


Seeing the Fashion World Through the Eyes of an 8-Year-Old

An interest in design and a knack for sewing have earned Max Alexander celebrity fans and millions of social media followers.



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By Jenny Block

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“Look at you in linen,” the designer Isaac Mizrahi said to a young fan he was meeting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on a Thursday in August, to see the “Sleeping Beauties: Reawakening Fashion” exhibition.

“And I’m dressed like Uncle Fester,” continued Mr. Mizrahi, who was wearing dark clothes.

Mr. Mizrahi, 62, showed his first collection about 30 years before Max Alexander, the 8-year-old who met him at the museum, was born. Mr. Mizrahi, a fashion world fixture who has sold clothes to the masses on QVC, has some 196,000 followers on Instagram. Max, an aspiring fashion designer who just started third grade, has three million.

Like many children his age, Max is playful and excitable. “Hi Max,” he said, looking at his reflection in a glass panel. While walking past mannequins dressed in elaborate ensembles, he observed aloud, “There are no heads.”

But unlike many children his age, Max — with support from his father, Jack Kolodny, 50, and mother, Sherri Madison, 48, who was with him at the museum — has managed to take an interest in fashion design and a knack for sewing surprisingly far.

He is showing items he has made on Tuesday, the penultimate day of New York Fashion Week, at an event at the Conrad New York Downtown hotel. (Max’s day at the Met was one of several engagements he had during a summer trip to New York ahead of that event.)



The fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi met Max for a tour of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in August. “He is so fresh and so alive, so full of inspiration,” Mr. Mizrahi said. Graham Dickie/The New York Times



The actress Sharon Stone in a jacket Max made for her. Sharon Stone, via Max Alexander



Max has also designed a coat for the actress Debra Messing. via Debra Messing

He has been featured on “Good Morning America” as well as in People and the Italian edition of Vanity Fair magazine. He has earned celebrity fans like Sharon Stone and Debra Messing. (Both found Max on Instagram.) And he has leveraged the attention he has received to gain audiences with designers including Pamella Roland; Wes Gordon, the creative director at Carolina Herrera; and Mr. Mizrahi, who shared his wisdom with Max as they wandered through the museum.

“That’s Worth,” Mr. Mizrahi said, pointing to a pale House of Worth gown with a cloud motif designed in the 1890s by Charles Frederick Worth, who is often called the father of the modern couture industry. “Remember that word: Worth.”

When Max mistook a feathered hand fan for a fly catcher, Mr. Mizrahi tried to correct him: “It’s actually a fan,” Mr. Mizrahi said. Max wasn’t persuaded. “It’s a fly catcher,” he replied.

But Max correctly recognized other pieces, including an embroidered green cape that pooled at the floor. “It’s Gucci,” Max said excitedly, and it was.

Mr. Mizrahi can relate to Max, he said, because he expressed an interest in fashion at such a young age that he can no longer remember how old he was. “What he has is that capacity to have a vision and then to make the vision a reality,” Mr. Mizrahi said. “I recognize that because I had that.”

Max's mother said he was 4-years-old when he announced during a family dinner at their home in Southern California that he was a dressmaker and needed a mannequin.

"We questioned why, since we had never seen him show any interest in fashion, and he replied, 'Get me a mannequin, and I'll show you,'" Ms. Madison said. She is an artist whose preferred medium is cardboard; Max's father works in finance.

Using cardboard, Ms. Madison made a dress form for Max with the proportions of his sister, who is four years older than him. (She is now 12; he has a younger brother who is 6.) Ms. Madison started to teach Max how to sew and, with her help, he began making pieces for his sister. After Max turned 5, he began taking sewing lessons with another teacher, whom he sees a couple times a month.

He attends a small private school in Southern California — his favorite classes include art, science, math and gym, his mother said — and he typically works on sewing projects at night or on the weekends. "It's really no different than having a child who plays soccer," Ms. Madison said.

She started Max's Instagram account in 2020 as a way to share videos of his sewing projects with his grandparents, whom he couldn't see in person because of pandemic restrictions. As Ms. Madison continued to post on the account, "we started receiving private messages about how Max made people's days," she said. "My family encouraged me to keep posting because Max's joy is fairly infectious."





Max with some of his confections at the Conrad New York Downtown hotel in August. On Tuesday, the penultimate day of New York Fashion Week, he is showing some items he has made at an event at the hotel. Photographs by Graham Dickie/The New York Times

As Max's profile has risen, his family has been learning how to handle the attention: "We have family conversations a lot around being grateful for the fans," Ms. Madison said. She manages his social media presence and has arranged his meetings with people like Mr. Mizrahi. Ms. Madison added that the money

Max had earned from selling some pieces had been saved, invested, used to buy materials or donated to charities of his choice.

Some clothes Max has made are more whimsical than wearable and show the hand of an 8-year-old. But he approaches many projects with imagination and a clear focus. In videos shared on his Instagram account, Max is seen draping fabric just so on dress forms and sitting at sewing machines as he installs zippers and makes French seams. Sometimes he bats away his mother when her attempts to help don't conform to his vision.

The day before Max's outing with Mr. Mizrahi, he and his mother went to Mood Fabrics, in the garment district of Manhattan, where Max ran his fingers over bolts of fabric as he moved frenetically but purposefully through aisles lined by towering racks crammed with materials.

"We need fancy fabric," Max said as he paced the store. After spotting a bolt of gold lamé, he pulled it from a shelf. "Bingo," he said.



The joy that fashion brings to Max, who just started third grade at a private school near his home in Southern California, is "fairly infectious," his mother said. Graham Dickie/The New York Times

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Max chooses materials by performing what he calls the “floop test”: tossing a fabric in the air and then running beneath it. He also likes to put fabrics in a bathtub full of water to see how they move.

A childhood interest in fashion design is a trait Max shares with several others, including some who have gone on to have successful careers, like Bob Mackie, Michael Kors, Isabel Toledo and Mr. Mizrahi, said Valerie Steele, the director and chief curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.

“When you look into the biographies of individual designers,” Ms. Steele said, “you often find that they’re obsessed with fashion from a very early age, from as early as 4 years old.”

Ken Downing, 62, the creative director and chief creative officer at Xcel Brands in New York, who met with Max and his mother a few days before their trip to Mood Fabrics, also showed an interest in fashion at a young age.

“I was 6 years old when I was pulling clothes out of my mother’s closet and dressing her,” said Mr. Downing, a former fashion director at Neiman Marcus who now oversees a portfolio of brands including Halston and Isaac Mizrahi (Mr. Mizrahi sold his namesake company to Xcel in 2011).

When Max visited the Halston showroom, Mr. Downing said, he was drawn to all things shiny — sequins, beads, hardware, silk flowers — leading Mr. Downing to give Max a nickname.

“I call him Maximalist,” he said.

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