

WU WHO

AFTER SHOOTING TO FAME AS MICHELLE OBAMA'S FAVOURITE DESIGNER, JASON WU IS REFASHIONING WOMENSWEAR FOR GERMAN FASHION GIANT HUGO BOSS. BY MARRYING HIS LADYLIKE AESTHETIC WITH PRECISION TAILORING, HE IS ATTRACTING A NEW KIND OF SOPHISTICATED WOMAN TO THE BRAND

STORY SHARON KRUM

Jason Wu was a teenager when he decided fashion was his future, and New York the place he would try to make his mark. To say he pulled it off is a dramatic understatement. At 32, he is already a serious player on Seventh Avenue, with his eponymous brand sold in 39 countries, a clutch of nominations and awards, a celebrity clientele that includes Michelle Williams, Kerry Washington and Diane Kruger — and then there is that small matter of the first lady.

Michelle Obama wore Wu's gowns to inaugural balls in 2009 and last year, which in Las Vegas is called beating the house. Wu's reaction on Twitter after learning he had won the Obama imprimatur again: #inshock!!!

With Wu focused on building his brand in New York, working in Germany was probably not on his "to do" list. Yet here he is, flying once a month to Metzingen, a city 30km south of Stuttgart, getting a handle on basic German — his trusted phrases are "guten morgen" and "danke schön" — so he can reboot the 16-year-old womenswear division of German fashion giant Hugo Boss.

Appointed last year as artistic director for women's ready-to-wear and accessories, Wu is now clearly attuned to all things German. "It's an interesting time for Germany right now," says the designer who was born in Taiwan and moved to Canada at age nine. "Berlin is exploding — there's a lot of energy there in art and culture. One would even argue the World Cup situation [Boss dressed the winning German team] was rather timely. Germany is the new black."

If you are a student of New York fashion, you would recognise Wu's designs as a hybrid of ladylike romance, craftsmanship, luxe fabrics and a hint of sex. (Or sometimes an exclamation mark of sex — see his spring 2013 Helmut Newton-inspired collection.) If you have ever owned or seen a Hugo Boss men's suit, you know the 90-year-old brand stands for precision tailoring and modern silhouettes.

Pairing Wu with Boss would not be your first thought, but as a company move it's laudably disruptive and strategic — those two important business buzzwords. (It

also prompted *New York Magazine* to ask: "Does this mean that Michelle Obama will wear Hugo Boss?")

"Frankly, I was a little surprised they approached me," Wu admits, sitting in a banquet at The Lambs Club restaurant near Times Square, where he is a regular. "Stylistically, I'm quite different from what you think Hugo Boss would be — in fact, somewhat opposite. But when I went there and started talking with them about where the company wanted to go, I changed my mind. The challenge really excited me."

The company had €2.4 billion in revenue last year, but close to 90 per cent of its profits came from menswear. Boss wanted a bigger slice of the women's market, but its ready-to-wear never had a point of view strong enough to lure editors, stylists and fashionistas. Enter Wu.

"I think they asked me because they appreciated that I understand what women want," he explains. "Clearly the DNA of Hugo Boss is menswear, and it's important to reference that. What I found was that they had all these tailoring techniques and technology they used for men but not women. So the question was, how do you construct a jacket or a dress with the same stitching and tailoring techniques? How does it look to use lasers to cut chiffon and make frills out of it?"

As for wearing two hats, Wu seems more than game. "I majored in menswear at Parsons [School of Design], and I think every designer has multiple facades, as do I. When I design for my own brand, it's a certain aesthetic, and when I design for Hugo Boss I use their set of rules."

"I think the fall collection [his first Boss show in New York in February] showed people a very different side of me." He offered the woman he describes as "a sophisticated, strong character with an appreciation for beautiful tailoring" a wardrobe of cashmere military coats, menswear proportions on jackets and suits, Bauhaus-inspired patterns and sequined chiffon dresses for evening.

Women's Wear Daily wrote: "Wu handled the Teutonic territory with graceful precision." He also created the right kind of noise off the runway because, by July, Boss womenswear sales were up 15 per cent. Many women were first-time customers drawn to the brand by Wu.

To the list of people who seem to be born as entrepreneurs, go ahead and add Jason Wu. Growing up in Taipei, he was an artistic child who liked to draw bridal gowns seen in store windows. "When I was young I was into sculpting, drawing, fine art. I was always into really creative things," he recalls. After his family moved to Vancouver, (they are now back in Taiwan) a gift of a sewing machine allowed him to draft patterns and sew clothes for dolls, a practice that would lead him to his first career. Yes, first. At 16, and in boarding school in the US, Wu sent samples of his doll designs to the fashion doll company Integrity Toys. Hired initially as a freelance designer, by 17 he was creative director and a partner of the company. (He still consults for the firm.)

In 2001, he moved to New York to study at the Parsons School of Design, but left six months before graduating to work for American designer Narciso Rodriguez. "When I was in my teens, perhaps the exchange wasn't as blatant, but today art, film, music, architecture, all collide in fashion," he says of the draw of the industry. "I found that irresistible and wanted to be part of it."

He opened his own studio in 2006, launching his first collection a year later. Last month Wu sold a controlling stake in his business to Interluxe to help him take the brand to the next level, opening a flagship and building his e-commerce and handbag businesses. That Wu was a creative director of a company at 17 and started his own brand at 24 doesn't surprise people who know him. "I remember having lunch with Jason pre-Michelle Obama," says luxury retail consultant Robert Burke, formerly senior vice-president of fashion at Bergdorf Goodman. "He had just started out, with two people and a very small space. [He now has 30 staff and bigger digs.] He was so clear on who his customer was, so focused. And he is a very hard worker." Wu's peers might cite Comme des Garçons' Rei Kawakubo or Marc Jacobs as influences, but he lists early 20th-century couturiers Charles James and Jacques Fath. This explains the infusion of glamour into his collections, and why he was pegged so early as one to watch. "It's a very competitive world, and he created a voice in that world," says Burke.

Soon he learned attention was also being paid by Chicago's Ikram Goldman, then Michelle Obama's



At just 32, Jason Wu is on a fast track to global recognition, running two design studios in New York, one for his own brand and one for Hugo Boss



Jason Wu showed a different side of himself in the Hugo Boss fall women's collection



unofficial stylist. The future first lady shot him into publicity heaven when she first wore one his sheaths — an ivory silk chiffon inaugural ball gown he had been asked to create for the 2009 inaugural ball. Wu delivered it himself to Chicago, unaware if it would make the final cut. He discovered his success only when watching the ball on TV in his apartment. (The second inaugural gown was a red custom-woven faille coupé.)

Burke believes Wu would have been successful regardless of the Obama effect on his reputation and business. “But she put him on a fast track to being recognised globally, overnight. Yet there are so many factors involved in the success of a designer — design, delivery, organisation, and you have to have it all.”

Wu is gracious when congratulated on entering the history books with two presidential ball gowns. It was a huge honour, he says, and “Mrs Obama is super supportive and continues to wear my clothes”. After the first inaugural, offers came in for television shows and endorsements, but Wu turned them down to focus on his brand. (Later there would be collaborations with TSE cashmere, Target and Lancome. “Those collaborations gave me valuable experience and insight.”)

Wu understands that support from the White House

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and dressing red carpet “it” girls such as Kerry Washington can be branding rocket fuel. “I mean, for an event like the Oscars, it puts you in every single living room.” Also primary is leveraging social media. “When I moved here in 2001, there were no bloggers, no Twitter, no Sartorialist. Today the internet is your image. When you hear about a new brand, the first thing you do is Google it.”

So when it comes to resetting the clock for Boss, the

web is king. “To take what the company does and make people look at it in a new way, that has to be communicated from the web, from Twitter and Instagram.”

Wu lives and works in midtown Manhattan — sharing his personal and professional life with partner Gustavo Rangel, who is chief financial officer of Jason Wu. He also now runs two design studios in New York, one for his own brand, where the decor is antiques and colour, and a second for Boss, where the interiors are black, white, wood and concrete. “Aesthetically when I walk in, I know what mode I am in.” But at the Boss headquarters in Metzingen, Wu enters another world, a glass and space-age campus he likens to the movie *Gattaca*. “I had never seen anything like it. There is not a pair of scissors in the entire atelier of 400 people. It’s all laser cut and computerised.” He is not such a purist that this bothers him. In fact, he seems jazzed about utilising the technology. “It’s just a different way to look at craftsmanship.”

Wu visited Australia eight years ago for Mardi Gras, but the prospect of a leisurely break seems remote for now. He’s too busy juggling plates on two continents, and his mantra seems to be — bring it on. “I feel like if I wanted to do this kind of thing, this is the time. My philosophy is set the bar high and then go higher.” **W**