



FEEL-GOOD FASHION

Collette Dinnigan, Downunder designer of bold, elegant and playful clothes, impresses the world with her creative and business talent.
By Frances Chan.

In a high-pressure industry that prizes aesthetics and uniqueness, Collette Dinnigan, arguably Australia's most successful fashion designer, retains the fundamental vision she had for her business when she started it 21 years ago: "I hope that anyone who wears my clothes feels special in them, and that the clothes give them the confidence to feel good about themselves." It's fair to say confidence oozes from Dinnigan's collections, whether it's bridal, lingerie or ready-to-wear. Her designs are forthrightly feminine, yet at the same time comfortable and sassy.

Dinnigan's recently released Resort 2012 collection is a sophisticated progression from last year's campaign, with fitted and flowing shapes and glamorous touches such as lace and jewels. Her Seaside Escapes theme "focuses on clean and relaxed silhouettes and are offset by summer prints and structured shoulders. Beaded pineapples, tonal hibiscus and palm prints sit alongside the new seaside scarf print, complete with seahorses and palm trees – perfect for summertime!" Indeed, Resort 2012 was "inspired by the colours of the deep sea, sunsets, tropical flowers and seaside treasures" – from coral and sand-coloured day dresses in satin georgette with flirty shoulder ties or bustiers to pretty eveningwear in royal blue, black and silver (choose from above the knee, on the knee or full length). Details include ruffle sleeves, scallop lace and beaded epaulets.

"The collection is very much about escaping and island adventures, and holidaying at all those wonderful feel-good places," says Dinnigan.

The designer's southern hemisphere upbringing can attest to her affinity with the sea. Born in South Africa, she was raised in New Zealand and graduated from Wellington Polytechnic in fashion design and textiles. Her fashionable mother exposed her to the trends of the 70s and 80s: "My mother would always wear bright-coloured [now] retro-style prints and pedal-pushers. She stood out and at the time I wished she had toned it down. But now I look back, I wouldn't have wanted her to dress any other way – she was so stylish."

After moving to Sydney, Dinnigan worked in the costume department of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) before launching her own label in 1990. That first range established Dinnigan's uncompromising standards: dry-clean-only lingerie in French fabrics hand-embroidered by craftsmen in India. She immediately attracted international clients – Barneys New York, Neiman Marcus, Harvey Nichols and Joyce in Hong Kong and stockists in Australia and New Zealand.

The 90s was a decade of massive growth for Dinnigan. From the beginning, Collette Dinnigan collections were designed, cut and handmade in Sydney for export around the world. She established retail stores in Sydney and Melbourne for an ever-expanding client base lured by beautiful dresses made with delicate lace. In 1995 Dinnigan became the first Australian-based designer invited by the Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode (union of ready-to-wear designers) to show in Paris. A year later she was chosen as Australian Designer of the Year,

Opposite page: Collette Dinnigan.
Right: Seaside Escapes silk twill corded strap long dress.





followed by a flurry of awards and accolades: in 1997 she received the Louis Vuitton Business Award and was appointed as an advisor to the South Australian Wool Board; in 1998 she received the Award for Excellence by Fashion Group International, was inducted into the Businesswomen's Hall of Fame and appointed chairperson of the NSW Small Business Development Corporation.

Dinnigan's 10th anniversary was celebrated with a store opening in Chelsea, London, and her exquisite beaded and embroidered eveningwear featured in the Victoria & Albert Museum's *Fashion in Motion* exhibition. A collaboration with Marks & Spencer saw the launch of the exclusive Wild Hearts lingerie range across M&S UK stores. In the new millennium, the Collette Dinnigan brand continued to be recognised, with appearances in Australia's 50 Most Beautiful Exports list in 2000, 2001 and 2004, a Leading Women Entrepreneurs of the World Award in Paris in 2002, and the *CLEO* and Maybelline Celebrity Designer of the Year Award in 2004.

In 2005 she was voted Best Australian Designer by readers of *InStyle* magazine and honoured with an Outstanding Achievement in Fashion award by *Marie Claire*. And to confirm her iconic status, she appeared on a stamp issued by Australian Post for its Australian Legends series.

Inspired by her daughter Estella, Dinnigan launched the Collette Dinnigan Enfant collection in 2006 in her boutiques and in stockists throughout Australia, the US, UK, Middle East and Asia. In 2007 she was honoured, along with Olivia Newton John, by the G'DAY New York Penfolds American Australian Association. Dinnigan said at the ceremony, "I am delighted and humbled to be honoured in the international arena for doing something I am truly passionate about. Australian fashion is now recognised internationally and I am proud to be a part of that." Later that year *Harper's Bazaar* readers voted her Best Australian Designer. And for her significant contribution to the Australian fashion industry, Dinnigan received the Award for Fashion Excellence from the National Retailers Association in 2008, followed by *Madison* magazine's Lifetime Achievement in Fashion Award in 2009. This year she was inducted into the Creative Arts Hall of Fame at Massey University.

There seems to be no end to Dinnigan's enterprise. In 2010 she became a director of Ecoya, a New Zealand-based body, bath and home fragrance company. She helps with ideas for product

Left: Satin georgette bow dress.
Opposite page, left to right: Tangerine sparkles bustier dress; luxe silk satin sleeveless dress.





Left: Pineapple Fleur De Lys ruffle long dress.
Above: Pearls and Palms strapless wedding gown.

development, and advises on ways to grow the brand. Today she produces more than nine collections a year of lingerie, bridal and womenswear. Does she ever run out of ideas? “Each collection is very different and yet all are very feminine,” she says. “I love the distraction of the lingerie collections, the fantasy of bridal and the modernity of the ready-to-wear.”

While her vision and talent have not faltered, the fashion industry has changed considerably in 21 years. “It’s very different and a lot faster these days, but change brings so many opportunities to grow. Online technology and the power of social media are amazing. But I still love the traditional elements of designing – from that initial inspiration for a garment through to the hand-finishing.”

Quality hand-finishing is a signature feature of Collette Dinnigan designs, attracting considerable celebrity interest. Halle, Angelina, Elle, Naomi, Kylie, Tori, Charlize and Cameron are all fans, and Dinnigan cites Kate Hudson, Cate Blanchett and Taylor Swift among her favourite clients. Wish list? “I would love Vanessa Paradis and Kate Moss to wear more of my clothes.”

By the end of this decade Dinnigan hopes to open stand-alone Collette by Collette Dinnigan stores. “The Collette range is the younger sister to Collette Dinnigan and is perfect for weekends,” she enthuses. For this inspiring woman, I have a feeling all her wishes will come true. 