroines?) such as Wonder Woman, Cat Woman and, most recently, a gender-bending Wonderman tunic commissioned by a male client for the latest Supernova cosplay event in Melbourne. Custom ordered costumes

have also included 1950s outfits, a 1930s wedding dress and swashbuckling pirates.

Alex is not a period or genre purist and is happy to combine elements from different contexts to make original, pleasing and fun outfits. 'There's so much overlap between fashion and costume,' says Alex who came across a Victorian-era book of woodblock prints of designs for party costumes including a Westernised geisha girl. 'This is something that people have been doing for so long.'

Photography and technology

Alex enjoys collaborations with photographers on magazine and vintage photoshoots, most recently with John McKay's Teardrop Studio. Earlier this year, Alex made a 'Romantic Victorian/Pre-Raphaelite mix' dress for a very striking and self-possessed twelve-year old model. Alex observes that the very concept of 'childhood' was invented in the Victorian era, its origins persisting in our favourite children's stories and popular imagery of nurseries and nannies.

She likes her models to have personality, 'for the people to wear the clothes and not the clothes to wear the people'. There is a strong sense of story-telling and drama, whether mysterious or whimsical, in the photoshoots and short films that promote Clockwork Butterfly's events and brand.

'Now I want to really look at myself and what my interests are,' says Alex who has started a Master of Design at the Whitehouse Institute in Melbourne. 'I want to always be expanding and taking on new things. People can box you in. I'm happy to try new things and experiment.'

Alex has also always been interested in the 'bigger picture' of the social context for clothing and 'how that influences what you choose to wear'. She looks forward to theory subjects and more in-depth research in this area as well as pushing further into the territory of the cross-over of art and fashion, wearable art and costume.

When asked, Alex mentions Alexander McQueen, Jean-Paul Gautier and Vivienne Westwood as inspiring role models who audaciously combine costume and fashion in their work, but she is also excited by influences in other areas such as architecture and the visual arts.

The Aurora electric dress Alex made for Melbourne DJ Silhouette D'Amour this year cleverly incorporated LED lights into its purple and white floating bustle and skirt. This has become a leaping off point for Alex's new interest in merging technology with fashion including possibly lighting and projection. Next year, she will be required to exhibit a major project as part of her degree.

'It's a good time in my life to do more of my own design,' says Alex who looks forward to exploring collaborations with technicians and other artists. 'You can't not take risks as a designer. If it's safe, you don't learn.'

Julian Leatherdale



RESOURCES

Clockwork Butterfly website <http://www.clockworkbutterfly.net/>
Short films: Aurora Illuminated Dress: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-LHUNPTY54>
Clockwork Butterfly: An Invitation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88FF4hCHjzo>
Clockwork Butterfly Teaser: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lnbgo-fhf8>
The Duel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3KZshaLtTE
Circa Nocturna Fashion Parade 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kM3tlq-2d8>
Clockwork Butterfly Circa Nocturna 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ryo0PxQrDtU>
Alexandra Chambers Designer Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/alexandrachambersdesigner>
Review of Steampunk Extravaganza by Culture Vulture, Nov 24, 2010 <https://culturevulture2201.wordpress.com/tag/clockwork-butterfly/>
"The making of the Antipodean Steampunk Show" by Artisan <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pACfnsyppw>





Man with Violin (photo Mercury Megaloudis) model Stirling Gill-Chambers, props Post Industrial Design and Caleb Heinselmann