

Alaska
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Luly Yang
High-flying fashion

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Fashion designer
Luly Yang.

HIGH- FLYING FASHION

Acclaimed Seattle couture designer brings a new sense of style to airline uniforms, in the air and on the ground

Alaska Airlines pilots like sturdy fabrics because cockpit seat harnesses rub against their shirt fronts and fray the cloth. Female flight attendants want skirts whose length and fit allows for easily reaching into overhead bins. Baggage handlers in Fairbanks, Alaska, bundle up in the cold, while in Los Cabos, Mexico, their counterparts need cool fabrics in the hot sun. Many airline employees prefer uniforms with deep pockets, to carry the tools of their trades. Everybody wants to look good, feel comfortable and represent Alaska Airlines with pride.

Luly Yang, a Seattle-based couture designer, knows what is important to airline employees. She's spent many months participating in focus groups and talking with employees as she embarks on a custom uniform makeover for more than 12,000 Alaska Airlines and Horizon Air employees in 13 different work groups. The possibility of this project growing even larger arose in April when Alaska announced its intent to purchase Virgin America. That acquisition will make the Seattle-based carrier the fifth-largest U.S. airline and the West Coast's premier airline.

When you meet Yang in her boutique at Seattle's Fairmont Olympic Hotel, you know immediately that she's up to the challenge. A petite, elegant woman with long black hair and a warm, open manner, she is both incredibly chic and refreshingly practical. She knows how to create excitement, to deliver a look

BY CANDACE DEMPSEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSÉ MANDOJANA



SHERMAN CHU

that people will appreciate and remember.

Indeed, Yang is her own best advertisement. She's wearing a blue cashmere sweater dress from her collection and crystal-studded earrings. Such dresses are a uniform of sorts for busy women, she says. "They're easy to travel with and easy to care for, which I love in all of my designs. I love how sweater dresses are easy to transition from day to night, and have that flexibility."

Yang is also a whiz at packing and can tell you the best way to wedge everything you need for a two-week trip through Europe into a single carry-on bag. Long before she was chosen for the uniform project, she was a fan of Alaska and flew it frequently.

"I'm a Seattleite," she says. "Alaska is our hometown airline. I love it. I've watched it grow, and I want to be part of its success."

Many in Seattle feel the same about Yang's business. Visitors and locals alike stop to gaze at the storybook bridal dresses and couture ballgowns displayed in the windows of Yang's boutique.

The true showstopper is the signature dress she patterned after monarch butterfly wings, its silk taffeta skirt embellished with ostrich feathers and dotted with Swarovski crystals.

Yang has also designed uniforms for the Pan

---- **Luly Yang**, above, drapes a gown for her new collection in her Seattle studio. Yang's signature **Monarch butterfly dress**, upper right, helped launch her fashion career.

Pacific Hotel, costumes for Teatro ZinZanni and red-carpet looks for celebrities. At annual fashion shows, an international clientele snaps up Yang's ready-to-wear and couture dresses, skirts, sweaters and accessories.

Designing uniforms, Yang says, is one of the most exciting challenges for a designer. Born in Taiwan into a family of designers, architects and engineers, Yang has been surrounded by creativity her whole life. She moved to Bellevue, Washington, when she was 10, and design was one of her first loves. "I sketched dresses at age 6," she recalls. "My grandmother was very fashionable. She designed and made her own clothes, and was very well-dressed. I remember watching her sew when I was really little."

Yang earned a design degree from the University of Washington. She began her career as a graphic designer for an architecture firm in Seattle, and taught fitness on the side. As part of a fundraising event, she entered a fashion contest for graphic designers. Having always loved butterflies, she played with the idea of a monarch butterfly emerging from its chrysalis and morphing into something new and beautiful and dramatic.

That fabulous butterfly dress became a metaphor

for Yang's own life. She saw a way to live out what her website calls "The Monarch's Tale," a "soaring flight of transformation." She realized she could still do what she loved, but in a different medium—fashion instead of graphics. She began to build her business, opening her first couture boutique in downtown Seattle in 2000 with 12 bridal gowns. Now, Luly Yang Couture is an international brand with clients all over the world.

Her past as a world traveler, graphic designer, fitness instructor, couture designer and successful business owner will certainly help Yang meet the challenge for Alaska Airlines. Her collection of uniform designs will be extensive, addressing the unique functionality and performance needs for a wide variety of job categories. Within a single group, she'll need to create diverse garment options—slacks to skirts, blazers to blouses—that take into account complex factors such as petite, curvy and slim body types. She'll even design maternity wear.

"This uniform project is the most rewarding project a designer could be asked to partake in,"

RIBBONS IN FLIGHT

As Luly Yang works through the initial designs of Alaska Airlines' extensive uniform makeover, she has one piece ready to fly. During October, flight attendants, pilots and customer service agents will wear new scarves and ties to show support for Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

"I'm really honored that I could make this the first piece," she says. "It's a cause my employees and I all support. It's a small piece, but very significant to those who choose to wear it."

The new silk neck pieces, in shades of pink, were inspired by the iconic pink ribbons that many people wear to call attention to the disease, the second most common cause of cancer deaths among U.S. women.

Yang has worked on projects that helped raise money for the Susan G. Komen organization, and has designed many gowns and dresses for breast cancer survivors. "These women are both amazing and inspiring," she says.

For more information on the fight

against cancer, visit the American Cancer Society at cancer.org.
—C.D.



---- The urban streets of Seattle near Yang's downtown studio are an inspiration to her design work.

Yang says. "I am honored to be a part of this, and view myself as a partner in Alaska's success."

It's a partnership that Yang fully embraced from the start. Well before Alaska announced her appointment in February 2016, she spent months flying around the airline's route system, listening, observing and exploring the challenge. She spoke with flight attendants, customer service agents, pilots and other employees about how their uniforms impact their roles.

Even now, when she travels to Europe and Asia on other business, she finds herself looking at how the crews are dressed, observing how the different pieces they're wearing perform in their environment, and taking notes.

Yang wants the new uniforms to be beautiful and also functional.

In choosing Yang, Alaska is following in a glamorous airline-industry tradition. Some fashionistas credit Oscar-winning costume designer Edith Head with creating the Jet Age's dazzling, colorful flight attendant uniforms way back in 1959. Now, Yang joins Christian Lacroix, Vivienne Westwood, Prabal Gurung and other well-known designers in presenting more modern versions.

Alaska's uniform project is an important piece of the airline's first big brand update in 25 years. The brand's visual enhancements include bolder colors (bright green, three shades of blue), a sleek new logo and even a more youthful visage for the iconic Eskimo image on the plane tails. "I love the organic curves of the Alaska brand aura, and I like the fact that the Eskimo is smiling more," Yang

says. "It's refreshing and smart."

As the airline completes its rebranding, Sangita Woerner, Alaska's vice president of marketing, says the focus is on building upon successes rather than conducting a total makeover. "The new colors are more exciting, more visible. They show our character. We're caring and approachable. There's this assurance when you board our planes that you are going to be taken care of."

Woerner says the uniform project is crucial to the way employees—those who see and interact with customers—feel about their jobs. "Employees are the biggest representatives of our brand," she says. "So this rebranding isn't complete without the uniforms. We want our frontline employees to look like Alaska when they're walking down the concourse, to immediately be recognizable."

Choosing Yang was the easy part, Woerner says. "We met at her boutique in downtown Seattle, and not only is she warm, approachable and friendly, but she asked a lot of smart questions, and she expressed such a passion for Alaska that within 15 minutes we knew that she was the one."

Employees are extremely excited about having Yang design their uniforms. They draw up lists of suggestions and some have even dropped into her boutique.

That enthusiasm is shared across the airline. "To say that our employees are thrilled to be getting new uniforms is an understatement," says Andy Schneider, vice president of inflight services at Alaska. "They take pride in their work and in our company, and they want to feel that same pride in how they look. Many know Luly and love her designs and her style. She has already invested much of herself in this project, and our employees are really excited to see her work."

What's on their wish lists? "Fit and function are always important features of a uniform, but I think what our employees are looking for now is something that sets them apart from the crowd," says Schneider. "They want something that aligns with our brand and makes them feel proud to be part of Alaska Airlines and Horizon Air."

In designing the uniforms, Yang can draw upon the understanding of the human form that she developed as a fitness instructor for many years. She's always been fascinated by how people move.



---- **Wedding gowns** remain a big part of Yang's couture work, and she enjoys the interaction she has with her customers.



When she talks about a particular uniform, she bends and sways, as if imagining how it will look when someone puts it on.

"The fun part for me," she says, "is when my clients finally put the garments on. That's my reward. Clothes come alive when people wear them."

Because Yang's shop is busy, with customers trying on dresses and salespeople bustling about, she does her actual designing in a private studio. Her team will

complete the Alaska project in that location, which is filled with swatches of fabric and inspiration boards with photographs of dramatic landscapes and flight-crew uniforms from all eras. Dress forms are clad in old captains' jackets and hats, and clothing racks are filled with Alaska's current wardrobe—everything from suits for pilots to the orange vests worn by ramp workers.

Yang's listening skills came in handy this year when she participated in focus groups with Alaska employees who were flown in from all over the route system. They represented all work groups: flight attendants, pilots, customer service agents, aircraft and maintenance technicians, and more.

Yang's favorite focus group moment came when

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she traveled to the state of Alaska to meet with employees. There, she peered into the belly of a 737 with ground crews and observed firsthand how employees load luggage.

From such focus groups, Yang learned just how important fit will be. “Every body is different, and we are designing for a range of body types and sizes. In all of my design work,” she says, “I’ve learned that no two bodies are the same. It’s an exciting challenge to design for such a diverse group with many diverse job functions.”

Now that the focus groups are finished, Yang is working on the conceptual design and development of the uniforms. In terms of fabrics, she says her goal is to use high-quality materials, and to use what’s best for job-specific needs.

“We want to improve breathability and function

by using more technology in fabrics, drawing inspiration from sportswear and athletic wear.”

Yang has set a high bar for the new uniforms. “We all have pieces in our closet that we love to pull out,” she says. “I’d like the uniforms to be like that. My goal is to design a uniform that reflects the brand and soul of Alaska Airlines. I want employees to be proud of wearing their uniforms.”

How will Yang measure the success of her uniform project?

“I want Alaska employees to look forward to putting their uniforms on every day,” she says. “I wish for them to care for their uniforms as if they were precious. Then I will know I have succeeded.” ▲

Candace Dempsey is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

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