

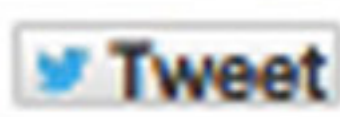

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In the boudoir with Vivian Luk, Hong Kong's poshest dressmaker

Fashion designer Vivian Luk on what it's like designing Oscar gowns for the world's biggest stars, and how she plans to give Hong Kong women the same treatment

By Tiffany Lam 24 December, 2010

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Vivian Luk in her atelier in Happy Valley.

Vivian Luk, a former protégé of Vera Wang who has designed red carpet gowns for the world's most recognizable leading ladies, is down on her haunches niftily draping and pinning a baby blue shift dress on a mannequin in her studio. She gives quiet but authoritative instructions to her seamstress, who looks like she's struggling to catch up.

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"I'm pretty hands on. I drape everything and have my ladies here to help me sew it," Luk says. She says the dress is for "a really prestigious client of ours, who is attending a gala."

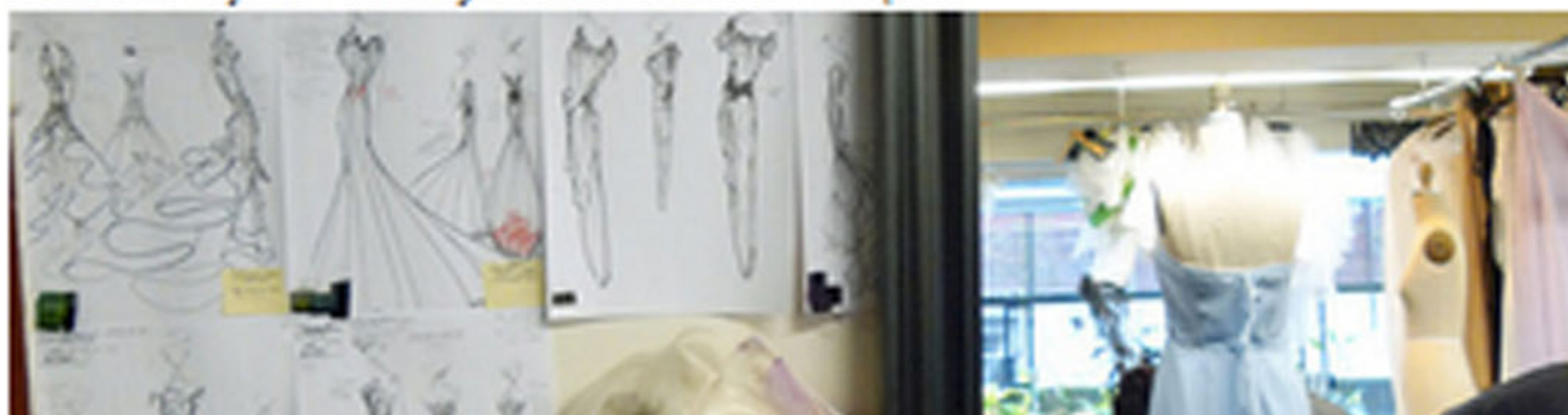
That client turns out to be Cathy Lee, a former model dubbed "hundred billion daughter in law" by the Hong Kong media after marrying Martin Lee of Henderson Land fortune. From tabloid pictures, it appears that the blue shift had morphed into a frilly, diaphanous concoction not unlike Cinderella's ball gown in the Disney cartoon.

Creating headline-making frocks is all in a day's work for Luk. The 30-something Parsons graduate spent three years overseeing Vera Wang's bridal and celebrity made-to-order departments in New York, before relocating to Hong Kong two years ago to start her own evening wear and bridal business.

The portfolio of Luk's work at Vera Wang is full of sketches of show-stopping dresses for Oscar nominees, and bridal gowns in society weddings.

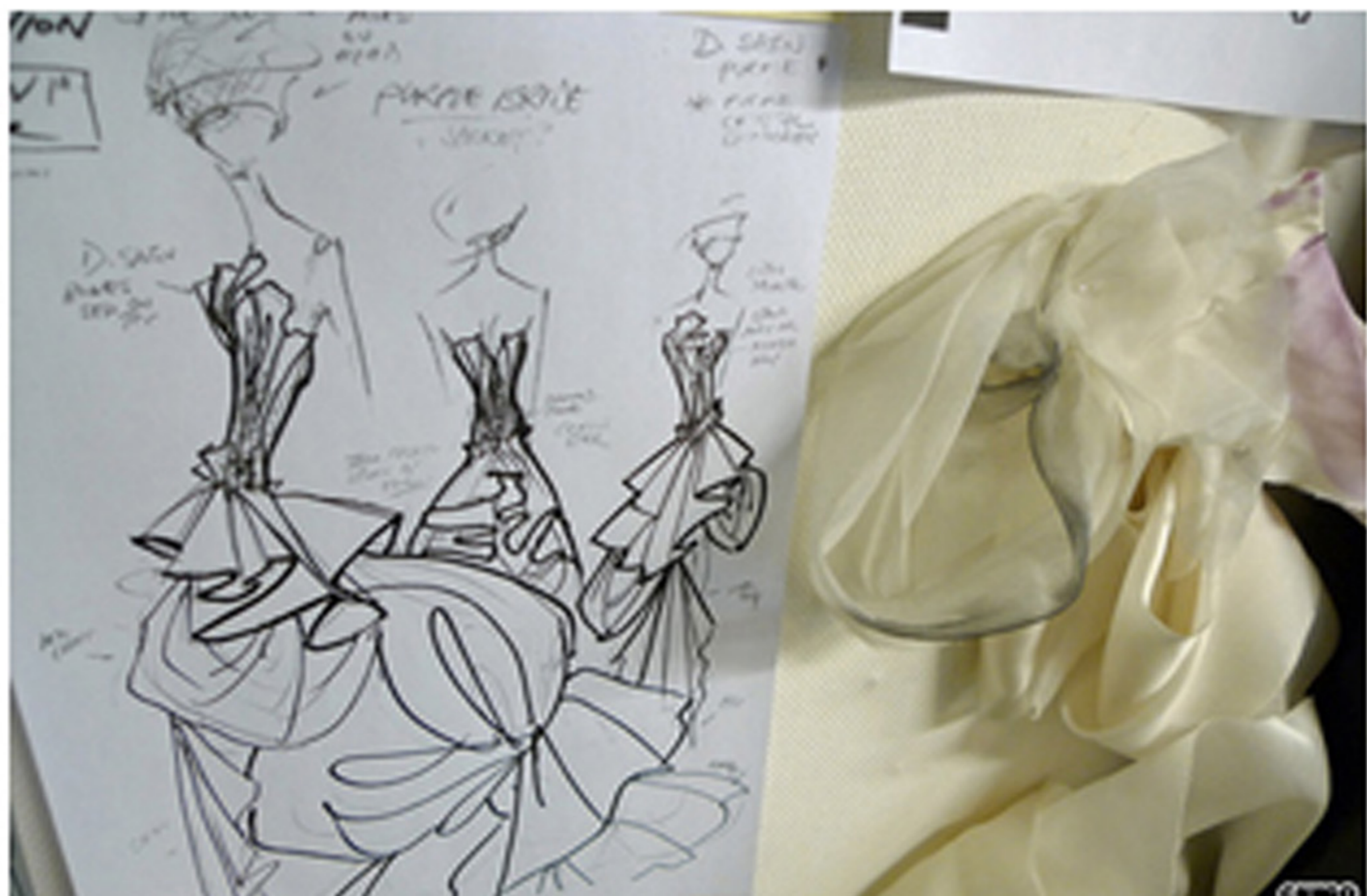
Among them, one is instantly recognizable, a maroon, one-shouldered number worn by a best actress nominee a few years ago. The sheath even inspired a virtual copy available for download in The Sims video game.

Her description of what goes on behind the scenes in Hollywood fashion makes Project Runway scenarios look insipid.





Each fold on Vivian Luk's dresses are painstakingly draped and sewn by hand.





Sketches are pinned to the walls of Luk's studio.



Most of Luk's gowns are fitted with built-in corsets, which are made to order at her atelier.

Hollywood glamour, an insider's perspective

When celebrities are nominated for an Oscar, their agents would request packs of sketches from around a dozen design houses. "We were only given about a day," Luk recalls. "So we sketched, we grabbed fabrics, we Googled, in order to try to understand who this person is."

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Luk's team then Fedex-ed the package to stylists and crossed their fingers in the hope of receiving a call back. When it finally came, it was with diva demands – the sketch was painted in baby blue, but the star wanted it in wine red.

"So we dashed out to the fabric store," Luk recalls. "It was five minutes before closing, but we have to buy all the red fabric that they have, because we had to make sure we have that fabric before we committed to anything."

"It seemed like it was all so chill for her and she probably has ten zillion options," says Luk, laughing. "And we are just totally focused on her one word: red!"

Since the star could not fly out to New York for fittings at Vera Wang's studio, Luk and her team had to make the dress on a mannequin and send the stylist pictures of the progress every few hours until the dress was shipped out.

But it did not end there. Luk's team was in for a last minute plot twist. A day before the Oscars, king of the red carpet Valentino issued a release, stating that they will dress the star in a black gown.

"We all thought we were finished!" Luk exclaims. "It was only when we saw her walk out of her car on TV, and she was wearing our red one, that we started ecstatically calling everybody."

The dress went on to grace best-dressed lists of the year but the designer says that she 'still preferred it in baby blue.'

Movie star treatment for the masses

Movie star treatment for the masses

Luk says she's trying to bring the experience of designing for Hollywood movie stars to Hong Kong.

"I miss it, so I try to take what I learnt there and create it in here. A world that is a fashion house, with many options for a bride, and is not completely commercial."

Getting a gown made at Vivian Luk can take two months to a year, involving intimate chats with the designer, mock-up making, and fittings. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience for many, but it doesn't come cheap.

The minimum spending at Vivian Luk is HK\$60,000 for a bridal gown and HK\$40,000 for a cocktail gown. More elaborate ball gowns can cost up to HK\$150,000.

While Luk has had her hands full designing for the well-heeled ever since her label launched, she says the rest of Hong Kong has yet to catch up on the culture of spending big bucks for a dress. "People already have to spend so much money on banquets in Asia that a gown may only be a small element in their budgets," she says. "Whereas in the States, brides can save up their entire lives for a dream gown."

Her first runway collection debuted in November this year and won rave reviews among local fashion insiders for the elaborate draping and soft, structured silhouettes. She says the show is an attempt to get the word out to a wider audience. "So far, my clientele in Hong Kong have been socialites who found me by referral, or entrepreneurs who have to attend private events. But we're starting to get more regular people as well."



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One of Luk's bridal gowns up close. Elaborate gowns can cost up to HK\$150,000.
