



THE SAMURAI FASHIONISTA

SINCE FIRST LAUNCHING HIS LABEL IN 1982, JAPANESE DESIGNER **TADASHI SHOJI** HAS CREATED A FULL FASHION AND LIFESTYLE EMPIRE BELOVED BY EVERYONE FROM MICHELLE OBAMA, HAUTE COUTURE MAGAZINE EDITORS, A-LIST CELEBRITIES AND EVERYDAY WOMEN ALIKE. BUT CONSTANT REINVENTION AND INNOVATION REMAIN KEY TO HIS CREATIVE PROCESS, REPORTS **CECILY-ANNA BENNETT**.

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Tadashi Shoji is not your average designer. In fact, he’s about as far from average as you can possibly get. Look at any red carpet event and chances are you’ll find his gowns adorning the bodies of some of the world’s most powerful—and beautiful—women. From Oscar winners to First Ladies, there’s no denying the Tadashi Shoji name is now synonymous with luxury and status. But this is not just a story about a creator of statement gowns, but a testament to what you can achieve when you have far-reaching vision. It’s about the founder of a fully-fledged fashion and lifestyle empire that started small and is now gargantuan. A label which manages to be both luxurious and attainable, timeless and innovative, and driven by an inspiration that encompasses both style and art.

Humble beginnings

Shoji was born and raised in Sendai, Japan, and from a young age had an affinity with the arts. His talent for painting and drawing saw him taken under the wing of Jiro Takamatsu, one of Japan’s most preeminent contemporary artists, whom he assisted for two and a half years. “Working for Jiro was an experience which gave me a unique perspective and helps keep my designs fresh,” he says. “I know my customers want to feel confident and beautiful, and they know I can create something that makes them feel good about themselves.”

There’s often a fine line between art and fashion, and it was after relocating to the United States in 1973 that Shoji found his passion for design. He started working with famed costume designer Bill Whitten designing costumes for the likes of the Jacksons and others of their ilk. After discovering a gap in the market for contemporary gowns for special occasions, he launched his eponymous label Tadashi in 1982. Twenty years later, Shoji was inducted into



the Council of Fashion Designers in America (CFDA). “As a Japanese-born American designer, it was a great honour,” he says.

Building an empire

Fast forward 35 years, and thanks to consistent growth and inspiring expansion—into everything from evening and day wear to accessories and fragrance—Shoji’s latest lines are now available in more than 1000 major department and specialty stores worldwide—including Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bloomingdale’s, Macy’s, and Lord & Taylor, as well as internationally in Vakko, Harvey Nichols Dubai, and Rustan’s. Shoji celebrated his 30th anniversary by launching a robust e-commerce business, and now employs three pattern-makers in his Californian corporate office, as well as 16 pattern ►

*From left to right:
A model during Tadashi Shoji’s
runway show at 2017 New York
Fashion Week and the designer
himself addressing the audience
at 2016 New York Fashion Week.*

“ONE OF MY GREATEST
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makers in Shanghai, where 99 per cent of the line is produced and where he works for several months of the year.

With ongoing plans for new lines and new stores, the sartorial snowball shows no sign of slowing down. “It’s a really exciting time for me as I’ve recently launched an affordable bridal collection online and in my stores,” Shoji says. “Modern brides are more savvy than ever before and don’t want to spend money on expensive gowns, but rather put that money towards something like a destination wedding or a down payment on a house.” If that’s not enough, over the next 12 months the designer plans to launch an intimates line, shape wear, sleepwear and leather handbags, in addition to working with Chalhoub Group to open 18 boutiques in the Middle East over the next five years.

“The introduction of these new categories, in addition to our signature classics, is a natural progression of the brand,” Shoji explains. “We launched our Spring/Summer ’18 bridal collection, our first fragrance Eau du Rose and a collaboration with eyewear brand HAZE Collection—all within the first quarter of 2017. I’m thrilled to bring affordable luxury to a wider range of consumers.”

Fit for a queen

Adding to his appeal, his label now also caters for what he refers to as “Queen sizes” (up to a



INSIDE THE MIND OF TADASHI SHOJI

The secret to creating an A-list label

On his creative process

"Typically, I begin each season with finding something that really inspires me to set a foundation for the collection.

My Spring/Summer '17 collection was inspired by Chinese artist Wu Junyong's piece *The Flying Ark*."

On the key to a flattering fit

"Cut and fit are crucial—if a dress is fitted in the right places, it makes a flattering shape. It's all about playing with illusions and keeping everything in proportion."

On his inspiration

"I am greatly influenced by art—finding a piece that really inspires me is typically where it starts."

On his passion for design

"I love designing because clothes help translate art to life. Everything from the fabrics, details, shape and cut bring that vision alive."



in 2010 and Octavia Spencer in 2012 for both of their Oscar wins."

One day at a time

Shoji says he feels incredibly fortunate to be able to do what he loves with the unyielding support of both his employees and devoted customers. "To have worked for 35 years, presented 20 fashion shows, while getting to work with creative minds is a great accomplishment, and is something I am lucky to be a part of," he adds.

As for his secret to surviving so long in a notoriously brutal industry, the designer is more sanguine. "Learning from your mistakes and picking yourself up when you fall down is key," he says. "My mantra is 'One day at a time'. It's important to focus on something and excel in that one thing before you can move forward."

It's fair to say excelling is something Tadashi Shoji has got down to fine art. 🍷

Right: Christina Hendricks in a Tadashi Shoji dress. Opposite page: Former First Lady Michelle Obama in another of the designer's beautiful creations.

Backstage at New York Fashion Week

size US 24), which is the designers' euphemistic term for plus-size. "As the average woman in the US today is a size 14/16, it's important now more than ever to offer stylish designs in Queen-sizing," he explains.

So, who is he actually designing for? "I like designing for strong women, and strong women come in all shapes and sizes. I can make any woman look and feel beautiful," Shoji says.

His penchant for dressing strong females may be just one of the reasons (along with his flattering cuts and exquisite fabrics) that some of the world's most impressive women have come knocking. "I have had the pleasure of dressing many influential women and those powerful, strong, graceful personalities have shaped my designs," he explains. "One of my greatest achievements to date was dressing the former First Lady, Michelle Obama. The purple gown that she wore to the White House State Dinner in honour of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was one of my favorite looks we did for her. Other notable moments include dressing actresses Mo'Nique