



DESIGNER PROFILE

# ALL THAT GLITTERS

Marchesa designers Keren Craig and Georgina Chapman add costume jewelry to their ever growing, ever gorgeous empire

STORY *Sabar Khan* PHOTOGRAPHY *Edwin Tse*



PRINCESS CHARMING

From left: Red-carpet ready dresses from Marchesa's spring 2016 collection; Renée Zellweger in Marchesa in 2004; the mood board in the duo's Manhattan studio

In a cavernous studio on Manhattan's West Side, Georgina Chapman and Keren Craig, the British expat design duo behind Marchesa, expertly pose for a *Rhapsody* photo shoot—backs arched, hips cocked—breaking into peals of laughter in between shots. They may create red-carpet confections for the A-list, but the two still find humor in playing dress-up for the camera. As soon as they finish, Craig, dressed in black eyelet, and Chapman, in fringed cream lace, step away to slip into something more comfortable. When they return, they're oozing the après-party ease specific to women who've had a really good night.

Or, in the case of Chapman and Craig, a really good decade. Last year marked Marchesa's 10th anniversary, a

jubilee they celebrated with a gypsy-meets-rocker-influenced show at the 17th-century Banqueting House in London, their home turf. It was a sarin-inspired dress worn by Renée Zellweger at the London premiere of *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* in 2004 that put them on the fashion map. That breakthrough helped the eager Chelsea College of Art and Design graduates jump on the fast-track to becoming fashion luminaries who now run a privately held, New York-based global lifestyle marque. "It was never just a passing endeavor," says Chapman. "We were working toward a lifestyle brand."

Their success is based on an aesthetic of unabashed femininity. Favoring lace, tulle, organza, and other diaphanous fabrics silhouetted in sweeping gowns

abloom with delicate embroidery, Chapman and Craig create clothes redolent of fairy tales, an oft-used descriptor that's hard to avoid for Marchesa designs. That may be because, amid the current zeitgeist of directional concepts, Marchesa is evocative of a bygone era. Their muse remains Marchesa Luisa Casati, the brand's namesake and an early 20th-century eccentric Italian socialite whose over-the-top style included wearing live snakes as jewelry.

"I appreciate the idea of a woman wanting to be a living work of art," Chapman says.

"It's her fearlessness that we found really inspiring," Craig adds.

"But Keren and I, we're not painting ourselves and going to parties with >

VICTOR VIRGILE/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES (PINK DRESS); ANTONIO DE MORAES BARROS FILHO/FILMMAGIC (WHITE DRESS, BLACK DRESS); JON FURNISS/WIREIMAGE (ZELLWEGER)



SHINE ON

From left: A red enameled bracelet and tassled earrings from the new collection; Chapman (left) and Craig in their showroom



panthers,” Chapman quips. “We like the idea of it...”

“But the reality is very different,” Craig finishes. They laugh in agreement.

When it comes to business, the twosome do not hold back, having expanded the Marchesa empire with diffusion lines that include eveningwear, contemporary, bridal (Blake Lively and Nicole Richie wore Marchesa for their nuptials), clutches, footwear, fragrance, tabletop, and fine jewelry. The latest territory they’ve set out to conquer is costume jewelry. “Keren and I are like magpies,” Chapman says, displaying a dainty wrist laden with gold and silver bracelets. “We love anything that sparkles.” Available this month, the pieces—studded with pearls, crystals, cubic zirconia, and other semi-precious stones—boast Marchesa signatures like tassels and florals. One set of necklaces and earrings is enameled in red inspired by the poppy embellishments from their ready-to-wear fall collection. “The fashion jewelry line feels like it’s an extension of Marchesa because we’ve done so much beading and work with jewelry before, but it’s so fun doing new things,” says Craig.

Fun may be the key ingredient in Craig and Chapman’s relationship. They laugh easily and often finish

each other’s sentences, the product of a friendship that developed over 20 years, beginning at a life drawing class when Craig decided she must get to know the kilt- and knee sock-attired Chapman. Their easygoing chemistry extends to the business partnership, which plays to each woman’s strengths: Craig, who worked as a textile designer

Marcus and Barneys New York were placing orders. “We came [to New York] for eight weeks and never left,” says Chapman. They borrowed studio space in the Garment District but had to wait until 7 p.m.—after everyone had left—to start their own workday, which included dyeing fabrics in the men’s bathroom.

Today, they have an enormous studio that looks out on the Hudson River. Mood boards pinned with pictures of birds, architectural details, and women lounging in frothy gowns all add to Marchesa’s air of romance, which extends to their personal lives. Craig is married to advertising executive Piers North, Chapman to movie mogul Harvey Weinstein. Their children, roughly the same age, often come to the studio after school.

The designers celebrated their spring 2016 runway show, at the St. Regis (Chapman and Craig are brand ambassadors for the iconic hotels), with dinner at Chapman’s home. “I had my daughter and brother over, and Georgina had lots of her family—her mother, father, aunts, uncles, brother—over from England,” Craig says. Chapman smiles at her partner: “It was a family celebration.” The culmination of romance, after all, is a happy home. ☺

“Keren and I are like magpies. We love anything that sparkles.”

before Marchesa, is in charge of print, embroidery, and textiles; Chapman, who studied costume design, handles draping and silhouette.

The pair began working together in 2004 after a chance meeting at a party with legendary fashion editor Isabella Blow, who, upon seeing Chapman in a dress of her own design, insisted they try their hand at eveningwear. Soon, American behemoths Neiman

VICTORIA WILL/CORBIS OUTLINE (CHAPMAN AND CRAIG)