



Covered Up Culture On The Catwalk

Designers at Paris, Milan, London and New York Fashion Weeks send abaya-inspired garments down the runways as a fashion-forward nod to the Middle East.

Despite Muslim women having been banned from wearing the *burqa* and *niqab* in France for almost an entire year, as Paris Fashion Week came to a close last month, dark and dazzling design elements that were no doubt inspired by women from our deserts were plainly present on the Paris runways. Though many designers did use bold black drapes to illustrate their concepts of punk extravagance, others put forth looks that were an obvious homage to the *abaya*, a garment that has come to serve as a universal symbol for Islam and Arab women.

An Vandevorst and Filip Arickx, the designers behind the Belgian label A.F. Vandevorst, styled models in scarves and hats that fully covered their faces, with one look in particular, a long black wrap dress, that resembled the enveloping cover of an *abaya*. In a similar manner, California-bred designer Rick Owens, known for his avant-garde and borderline-grunge creations, opened his show with a model wearing a grey robe, draped on top of a turtleneck maxi gown. With every inch of skin covered, including much of the models' hair, these two ensembles appeared to reference the conventional conservatively-clad woman of the Middle East.

For Autumn Winter 2012 Alice Temperley and L'Wren Scott may have channelled the elegance, grace and nobility of the *abaya* in their dark embellished full length gowns, but other designers were less subtle in their approach. Zac Posen and DAKS included black button-down looks that were open and flowing from the waist down, which, though slightly masculine, were quite reminiscent of open-front abayas often worn by women in the metropolitan Gulf.



Azzaro, Spring Summer 2012



Yves Saint Laurent, Autumn Winter 2012



Gucci, Autumn Winter 2012



Osman, Autumn Winter 2012



Etro, Spring Summer 2012

Frida Giannini meanwhile, included a long black cape in her collection for Gucci. From the stiff but shiny silk material to tiers and ribbon tie, it resembled designs worn by Arab women on top of gowns or *jalabiyas* when attending galas and banquets. Some designers may have taken their interpretations too literally—Emilio de la Morena for instance, whose signature colourful garments are often revealing, took an all round more conservative approach with a black belted dress complete with a *sbayla*-esque head covering. Though reportedly influenced by his Spanish heritage, he appeared to have been inspired by a Middle Eastern muse.

Designers may have collectively utilized the colour and form of the *abaya* to evoke edginess in their Autumn Winter collections, but the Arabic-inspired theme is far from a new season trend. Rather, it was a continuation from the Spring Summer 2012 collections which were shown at fashion weeks around the same time as Egyptian demonstrators were occupying Tahir Square, protesting the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Italian label Etro sent an obvious representation of the abaya down the runway in the form of a striking, panelled, black dress with purple and orange colour pops that would look right at home on the streets of Dubai or Beirut. At Carlos Miele *burqa*-inspired beachwear was seen in chiffon poolside cover-ups with loose, fluid silhouettes. French fashion house Azzaro's draped navy blue gown is quite identical to *jalabiyas* that hang in the closets of many women in the Middle East, as well as a ready-to-wear version by preppy American designer Tommy Hilfiger. A more avant-garde take came from Alexis Mabille which although form-fitting, sky blue, and more utilitarian than feminine, clearly drew reference from the functionality of an *abaya*, with a button-down front and trail.

By keeping design elements akin to the *abaya* in mind when producing their seasonal collections, American and European fashion houses have created clothing that appeals to their more modest Middle Eastern clientele, perhaps a deliberate response to their own countries lack of spending power post-recession. Whatever the reason its good to see our favourite designers looking to the Middle East for style inspiration.

WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST WEIGH IN...



Emilio de la Morena, Autumn Winter 2012

LEILA AL MARASHI

Founder and Designer of fashion brand Sugar Vintage

"These designs are ethereal and beautiful, and though I wouldn't call abayas, it's obvious they've been inspired by some of the *abayas* local women wear today. The Middle East has influenced a lot of fashion lately, probably because designers find our women mysterious, alluring and exotic."

DANA AL KHALIFA

Brand Representative and Blogger, *TheOverdressed.com*

"Girls who prefer an edgier, darker and biker-chic look can wear some of these designs as *abayas*. I would wear the A.F. Vandevorst long coat as an *abaya*, because the cut and structure embody my personal style."

SUMAYYAH AL SUWAIDI

Emirati artist, fashion designer and owner of *Grafika Boutique*

"I don't believe these designs are inspired by the *abaya*, they are just long dresses very similar to kaftans—my favourite is the dress by Etro, I liked its flowiness and combination of colours."