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an Shubber – Iraqi-born, London-living architect, and daughter of the renowned artist Suad al-Attar – is showing me round the Victoria & Albert Museum’s photography exhibition *Light from the Middle East*. As we stroll from Shadi Ghadirian’s *Qajar* series to Hassan Hajjaj’s *Saida in Green* – both of which play with aspects of traditional Muslim dress in a contemporary setting – our conversation takes on a more general turn and I find myself enraptured at her description of her first formal gathering in the United Arab Emirates. Even though her friend (the daughter of the ruler of one of the seven states) had warned her, even though she’d read the stories of glamorous gowns and beauty nonpareil, nothing quite prepared her. Woman after woman filed past in the segregated female-only zone of the palace, each of the 500 guests dressed in the most glorious couture gowns, dripping with Bulgari, encrusted in Cartier. They settled down to eat dinner (conversation kept to a minimum, as is traditional) and awaited the grand finale: the wheeling in of a trolley of perfumes.

“Not just any perfumes – enormous flacons, more than 20 of them, the size of which I’d never seen before. All by Chanel, Dior, and the other familiar names,” she says. “And the guests congregated around the trolley to put them on, not just with a quick dab behind the ear or on the wrist, but with a generous spray from head to toe, as if it was air freshener. Then they’d pick up another bottle and do it all over again. And again.”

So far, so stereotypical. That the Arab world loves fashion is nothing new. That the West loves a story of Middle Eastern shopping excess is also nothing new, particularly in a time of recession. It plays on all our wildest shopping fantasies – no wonder it was parodied (somewhat lamely) in *Sex and the City 2*. There’s the story of the sheikha who commissioned a dinner service – for 200 guests – to match the exact shade of the pistachio-green dress she planned to >

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INEZ VAN LANSWERDE AND VINCOOH MATADIN/TRUNK ARCHIVE



The booming Middle Eastern economy is seeing brands court Muslim customers like never before. From Saudi shoppers to British hijabistas, *Kathleen Baird-Murray* looks at the Islamic world's influence on the fashion industry

BEYOND *the* VEIL

wear to her party, complete with initials. Or the legendary Ramadan raids on Harrods (now owned by the Qatari royal family), with their “I’ll take five” Birkin bags (that’s five in every colour). Of course, it’s often vilified as well as glorified – the world was horrified when hacked emails revealed that Syrian first lady Asma Assad’s penchant for ottomans and jewels continued unabated while the rest of Syria was being torn apart. It’s also often misunderstood – the buying-in-bulk phenomenon, for example, is born out of generosity rather than greed. It’s not unusual for a Saudi shopper to gift each of her friends and sisters back home a souvenir from her trip. You can imagine the T-shirt: “My sister went to London and all I got was a Birkin bag.”

Designers have long realised this is a potentially lucrative market, but it’s only now they’re realising just how lucrative. When Chanel’s third boutique opened in the Middle East, in 1998 (there are nine now, with two more set to open this year), Karl Lagerfeld was quoted in this magazine as saying, “It’s a very important market for us. As long as we respect the fact that these women cannot wear clothes that are too short, too revealing or too transparent, then they really enjoy fashion.” Since 2001 designers have been less happy to be interviewed on the same subject. Several of the so-called power brands declined to comment for this feature, saying they were worried any story about Muslim fashion might be too loaded with potentially contentious religious associations; others expressed a fear of alienating high-profile customers, who value discretion above all else; while some with roots in Muslim countries expressed concern they might attract criticism from more conservative Islamic factions. But the figures speak for themselves. According to a report published by Euromonitor in June 2011, the designer clothing industry in the United Arab Emirates is worth nearly £600 million, a massive 42 per cent of their overall luxury goods sales. Qatar, the richest nation per capita throughout the world, is enjoying strong economic growth with a GDP growth forecast of 19 per cent. Hermès, which opened its third store in the UAE last year (May 2012), attributes 30 to 35 per cent of its annual sales growth to the Middle East, something which has steadily grown in the past two to three years. Online stores are also doing big business – Abu Dhabi is Moda Operandi’s second biggest customer base after New York, with gowns and cocktail dresses from brands such as Valentino, Marchesa and Zac Posen proving popular among clients whose social calendar typically features as many as 15 to

20 weddings a year, and for whom wearing a garment more than once is tantamount to social suicide.

Harvey Nichols recently opened its third store in the Middle East, in Kuwait. “It was a real eye-opener for me,” says its fashion director, Paula Reed. “There were women who had clearly spent all afternoon getting ready for the event – one girl would have given Lady Gaga a run for her money, wearing hot-off-the-catwalk Balenciaga, and the McQueen visor. The personal shopper introduced me to a client who quizzed me on what stock we had; did I know what our competitors had; did I realise that in another nearby mall they already had the X, Y and Z bags from a certain brand and would we be getting styles A, B and C? These women are very discerning shoppers; there’s no such thing as throwing a look together, it’s all very considered. I thought it would be a glitz parade, but there were women who were

The days of putting diamanté studs on a stiletto and hoping it’ll shift in the Gulf are truly over

working that Céline look in a very chic way,” says Reed. “The eveningwear department was exquisite, with one-off garments studded with Swarovski crystals and designer dresses augmented with jewels that you won’t find by the same designers here – but there were just as many younger designers, like Mary Katrantzou, Roksanda Ilincic (lots of Roksanda) and Peter Pilotto. I was amazed by the number of Victoria Beckham dresses I saw.”

Harriet Quick, former *Vogue* fashion features director and now editorial director of global online luxury shopping site Luxup.com, says: “Our clients from the UAE and Qatar are increasingly buying more avant-garde designers: Balenciaga, for example, as well as Jonathan Saunders and Christopher Kane, especially the easy pieces like print T-shirts. With the uptake of social-media channels like Tumblr and Instagram, women’s fashion awareness, knowledge and inspiration has expanded – the upshot of this is that tastes become more individual, informed and discerning.”

Even in Saudi Arabia, where women wear the *abaya* when they go outside so that

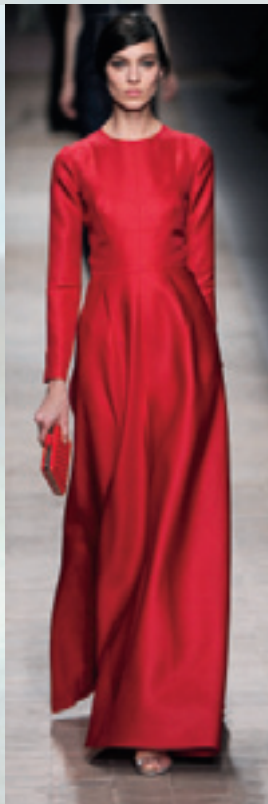
only their extremities are visible, the shift is just as pronounced. Famously, accessories are important – the Saudi woman’s way of expressing her identity when the rest of her might be covered. Anya Hindmarch, who recently opened a store in Kuwait, says: “Accessories express who you are almost more than any other aspect of clothing. And if you narrow that down even more, so that it’s all you see, it becomes even more important.” The more limited the bag, the more desirable it is – Boutique1.com, the Lebanon-based luxury concept store and e-commerce site, has a limited-edition Charlotte Olympia clutch for s/s ’13 which has a growing waiting list of eager buyers, while Moda Operandi recently sold “an extremely rare” Hermès bag for \$75,000 – its most expensive item.

While handbags are obvious indicators of wealth and style, the growth in designer jeans, shoes, sunglasses and scarves in the Middle East is also driving the international accessories market forward. The demand for stylish outward signatures has helped boost the popularity of these items on a global scale – a trend that started with the Alexander McQueen silk skull scarf has metamorphosed into a full-scale industry. “The time of the ‘It’ scarf is over,” says Lara Kabbani of Boutique1.com. “Nowadays our customers want more original options – bold landscapes or prints like those by British house Lily & Lionel are popular, not to mention Missoni’s traditional zig-zag print. Missoni has also introduced matching scarves with all its evening outfits to ensure that conservative women can keep their shoulders covered, or use the extra fabric to create sleeves or a more covered bustline.” Sunglasses are also doing a brisk trade, and not just because it’s sunny. “They’re one of the first things you notice when you meet someone,” says Rasha Khouri, CEO of Dia-style.com. “A key accessory which allows women to express their individuality and style.” As for jeans: “They’re an absolute essential for the woman in the Middle East. Jeans follow international trends, with J Brand and Victoria Beckham being especially popular.” No wonder Paige Adams-Geller, founder of Paige Denim, often designs with individual markets in mind. “We take into account all the information we gather from our sales reps, retail co-ordinators, distributors and agents when we’re designing, so that we can pinpoint what each market will most likely be drawn to buy.” Like Khouri, she has also seen a shift in the Middle East towards the same lines as her European business (with Verdugos, Skyline Ankle Pegs and Hoxtons being >



Left: fashion-forward shoppers at the opening of Harvey Nichols in Kuwait. Above: Florence Welch in a kaftan by the Qatari designer Toujourri. Below: Stella McCartney's Dubai store. Right: Tunisian model Hanaa Ben Abdesslem

Above: Princess Ameerah Al-Taweel. Above right and right: Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Missned with her signature turban. Below: the more modest catwalk styles have proven popular with Middle Eastern customers (from left, Osman, Chanel, Maison Martin Margiela)



From far left: catwalk looks by Giambattista Valli, Valentino, Givenchy and, below, Dior. Below right: Chanel's boutique in Dubai



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JASON LLOYD-EVANS; JAIN MASTERTON; GETTY; WIRE IMAGE

bestsellers) while lightweight fabrics and leather leggings also sell well, because they adapt so easily to hotter climes. “I find that our Muslim customers tend to want to be comfortable while looking exceptionally luxurious.”

The days of putting a few diamanté studs on a stiletto heel and hoping they’ll shift in the Gulf are well and truly over. Brands today are discovering they need to cater for the increase in the number of Muslim women working, mostly younger customers (most of the customers at the Saudi HN are aged between 18 and 35) who are more conscious of international trends. Today, the demands have changed from being 60 per cent eveningwear, 40 per cent daywear to the other way round. “It’s a different conversation that we’re having now,” explains Reema Bandar Al-Saud, CEO of Harvey Nichols Riyadh, whose bestselling handbag is the Proenza Schouler PS 1. “Women who were wealthy in the Eighties and Nineties didn’t have their taste questioned if they bought Chanel or Bottega – everyone knew it was chic and elegant. But now, with the increase in online shopping, websites like Style.com [which recently launched Style.com Arabia] and fashion television, people can see how others are wearing the clothes, and interpret it themselves.” And, while the buyer is still affluent, the increase in the number of women working means that brands at entry-level luxury price points are gaining rapidly in popularity. “Women are getting married at a later age. They are active members of gyms, and extreme socialisers – they’re more cautious when it’s their own money they’re spending, as opposed to their father’s or their husband’s,” says Bandar Al-Saud. “I’m not selling Oscar de la Renta any more. I’m selling DVF, Phillip Lim, Derek Lam, clothes that are easy to wear under your *abaya* yet still chic to wear to work or for evening. Giles Deacon is one of our bestsellers, but equally people walk in asking for Ann Demeulemeester, Rick Owens: brands you really wouldn’t associate with a Saudi woman.” Meanwhile, over in Kuwait, Cos has just opened its first store – the working woman’s go-to brand for discreet yet stylish work apparel.

And yet, it’s taken a long time for the West to catch on to this important market. Sheikh Majed Al-Sabah – a member of the Kuwaiti royal family – who launched Villa Moda, one of the first large-scale fashion retail concepts in the Middle East, in 1992, has noticed a huge difference between attitudes now and then. “It was very frustrating – there were a lot of stereotypes out there and a lot of ignorance. I’d be sitting

far back in the seventh or eighth rows at the shows; people were constantly asking me, ‘Is your part of the world ready for fashion? All your women are covered up and you still ride camels and live in the desert.’”

Even after designers did sit up and take note, the Middle East was last on the list of priorities, with shipments often arriving late because it was a neglected market. “The international houses were slow to catch on to just how savvy our shoppers are,” says Bandar Al-Saud. “And yes, Saudi women do have the luxury to jump on a plane, but they shouldn’t feel obliged to have to shop in London.” The HN Saudi buying team this season are, for the first time, local Saudis, something that has given them an edge over other stores who rely on foreign buyers. “Saudi Arabia is very much a suitcase shopping environment, by which I mean ladies will call the store and say ‘I need shoes in a size 6, and a dress in a size 10,’ and an assistant will deliver a suitcase to her home.

*“People asked me,
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The client will select the clothes, make the payment and the suitcase comes back empty.” But thanks to competition from online retailers, with Moda Operandi allowing shoppers to pre-order exclusive pieces straight from the catwalks, this has had to evolve. “We have to be diligent and strict with our supply chain, because if our products aren’t received by a promised date the client will already have bought it online,” says Bandar Al-Saud. Should clients wish to leave home and visit the store, they’ll find a VIP lounge with its own dressing room and personal shoppers who are vigilant to the point of obsession with who has ordered what – a potentially tricky area to navigate in niche social circles. At Boutique 1, Kabbani says it’s not uncommon for clients buying expensive eveningwear (usually for a 2,000-person wedding) to ask the store to keep the remaining stock – perhaps one or two more dresses – in the stock room until a particular event is over, to ensure no other guests will even catch a glimpse of the dress before she makes her debut. Nor will you see many Middle Eastern women attending the shows themselves – couture clients will

often get fittings in their homes should they request it, and, increasingly, ready-to-wear designers will send catwalk selections direct from the shows. “Middle Eastern buyers are some of the biggest couture customers, but they are very discreet,” explains Khouri. The Middle Eastern fashion press also has less of a presence, but Khouri expects that in time, this will change. “It’s on the increase as fashion takes a more dynamic role in the region. There are some very strong fashion publications coming through.”

But perhaps the most exciting development, at least sartorially, has been the increase in demand for more traditional styles, reworked in a contemporary way. In 2009 Lama El-Moatassem launched her label, Toujouri, with a small line of kaftans. Palestinian but brought up in Qatar, she studied at Central St Martins and worked at Matthew Williamson for three years after graduating. A practising Muslim, she was keen to return to Doha and fuse her Middle Eastern upbringing with her experience in the West. Four years on, the kaftans are selling at home and abroad, supplemented by a strong eveningwear line and the lure of a shop in Doha designed by architect Peter Marino. “It was his first retail project outside of the usual Chanel/Vuitton/Fendi type of stores,” says El-Moatassem. “Peter really captured what this brand is about and worked with it rather than against it.”

The shift towards celebrating Muslim culture is as profound as it is visceral. “It’s a matter of national pride,” says Bandar Al-Saud. “These young girls are proud of who they are and where they’re from, they’re embracing their culture as a positive vehicle of expression; 60 per cent of our population in Saudi Arabia is below the age of 35. As long as there is opportunity there will be optimism. I don’t know how to express this without it sounding like a political statement, but post 9-11 we had to decide who we were – do we choose to be positive members of the world and flourish that way, or do we allow others to define who we are?”

The dust is yet to settle from the Arab Spring, but – according to some – being the focus of the world’s media has had some unexpectedly favourable effects. “We’re exposed to the world, everyone’s looking at us, even if it sees chaos, killing, riots and revolution. Controversy sells,” says Sheikh Al-Sabah, who in addition to planning a Middle Eastern department store in conjunction with the architect Rem Koolhaas, is also releasing a new brand of scents. “I’m launching a fragrance called Arab Spring,” he adds, “which has different notes from the countries that were most

affected – Tunisian orange blossom, rose petals from Syria. From frustration comes creativity.” (Oud fragrances, incidentally, long popular in Pan-Arab countries, have become strong sellers here for some years now, with Harrods finding that demand for Roja Dove’s Aoud, at £495, often outstrips supply. Dior’s Collection Privée Oud Ispahan was its bestselling fragrance in 2012 and Tom Ford’s Private Blend Oud Wood has become a modern classic.)

So, too, has the increased media presence of influential Muslim women inspired change. The Qatari royal family, which recently acquired Valentino in addition to Harrods, is launching its own label, driven by the glamorous Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Missned. An incredibly stylish and elegant dresser, she juggles the more conservative dress requirements of Wahhabism at home (Qatar is the only state outside Saudi Arabia to espouse this aspect of the Muslim religion) with regular appearances abroad. Her turban has become something of a signature style. “Sheikha Mozah is leading the way forward for veiled women, showing them another point of view,” says Sheikh Al-Sabah. “Before, the Middle Eastern woman wouldn’t even consider wearing a turban.” Elsewhere, Princess Ameerah Al-Taweel is a front-row regular as well as an advocate for Saudi women’s rights, and the Tunisian model Hanaa Ben Abdesslem is a Lancôme spokesperson. “I’m proud to be a role model to Arab women, to mentor and inspire a younger generation, of models, artists, designers and photographers. My picture’s everywhere, and it’s all thanks to the Lancôme campaign,” says the crop-haired model, who recently appeared in a Pirelli calendar – albeit the first one to feature clothes. “When I started modelling, I thought I might have problems being a Muslim,” she says of her faith’s emphasis on female modesty, as well as its sometimes difficult political relationships with the non-Muslim world. “But what I’ve found out is that if you want something, you can find it.”

The West has been assiduously taking notes. “My favourite aspect of my job is exploring new fashion scenes and introducing them to our customers,” says Moda Operandi’s Aslaug Magnusdottir. “I’m setting aside a couple of days during my next visit to the Middle East to visit local design talent and hopefully bring some Middle Eastern designers on board.” “It’s overwhelming,” says Bandar Al-Saud. “Recently at Harvey Nichols in Saudi, we launched a collaboration between Saudi designers and Swarovski. I wasn’t sure if customers would look at the results and say,

‘Oh congrats, you’re supporting Saudi designers’ and then go off and buy Alexander McQueen, but they didn’t – they bought the local designs.” The London College of Fashion now runs short courses in Dubai, and the fact that many young Gulf students travel so much, and have a disposable income unparalleled by that of the average British fashion student, means that they often have access to the kind of backing young British designers can only dream of.

With the Muslim population estimated at 1.8 billion, and expected to grow by 25 per cent in the next two decades, it’s more important than ever to avoid the temptation to encapsulate trends in different Islamic cultures in handy fashion soundbites: “There is no such thing as Muslim fashion,” says Sheikh Al-Sabah. “There are Muslim Fashion Weeks in Indonesia and Malaysia, but they’re for conservative as opposed to liberal Muslims. While there are women like Princess Ameerah Al-Taweel who is

“Designers are extremely accommodating. If a dress is split high, they’ll bring the split lower”

always exposed to the press in the front rows at the collections, Muslim fashion as a whole is a huge subject, a book of extremes, both conservative and open-minded, with diverse elements that are fascinating.”

Yet certain themes do run true to a greater or lesser degree and, still, the biggest unifier of the Muslim world is the veil itself, a symbol of the prevailing code for modesty. This too is totemic of changing attitudes and needs. In the West, Muslims who have grown up with a different aesthetic to their Arab or Asian counterparts, have embraced the hijab and adapted it to the particular climatic and cultural demands of their home countries. So-called hipster Muslims, blogging on websites like Middle East Fashion or Heba Magazine, provide a street-style element to modest, Muslim-friendly dressing, as well as challenge Islamophobic perceptions of what being a modern Muslim entails. Meanwhile, the fashion industry is standing by to supply the hijabista with just the right lightweight fabrics required. “Women wearing scarves as a hijab need them to be a special shape, size and material so they don’t slip off the head

and show any hair whatsoever,” explains Kabbani. “Louis Vuitton is a sought-after brand as well as Burberry and Gucci.” It’s a lucrative market – Hermès reported in 2011 that sales of scarves, *carrés* and ties worldwide were worth some £280 million, up by 23 per cent on the previous year.

Current fashions vary according to different ethnic groups but younger girls favour the larger scarves to create volume, wrapping metres of fabric into voluminous folds around the head; while professionals prefer square scarves folded into triangles, for a neat and polished finish. You can get bonnet caps to lie underneath the hijab to keep the hair back from your face. “The main thing is to mix it up,” says 24-year-old Hana Tajima, who is in the process of winding down her own clothing label Maysa, to concentrate more on her Islamic-fashion blog, Stylecovered.com. “Whenever the high street picks up on a Muslim-friendly trend, you’ll get girls stocking up on maxi skirts and things like that. I wear a lot of vintage because the cuts are usually more covered up. It’s why I started making things. One thing all Muslim cultures have in common is a rich tradition of fabric. In India and Bangladesh there is an incredible embellishment and embroidery; in Malaysia and Indonesia it’s batik. There is this richness that is underplayed, a lack of fear about colour, which for someone who spends her days looking at grey skies is dazzling.”

It is doubtful whether the tendency for international designers to make Muslim-friendly collections for their young Muslim clientele in Britain in quite the same way they do for customers in the Gulf States will ever catch on. However, there is definitely a gap waiting to be filled. The stakes in the Gulf will always be higher. “Diane von Furstenberg, L’Wren Scott, Reem Acra – all these designers are extremely accommodating,” says Bandar Al-Saud. “If a dress is split high, they’ll bring the split down lower.” But while there remains a gap between East and West, culturally at least there are tentative signs that fashion is beginning to bring us closer together. When Florence Welch stepped on to the stage at Lollapalooza wearing a Toujourri kaftan, for El-Moatassem it was profoundly significant. “When I set about designing, I wanted to be proud of our Middle Eastern culture. To see a music star wearing something so associated with the Middle East – that’s not what you’d expect,” she says. “Muslim culture is not often very well represented in the media, and it’s important for people to know it’s changing. For me, that was definitely a box ticked.” ■