
Suwha Hong | Designer

2009-05-15

It was an open casting call that Ryan Seacrest and Heidi Klum would have fought each other to cover. Waiting in the throng on 5th Avenue in New York outside the posh fashion seller Henri Bendel, clutching a suitcase of design samples, Suwha Hong was an unknown hoping to become known. Hong had already taken the biggest gamble of her life two years earlier—trading in a high-powered legal career for the life of an aspiring fashion designer—and she had traveled from London in the hopes that her venture would pay off. Henri Bendel was looking to add new blood to its exclusive lineup, and the street corner was buzzing louder than a Project Runway audition.

“I stood in line for hours,” says Hong. “There were so many people there trying to get noticed just like I was. Then I finally got in and saw the buyers and they thought I was worth a second look.”

Not only that, but Bendel’s buyers decided that Hong’s collection of jackets and hats, which are defined by a structured, classic look with fun extra details (like buckles and buttons) that bring femininity and modernity to the pieces, was worth investing in.

“I had a suitcase filled with my collection and a few appointments,” says

Hong. "But it definitely went better than I could have imagined."

While many in law have had the fleeting thought of making a career change, Hong is one who actually made the leap. After five years practicing corporate law in New York and Boston, the last three as an associate at WilmerHale, she could not resist the lure of a more creative path—and it appears the reward was worth the risk. Hong's debut autumn-winter collection is being carried in 16 stores worldwide, including Henri Bendel in New York, Beams in Tokyo, Holt Renfrew in Toronto and Paul and Joe in London. Her designs have also appeared in high-profile magazines like Vogue and Elle. And right now she can be found exhibiting at the Vendome Luxury Trade Show in Paris.

"A lot of the skill I learned in law school translates," says Hong, who graduated from Cornell Law School in 2001. "There's a lot of attention to detail and thinking critically and logically. The organizational skills I learned definitely help. Running a small fashion design business is 80 percent managing. And the other 20 percent is the creative part."

It was only in the summer of last year that Hong launched her own label, suwha, with the goal, she says, of creating clothes that embodied her values and spirit. Her first line consisted solely of coats and hats, which she notes are much more popular in England. "I wanted the line to reflect a certain kind of woman and a certain kind of lifestyle—an adventurous and intelligent woman who is willing to travel and explore new things," she explains. "My look is very classic. But what distinguishes it, are the playful details."

Born in Korea, Hong spent her childhood living in New York and parts of New England. Despite a love for art and fashion, she followed the crowd and

went to law school. “Through college I had taken art classes and really loved doing creative things,” she reflects. “But I was a political science major and decided to go to law school because I loved reading and writing. I was torn between two worlds.”

Hong finally gave in to her more creative side when in July 2006—after getting married and traveling the world for a few months with her husband Tim, a private equity investor—she settled in London and began studying fashion design and garment construction at London College of Fashion and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. In her spare time she fell under the tutelage of the London-based designer who would become her mentor, Avsh Alom Gur.

Rather quickly, Hong set out on her own, and found that to become a success in the fashion world you had to do more than sit in a coffee shop doodling designs and hoping that they would find their way onto the runways of Paris. “I set up a company of jackets and hats for the autumn winter 2008 collection,” says Suwha. “To do that I took a very guerilla tactic to selling them.”

Part of that effort included the trip to New York. As a testament to her skill, her collection has quickly gained attention, including having one of her jackets named one of the “best of the season” by popular UK fashion magazine Grazia.

Hong’s success has been followed with interest by her former colleagues at WilmerHale. “She worked on a couple cases with me and did a fine job,” says Boston litigation partner Stephen Jonas. “I’m glad things have worked out so well for her and given her fashion sense, I am not surprised where she landed.”

Now Hong has no doubts about her career move. Last month, she exhibited her work in London Fashion Week, which she says went well and has helped generate interest from top stores and the press*. Next spring she will add tops and pants to her line, as she begins to expand her repertoire.

"I hope to continue to make creative but accessible designs," says Hong. "And to continue to please our core customers in the coming years."

*Several pieces from Suwha's debut collection were included in Vogue (UK):
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