

## FASHION UNFOLDING

*Laura Rysman* REPORTING FROM *Milan*: By trusting his instincts and crafting timeless, origami-inspired garments on his own terms, Satoshi Kuwata's Setchu is redefining the role of the modern fashion brand – and scooping the industry's most prestigious awards in the process. PHOTOGRAPHER *Luigi Fiano*

"I'm not a fashion designer," says Satoshi Kuwata, whose brand, Setchu, won the 2023 edition of the prestigious LVMH Prize for emerging talent. "I'm a product designer," adds the Kyoto-born creative, who worked for brands in London, New York and Paris before settling in Milan. "Fashion is about garments that you make for a runway show that are never sold. I'd rather make beautiful products that last a long time."

Kuwata's product-focused ethos is informed by both his Japanese heritage and his early training on London's Savile Row; he favours creating functional garments that he can revisit season after season and tweak to perfection. It's an approach that resonates with today's luxury shoppers and their increasing appreciation for handcraft. It also makes Setchu one of the most relevant new fashion brands, one with the potential to gain international recognition and be more widely distributed in boutiques around the world in the new year.

One might expect such a single-minded perfectionist to be working in a gleaming white cube of a studio but, for now, Kuwata operates with a skeleton staff in his cramped flat in Milan's not-so-fashionable neighbourhood of Giambellino. He has plans to move into a dedicated office and expand his team using his €300,000 LVMH Prize money. But for now he is simply focused on producing his premium tailoring and sourcing the highest-quality fabrics from the best factories in Italy. Each Setchu collection costs up to €200,000 to produce. "It's like buying a Ferrari every season," says Kuwata, proudly running a hand along the styles hanging on the rail in front of him: a double-breasted blazer cinched at the waist, a pinstripe suit, a wool overshirt with extra-large front pockets.

After a morning spent doing fittings of the new collection with a stylist and a model, the Setchu atelier is a tumble of creative chaos: stacks of shoeboxes in the entrance, clothing racks overtaking the workspace and mock-ups of new designs

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in paper and canvas strewn everywhere. Meanwhile, Kuwata bounces around the place, photographing a new slipper shoe for a collaboration with Lexus, fine-tuning details on garments and comparing swatches of a kimono-inspired floral from a Como jacquard weaver. Yet out of this boisterous confusion emerge impeccable garments, as Kuwata demonstrates by pulling out a long black overcoat, a Setchu icon made from pure cashmere that is as soft as a baby lamb's fleece and has a flash of cerulean silk lining. The Japanese designer has an obsession with supreme fabrics. Even a hooded sweatshirt, featuring a zipper along its sleeves that allows it to be easily turned into a poncho, is made from the softest cotton.


Kuwata takes a large tote, still in its canvas mock-up stage, and demonstrates how it has been designed to be folded down into a small clutch bag. "I love origami," he says, showing how the Setchu T-shirt that he is wearing can change shape as well. "I always ask myself if the garment is conceptual," he says of his design process. "But also, 'Can my dad wear it?'" Ricocheting around the studio, he pulls out another featherlight wool blazer that is etched with kimono-like folds for easy packing in suitcases.

Kuwata studied womenswear at London's Central Saint Martins while working at Huntsman on Savile Row and mastering traditional tailoring. He went on to design for Givenchy in Paris, Edun in New York, and Golden Goose in Milan. As his career developed, he found himself merging his Japanese heritage with his British tailoring background. So when he decided to venture out on his own in 2020, that meeting of East and West became the guiding principle for Setchu too. The brand's name comes from the Japanese phrase "*wayo setchu*", meaning a compromise between Japan and the West. "It's always interesting to see what comes when mixing cultures," says Kuwata, laying

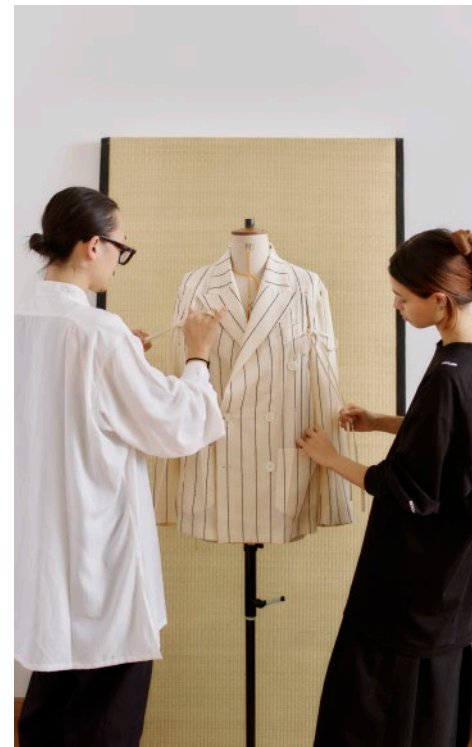


out a kimono with Western-style lapels to emphasise his point. "When the mix works, it becomes something modern."

Kuwata (*pictured*) pauses for a cigarette in his narrow kitchen. He usually starts every day in a similar way: with a smoke and an hour of meditation or doing nothing in the kitchen. He then dives into his work, pausing only to cook lunch for his small team and wrapping up by early evening with a beer back in the kitchen. Unlike some of his previous workplaces, there are no late nights in this fashion studio.

Beer time has arrived and Kuwata sends his two assistants home. A new era is beginning for Setchu following the LVMH Prize – an office space, media attention and countless collaboration requests await – but he has so far rejected offers from investors and luxury groups who would undoubtedly interfere with his product designer's rigour with garments. "I'm not mainstream," he says with a smile and a sip of beer. "I really believe that sustainable growth is hidden growth and it's the only way for Setchu to become a long-lasting brand." — 

[laesetchu.com](http://laesetchu.com)



### More brands to watch

1. **Jan Jan Van Esche**  
*Belgium*  
Jan Jan Van Esche has been running his label from his Antwerp atelier for more than a decade, building a close-knit circle of customers who appreciate his flair for purist design, natural fibres and Japanese-inspired silhouettes. After hosting his first fashion show at Florence's Pitti Uomo fair earlier this year, the Belgian designer began commanding more global attention and is now in the process of expanding his retail network.  
[janjanvanessche.com](http://janjanvanessche.com)

2. **Fforme**  
*USA*  
New York-based Paul Helbers honed his craft as a menswear designer for The Row before launching

his own label, Fforme. It is known for impeccable tailoring, masterfully draped garments and high-quality fabrics. Retailers were quick to praise his skills and invest in his brand so expect to see the label on shop floors around the world from 2024.  
[fforme.com](http://fforme.com)

3. **Man-Tle**  
*Australia*  
Founded by Aida Kim and Larz Harry from a small studio-shop in Northbridge, Western Australia, this young label is quickly making a name for itself for its utilitarian approach to dressing. Man-Tle offers workwear jackets, wide-leg trousers and tweed jackets – all produced in collaboration with fabric specialists Heavy Weight Clothing Pty and artisanal Japanese manufacturers.  
[man-tle.com](http://man-tle.com)