



WOMEN IN LUXURY

Aisles of Style

She put her indelible stamp on the bridal-dress industry, then the red carpet. Now Vera Wang is set to revolutionize mass-market ready-to-wear with her new line for Kohl's

By Kristina Zimbalist

VITAL STATISTICS:

NAME VERA WANG

CURRENT JOB
CHAIRMAN AND CEO,
VERA WANG

FIRST JOB YSL BOUTIQUE
SALES ASSOCIATE

INSIDE TRACK SPENT 16
YEARS AT VOGUE
BEFORE WORKING FOR
RALPH LAUREN

CLAIM TO FAME ONCE
TRAINED TO BE AN
OLYMPIC FIGURE
SKATER

VERA WANG HAS HAD A STORYBOOK CAREER, building a thriving bridal, fashion and housewares empire, but to hear her tell it, she would just as soon have eloped. "I had always wanted to be a designer, and my father said, 'How do you know you have what it takes to be in fashion?' And, boy, was I determined. And I showed him. And I've lived to regret it," she says, and then tops the statement off with a gleeful laugh. Wang is kidding, of course. Her sharp, native-New Yorker wit and sarcasm don't stay hidden under the hem for long. "I say things like this, and people take it and say, 'Vera hates fashion.' And I'm trying to be funny, because if you don't laugh, you're going to keel over."

Wang is hyperintelligent, hilariously funny, sensitive—and self-deprecating. Having started out as a fashion editor at *Vogue* among some pretty big personalities, she has every reason to have adopted some strain of diva behavior. "I am not a diva," she says. And she's not. Born to traditional-minded Asian parents and raised with what she jokingly calls "good Midwestern values," Wang says, she's "a worker." Her work ethic—few could argue—has paid off.

What began nearly two decades ago as a tiny shop bearing her name on Madison Avenue has become Vera Wang the corporation. Her name is synonymous with fashionable brides' and bridesmaids' dresses. Her evening gowns are red-carpet staples. After an early venture into ready-to-wear proved a critical and commercial disappointment in 2001, she made a risky second dive in with great success—she was named Womenswear Designer of the Year by the CFDA in 2005. She has since launched a younger, secondary line, Lavender, and this fall teams up with Kohl's to launch a mass-market minicollection, Simply Vera. She has two fragrances and a line of diamonds and sells housewares, linens and china under her moniker. This list goes on and on. "It has been a labor of love," Wang says of her creations and career, if not always a skip down the aisle.

"A lot of my life has been predicated on not getting what I hoped I would get," Wang confesses. She spent the first third of her life training to be an Olympic figure skater. Every waking hour was devoted to the sport; she studied classical ballet at George Balanchine's School of American Ballet. When she didn't make the Olympic team, "I had to learn a big life lesson," she says, "which is that when you are so obsessed by something and you can no longer do it, you dust yourself off and keep going."

Her next passion was fashion, and it led her from summer jobs at the Yves Saint Laurent boutique in New York City to 16 years as a fashion editor at *Vogue*, where she did covers and influential shoots with photographers like Richard Avedon and Deborah Turbeville. There too she eyed the top prize. "I don't think you stay for 16 years and not want the ultimate say," Wang explains. When she realized she wasn't going to get it, that she would never be editor in chief, "I had to try to recover," she says.

She hopped over to Ralph Lauren as design director of women's accessories. There, "much as I loved sit-tings," Wang says, "creating made me feel so good. And it was just genius fun."