

Bourbon Street

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Couture techniques, Sustainability, Ready-to-wear

Bust: 33", waist: 27", hip: 35", length: 32"

New Orleans' unique identity results from a mixture of French, Spanish, Native American, and African influences. From its cuisine, music, and architecture to its values, New Orleans is a conglomeration of rich culture. In experiencing the city firsthand, I was particularly inspired by its ability to integrate the natural landscape and the bustling cityscape. New Orleans contains landforms including bayous, lakes, rivers, and wetlands; yet, interwoven between all these landforms is a lively city of hard-hitting jazz, Cajun food, and copious amounts of history. Its architecture is dominated by French colonial style structures with intricate filigree ironwork and hints modified Spanish baroque. I wanted to create a cocktail dress that would properly depict that which is New Orleans. I used an alligator skin to depict the rawness of the bayou. I chose to use a less desirable grade 3 alligator skin, which contains cuts and scratches, to really show the ruggedness of life in the swamplands. I also wanted to incorporate some metal hardware to depict the more polished side of New Orleans.

When sketching possible designs, I wanted to focus on three principles—dominance, contrast, and balance. The main focus of the design had to be the alligator skin. The broad, rugged scales of the skin provided a texture that could only be contrasted with a fine, tightly fabric. Therefore, cotton Ponte knit was chosen to properly balance the weight of the leather. The juxtaposition of the hard leather and soft Ponte was used to create lines to draw the eyes in a downward direction following the natural curves of the alligator. Thus, the beholder may examine the dress for its details and then as a whole. Concurrently, I wanted to incorporate the ironwork of the French Quarter to introduce the urbane side of New Orleans. I wanted to exemplify the relationship by explicitly combining the metal hardware and the leather by wrapping the metal in the leather.

Different sizes of metal rings were selected for their shape and hardness. Since the leather on the back legs was wrinkled and maneuverable, it was suitable to cover the metal rings. Conversely, the leather on the stomach was shiny and smooth; therefore, it was later used on the main body of the dress. To cover the 3½" ring, the leather was cut in a 1½" wide and 13" long strip. The strip was punctured by sewing machine on both ends and hand sewn to wrap the ring with smooth finish. For the 2" ring, the leather was cut in a 1¼" wide and 8" long strip, and for 1" ring, the leather was cut in a 1" wide and 4¼" long strip. After these three rings were covered with leather and hand stitched, the rings and the leather were placed on the dress form to develop the design. The selected design featured a choker of rings and a Ponte dress with leather shoulder straps, front darted panel, center back ring, and belt.

For the choker, the 2" leather covered ring was placed at the center for accent, leather strips connected five rings, and a closure was placed on back. To create the front leather panel, the front legs of the leather were darted to fit the bust; it formed three-dimensional ruffle. The 1"

leather covered ring was looped and stitched at the front neck. The lower part of the leather was pieced to accommodate the leather's imperfections. The remaining leather was pieced to create the shoulder straps and waist belt. The belt has two sets of hand-sewn snaps as the closure.

Black medium weight cotton Ponte knit was selected to make the base of the dress. Draping was used to create the pattern. The front leather panel was attached onto the knit dress. The back of the dress featured a 3½" leather covered ring connecting the shoulder straps. The dress is completely lined in lightweight double jersey. The alligator leather was used entirely for the design.

My goal was to implement a design that properly represented the bayou and the city to showcase the beauty in the combination of the two. The final cocktail dress encompassed attributes from two starkly different sides of the single city of New Orleans. The contrasting Ponte knit accentuated the polished black alligator skin. The black metal rings provided a sense of smoothness structure and civilization to the rugged design. Though my intent was to have zero waste at the end of the project, this was difficult as the shape of the alligator skin was so arbitrary. In future implications, I hope to be able to minimize waste more and more so.

