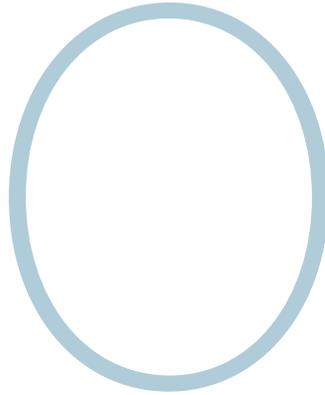


BY SARAH MACDONALD

BLENDING TRADITION WITH STYLE

Omani fashion has long been rooted in tradition; however, local designers have now started fusing their culture and heritage with international styles. The customers of top fashion houses in Oman are increasingly well-travelled and inspired by international trends. There is now a greater demand for practical, comfortable outfits that match the customer's personality.





Omani fashion has long been rooted in tradition, but now, local designers are fusing their culture and heritage with more international styles. Top Omani designers are now proving to be just as comfortable with making abayas, jalabiyas, and traditional Omani salwar and kameez sets as they are with making Western-cut gowns and miniskirts. Nawal Al Hooti, who is considered by many to be the leading designer in Oman, said what makes her designs and fashion statements unique is the fact that they are all about fusion. More and more of her customers are well-travelled and are inspired by international trends, so she keeps this in mind when creating her collections.

“It’s all about combining our best ethnic designs with what is trendy internationally. The idea is to listen carefully to the [customers], pick up on what they consider to be appealing, and combine that perspective with our ethnic styles and patterns. So yes, there is an international influence, but there is a precise concept behind that fusion,” explained Nawal. Nawal and other designers from the most popular local fashion houses, such as Dibaj Oman, the label introduced by sisters Afaf and Aida Al Farsi, are finding ways to express their Omani roots while adapting to fashion trends and changes. Some of Nawal’s recent designs, such as her Western-style jackets and miniskirts that are decorated with Omani patterns and detailing, reflect this new approach to fashion. Nawal noted that there is a greater demand for outfits that are practical and comfortable yet “feed your personality.”

“The Omani pride, the colours, and our beautiful culture are combined with what is simple, more presentable, and adorable and which brings out the best in you,” stated Nawal, adding that her greatest influences stem from her own cultural roots.

Dibaj’s designs tend to fuse the old with the new and the east with the west. They have modern, more European silhouettes, but the details are definitely Omani. The embroidery, stripes, and accessories take them back to their roots. The designers looked at the clothes their mother, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers wore and introduced elements of that style but in a modern way, explained Afaf.

“It’s always ethnic-based and Omani-influenced,” asserted Afaf.

Over the past few years, Afaf and Aida have been inspired by Omani landscapes, the Royal Opera House Muscat, and by visits to Muttrah Souk, where they find jewellery and cloth for their work. They are also inspired through travelling and by works of art. They follow global fashion trends too and pay attention to the creations of their favourite designers, such as Lanvin, Yves Saint Laurent, Valentino, Balenciaga, and Chanel. They make clothes that they would want to wear.

“We are doing what we enjoy, creating something we can wear,” said Aida.

From their observations, fashion in Oman is becoming simpler. There are fewer sequins and sparkles, and modern designs are becoming easier to wear.

“Fashion is getting simpler; a wider selection is available. But Omanis have always been less flashy than other people in the GCC. We’re more understated,” observed Afaf. Indo-Omani designer Mrunal Khimji, who opened a boutique in 2007 to sell her own designs, fuses Omani, Indian, and international designs. Although she is not Omani by birth, Mrunal has made her mark on the local fashion industry. She is comfortable with making clothes in any style for people from any cultural background and who have any shape and size.

“Oman hosts so many nationalities. We are inspired by all cultures. All my garments are a significant attempt at fusion,” explained Mrunal. According to Mrunal, a continually increasing number of people in Oman are becoming aware of international fashion trends, be they from Hollywood, Europe, or Bollywood. They are also becoming more willing to experiment with fashion and to spend a bit more money on it. Omani women are taking more chances with their abayas too; they want them to be more colourful and more fashionable.

“It’s evolving very slowly. People are willing to take more risks. They are reading more international fashion magazines. Bollywood has influenced fashion in Oman so much,” she remarked, adding that customers had requested designs similar to those worn by their favourite stars.

The fashion scene is also expanding in Oman, thanks in large part to the annual Muscat Fashion Week (MFW), launched in 2011, where designers from across the Middle East are invited to share their collections. Malik Al Hinai, MFW’s organiser, said it was a great platform to showcase the best Omani and regional designers not just for a local audience but also for international journalists and buyers. Plans for MFW include going bigger and better, soliciting interest from more foreign buyers and the international press, and showcasing more collections from renowned designers. As MFW grows, Omanis will learn more from international fashion experts such as top journalist Hilary Alexander, stated Malik.

“We always like to speak to people in the know. We learn from them. We’re getting experts to lead us,” he noted. He acknowledged that current trends are still rooted in tradition, with many designers focusing on abayas, Omani salwar and kameez sets, and Omani embroidery, but he has also noticed that more of the country’s leading designers, including Nawal Al Hooti, are adding international elements to their styles.

“Nawal surprised us this year with her miniskirts, which was good. But most [designers] stick with what makes them comfortable. It’s our job now to coax them out of their shell and tell them they can do other things too,” explained Malik. Malik pointed out that top Omani design houses such as Nawal Al Hooti and Dibaj are doing great things for up-and-coming designers. He has included Nawal and Dibaj in all three fashion weeks because he believes they represent the best that Oman has to offer.

“They are opening doors for us. Dibaj has interested buyers in the West, and Nawal has a lot of interest locally and in the region. They’re putting Oman on the map,” reported Malik. Currently, Dibaj is only sold in Oman, but there has been increasing interest in the brand from buyers in New York, London, and Paris. The designers hope that in time, their collections will be available internationally.

“The burgeoning fashion scene in this part of the world is attracting an international audience, and we have seen evidence of this while participating overseas and in the response we get at MFW annually. The response has been very encouraging, which signals the responsibility we will bear in the future,” said Nawal Al Hooti. As Oman gradually opens up to the world, thanks to Omanis travelling more and the hosting of events such as MFW, it will slowly develop into a place that is recognised for high fashion, where tradition and modernity can be combined with beautiful results.

“I think Muscat will grow. Give us time. We may not have the Tom Ford and Gucci shops, but we have people coming here and getting inspired,” concluded Malik.

