Unleash the Princess Within With Sennet Frères's Disney Collaboration

On the heels of the debut Sennet Frères collaboration with Disney for the Ultimate Princess Celebration, we speak to creative director Kee Yu on making women feel like royalty with his gowns.

By Vivien Wong
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Ad Posc Contents from Jackson Ting

Once upon a time, there was a girl who met her Prince Charming, and the Prince and Princess lived happily ever after. It's the fairy tale every little girl dreams of. However, as we grow up, life becomes less simple and we tend to lose sight of our dreams. Disney, with its Ultimate Princess Celebration, wants to encourage us to revisit these fairy tales, which show us that we can be in charge of our own destiny by influencing others with kindness and courage – and that most importantly, love conquers all.

Photo: Sennet Frères

Boutique bridal label Sennet Frères, led by brand heritage consultant Hiro Cheung and chief creative and design director Kee Yu, has recently collaborated with The Walt Disney Company for the very first time to bring princesses and queens to life through the launch of an astonishing couture collection, The Princess Wishes, which was recently shown on the lush courtyards of Grade II listeners residence The Old Albertine in Pok Fu Lam. Inspired by 12 Disney princesses and two queens, this collection bestows their unique characteristics and celebrates one of the most significant attributes: the courage to be kind. We speak to Yu about this once-in-a-lifetime experience and how he embarked on this magical journey.

You've loved designing since you were young. How did you discover this talent and why did you decide to make this your career?

I don't think this is a special talent – everyone has something that they're good at. I grew up with two older sisters and two younger sisters, so I've had passion for fashion from a young age. I never call myself a couturier. You have to put a lot of devotion into haute couture and to me, I just love to create and enjoy the process of designing beautiful pieces. I actually went to England to study fashion design without informing my family! I don't really wear dress as my career – I'm just at my happiest when I'm sitting in front of my sewing machine, creating. And I'm also very grateful for my team, since they're part of my success and who I am today.

Photo: Kee Yu

Why did you choose to create couture bridal gowns and not ready-to-wear?

I think a gown is something that's beyond everyday reality. I wouldn't say it's an art piece, but it's something that you wouldn't wear every day. Every girl feels happy when she sees one and would be delighted to wear it. So I think gowns have a special place in the fashion category. I wouldn't say no to prêt-à-porter, but I think a gown provides the biggest space for me in terms of creativity and craftsmanship.

How did this Disney collaboration with Sennet Frères happen and were you overwhelmed when you first found out about it?

At first, I thought it was challenging. Usually, for my own collections, I start with my own inspiration and concept. For this partnership with Disney, I needed to collaborate and, at the same time, bring out my own ideas and creativities. There are always some boundaries in creating, be it budget or season. Disney is all about storytelling and they're very particular about every single detail. We need to interpret every part of our creation – for example, why we use certain patterns and colours. This was a great opportunity to dig deep into my own design – the core and the intention. It was a unique experience. Sometimes you just design based on your instincts, but this made us think back to the origin of my design. There's always a reason behind it. It has also inspired me to look back at my journey and my core values.

Photo: Sennet Frères

Can you walk us through your design process for this spectacular collection? Did you watch or rewatch the Disney movies to get to know more about the princesses and queens?

Yes! I watched all the Disney princess movies again. Though I might have watched them when I was young, this time I paid more attention to all the details and explored the elements. I thought about why these characters, which were created a long, long time ago, still remain in people's hearts. For example, when you think of Snow White, you immediately think of her pumpkin puffy-sleeved dress and her big bow. I also watched the making-of to learn about the movies' backgrounds and how Disney turns simple elements into classics – and their characters into icons!

I learned so much through this collection and this collaboration. This year marks the 12th year of my gown business. Everything has become quite routine for me, yet with this Disney collection, I feel like I'm back in university, where I have to do a lot of research and studying. So this refreshes me. It's quite amazing to learn how Disney has turned every single story into a timeless classic – there's still so much to learn.

Photo: Sennet Frères

Do you have a favourite Disney princess or queen?

My favourite is Sleeping Beauty. It was me and my little sister's first encounter with a princess! Some elements of Sleeping Beauty's gown inspired me a lot in my early drawings. It's just the magic of Disney!

This collection is named The Princess Within. Being a fashion designer, you don't only help a woman show off her outer look – you also need to bring out her inner beat. How can you achieve that with your designs?

Fashion is a way of expression. It's an invisible language. With The Princess Within, we believe every girl deserves her special moment and her unique beauty. In this social media era, a lot of people think beauty is defined by what the internet tells you. I don't like this. As a designer, I always encourage my customers to try as many silhouettes as they can. I want to help them to expand their vision and their possibilities. Fashion is also about experimenting – you wren't know how it looks until you wear it.

Photo: Sennet Frères

How do you want a woman to feel when she's wearing one of your gowns?

To feel confident about herself – it's that simple! A lot of women feel that they're judged by the media and others. But when you have the right clothes, with the right make-up and hair, everyone can be beautiful. As a designer, I give certain guidance and opinions, and I want my gowns to be able to find that confidence and inner beauty of a woman.

Sennet Frères was managed by the Wolf family many years ago. The brand was brought to life again in 2015, after 70 years, and appointed you as its creative director. What was your first impression of the brand and the history of the Wolf family?

Before I started working for this brand, Hiro Cheung introduced me to The Old Albertine [the historic Wolf residence in Pok Fu Lam, which Cheung moved into in 2018] and told me about the Wolf family. I felt so mesmerised when I heard about their many stories and history while I was at their original mansion. I said yes to the collaboration immediately, and I feel blessed to be able to showcase this collection at its heritage place. This collaboration is different from what I'd done before because this brand really has its own history, with its birth after the Second World War. Regardless of whether it's watches or gowns or furniture, it's still important to have a very strong DNA, design concept and identity – to brazenly the quality of one's lifestyle.

The Old Albertine. Photo: Sennet Frères

As a creative director, how do you find a balance in bringing new direction to the brand and maintaining its heritage elements?

We have several streams in our collections. Rosie, who was the wife of [the original Sennet Frères merchant], Albert Wolf, is more elegant and classic. Susanna, the elder daughter, is more active and has a strong personality. Maurice, the youngest daughter, is sweet and full of life. Hiro Cheung also had a chance to meet up with 80-year-old Molly O'Dell, from the third generation of the Wolf family, and brought her to The Old Albertine. They felt instantly connected, as all the decorations and furniture

in the Matisse – which Cheng had no reference to when he moved it – are very similar to the original setup by the Wolf family. Hence, they made a decision to bring Sensor Fritzes back to life. I'm here to continue the brand's philosophy, its vision of beauty and the precision of craftsmanship.

What's next for you?

The Disney project is actually a continuing project, so you can expect to see other Disney characters coming. For our own main collection, we'll be doing gowns on the royalty theme. It's very interesting for me to study the stories of royalty – real-life princesses such as Princess Diana and the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton – and try to interpret them in my designs. I can't give away too much, but maybe a Prince Charming collection is on the way, too.

After chatting with Kit, my mind just can't stop thinking how Cruella de Vil and Maleficent are going to be interpreted in a modern, contemporary way. Oh, I think I just gave away too much.

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