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Asian-American Fashionista Connects Culture With Threads

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The Lincoln Center in New York City playing host to Fashion Week, which launches today. Back in June, the Center was also where the Council of Fashion Designers of America issued its prestigious designer awards and three \$25,000 Geoffrey Beene Design Scholarships. One of those scholarship winners was twenty-four year-old Carmen Wu, a senior at Parsons: The New School for Design in New York. Host Michel Martin speaks with Wu about what led her to fashion, and the spiritual, social and cultural roles it plays in her life.

Transcript

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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

This is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. I'm Michel Martin.

Coming up, which of your dance moves are more likely to lead to love, and which ones, well, won't? Two psychologists from England say they have the answer, for the guys anyway. That's coming up. But, first, we want to talk about new moves in fashion. New York Fashion Week opens today at Lincoln Center. And alongside those megastars who will be displaying their wares this week like Donna Karan and Marc Jacobs will be new stars like Jason Wu and Alexander Wang. They are just two of a new wave of Asian born and Asian heritage designers who are rising to the top of the fashion world.

In June, the Council of Fashion Designers of America gave all three of its top prizes to Asian heritage designers, as well as all three of its \$25,000 Geoffrey Beene Design Scholarships. Those all went to Asian heritage students.

To celebrate Fashion Week and to talk a little bit about this demographic shift on 7th Avenue, we called one of the scholarship winners, Carmen Wu. She is a senior at Parsons The New School for Design in New York. And she joins us from our bureau in New York. Carmen, welcome and thank you so much for joining us and congratulations.

Ms. CARMEN WU (Geoffrey Beene Design Scholarship Winner): Thank you for having me, Michel.

MARTIN: So, how did you get interested in fashion?

Ms. WU: It started at an early age, but I actually was born in Spain and bred there. So after I finished high school I had always dreamed of coming to the U.S. to study. And my parents sent me here. I went to Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and I studied economics because that's what made them happy. And I guess I thought it made me happy at the time, but it didn't.

And after two years of that, I decided I needed to take a break and think through what I really wanted in life. I decided that I wanted to get into fashion. And what excites me about fashion is that I really, really love studying people. And I believe in this woman that exists in New York - she's a Buddhist - and I believe that someone needs to dress her, and I am there to dress her.

(Soundbite of laughter)

MARTIN: Well, that makes sense. Although I'm sure that non-Buddhists will be interested in your work as well. So I wanted to ask you, though, about the dinner where you received your scholarship award. I do want to hear a little bit about what your designs were that you presented and so forth.

But the Times wrote about this and the headlines of the piece is "Asian-Americans Climb Fashion Industry Ladder." It pointed out that all three prizes given by the Council of Fashion Designers that night were awarded to designers who were Asian-American. And then all three of the scholarship winners were also of Asian heritage.

And I was wondering, if at the time, was this something that people noticed? Or was it something that you just thought, oh, you know, later you said, oh, well, that's interesting.

Ms. WU: Yeah, that's very, very curious, actually. It is something that I later on noticed after the awards ceremony and I got to meet these other two girls that received the fashion scholarships. I'm not sure if there is a connection because we are all judged based on the quality of our work, but Eric Wilson in his article did have a point. And that was that maybe because there is a big shift of the luxury market towards Asia right now, there could be a connection. And maybe Asian designers will bring another, like, a different kind of aesthetic to the industry, especially the luxury market is booming in Asia.

And maybe a lot of designers might cater or part of the work will cater to the Asian market's taste. I guess we'll just have to see what happens.

MARTIN: Tell us a little bit more about your vision. You submitted 40 sketches, 10 outfits, the theme was Concealing and Revealing and you used geometric shapes, 'cause of course Geoffrey Beene, the designer, was also very interested in geometric shapes and you used, kind of, circles as your inspiration. But tell me a little bit more about your girl, as it were, the person who you were planning to design for, what you think she's into and what your style is. Tell us a little bit more about that.

Ms. WU: She is a very special girl. I think she is actually my alter ego. Picture her: She sits at a Starbucks in the morning and she is fully aware. She is fully aware. And what does that mean? From a Buddhist perspective, she is meditating, basically. And she is wearing this beautiful piece of like knit. And she is wearing this knit that doesn't really look like a dress or a shirt or a jacket. She is wearing a vomit of nature and she loves that. She loves for things to sprout and happen and things that don't have a like a dictionary definition. And maybe she pairs this with a tight leggings or leather. I'm getting nervous now. I'm getting mixed up in my head.

MARTIN: That's okay. That's okay. Maybe what you can do, if this is permitted, if this is permitted, if you have some images of your winning designs and we can post them on our site, just so people can have a sense of what it is that you're talking about, okay?

Ms. WU: Oh sure...

MARTIN: So that sounds like - so how do your folks feel now that about your switch now that, you mentioned that initially you were studying economics because you thought that that would make them happy. But now that you've switched into fashion, how do they feel now about what you're doing?

Ms. WU: My parents are thrilled that I am into fashion. And actually, they are very, very proud of me winning this scholarship. My parents actually live currently in Chile, in South America, and they just went through the terrible earthquake in February so after after that I won the award and I was very happy to give my mom really good news. And they do realize that fashion is also a very good industry in which I can bloom and I can succeed, and I am pursuing my dreams.

MARTIN: (Unintelligible) that's great, and I'm glad I know and I'm glad that your family is well.

Ms. WU: Thank you.

MARTIN: And passed through that terrible experience safely.

Ms. WU: It was a big shock.

MARTIN: Sure.

Ms. WU: But they're fine now.

MARTIN: I did want to ask - Carmen, I'm sorry, I feel I have to put my pitch in here.

Ms. WU: Sure.

MARTIN: You know, one of the ongoing criticisms of the fashion industry is that it really isn't for real women. You know, the women who aren't a size two, what do you have for them?

Ms. WU: Of course...

MARTIN: Or are we just out of luck?

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. WU: That's a very good question, Michel. Of course, really, fashion is just a fantasy that designers in the industry create in people's minds. But all the clothing that designers make are for real people and we hope that real people will buy them. And my clothing will fit any size woman. If it's size zero or size, I don't know, 20? Is that like the max size in the U.S.? I'm not even sure.

But, yeah, any size will fit my clothing, especially since I focus on knitwear. And knitwear has a lot of ease. And it's all about the beautiful drapes on the body and how it hangs. So any size will, like any woman would look beautiful in my clothing.

MARTIN: Well, remember the not size two, Carmen. That's all I'm going to ask you.

(Soundbite of laughter)

MARTIN: I'm putting in my plea now. Congratulations to you once again.

Ms. WU: Thank you. Thank you, Michel.

MARTIN: Carmen Wu is a senior student at Parsons and a recipient of a \$25,000 Geoffrey Beane Design Scholarship, which was offered by the Council of Fashion Designers of America, and she joined us from our bureau in New York.

Carmen, best of luck to you.

Ms. WU: Thank you, Michel. Have a good day.

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