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Exhibition Review of
ContemporaryMuslimFashions.pdf

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Contemporary Muslim Fashions

De Young Museum, San Francisco, CA
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Reviewed by Carol Bier

Calico, chintz, damask, muslin, cashmere, seersucker, taffeta, shawl, caftan, and cummerbund—all English terms derived from Islamic textiles and dress—are the products of textile technologies that resulted from colonization and trade. Their cultural origins are long forgotten, shrouded in the fast-moving commercialized fashion industry and haute couture of the West that developed during the 20th century. The exhibition, Contemporary Muslim Fashions, is a game-changer.

The exhibition organizers, Jill D’Alessandro and Laura Camerlengo, curators of costumes and textiles at the De Young Museum in San Francisco, worked with Reina Lewis in London as a curatorial consultant. Together, they drew upon the local advice of numerous Muslims in the Bay Area who represent a diversity of Islamic traditions from around the world. The exhibition presents a grand and lavish glimpse into the global fashion phenomenon of the moment, largely propelled by
social media, with a focus on emergent Muslim women designers and the historically complex interactions of Islamic dress with European fashion houses.

Ambitious yes, but also brilliantly conceived and exquisitely executed. A team of two sisters, Iranian-born NY-based architects, Gisue Hariri and Mojgan Hariri, of Hariri and Hariri Architecture, were engaged to design the gallery space. The setting offers an ambient minimalism of curved white surfaces that alternately suggest walls or dunes set within an infinite black expanse. Eighty ensembles of garments, which include abayas, shalwar, caftans, shawls, and turbans, are elegantly displayed in thematic clusters of mannequins, most of which are painted gray to avoid issues of identity politics and questions or assumptions about blackness or whiteness. The displays range from French haute couture designed for distinguished Muslim patrons, to street wear from Turkey, and Macy’s newly launched Verona Collection, as well as sportswear that includes reference to Nike’s Pro Hijab athletic line, and the burkini, originally designed in Australia and banned for awhile on beaches in France.

The display of garments is augmented by forty photographs, which offer didactic visual narratives and contextual understanding. Challenging audience perceptions of Muslim women, fashion, and personal habits, street photographs from several Muslim-majority countries by Langston Hues (b. 1988, Detroit) are interspersed throughout the galleries, while near the entrance is a display of scenes of women from Occupied Pleasures (2015), a book of photographs of everyday life in Palestine taken by Tanya Habjouqa (b. 1975, Jordan). An assemblage of headshots of photographer Boushra Almutawakel (b. 1969, Yemen) teases the viewer’s reactions to the same face, with head uncovered, or wearing hijab or niqab. Two large documentary portraits of women in the privacy of their own rooms, photographed by Rania Matar (b. 1964, Lebanon) toy with issues of Orientalism countering fantasies of the exotic, as do the works of Lalla Essaydi (b. 1956, Morocco) exhibited elsewhere in the exhibition.

The impact of social media is also featured, giving visibility to smartphone usage and how it contributes to the global world of modest Muslim fashion today. The proliferation of fashion bloggers and the role of Instagram gave rise to dramatic new ways of promoting styles and products. But the world’s demographics and population shifts have also contributed to a renewed globalization of the industry. Couture designer Raşit Bağzıbağlı (b. 1985, London), for example, is third generation of a Cypriot family involved in textiles and trade; he is a designer for Modanisa, based in Turkey, with an online presence (six million website hits per month), serving clients in 70 countries. Design influencers around the world utilize popular Instagram hashtags such as #modestfashion, #Muslimfashion, and #hijab, to both stimulate and mediate global tastes.

Clearly, interpretations of modesty are many. For myself growing up, to be modest was equated with being thrifty and unassuming. It connoted the antithesis of extravagance, flamboyance, or ostentatious behavior. That is not the modesty addressed here; many of the garments displayed are quite the opposite of that definition. But the modest fashion movement, inspired by Muslim custom, is religiously motivated, and yet nowhere in the exhibition is there any reference to the Qur’anic injunction (chapter 7, verse 26), which pertains as much to men as it does to women. And no male fashion is included among the displays although there is one oblique reference—a dual channel audio-video installation by Shirin Neshat (b. 1957, Iran) that depicts in stark contrast a male singer and an audience of men dressed in white shirts on one screen with a female singer dressed in black in an empty hall on the second screen.
Muslim modest fashion is inclined to emphasize form, drapery, structure, and movement, rather than expressing sexuality or revealing the body. In the exhibition, polyester, jerseys, and silk crepe seem to be preferred materials. Although emphasis is placed on elaborate patterns that require extensive cutting and sewing, little is explored or explained regarding the culturally significant role of tailors or seamstresses, so important historically. Nor is this exhibition about textiles, per se, but there are several visual references in the contemporary fashion of Malaysia and Indonesia to historical and ethnographic fabrics, such as wax-resist batik, ikat (warp-resist plain weave), and songket weaving (supplementary weft) in the works of Dian Pelangi (b. 1991, Indonesia). My favorite garment that blends the historic with the modern is a white coat by Wadha al-Hajri (b. 1987, Qatar) made of silk organza with an appliquéd cutwork in a traditional geometric pattern that references architecture. One feature that struck me throughout the exhibition is the issue of signature, and the identification of individual designers and their houses, in contrast to the anonymity of traditional dress. Sub-Saharan Africa is absent entirely, with no reference to the extraordinarily vibrant fashion scene in Mali. Also omitted are the post-Soviet republics, several of which are Muslim-majority today, and finding voice through fashion, such as the design house of Bibi Khanum in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

In negotiating personal and collective identity through dress, characterized in Jori Finkel’s review in the New York Times as a “fusion of faith and fashion, modesty and modernity,” this exhibition finds amazing parallels with an exhibition held simultaneously across town at the Contemporary Jewish Museum. *Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress, from the Collection of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem*, a more traditional display of historical and ethnographic costume, explores (male and female) dress as a form of cultural expression, mediating between the individual and group affiliation within the larger forces of political hegemony and pragmatic adaptation. Regional styles often reflect a melding of cultural traditions, resulting in a cosmopolitanism that is nonetheless local. Parallels with *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* reference diverse cultural traditions within the Jewish diaspora and the historical expansion of Islam. That Jews lived in Islamic lands is immediately apparent in the geographic span of the CJM’s exhibition, encompassing Iraq, Iran, Yemen, North Africa, Turkey and the Balkan states, Central Asia, and the India subcontinent, as well as Eastern Europe. Both exhibitions emphasize the importance of weddings and religious festivals for the display of richly embellished dress. While the focus of *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* is on the contemporary, and that of *Fashioning Jewish Dress* is historical, both exhibitions are global in scope, exploring the meaning as well as the extraordinary diversity and complexity of fashion in an ever-changing present.

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