



DESIGNER PROFILE

HE'S THE BOSS

How Jason Wu went from design-school dropout to fashion's man in charge

STORY *Michele Meyer* PHOTOGRAPHY *Sunny Shokrae*

“I’m super driven,” designer Jason Wu says over martinis at Houston’s St. Regis hotel, while in town for a trunk show of his eponymous label’s fall collection. “As a creative individual, that’s important. It’s about having your own point of view and being uncompromising. You have to pave your own way to stand out.”

Wearing an understated ensemble of black jeans, a matching crewneck pullover and his omnipresent, never-smudged alabaster Adidas, Wu, 32, has made a career of quietly bucking fashion convention. His diverse résumé includes a stint as a toy designer in his teens and an incomplete degree from Parsons School of Design, which he left six months shy of graduation. Despite these unconventional beginnings, Wu became the designer of choice for celebrities like Michelle Williams, Diane Kruger and Michelle Obama—he designed both of the First Lady’s inaugural gowns—and, since 2013, has served as womenswear director of Hugo Boss.

Known for his subtly sexy style, and with a successful label already to his name, Wu wasn’t, at the time of his Boss appointment, an obvious choice to head the 91-year-old German behemoth of precision tailoring.

“It’s a different way of designing,” he says. “But it’s also incredible to work with a machine that has more than 10,000 employees. I learn new things every day.”

While some fashion insiders—including Wu himself—may have wondered if he was capable of making the crossover from indie label to global brand, family and friends knew he was capable of acclimating to new and more challenging environments. After all, this wasn’t the first time. >



NEW CLASSICS

Top: Jason Wu and Michelle Obama admire the gown he designed for her for the 2009 Inaugural Ball; right: looks from Wu’s fall 2015 collection

BROOKS KRAFT/CORBIS (OBAMA AND WU)

Born in Taipei in 1982, Wu moved with his parents at the age of 9 to Vancouver, British Columbia. The move opened doors for the budding creative, but it required adjustments as well. “Life as I knew it flipped upside down,” Wu says. “I didn’t speak a word of English and didn’t want to leave my friends to go to a country I’d never heard of. But it defined me. I’ve been independent ever since.”

Following a childhood spent translating issues of *Vogue* and designing elaborate clothing for dolls, Wu’s unflagging independence propelled him to make the leap from fashion student to full-time designer in 2006. “Day one, it was just me,” he recalls. “Doubts and setbacks were the theme of my first three years. I had limited resources, and I was learning as I went. Every day I realized, ‘Oh my god, I don’t know anything!’ But that made me stronger.”

A look through his label’s archives reveals the designer’s transformation from a 23-year-old shying away from the runway’s spotlights to a 32-year-old confidently looking into a camera and waving. “I’ve grown a much thicker skin since then,” he says.

Another gradual transformation has been Wu’s aesthetic. At the start of his career, the designer was heralded as a young Oscar de la Renta. His spring 2007 collection featured tulle, feathers and ultra-feminine silhouettes that made him a Park Avenue favorite. Over the course of the intervening years, however, his shapes have simplified, and since he took over Hugo Boss, his tailoring has sharpened.



CONFIDENCE
MAN

Wu in his
Manhattan studio

“I’ve always wanted to create a world that’s singular in vision.”

“In the beginning, my brand was about glamour and extravagance,” Wu says. “As you grow up, you realize you don’t have to shout.”

For his label’s fall 2015 collection, which hits stores this month, the designer focused on classic shapes, with luxe touches in shades of olive, pewter and navy. In addition to fall offerings for both brands, Wu also is releasing a collection of sleek minimalist rings and bracelets. And in the near future, he will open his first store in Manhattan.

“I’ve always wanted to create a world that’s singular in vision,” he says. “It has to be more than the clothes themselves.”