

# Jimmy Choo



## Essay

By

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An unceasing inspiration to a generation of forward-thinking designers, the Malaysian-born shoemaking icon stays on the move in both life and work.

Worn by everyone from royalty to stylish secretaries, the high-heeled wonders designed under the Jimmy Choo brand have long been established as the ultimate red carpet accoutrement since the business was founded decades ago.

What has always set the shoes apart was Choo's belief that the best-made shoes emerge from an empathy with the client. "What makes a beautiful shoe is not just the design but also the comfort it offers to the wearer," Choo says. Imbued with a sole purpose—to make women's feet look and feel as beautiful as humanly possible—a custom-made pair of Jimmy Choo's became interminably covetable.

But for all the pomp and circumstance that immediately precedes Choo's legendary moniker, the man himself remains an enigma. He is often photographed at society events, seemingly at odds with his notably private side. Some might connect Choo's reserve to his public falling out with his former business partner Tamara Mellon, detailed in her recently published tell-all memoir, *In my Shoes*. Choo remains silent on the issue. Others imagine his desire to let his work do the talking and still others associate his reserved nature with a humble beginning. It was from this humble beginning that kindled his love affair with shoes.

Born Choo Yeang Keat on the Malaysian island of Penang, Choo stumbled upon his vocation early, nurtured by a shoemaking father. "The first pair of shoes that I made at the age of 11 ... was a 'doggy' shoe—the shoe vamp was in the shape of a dog's head," says Choo, who worked as his father's apprentice for a number of years. His passion for footwear eventually took him to London where he studied at Cordwainers College. Upon graduation, Choo set up his first workshop focusing on made-to-order shoes. "It was at the

studio that I started to get noticed by clothing designers who would collaborate with me for their collections," he says. "The collaborations eventually ended up at London Fashion Week where my shoes caught the attention of Vogue magazine. That was the turning point for me,"

Vogue expressed that interest with an eight-page spread, and overnight, Choo's unglamorous Hackney studio landed in the address books of clients in the know, for example, the late Princess Diana. Finally, his work was getting the attention it deserved. "My knowledge and skills in the actual construction of the shoe shape set me apart from other shoe designers," says Choo. "I can almost tell instinctively what type of shoes are comfortable and what type of shoes are not comfortable just by looking at them."

In 1996, Choo partnered with Mellon, then a fashion editor, and her father, Tom Yeardye. They launched his ready-to-wear line which propelled the brand to stratospheric new heights, making available to the world what only the well-heeled smart set in London could previously access. It was a move that would bring Choo's name to the fore. A diverse selection of new designs, ranging from sandals to bejewelled mules produced with greater capacity and speed, lured droves of women across the world.

But while the business boomed, he remained a craftsman at heart. Choo would later sell his stake in the label at the height of its fame and quietly return to his couture roots. His current shop on London's Connaught Street, manned by a knowledgeable team of assistants, stands as a testament to his enduring love of bespoke footwear, and although the cache of the modest workshop in Hackney has since been replaced with a more established ambiance, the same motivations are underfoot.

This new phase in Choo's career also marks a number of professional milestones, including an honorary OBE from Britain's Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on behalf of the Queen, the conferred title of Dato' (the Malaysian equivalent of a British Knighthood) from Penang's Head of State, and a slew of awards in acknowledgement of his contributions to the fashion industry. Choo also lectures regularly at colleges, including his own, as a visiting professor.

Though a fervent advocate of education, he denies rumours of an upcoming Malaysia-based shoemaking institute bearing his name; his ongoing responsibilities as a tourism ambassador for Malaysia are plenty. These other pursuits inform his design practice. For Choo, adaptability is key. "A designer should not just be someone who is good at sketching, but also well-versed and knowledgeable in every aspect of the making of any creation."