once in the 200—to teammate LeeAnn Chang ‘07. At the H-Y-P meet, freshman Pangilinan handed Princeton’s all-Ivy senior Stephanie Hsiao the only defeat of the latter’s four-year career in the 100-yard breaststroke. “She was ahead the whole race, but I came from behind in the last five yards,” Pangilinan recalls. At the NCAA meet in 2005, she finished fifteenth and lowered Harvard’s previous record (set by Morawski) with a 2:13.98 time in the 200-yard breaststroke. Pangilinan and her teammates wouldn’t mind setting a few more records this season, and repeating as Ivy champions at the season-ending meet in Blodgett Pool.  ~craig lambert

The spotlights are on and the music is pounding. I am sitting close to the edge of a stage in the darkened Bright Hockey Center, gaping as my fellow Harvard students parade above me in blazers with no shirts underneath, and sometimes just a sprinkling of strategically placed paper lilies. I’m not alone: 1500 of us have turned out for Eleganza—the popular charity fashion show run under the auspices of BlackCAST (Harvard Black Community and Student Theater). A showcase of trends, this event is in some ways a trend in itself. For an increasingly visible set of undergraduates, fashion—the runway kind—has acquired a new significance, becoming both an avowed interest and a professional pursuit.

The idea of Harvard students strutting around in bikinis (and in the case of one brave male, a satin robe that was dropped to reveal a black G-string) might seem to some observers a death knell for both fashion and the University. But no one who’s been to Eleganza can escape its positive energy. Now entering its twelfth year, it attracts one of the most diverse audiences of any campus spectacle—whether by race, nationality, or type of interest—to enjoy what one of its co-producers, Tessa Petrich ‘07, calls “pop culture.”

Over the years, Eleganza has benefited from controversy surrounding its risqué reputation, attracting ever-larger audiences and becoming near-professional in the scale of its production. In 2005, two major student-run projects joined it: Lewis Albert, the launch of an undergraduate’s line of designer clothing; and Haute, a more style-focused charity fashion show, in its third year.

As an armchair follower of style, I viewed these developments with interest rather than shock. It’s true: fashion is not fundamentally intellectual, nor does it pretend to be. But through it, Harvard students are finding a means to express themselves creatively and develop real-world skills—endeavors to which they bring a characteristic mix of brainpower and ambition. In the process, they’re leaving their own imprint on a field rarely touched by their predecessors, and engaging in new ways with a set of tensions that always exist here.

“It’s something different,” says Petrich, an ex-varsity athlete who occasionally makes her own clothing. “It’s a chance, maybe for one night a year, for us to be normal college students, to show that we can just be young and really have fun with fashion and clothing and music.”

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“I think more people are embracing fashion these days,” says Lewis Remele ’06. “The age of the supermodel is kind of dead. It was totally unheard of until five years ago that you would have actresses on the cover of fashion magazines. But there’s been a coming together of fashion and mainstream pop culture.”

It’s a trend Remele is counting on to fuel his career. Wearing a cashmere scarf and blue jeans, he’s just wrapped up an interview with the Boston Herald about his line of designer women’s clothing, which he produced this year in collaboration with a friend, Liz Whitman ’06. Remele, who has been sketching dresses since he was seven or eight, says he hadn’t planned to become a designer so soon, but Whitman, a history concentrator with experience ranging from costume styling to photography, persuaded him that she could help get the dresses made. It would be expensive—Remele wanted to use natural fabrics like wool and silk—but she thought they could cover their costs. Having interned on the business side of Vogue the previous summer, she knew a thing or two about marketing.

Remele spent weeks researching, plan-
ning, and drawing the looks for his first collection. An art-history concentrator, he decided to model his designs on his other main interest: architecture. His 31 pieces channel Russian constructivism and art deco detailing in dresses like “The Chrysler,” whose blue satin straps echo the spires of the New York landmark. He and Whitman came up with the brand name Lewis Albert—using his middle name—and a marketing strategy: Whitman secured funding from private donors to have Remele’s drawings made into samples in New York’s Garment District, and she organized a runway launch in Boston to generate publicity.

The launch was for-profit, created to sell the clothes on display, and therefore entirely different from Eleganza, on which Whitman had worked the year before. She says she kept it minimalist and short, in the style of designer fashion shows, using models from a Boston agency instead of Harvard students to focus attention on the clothes. The show did the trick, generating plenty of press coverage and interest: the dresses and suits sold quickly at two subsequent trunk shows—one in Cambridge and a second in Remele’s hometown, Minneapolis. After recouping their production costs, he and Whitman still had more than $60,000—enough to launch them into New York this February, where Remele’s second line competed with other young but established designers like Zac Posen.

Back in Cambridge, however, Remele walked a difficult tightrope between his lives as professional designer and Harvard undergraduate. Student publications pointed to the sti prices of the clothes—from $250 to more than twice that per item—to suggest that his sales profited from connections to well-heeled students. Remele admits that his line was aimed at a “niche market” among students, but adds that he could not have gotten it off the ground for lower prices. “It’s a show of support,” he says of the friends who bought from him, “like the classic case of alumni who see it of social value to support the ballet.” He describes clothing design, despite its commercial element, as a way to support an artistic career: “Like architecture, it’s a really functional art. If you choose to take it seriously and try to endow it with meaning, you can.”

Within the fashion industry, ironically, he encountered another kind of skepticism: his Harvard affiliation detracted from his artistic credibility. When he and a group of College friends, including Whitman, went to meet a fashion critic at the Improper Bostonian—all of them neatly dressed and armed with a portfolio, samples, and promotional materials—Remele says she greeted them with howls of laughter, and told him never to let on where he had gone to college.

“At any other interview I would be trying to act as straight-laced as possible to gain credibility,” he says. “Now here I am trying to pretend I am, like, less serious.”

One student group has, in fact, taken on the ambitious goal of bridging the mutual distrust between Harvard and the fashion industry. Last winter, after they finished the second annual production of Haute—a fashion show that raises funds for low-income women—Kristin O’Neill ’07, Alex Tan ’06, and Chelsae Smith ’08 longed to fill what they saw as a void for students interested in both fashion and the arts. They came up with the Harvard Vestis Council, a group whose aim would be jointly to “promote art and the art of fashion” and to help students find careers in “alternative” industries. According to O’Neill, within three weeks of its founding, Vestis (the name comes from the Latin word for clothing) had attracted more than 100 members, including, to their surprise, quite a few men.

Both explicitly preprofessional and an extracurricular activity, Vestis falls some-
where between Eleganza and a project like Remele’s. Its members set up general-interest events, such as a gallery talk at the Fogg featuring professors from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and Harvard’s department of visual and environmental studies. And they work with the Office of Career Services (OCS) to plan recruiting programs along the lines of those that already exist in fields like banking and consulting. Last year, Vestis helped put together a panel with retailers including Liz Claiborne, L’Oreal, and the Gap, where students split into groups and tried out mini-merchandising projects—for example, how to package and promote a new line of “premium-blend” jeans.

Having secured a hefty grant from the Undergraduate Council (which doesn’t get many appeals from fashion groups) O’Neill and Tan set out to make this year’s Haute into a professional-grade show. Besides raising money for charity, O’Neill says the show’s purpose is “to represent something that’s really creative and that’s student-run. We wanted to do something that’s theatrical and a fashion show, to give people an experience they might not have had here.” They formed a production board, drawing on Vestis’s membership, and gathered clothes from a hodgepodge of sources: Japanese couturier Yohji Yamamoto (who happened to have a Harvard student working in his PR department), Remele’s line, corporate sponsors like Banana Republic, and vintage clothing donated by local stores. O’Neill reworked many of the pieces on a sewing machine with the help of her sister, a freshman at New York University. Then she and Tan styled them into 87 “looks,” using the dark palate of John Singer Sargent’s Portrait of Madame X for inspiration. The show, staged at the Arrow Street Theater, starred Harvard students as models, and depicted a series of moody “scenes” set to music. Drawing a crowd of nearly 300, it tripled the amount raised for charity during the previous year.

For O’Neill, who considered attending Parsons School of Design before she settled on Harvard, fashion has always been a potential career: her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother came from a long line of seamstresses, and her grandmother designed for Dior in the 1940s. But Tan, a longtime fan of musical theater who just completed a thesis on West Side Story, says she used to dream of being a doctor before considering the entertainment business. She was drawn to Haute because of its resonance with performance-based art, but she says the experience has made her want to work in luxury retail.

In recent years, the business side of fashion has had growing appeal for Harvard students, observes Nancy Saunders of OCS. She says OCS began setting up information sessions two years ago in response to student queries. Today, these events are “always well attended,” while recruiting programs of the kind Vestis sponsors tend to draw between 50 and 70 participants. Whitman, who has deferred law school to run Lewis Albert next year, has a theory to explain this: “I think there’s a reversion to trying alternative jobs, and to wanting some sort of autonomous position in today’s world,” she says. “Women especially are looking for opportunities to be more flexible and to set their own hours…and in the fashion industry, if you are very educated, you can make huge strides forward.” At only 22, she is a living example of this strategy: she will be chief executive of her own company next year, setting her own hours and her own agenda.

But even for students not interested in fashion per se, events like Haute and Eleganza can have all-purpose appeal—combining elements of production, management, and creativity that look good on any résumé. Alissa Gordon ’06, an English concentration who worked on both Eleganza and the launch of Lewis Albert, says she hopes to translate her experience into a career in business. In the past few years, she says, Harvard students have used the historic lack of campus fashion activities to become trailblazers: “There’s an entrepreneurial bug at Harvard. Everyone’s trying to start something new, to get their name on an idea from the ground up. In fashion, there wasn’t much of a preexisting structure on campus, so I think that was very exciting for people.”

When I buy my last ticket to Eleganza this April, I expect that most people in the crowd around me, as always, will be going on to careers in medicine, banking, and public service, and that’s certainly a good thing. However, I don’t think we’re any worse off now that a vocal minority plans on making or selling clothes for a living. No generation has existed without its pop culture, designers, and trends. Watching my peers engage with these forces is, for me, another sign of the range of interests that makes life here so interesting. I find it heartening that, somewhere along the line, a few of them have decided to sketch elegant dresses—or simply take the stage in robes and paper lilies.

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow Elizabeth S. Widdicombe ’06, a history and literature concentrator, appreciates many styles.