



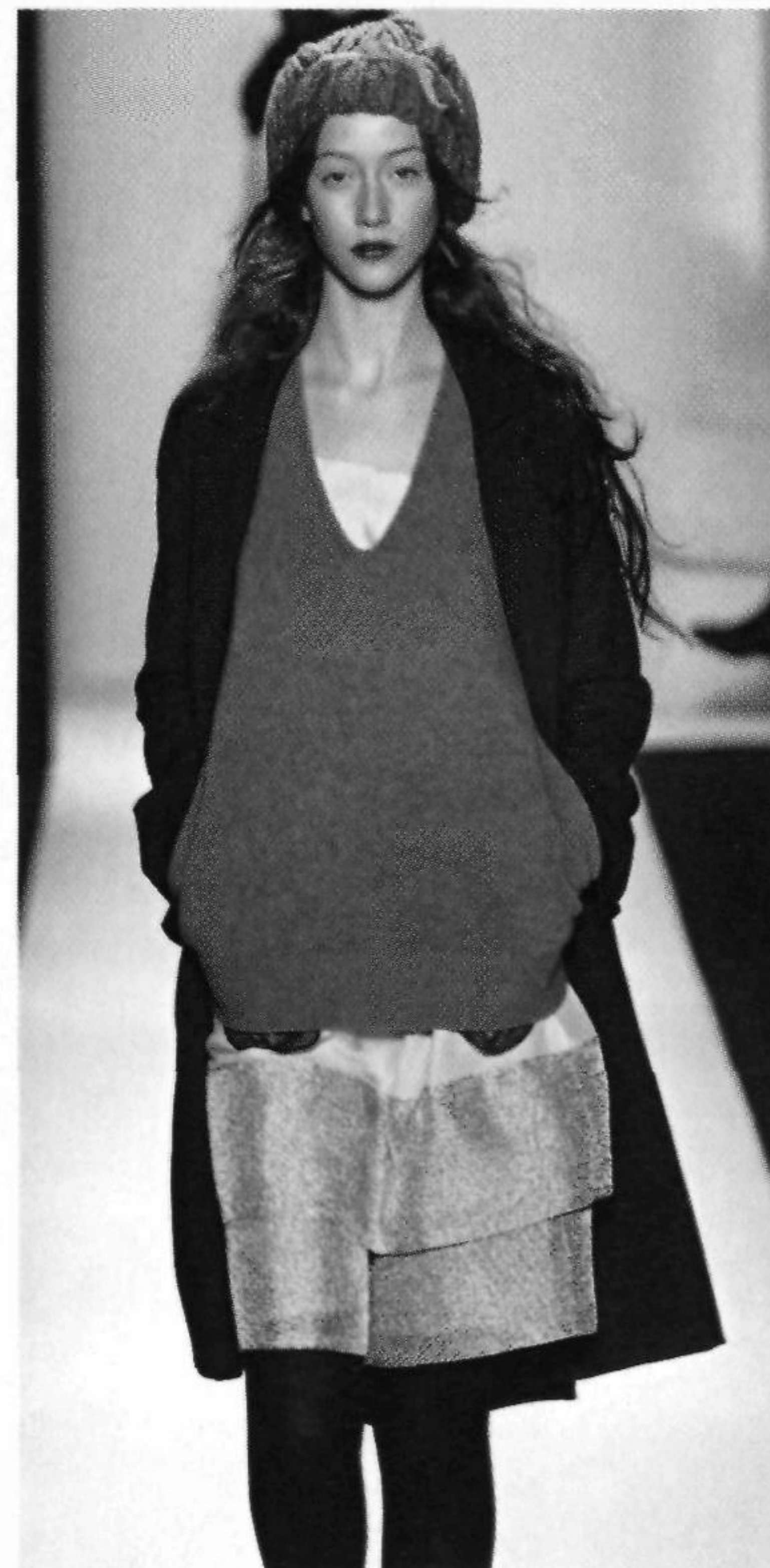
WOMEN IN LUXURY

Wang was born creative. “I have always expressed myself, whether athletically or telling tales through fashion shoots,” she says. Along with that nature, she was blessed with nurture. “I had a mother who was superbly chic. She made fashion this adventure for me as a young woman. She viewed fashion not as superficial but as expressive. That’s a big difference,” Wang says. Her father’s attention to design extended all the way to his Hermès eyeglass cases. “I had an immense education from them in everything, not only fashion but in art and painting. They were very sophisticated people, and yet they loved Dunkin’ Donuts too.” The tension of opposites sits easily with Wang. “That’s always been me. That’s how I’ve always dressed. That’s who I am.”

Indeed, sitting in a ninth-floor studio of her New York City atelier, Wang comes across like the overachiever who is also a rebel, the A student who ditches class more than once in a while. She has delicate Asian features but packs a wallop of American wit. Her look is feminine and slight, yet she dresses, she says, “like a boy.” (Today, it’s Yohji Yamamoto black leggings, black T shirt, charcoal ribbed cashmere sweater and a phenomenally oversize jeweled cross.) Partway through college at Sarah Lawrence, she left for Paris, presumably to study, but it was really to hang out with her then boyfriend, an Olympic champion. She waited to get married until she was “39 and 7/8,” she says. “Just under the wire.” It was while scouting for wedding dresses and finding nothing remotely up to snuff that her father said, “These are really pretty ugly,” Wang recalls. “He said, ‘I’ll back you in a business if it’s bridal, but no fashion.’” A few months later, Wang took him up on the offer.

The difference between “bridal fashion” and “fashion fashion” comes up frequently. “I always say we’re not a bridal house. We’re a fashion house that does bridal. There’s a very big difference,” says Wang, who is one of the few American designers to have a full-fledged, European-style atelier, complete with working sample room and U.S.-based factories. If Wang’s version of bridal involved all the thought, handiwork and talent of high fashion, it had none of the spotlight. It was as if Wang were designing on another planet. Her coping mechanism: “I took out my fashion frustration in bridal.” She whipped up couture-worthy collections every season, one time concentrating on bustiers, everything from crumb catchers à la old Dior to Vivienne Westwood-inspired corsetry; the next time exploring every variation of lace. And she created her signature look: elegant, Charles James-style structuring, often adorned with a subtle flourish—a bow made to look like origami or a small cloud of organza.

By the time Wang got behind her collection the second time around, “I had really studied the craft of making clothes,” she says. And while the collection is clearly her crowning achievement, “it’s been a struggle,” she admits. “I don’t want to imply it’s been easy. I’ve thrown everything in my life behind it.” Her opulent, Russian-themed fall collection is inspired by the decadence of the Romanovs. She showed an extremely luxe brocade dress with a Japanese raw twisted-yarn sweater tossed over it and military Cossack boots worn with a



Wang in her skating days, far left; a look inspired by early 20th century Russia from her fall 2007 collection, center; her Simply Vera collection for Kohl’s

‘A lot of my life has been predicated on not getting what I hoped I would get.’

—VERA WANG

beautiful matte-jersey evening dress. “There’s always thought. It’s the padding just here, but no padding there,” she says of a gray taffeta dress that has the boyish slouch of nylon. “I wanted to find clothes again that I would wear and enjoy and don’t already own,” Wang says of her collection line. “I wanted to get my own philosophy across. The way I’ve always dressed.”

The same contradictions that define her personality have defined Wang’s style. “I would wear a Saint Laurent three-quarter-length belted jacket meant to look like a coachman’s jacket in royal blue felt with tight leather pants and flat ballerina slippers.” It’s the mix of high and low that today defines personal style. “Luxe is always more luxe when thrown against something that isn’t. I felt that a good 35 years ago,” Wang says.

Wang’s Lavender line has the structure and attention to detail of the collection line but is a bit younger. It’s “how my daughters dress,” Wang says. They are 13 and 16. Her recently launched Kohl’s line features signature trends of the season: metallic shows up in a gold pseudo-brocade skirt, which she pairs with a crisp white shirt and a heather-gray sweater. A gray jersey dress is one of her favorites, worn with or without a black satiny ruched belt, a very Vera flourish straight out of the bridal line. “These clothes have real detail,” she says. And yet “I don’t want women to be intimidated by fashion. I want them to feel comfortable and enjoy and have fun with it.”

“As a woman designer for other women, it’s a very personal, intimate message,” Wang says. “Men bring an abstractness and maybe a freedom, where they’re intuiting what it’s like to be a woman. But women designers, each of us brings our own personal, intimate relationship not only with our bodies but with our minds and with who we develop into as people.” No wonder Wang has come out so well.