



A sense of OCCASION

Favoured by A-listers and royalty alike, British designer Jenny Packham is quietly taking over the world – one beaded dress at a time

By GRACE CAIN / *Portrait photographer* CAROLINE IRBY

Jenny Packham was 11 years old when she decided that she wanted to be a fashion designer. “And that was it,” she says, calmly sipping her breakfast coffee. Packham has a way of speaking that makes everything seem of equal importance. When she states her intention to order avocado on toast, it is uttered with the same cool cadence as the story of her label’s beginnings. “I was 24. Matthew and I had just finished studying at Central Saint Martins [in London], so we decided to start a business together.” She is referring to Matthew Anderson, CEO of Jenny Packham and her (now) husband. I venture that it must have been a momentous decision, to jump straight out of studying and headfirst into business ownership. Packham points out that she grew up in the 1980s. “If you wanted to do something, you just got on with it.” She pauses for a moment. “And I was obviously very naive and silly.”

These are not the first words that come to mind to describe the woman sitting before me today. Pragmatic and quietly confident, the designer’s composed demeanour feels at odds with the extravagance of her dresses. From dream-come-true bridal gowns to red-carpet-ready numbers, she is known from LA to East Asia for her sparkling beadwork and opulent details. “The sort of women who wear our dresses definitely want some attention,” she says. “But in a discreet way.”

If you can get your head around that oxymoronic statement, it all starts to make sense. It’s a little like how Jenny Packham >

(the person) tends to avoid the spotlight, while Jenny Packham (the label) is all about making an impression. Even if you don't know the name, you've almost definitely seen the dresses; they regularly appear on an army of A-listers, from the Duchess of Cambridge to burlesque performer Dita Von Teese by way of Priyanka Chopra, Rainie Yang, Victoria Song and Cara Delevingne.

Circumstances have certainly improved since the brand's early years, when willing models were apparently in short supply. Packham vividly remembers selling one of her first collections into Harrods, when her brand was still in its infancy. "They wanted to see the dresses on someone, so I stood in Harrods' buying offices trying them on myself. I had to stand there in this stupid tutu with the whole office looking at me." She laughs (a measured, sensible laugh). "You only do those things when you're young. But how wonderful to have made that effort!"

These days, Packham's success is quiet, but global. Earlier this year, her brand closed Shanghai Fashion Week as one of several showing as part of the British Fashion Council's strategy to open up this lucrative market to UK-based designers. "People in China are becoming more interested in niche brands – now it's just about gaining their confidence," she says.

Although the Jenny Packham name has been a presence in China for more than 25 years, it was only after the designer visited her first store in Beijing that she realised the full potential for her label. "Seeing the customers putting the dresses on and the way they were interacting with the collection... I could just see there was a market there for us."

Packham is one of those rare people who can balance creativity with acute business acumen. In her typically meticulous way, she spends a great deal of time trying to understand the different sartorial needs of her international clientele; in fact, she cites this as one of the reasons for her brand's longevity.

"In the Middle East, people want a different dress for every special event," she says. "In America, the mother of the bride tends to wear a long, beaded gown. In the south of France, they want something very, very short." Despite variations in global trends, however, there is one aspect that unites almost every customer: "If we don't put any beads on it, nobody looks at it," the designer chuckles ruefully. "Sometimes we'll do a lovely crepe dress and then people will ask where the beads are going. That's what most of our customers around the world are expecting from us, and it's the thing we do really well."

For anyone who designs clothes for a special occasion, there's the added pressure of knowing that, in the mind of the wearer, your creation will always be associated with a particular



Chinese actress Li Bingbing at the opening of Jenny Packham's Shanghai boutique in April

memory. Packham views this as part of the magic of her job. Her face lights up as she recounts the tale of a customer who was wearing Jenny Packham when she met her husband. "People will tell me stories like, 'I was wearing your dress – you know, the one with the beads!'" Packham jokes. "But I love hearing them. It's very nice to feel you've played a little part in someone's life."

This philosophy extends to the red carpet, where her designs have appeared on successful actresses the world over, from Kate Winslet and Angelina Jolie to Li Bingbing, Tiffany Tang and Angelababy. "When it happens, it's fabulous," she says. "It feels like a little bit of you is going down in history."

While it's obviously a boost for brand awareness when a megawatt celeb chooses to wear Jenny Packham, the designer says it's rare for customers to request a replica of a dress they have seen on the red carpet. China, however, is the exception. "On the day that a celebrity wears a particular style, we'll get shops ordering 20 pieces," says Packham. "That doesn't happen in the rest of the world, but it happens often in China."

An amused glint appears in her eye as she recalls one dress that drew a very unexpected reaction: the gown worn by actress Caterina Murino in the James Bond film *Casino Royale*. If you've seen it, you might remember the deep orange-red satin piece, bias-cut with lace criss-crossing the back and into a bow

Gerry Images

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This page JENNY PACKHAM gown from a selection; opposite page JENNY PACKHAM dress £2,660 Womenswear, First Floor; and harrods.com

at the base of her spine. "Apparently, when she stepped out in it, the crew went completely silent," says Packham. "She told me that the dress changed her life. But the really odd thing was that we started getting phone calls from men across the world, all wanting to order that exact piece. It's the only time that has ever happened." She gives a wry chuckle. "I suppose they all wanted to feel like James Bond."

Side-effects of the male gaze aside, the idea that a piece of clothing can completely alter the course of someone's life is compelling. I wonder if Packham sets out to design clothes that help the wearer feel empowered? At this, she pauses for a moment to think. "Ultimately, these are dresses to enjoy yourself in," she says. "If you feel comfortable and confident, of course that can be very empowering. It's weird how feeling unhappy with what you're wearing can unbalance you."

With that in mind, does she believe she's ever made the perfect dress? "No!" She seems utterly horrified at the thought. "There's always something wrong with it! But that's how you keep moving forward in fashion, by wanting to do better each season." Ever the businesswoman, she admits that her opinion on a design is usually dictated by its commercial performance. "If something doesn't sell, I'm afraid I do see it as a bit of a failure. But when somebody wants what you've produced, that's job done."

Last year, Packham celebrated the 30th anniversary of her business. Surely a cause for celebration, even for someone who is never completely satisfied? "I don't think Matthew and I felt like everyone else. It actually made me feel very old. I began to wonder if we had accomplished everything we had wanted. But it was also a moment for us to think about what we want to achieve going forward." She smiles. "I suppose it was a bit of a midlife crisis." Hmm, maybe not then.

That's not to say she isn't grateful for – and perhaps even a little proud of – all she has done over the past three decades. "I have had so many amazing experiences, from dressing people I've really admired to all the wonderful teams I've worked with over the years. I don't hold back on how difficult it is to survive in fashion, but I still love it very much."

Knowing full well that she will be far too discreet to answer, I tentatively mention her connections to the British royal family. A neat little smile opens across her face. "I can say it's obviously been a real highlight to dress the Duchess," she ventures – and that's the end of that conversation.

Even in a turbulent international climate, the future for Jenny Packham looks promising. Packham is planning to produce more exclusive ranges for different locations and hopes to expand further into markets with untapped potential, such as Asia.

"The old classic: in hard times, women wear lipstick," she says. "There is more of a tendency to dress up when things are tough, because we want what we haven't got. Clothing is the perfect way to achieve that." □