

COMMERCE

Fashion allows wearer to inhabit ideal self: Jason Wu

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Hugo Boss spring/summer 2016

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SEOUL, South Korea Fashion is an ongoing game of dress-up, but that gives it an ability to affect change, according to designer Jason Wu at the Cond Nast International Luxury Conference on April 20.

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Mr. Wu's product design background gives him a holistic and experimental approach to fashion, traits that have propelled him to international success despite his youth. His experiences with Hugo Boss' women's wear and dressing the first lady of the United States have shown him that fashion is more than frivolity and can have a profound impact on the way people see themselves.

"The ideals of being in powerful positions as a woman and being able to deal with serious matters no longer has to tie you down to preconceived notions of what a woman should be in a workplace, and I think Ms. Obama had a lot to do with that," said Jason Wu, art director at Hugo Boss. "She came out in something almost sexy but you didn't lose an ounce of respect for her; she looked very powerful.

"I think that's been very very important, an important influence in how women perceive themselves," he said. "And I think there's a sense of ownership and pride in embracing your femininity, and it's been a really positive movement."

Breaking barriers

Mr. Wu's work life started in the field of toys. As a 16-year-old at boarding school surrounded by friends who had summer jobs, he wanted a taste of the real world.

This taste gave him a gig with a toy company, and he would travel to China every three months to visit factories and analyze production and packaging. This fervidity and package design background would inform his approach to fashion.



Jason Wu

Asked about the extent to which his method is linked to his Asian heritage or united with other superstar Asian designers, Mr. Wu downplayed similarities. Instead, he notes that until recently, many Asian countries had very strict codes of gender and professionalism that discouraged men from going into design and similar fields.

With those codes eroding, Asians have been able to enter the field for the first time. Unwilling to speak for his contemporaries, Mr. Wu notes that his family's business background and professionalism may have contributed to a certain pragmatism in his design.

That attitude, his eagerness and his product design background have taken Mr. Wu to Hugo Boss, where he oversees the entire women's wear range. Mr. Wu admits that when he first was offered the position, he knew the brand only for its menswear, which he suspects remains true to most consumers.

Working for a brand with a very recognizable menswear aesthetic but a much smaller presence in the women's wear market, Mr. Wu stated that early designs needed to reference menswear and practice the same techniques.



Hugo Boss spring/summer 2016

"I did feel like it was important to stake a claim on why it is that Boss makes women's wear," Mr. Wu said. "I took a lot

of tailoring clothes and a lot of very obvious menswear codes and applied them to women's wear in a way that still feels very feminine."

With the line growing, Mr. Wu states that he has found the room to experiment, and five seasons into the role, the clothing needs to evolve. Newer collections lack the shoulder pads and canvases that bring the women's clothing closer to their masculine counterparts and feel more feminine without sacrificing the Hugo Boss attitude.

The departure from menswear codes, as well as designing dresses for Michelle Obama on the occasion of Barack Obama's inauguration as the president of the United States have revealed to Mr. Wu how important fashion can be.

"That was really a special moment for me because you don't really set out to do that," Mr. Wu said. "Suddenly there was this historical moment, the first African-American president and a sense of optimism in the United States.

"I was a part of a bigger moment," he said. "It wasn't just about dressing somebody well known, it was a part of history that can never be repeated again and for me it was kind of my part of the American Dream, that I moved to America that my parents moved me to the West to provide the possibility of becoming a fashion designer."



Jason Wu pre-fall 2016

For the first term inauguration, the first lady wore a one-shouldered dress. Both Mr. Wu and moderator Suzy Menkes, international fashion editor at Vogue, agreed that from that moment Ms. Obama made a name for herself by being unafraid of showing her arms and exhibiting her femininity.

Mr. Wu added that since then, he has gone to Washington on several occasions. Over the years he has seen a shift in workplace attire, with governmental women now wearing dresses rather than suit jackets to work, a change he attributes to Ms. Obama.

Gender bender

While Boss began by referencing its menswear with its women's collection and has moved away, other brands are playing with gender in other ways.

Italian fashion label Gucci is the latest house to alter its runway show format.

Gucci president and CEO Marco Bizzarri announced during his keynote at the International New York Times Luxury Conference on April 5 that the brand will begin showing its men's and women's wear together in a single show per

season starting in 2017. Fashion is trying to find a winning format for the runway show, which causes creatives at large houses to stage numerous spectacles a year ([see story](#)).

In another move challenging gender norms, Italy's Fendi took an untraditional approach to menswear marketing by casting Amanda Harlech as lead in the narrative campaign surrounding the fall/winter 2015 collection.

In "aMANda," Ms. Harlech played two contrasting roles, a man and his mysterious love interest, in a voyage of self-discovery framed by Fendi's collections to capture its menswear universe. Casting Ms. Harlech, a fashion consultant and Karl Lagerfeld muse, as the male lead in the cinematic narrative, played to the notion of gender neutrality and sexually ambiguity currently being explored by high-fashion labels in campaigns and on the runway ([see story](#)).

"What you wear has a lot to do with how you feel," Mr. Wu said. "There is a performative nature to fashion that can be very powerful.

"If you want to feel like a different person, you put on something you don't always put on," he said. "I think in some ways we're all playing dress-up, we have an idea of ourselves and we play dress-up to meet that expectation, and that's how the world perceives us because we judge everything by what we see.

"Fashion isn't just frivolity. I think there's a lot of importance in how you can transform yourself and be whatever you want to be based on how you dress."

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