Ohlala!

Styling





The Interview

Walla al alaWi , one of Bahrain's leading young fashion designers, spoke to *Jane Faberij de Jonge* about her life in a competitive business.

Walla Al Alawi is part of a progressive new generation of Bahraini designers, merging the modern and the traditional to create a distinctive style and flair. The young designer, who has her own shop in Al'A'ali Mall, has three fashion lines: designer abayas, ready-to-wear, and a made-to-measure collection. She recently showcased her work in an exclusive fashion event hosted by Saks Fifth Avenue in Bahrain and sponsored by the Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts. Her creations are aimed at traditional women who possess individual character with style. Clients return to buy Walla's creations because they like her manner of blending Arab and Western cultures and styles; they trust her taste and know that she understands their sense of style. □

Walla Al Alawi



"I often get stopped in London, New York and Paris and asked about the clothes I'm wearing."

When Walla graduated in 2001 with a degree in fashion design from the American University in London, she wanted to recreate a modern stylish abaya. The collection for her final thesis had been "What's Beneath the Black Veil" and upon returning to Bahrain, she continued her theme by designing classic abayas reflecting modern style and contemporary fashion. They feature delicate embroidery, dazzling beadwork the finest silk, lace, jersey, velvet, cashmere and leather, each embellished with glistening crystals and sparkling sequins. The cloth is cut in Italy and the pieces are embroidered and finished in Bahrain.

Walla is married to Dr. Wesam Al-Arrayed and has two children, Alghala, 5, and Mohammed, 2. I had the opportunity to meet and interview Walla in her workshop, and here is some of what she had to say.

How did your interest in fashion develop?

Wa. When we were on holiday as children, our father used to take us to various designer shops around the world. My two sisters, three brothers and I all grew to love fashion but it was only I who had the talent and wanted to follow a career in fashion. My father encouraged me to follow my dreams and express my own personality.

is the Gulf a good place for creative women; is it hard to gain success in Bahrain's fashion-conscious market?

Wa. I think Bahrain is a good place. I believe that fashion is now incorporated in some local college programmes and hope this will result in more Bahrainis putting across their ideas and encouraging local panache. At the moment, I'm one of the few designers here promoting my style of chic. I have been successful because my designs are inspired



by modern Arab women who appreciate fashion but also have their own sense of style and self confidence. Competition is good; it encourages fresh ideas and stimulates progressive thought.

Does arab fashion appeal to many outside the Gulf?

Wa. My fashion does, definitely! My clothes are stylish and fashionable and I often get stopped in London, New York or Paris and asked about the clothes I'm wearing. I have clients around Europe who maybe wear my abayas for different purposes, for example, as evening coats. Last November, a buyer from Bergdorf Goodman in New York complimented me on my clothes and asked to see my brochure. I'm now in discussions to sell my range through their luxury store in Manhattan.

What advice would you give young people entering your world?

Wa. Never copy other designers. Develop

Walla Al Alawi



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your own style and stick to it; be original. Reflect your emotions but also understand how people will wear and present the clothes you are creating. It is important to follow and be aware of the international fashion trends. Learn to understand different materials – how they flow and how they wear. If possible, travel and study abroad.

It's important to understand different aspects of world fashion even if you're not aiming to design those lines. You have to appreciate the changes each season in the studios of London, Paris, Milan and New York.

Where are you going from here?

Wa. I'm trying to gain international recognition but I don't want to go too fast or lose my identity. I must stay in control, watch each step, protect my image and move forward carefully.

How do you relax?

Wa. I'm happiest when I'm with my husband and children; that's always relaxing. But I do tend to lie awake at night and dream about new lines of clothes, different ways to decorate my exclusive abayas, or how to create showpiece statements for my exceptional clients. I do love what I am doing.

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