



Meggen Taylor Contributor

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Fashion Designer Mi Jong Lee Revitalizes the NYC Garment District And Herself

After thirty years of building [Emmelle](#), a ready to wear line known for its distinct style and understated elegance (and worn by the likes of Catherine Zeta-Jones, Oprah Winfrey, Madeline Albright, and Hillary Clinton), NYC fashion designer Mi Jong Lee has proven that it is never too late to reinvent yourself. With her newly launched [namesake line](#) that speaks to every woman regardless of lifestyle or age, Lee has not only created a fresh addition to her brand but by making every garment in her studio she is helping to reinvigorate the NYC Garment District.

Born in Seoul, Korea to a diplomat father, Lee traveled the world and lived in diverse cultures and countries like Spain, Costa Rica and Mexico, all of which have helped to shape Lee's worldly view. Lee's curiosity of people led her to study Sociology at Cornell University where she discovered that her real passion lied in more creative endeavors. Lee went on to study at Parsons The School for Design and in 1982 opened her first retail store, Emmelle.

In 2007, Lee launched her wholesale division putting her iconic designs in 65 specialty stores across the US. Five years ago Lee created innovative capsule collection for an art/fashion exhibition in Paris where she tapped into an even more personal form of artistic expression that sparked the drive behind her new namesake line that she states resonates with the "new woman".



Slate Flow dress from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Pre-fall Collection



Bronze Vest and Camel Pants from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection



Silver Dress from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Pre-fall Collection



Black Cape, Top & Pant from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection

We were invited to see Lee's Pre-fall and Fall 2016 collections (inspired by late architect, [Zaha Hadid](#)) at her recently renovated Emmelle store on Madison Avenue by her new brand ambassador, [Halstead Property](#) powerbroker, [Louise Phillips Forbes](#). Lee met Forbes in their chapter of [Women's Presidents Organization \(WPO\)](#), an organization for highly successful female entrepreneurs where they clicked immediately.



Photo of Mi Jong Lee

“Louise personifies the “new woman” that I am designing for,” says Lee. “When I first started [Emmelle](#), the workplace landscape for women was different then it is today. Many women felt as though their work attire needed to be masculine to show their strength in the boardroom. Women are more empowered now and their fashion choices for work reflect this cultural change. Louise is vibrant, fit, and powerful and she epitomizes the modern day version of a woman in her 50s who embraces her beauty. Louise is the perfect woman to have as a brand ambassador who embodies my design aesthetic.”



Mi Jong Lee Brand Ambassador Louise Phillips Forbes and Mi Jong Lee



Black Dress from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection

“I am beyond thrilled to be Mi Jong Lee’s brand ambassador,” Forbes tells me. “I love the custom tailoring of her clothes but it’s the fabrics and patterns that really speak to me. There is a casual elegance about her collection that fits my lifestyle. Whether I am meeting with clients or at a red carpet event, I feel uniquely stylish whenever I wear one of her stunning designs. Every [Mi Jong Lee](#) piece in my wardrobe is special but I love the off-the-shoulder little black dress from her fall 2016 collection. That dress is so sexy and chic; it makes me proud to be woman.”



Hotel 48LEX New York in Midtown Manhattan



Photo of Mi Jong Lee's Garment District Courtesy of Peter Lane Taylor



Photo of Mi Jong Lee's Studio in the Garment District Courtesy of Peter Lane Taylor



Photo of Mi Jong Lee's Studio in the Garment District Courtesy of Peter Lane Taylor

We headed up a day early so that we could meet with Lee and to see her studio space and her designs before the launch party. We dropped our bags off at [Hotel 48LEX New York](#), a fabulous boutique hotel that hosted our stay in Midtown Manhattan and headed over to Lee's studio in the Garment District. Upon entering it is hard not to be floored by the whole operation that exists in a whopping 10,000 square feet filled with beautiful hand made garments, design sketches on drafting tables still in their conceptual phase with luxurious fabrics stacked floor to ceiling. Meeting Lee was even more humbling—she is passionate, worldly, kind, intelligent (she speaks 4 languages), and has an enviable drive most people half of her age don't have.

When I saw [Lee's designs online](#) I was impressed. But seeing them in person I was in fashion heaven. Lee's knack for selecting fabrics and creating prints even had me (a woman who can be a little averse to prints and bold colors) visualizing myself in them.



Red Flow Tunic & Pant from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Pre-fall Collection



Black Vest, Top & Pant from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection



Slate Jacket, Silver Top & Slate Pant from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Pre-fall Collection



Bronze Sweater & Camel Pant from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection

Lee tells me, “I am always searching for unusual fabrics, and what I enjoy most is to place the flow of prints and textures, as well as the drape of fabric, in a design. It is like I am painting with these tools. I love this process—it appeals to my Eastern sensibility of focus in flow.” Lee’s love for what she does is evident and contagious. Seeing the pure excitement on my face as I looked at her creations, Lee insisted that I should try a few things on. I certainly was not going to say no.



Mi Jong Lee's Studio Courtesy of Peter Lane Taylor



Richard Johnson of Halstead Property, Meggen Taylor and Mi Jong Lee in her Studio Courtesy of Peter Lane Taylor



Technician at work in Mi Jong Lee's Studio Courtesy of Peter Lane Taylor

Each and every garment Lee creates is hand made in her studio from one technician from start to finish—“This empowers my team and makes them take pride and ownership in their

work”, Lee says. In looking at her collection, the pride is evident in the craftsmanship and detail put into each piece. In speaking with Lee about her decision to make every garment in-house and not to outsource despite cost savings it is clear that the decision arose from closely held values.



Black Jacket, Red Flow Tee Shirt & Black Skirt from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Pre-fall Collection



Cream Vest, Forest Green Top & Camel Pant from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection



Oatmeal Top & Black Pant from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Pre-fall Collection



Mulberry Dress from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection

“My [collection](#) and business grew organically from my love of design and it’s process. It was important to me to see the evolvement in our own control. As the business grew and we were entering a bigger volume including wholesale, the challenges grew. We understood that the competition if we chose to outsource would be severe. It was a principled decision to continue within our infrastructure to preserve the quality and flexibility of our collection and to make our clothing entirely in NYC”, says Lee.

No decision in business comes without consequences. As a result of Lee’s decision, her business grew at a slower rate as the market was searching faster, cheaper and easier alternatives. But Lee wouldn’t have it any other way.



Black Jacket from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Pre-fall Collection



Rust Jacket, Black Top & Camel Pants from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection



Red Jacket & Camel Pant from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Pre-fall Collection



Rust Dress from Mi Jong Lee's 2016 Fall Collection

“Our prices are higher than mass produced or assembly produced garments,” Lee says, “But I felt that the love and effort that goes into constructing each garment by an individual technician was essential to preserve our standards. I often compare this process to cooking. Yes, the food processor is much faster and efficient, but the love that goes into hand selecting ingredients where items are hand chopped to create a meal from the heart cannot be compared to fast food production even at it’s highest level”.

Lee continues, “I am confident that there is a customer base that identifies with this commitment to quality in addition to supporting the local economy. My prints are not mass-produced—they are unique and cut individually by each technician to ensure the exact placement. I know there are individuals that can identify with the care this process requires along with the inherent value. We do not have a huge luxury brand infrastructure but we have our own focus on quality and aesthetics—a perspective risen from the love of the design process that is put ahead of bottom line cost factors”.



Hotel 48LEX New York Executive King Bedroom

After Lee spent a few hours of her time with us, it is time for us to head back to our hotel to get ready for the unveiling of her collection. As I sat looking out of the expansive city views from our floor to ceiling windows in our [corner suite](#), my phone rings. It is one of Lee’s assistants who wants to bring me a beautiful forest green silk blouse from her [Fall collection](#) that I fell in love with to wear to the party. I was honored and more than happy to oblige.



Mi Jong Lee Brand Ambassador Louise Phillips Forbes and designer Mi Jong Lee with two models wearing dresses from her new Fall 2016 Collection



Mi Jong Lee Brand Ambassador Louise Phillips Forbes, a top broker at Halstead Property, Designer Mi Jong Lee, Halstead Property's Chairman & CEO Diane Ramirez, and Dr. Marsha Firestone, Founder & President of WPO



Milly designer, Michelle Smith and Mi Jong Lee Brand Ambassador Louise Phillips Forbes at the launch party of the Mi Jong Lee Collection

Peter Taylor with Mi Jong Lee Brand Ambassador Louise Phillips Forbes and Meggen Taylor at the launch of the Mi Jong Lee Collection. Both ladies are wearing looks from Mi Jong's Fall 2016 Collection

When we arrived to the event it was packed with fashionable guests and both Forbes and Lee looked gorgeous in Lee's designs. The newly renovated store with its modern, clean design and well-selected art, and beautiful bouquets of cherry blossoms was the perfect backdrop to see the debut of her namesake collection. After taking in all of the beauty that surrounded us I noticed how cohesive the [Emmelle](#) line and [Mi Jong Lee](#) collection are.

When the opportunity for me to chat with Lee arose to see how the event was going and to touch upon the untimely death of her muse for the collection she said, "I am constantly inspired by artists from diverse cultural backgrounds. Calligraphy delineates space by the graceful arc of linear paths, creating bold boundaries of strength. I have admired this dynamic in the artistry of world-renowned architect [Zaha Hadid](#), who will sadly be missed and was the inspiration for my Fall 2016 collection".

(Full disclosure: My husband and I have worked with Louise Phillips Forbes to market her historic real estate listings.)