

"Just because you need to be fashionable doesn't mean you can't have fun dressing up," says fashion designer Mrunal Khimji. **Anne Kurian** meets the young designer who infuses streaks of fun into her amazing designs.

Think
Fashion,
Think Fun!





Mama's girl

"My mom's one of the simplest people I know. She was the one person on whom I tried all my fashion experiments. In fact, I changed her rather simple beige, white and neutral wardrobe to a more colourful one with all these experiments. I owe a lot of my success to my mom. I have inherited a lot of my creativity and talent from her."

Mrunal

Khimji could easily pass off as a college-going young lady... But this sprightly young woman is a fashion designer with tons of panache. When you meet her for the first time, what comes as a surprise is her down-to-earth, unpretentious attitude; she has none of the airs (read snooty and patronising) that many designers can't help but exude. Instead, she's an exceptionally friendly, open, vivacious person who simply loves to dress people up. This is probably why most of her clients end up being her friends too.

This young fashion designer from the Khimji clan (Mrunal is married to Hritik Khimji, who is Ajay Khimji's son) has already carved a fine niche for herself in Mumbai, India, and is now dressing up women in Muscat in ensembles that are chic, elegant, intricately worked upon and totally trendy.

For above all, she brings the fun back into dressing up. Mrunal's designs are best described as a blend of contemporariness and ethnicity, class and bold streaks of fun.

Mrunal recently held her maiden exhibition in Muscat, and it witnessed a near stampede on day one itself! Needless to say, by day two, there were just a handful of designs left. Overwhelmed by orders and requests for more such exhibitions, this designer is working at a frenetic pace, which she thoroughly enjoys. As

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we go to press she is all set for her first major showing at The Grand India Show In Touch with Fashion being held in Dubai from October 28-31. Al Mar'a caught up with Mrunal for an informal chat at the Khimji residence.

Before getting bitten by the designer bug...

"I did my schooling at the Utpal Sanghvi School, in Mumbai, India. After I completed my 10th standard, my father felt that an international exposure would be good for me; my sister was already in the United States pursuing her higher studies. Soon after, when my father was on a business trip to Switzerland, he heard about the Institut Le Rosey, a boarding school that has two campuses — Rolle for summer and spring and Gstaad for autumn and winter. (Incidentally, the school's alumni include Aga Khan IV, Prince Edward, John Lennon's son Sean and many more.) He was very impressed by the Institute and sent me there for further studies. It sure was a great school; I learnt so much there and made some really great friends."

The innate designer...

"While I was at the Institut Le Rosey, I would advise my friends about what to wear and how to mix and match their garments. I knew I had a creative streak in me and my mother, though not a designer is also an immensely creative person. And she was a big influence on me. I actually wanted to take up theatre but my mother convinced me that designing was an option that suited me better since I already had the inclination. From Switzerland I went to New York where I joined the Fashion Institute of Technology and did my graduation in jewellery designing. I still designed clothes for friends in New York because I enjoyed doing it.

"After completing my degree, I joined Rosy Blue in New York; they are the world's largest manufacturers of diamonds. I was working with them when one day I got a call from home saying that my father had fallen ill. I had stayed away from home for many years and felt I should return. So I packed my bags and went back to Mumbai. In India, I joined Rosy Blue's Mumbai office and continued to work for them till I got married. While I was at Rosy Blue, a friend and I started designing clothes for clients. It was more of a hobby for me then, although we had a tailoring unit consisting of almost 200 tailors. We cater to clients from India, the Gulf countries and also the West."

The turning point...

"I have always designed clothes for friends and relatives, though I trained in jewellery designing. I guess the turning point (a shift to fashion designing) happened during a best friend's wedding. I was almost like the event manager for her wedding, and even

Musing...

Absolutely adores: "Louis Vuitton designs and handbags."

Is inspired by: "My country and culture. Just about every street, village and state has something different to offer. I don't have to look elsewhere."

Something that will never go out of fashion: "The traditional attire of a country. The design, cut and styling might change, but the traditional garments will always hold good."

Favourite designers: "Indian — Tarun Tahiliani and Sabyaschi Mukherjee; International — Vera Wang."

All time favourite colours: "Blue, black, white."

For that fab look: "Accessorise, accessorise, accessorise!"

A very simple outfit can make you look great if you have the right accessories which could include jewellery, handbags and footwear."

Fashion is: "Not restricted. Have fun."

designed her whole wedding trousseau — Right from her party wear to the ensembles for the formal pre-wedding events to her wedding and post-wedding attire. At the wedding, a lot of people asked her about her trousseau and many of them couldn't believe that her best friend had designed her whole wedding look. I moved to fashion designing from then on and have been in the field ever since."

A sell-out success right away

"When I came to Muscat after my wedding, a year and a half ago, I got involved in helping my husband set up his business. It took

up a good deal of my time and I was busy for a while. During that time I didn't do much designing but it gave me a chance to meet a lot of ladies and understand their tastes. My mother-in-law (whom she fondly refers to as mom) then suggested that I should take up from where I had left off and do what I was trained to do.

"Since I had got to know a lot of women here by then and knew what they wanted and liked, I started designing my initial collection for Muscat. My first exhibition was held at our home in early September this year. The collection consisted of skirts, kurtis (short/ full-sleeved tops), tunics, salwar suits (traditional Indian-Pakistani attire), sarees and ready-to-stitch fabrics. And it was a complete sell-out. The response was really overwhelming! I'm working on getting my next collection ready now."

A designer and friend...

"I don't want to open a store and give my clients the treatment one receives when one walks into a designer store. I prefer to spend time with each of my clients and get to know them better. I need to know their lifestyle and their interests as this helps me when designing a collection or garments for them. This has been my style of working even in India. I usually meet my clients by appointment and many of them end up spending almost two hours with me. We don't just discuss clothes and fashion but I also get to be a part of my client's life.

"In Mumbai, sometimes I would have a client walking into my home (where I met my clients) to just chill and talk over a cup of coffee or a meal. They get a chance to forget all their worries and troubles at my place. This makes me feel good too. When I do have a store, it'll be different from the rest."

Dressing up is fun!

"I like to infuse a lot of fun into dressing up. I do this by accessorising and working on fabrics and the clothes. I try to jazz up even the simplest of fabrics, be it through beads, sequins or embroidery. Stark, straight colours or designs are not my style. My clothes are all about having fun... I try to bring the fun element back into dressing up, like when we were kids!

"I love all sorts of fabrics and colours. Mixing and matching them is great fun too. And making clothes that are fashionable and yet give you a certain element of joy when you wear them, is what I strive to do. Just because you need to be fashionable doesn't mean you can't have fun dressing up." •

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