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Haute architecture

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PEOPLE



Hong Kong's favourite couturier **BARNEY CHENG** spent part of this summer working with HKDI's students to create high fashion



for the city's most prestigious racing event. He talked to **DAISY ZHONG** about the insights he acquired from his young colleagues.

HAUTE

ARCHITECTURE



THIS PAGE
BARNEY CHENG
GIVING ADVICE TO
STUDENTS AT A SA SA
LADIES' PURSE DAY
WORKSHOP IN JULY



« I SEE A DRESS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS NEGATIVE SPACE, SILHOUETTE AND PROPORTION. »

Your design is beautiful and the details are impeccable, but the belt is damaging the silhouette,” said Barney Cheng, Hong Kong’s most sought-after couture designer, as he scrutinised the sketch of a cocktail dress created by one of 16 HKDI fashion students. His message was clear - when it comes to fashion design every nuance makes a difference.

The 16 students worked with Cheng last July to create dresses to be worn by models and celebrities during one of Hong Kong’s most celebrated social events and fashion pageants, the Sa Sa Ladies’ Purse Day race meeting on November 3rd. Cheng is the creative consultant of the fashion show event and his HKDI workshop was a master class in couture design.

“I am sensitive to the structure of my surroundings,” says Cheng, whose approach is rooted in architecture, which he studied before entering the fashion world. “I see a dress from the perspective of its negative space, silhouette and proportion. Couture is designed to perfect female beauty. A well-designed couture dress should use structure to minimise a woman’s less favourable features while maximising her virtues.”

The chic females who flock to Ladies’ Purse Day have coveted flattering couture dresses since 1846, when the event was first held at Happy Valley. It has since become one of the most popular race days in Hong Kong. In 2005 the Hong Kong Jockey Club joined forces with Sa Sa, the largest cosmetics retail chain in Asia, to organise the event. Sa Sa has turned the Ladies’ Purse Day into a major festival of femininity with catwalk shows, a make-up workshop and a photo corner for those wearing the best hats. Last year the event attracted 63,000 people.

To encourage the city’s homegrown designers Sa Sa chose to collaborate this year with students from HKDI’s Department of Fashion and Image Design (FID). The first thing FID agreed with Sa Sa was a budget of HKD8,000 per dress. “We wanted to provide the students with a good opportunity that enabled them to produce something interesting using quality fabrics,” says Liz McLafferty, Head of FID and coordinator of the collaboration.

This year’s Ladies’ Purse Day took *England Chic: Ladies and Gentlemen* as its theme and was inspired by prestigious high society occasions in Britain like Royal Ascot where racing thoroughbreds and high fashion mix as naturally as strawberries and cream. Cheng is well aware that heritage plays a key role in design. “The event is a platform where modern aristocrats like to distinguish themselves by the taste of their outfits, and young ladies in search of a husband will dress up in order to impress young men who are in the matrimony market. The best reference would be the Royal Ascot scene in Audrey Hepburn’s 1964 film, *My Fair Lady*.”

Royal Ascot was founded in 1711 by Queen Anne and is Britain’s most prestigious racing event. In the film Hepburn stunned the exclusive Royal Enclosure with her iconic Cecil Beaton designed black and white lace gown and swooping feathered hat, which was sold at a memorabilia auction in 2011 for US\$3.7 million.

To ensure fashion decorum, Royal Ascot’s organisers publish a style guide, specifying strict protocols – hats must have a base of at least 10-centimetres; dresses must be of “modest” length, falling just below the knee; fancy dress, strapless, off-the-shoulder and halter neck tops are outlawed, and a lady’s midriff must be covered at all times.

Much like in *My Fair Lady*, designer dresses and millinery masterpieces are also a must for Hong Kong’s high society. Although Cheng has not published



ABOVE A LOOK FROM
AUDREY HEPBURN'S
1964 FILM, MY FAIR LADY

a style guide for the Ladies' Purse Day in Hong Kong, he does stress the importance of refinement in couture design.

"You should think of a lady like Guo Jingjing (the former diver and Olympic celebrity who married business tycoon Kenneth Fok) when considering the person who will wear your dress," he says. "It's difficult – the dress should be fashionable but at the same time proper and appropriate for her social status."

Overall, Cheng identifies the design aesthetic for Ladies' Purse Day as "royal, elegant, and noble", that should be executed in knee-length cocktail dresses. "The design should be about details, a feminine feeling with an haute couture element."

Cheng is pleased that the HKDI students have captured the right design direction for Sa Sa Ladies' Purse Day. "Students have very sharp fashion sense. I have faith that this new generation of designers will provide a good foundation for Hong Kong as a centre of creativity."


But Cheng also notes that students need to polish their skills in handling materials. "Few students go beyond using materials as they are," he says. "They need to take one step further and process the fabric to increase its value. Ingenuity and craftsmanship can improve a design without increasing the budget required for manufacturing. For example, after producing a digital print they can embroider the fabric's surface, which can create a noble feeling, even with an average piece of fabric."

A noble feeling is not just about exquisite design but also propriety. Cheng notes that race day outfits should be distinguished from other kinds of haute couture. "The Ladies' Day race is a daytime event. Thus the dress should be formal daywear and designers ignorant of this might design evening gowns. As a designer you should know that ladies in the 19th century England wore different types of dresses for different occasions in their daily routine, so having some knowledge of these etiquette rules is very important for creating appropriate clothes for women in high society."

Raised in a well-heeled local family, Cheng is no stranger to the culture of high society. He has a strong following among celebrities and socialites from across Asia, including Michelle Yeoh, Maggie Cheung and Eleanor Kwok, the owner of Sa Sa. His expertise encompasses couture, couture-a-porter, daywear and eveningwear, with a signature style that combines luxurious, intricate beading details, embellishments and fur.

According to Cheng, sophistication is paramount in securing a clientele that many regard as inaccessible, "As an haute couture designer, you should be familiar with the haute couture lifestyle. If your clients are trend leaders and collectors, you should educate yourself about art, wine, fashion, jewellery and travel for the purpose of more meaningful communication, which is the foundation of a good client relationship. You don't need to be rich in order to know these things, but you need to be well-read, know their life and make yourself convincing."

As a designer who set up his own design studio in 1993 at the age of 27, Cheng treasures the spirit of entrepreneurship and believes that communication technology has made it much easier for fresh graduates to set up their own brands, and "to have their own look from the beginning". "You can create your own website at home, targeting people all around the globe and start to have followers online. Furthermore, geographically Hong Kong is very promising because China is the most energetic and vibrant place in the world now and is seeing a strong rebirth of its fashion industry."

And that seems good advice from a man who has been the architect of his own success. 

«INGENUITY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP CAN IMPROVE A DESIGN WITHOUT INCREASING THE BUDGET REQUIRED FOR MANUFACTURING»

BELOW A LOOK FROM CRISTOBAL BALENCIAGA'S 1950 HAUTE COUTURE COLLECTION USED BY BARNEY CHENG AS AN EXAMPLE OF NOBLE DRESSING



«AS AN HAUTE COUTURE DESIGNER, YOU SHOULD BE FAMILIAR WITH THE HAUTE COUTURE LIFESTYLE.»



THIS PAGE LOOKS FROM THE SA SA LADIES PURSE DAY CATWALK SHOWS FROM 2009, 2010 AND 2012

