

# beyond

VIETNAM | MALAYSIA | DUBAI | + MORE

A look from  
Phuong My's  
latest  
collection.

FASHION

## Rose of Saigon

One of Vietnam's most sought-after stylists and design stars never intended to enter the fashion world at all. **Diana Hubbell** catches up with Tran Phuong My about her unconventional road to international success.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ZHANG JINGNA >>

**"I'M NOT A DREAMER,"** Tran Phuong My says, "I just set a goal and keep going." Yes, she's doggedly pursued her ambitions, but it is hard to look at the clothes this fashion prodigy creates, some of Saigon's dreamiest styles, and not see the spark of fancy. At 19, when most of her peers at UCLA were busy planning their party outfits, she imagined creating them. But her family pressured her to pursue a future in business and a degree in mathematics.

"A friend asked me why I was studying math and all I could think of was that I was good at it," she says. "So then they asked me what I would do if I could choose anything, and I said fashion. So two weeks later, I transferred to a fashion school in San Francisco."

Though she moved quickly, it wasn't an easy decision to make. "My father cried when I told him. He told me he didn't send me overseas just so I could become a tailor," she says. It didn't get any easier after enrollment. She may have been a whiz at math, but in the creative scene she felt like a rookie. "At fashion school it seemed like everyone had been practicing art their whole lives. I had to start from the beginning."

Fast-forward eight years and Phuong My now collaborates with runway rulers like Versace and Fendi, while her gorgeously crafted garments have appeared on the catwalks of New York Fashion Week and are favored by celebrities including Minh Hang, Lydia Hearst and Lindsay Lohan. Though only three years old, her eponymous label boasts boutiques in France, Kuwait and Vietnam and is sold in more than 20 countries. With five stores opening in Vietnam in 2016 and a new line of more affordable ready-to-wear, Mymy by Phuong My, this is set to be a breakout year for the 27-year-old designer.

As it turned out, Phuong My got to use her math training after all. She quickly realized that the hyper-rational approach she had once used to solve to equations could be applied to couture. If the goal of a piece of clothing was to highlight an individual's physical strengths and downplay defects, there had to be a logical way to approach the real-life geometric puzzle: "I spent a lot of time studying human ratios. Everything I create is very proportional, because of my background in mathematics."

Phuong My finished her degree and started developing clear aesthetic ideas of her own, and by 2012 she was ready to return to Vietnam and plunge headfirst into the fashion scene. Rather than focus on one specific culture, she allowed her imagination to roam the continent, resulting in styles that hover somewhere between pan-Asian and of-the-moment Saigon, and right within her clients' aspirations.



FROM TOP: Designer Tran Phuong My; a dress from her Spring/Summer 2016 collection.



"My favorite part is talking directly to my customers," she says. "Most of our clients are between 30 and 55. I love that because these women are confident and strong. They know who they are and what they want." What they want, it seems, are artfully draped pleats, bold cuts and vibrant textured fabrics.

Since the flagship store in Saigon opened its doors in March 2013, the brand has kept evolving to meet the needs of her headstrong clientele. Initial collections consisted of pure silk attire, but when customers complained that the material wrinkled too easily, Phuong My went searching for an alternative, creating custom silk and synthetic blends. "We use new fabrics every season and new cuts to highlight their textures."

Phuong My's return to Saigon reflects her deep affection for the country and culture. "People in America are very realistic," she says, "they buy a piece of clothing because it's a piece of clothing. Vietnamese are not that way.

They dress like who they want to be, not who they really are." It's easy to see how a designer who once swapped a safe reality for an uncertain dream could relate. [phuongmy.com](http://phuongmy.com); dresses from US\$500. ☘