

Oh, Mai!

How an emerging young designer turned to his Texas roots to inspire his second collection

By Annie Jones, Jennifer Liu & Mia Hong

Bach Mai's career as a fashion designer began at St. John's when he started sewing his friends' formal dresses. Back in 2017, while he was working for couture house Maison Margiela in Paris, *The Review* reported on his growing fame – just four years later, he was featured in *Vogue* after the launch of his own fashion label.

Fresh off the release of his second line, Mai ('07) centers his work around a Texan interpretation of luxury. His father, a Vietnamese immigrant and engineer at an oil refinery and chemical plant, is the chief inspiration for Mai's latest collection. He combined glitzy stilettos and iridescent organza with baggy orange trousers and structured tweed skirts to evoke his father's humble origins.

"We live, eat and breathe glamour down here," Mai said at an exclusive reception in Neiman Marcus' Galleria location to celebrate his nomination as the CFDA Emerging Designer of the Year. "It's not just a fantasy: we have an understanding of glamour that's innate. It's an irreverent approach to glamour."

His father's blue denim coveralls inspired the color palette of the collection – and the matching hair color Mai sported at the premiere. After he was interviewed by *Vogue*, Mai predicted that the first line of the article would mention his turquoise blue hair. It did.

Bach Mai's latest styles utilize bold colors, flowy florals and strong shadows.

PHOTOS | Isabella Diaz-Mira



At a recent Neiman Marcus reception honoring Bach Mai ('07), center, the designer is flanked by host Duyen Huynh Nguyen, her husband Marc and four models, all wearing his designs.

PHOTO | Lexi Guo

"Manic Panic, if you haven't tried it," he said. "Great color."

Mai has always known he wanted to be a designer. His passion for evening wear stretches back to high school when, beyond sewing dresses, he explored the closets of his friends' moms. Real Texas women were his earliest inspiration, which he said makes his couture more appealing and familiar.

"These women understand where I'm coming from," Mai said, "because where I'm coming from is inspired by them."

As a sophomore at St. John's, Mai created his first collection as an Independent Study Project with faculty advisor and former history teacher Bela Thacker. Famed couturier Paul Poriet was the main inspiration of the ISP, but he called John Galliano's Dior Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2004 collection "the beginning of my love for couture."

Thacker kept the first item from his collection, which Mai called "a terrible little skirt" and Thacker called "fabulous."

"One of my friends stole it from me," said Thacker, who also mysteriously lost a bag that Mai had designed especially for her. "He was in so much demand."

Even as a high school student, he was "very entrepreneurial," Thacker said. She most admired Mai's confidence that he would achieve his ambitions.

"It's always nice to see students grow and become successful," she said, "but with Bach, it's a little extra special."

Mai earned his bachelor's in fashion at Parsons School of Design in New York City, which is among the best fashion schools in the country. In college, Mai said he slept only six nights a week, every week.

He has worked with some of the most prestigious fashion houses in the world. After graduating, the budding couturier moved to Paris to assist in the fur studio at Oscar de la Renta and earned his master's in fashion design from Institut Français de la Mode. After graduating, he worked for Prabal Gurung, and then under the tutelage of his longtime idol, John Galliano, at Maison Margiela.

In October 2021, Mai held the showroom presentation of his first collection in his friend's living room. *Vogue* called the collection, which featured custom lurex jacquard fabric and velvet made from metallic threads, an embrace of "unabashed femininity."

When his publicist sent out invitations for the event, they initially received no replies from *Vogue*. That is, until the global director of

Vogue runway, Nicole Phelps, emailed back to reserve the next available appointment slot.

"My first ever presentation appointment was with a director at *Vogue*."

Five days later, his name was splashed across *Vogue*'s homepage for six days.

"My life has been insanity ever since then," Mai said. "I haven't stopped running."

Since then, a slew of Hollywood A-listers have donned his dresses for star-studded events. Only a few weeks later, Venus Williams wore a silver dress from Mai's inaugural collection at the closing night premiere of "King Richard" at the American Film Institute Festival in Los Angeles.

Most recently, Heidi Klum wore a blush silk-and-organza suit from the same collection on an episode of "Making the Cut," a fashion competition TV series produced by Amazon Studios, while Lupita Nyong'o wore a blue moiré pantsuit and tweed bralette from Mai's latest collection to kick off the "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" press tour.

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BACH MAI

"It's one thing to talk about it, to hear about it," Mai said, "but to actually feel the power of *Vogue* behind you is a totally different level of craziness."

Mai's soaring success allowed him to recruit a creative team in May. He said that building his own brand is one of the hardest things he has ever done, especially since he has to spend less time designing and more time leading.

"I've spent my whole life making clothes, not learning how to run a company," he said. "Even though I have more people, it seems like there's more to do than ever."

The video on Mai's website showcasing Collection 2 takes place in a sparsely decorated room divided by clear plastic tarps. Many models have blue or white lipstick smeared across their mouths; one has branch-like twine glued around her eyes, and all move in slow motion to ethereal lo-fi music. Exposed pipes decorate the ceiling, illuminated by white neon poles.

The clean-but-industrial backdrop calls to mind his roots as a child of immigrants. He partners with Paris textile supplier Hurel to source fabrics reminiscent, in his words, of steel and oil spills, and prioritizes inclusive and diverse representation in his promotional material.

"My version of glamour is for everyone," Mai told *Vogue* in September. His father's work in the oil refinery, after all, made Mai's career possible.

Mai's family are his first and truest supporters. His father used to drive him to Houston fabric stores on weekends, and his aunts helped him sew dresses. His cousin, Christina Mai ('08), has always been his biggest fan and was his first muse when he began designing.

Mai has been working for decades to build, from the ground-up, an American couture house on par with the houses of Paris. Ever since she saw his ISP fashion show, Bela Thacker has known he would achieve his goals.

"His future was in fashion," she said. "There was no doubt about it."

DESIGN | Georgia Andrews