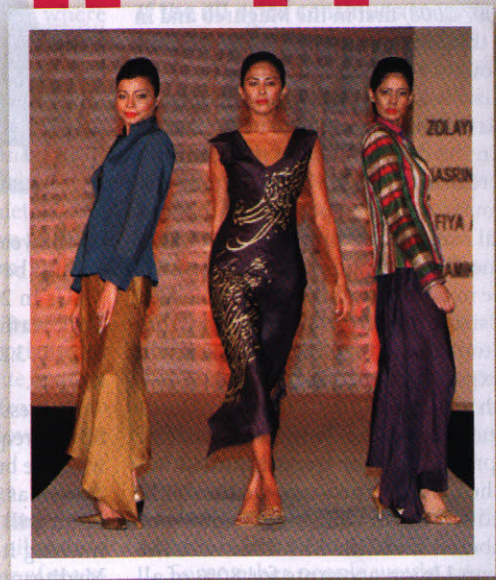


Afghan Chic

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE



Afghanistan is understandably perhaps not the first country that you associate with modern design. For centuries women's stories were woven into traditional carpets, and like those rugs, the country weaves its magic like threads of a carpet. It remains one of the most visually sumptuous, wholly unique and intriguing places on earth.

IT TAKES SOME time for the foreign eye to adjust to its peculiar beauty, to see past the dusty ruins and ruminations of a country locked into a different time zone, decimated by almost three decades of war and still facing an uncertain future. Like the capital city itself, though, through the metal gates that can hide magnificent rose gardens, there are small oases of calm and contemporary design, once again, admittedly not much but there.

Down a pockmarked road, crossing over puddles full of muddy water, through an in-

auspicious barricade that opens onto a wide flat stone path is the workshop and store of Zolaykha Sherzad, a New York-based architect who left her native Afghanistan at the age of 10 and was drawn back after 9/11.

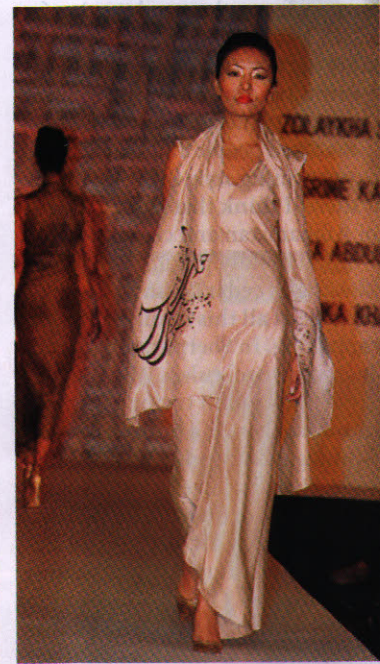
The inspiration for her collection, called *Zarif*, comes from traditional designs that are reinterpreted and given a modern twist – last season's scarves and evening dresses drew inspiration from calligraphy, reviving an old technique and giving it a new function.

For Zolaykha the flow from architecture

to design made sense. “In both cases we are creating an environment that protect and define the body. Clothing is our second layer of identity. The practice of architecture is a long process and I found clothing much faster and fulfilling.” She received her Master's from Switzerland's School of Architecture in Lausanne, then taught at New York's Pratt School of Architecture.

At the same time as she began designing in Afghanistan, she founded the School of Hope, an NGO rebuilding primary schools in rural Afghanistan. “Somehow the work done through this organisation got me closer to my culture, and to my identity. I felt there was something more that I could contribute, something more personal. The clothing became a way for me to explore the possibilities of reviving the Afghan culture,

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THE ZARIF collection embodies the new Afghan style, where traditional calligraphy and designs blend with contemporary fashion, providing a striking and stylish look that could rival the catwalks of the world

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but at the same time, shaping its future.” Many expatriates have returned, and many have created charities.

A few years ago Sara Rahmani caused a storm when she remodelled the all-enveloping burqa into shirts that showed a bit of cleavage.

Nasima began her business three years ago. An Afghan whose husband of eight-months was killed by the Russians took her life savings of \$750 and invested it in making 50 silk scarves. They sold out immediately. She now has two people weaving for her exclusively. When Zoalykha is in New York, as she regularly commutes between Kabul and Manhattan, Nasima runs her business.

Royah Ethical Design is a project dedicated to women and design in Afghanistan. “It draws on Afghanistan’s rich cultural history,” says Gabriella Ghidoni, the Italian initiator of the business. “We create contemporary fashion using Afghan textiles and Italian expertise.” Another expatriate Afghan designer is DMG’s Durrana Ghazi, who has a following in Kabul and has sold her work in Rome and LA.

Sarah Takesh, a fluent Farsi speaker, was lured to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. She has created one of the country’s leading clothing design labels, Tarsian and Binkley. “Zolaykha does the avant-garde and equestrian structured thing. I do the feminine embellishment and the crafty stuff. But overall, the noteworthy thing is that Afghanistan has attracted many people with style and taste. If you go to a some other countries, there are a lot of cheesy things there. Funny enough, the little design scene in Kabul is not cheesy at all. Almost everyone has ‘taste’, which is interesting.”

For her the modern look as you travel

through peoples’ homes is about the fusion of east and west. “There is a commonality,” she says, “there are similar colours, materials, styles.”

The backdrop to most homes are the rugs designed by Rahim Walizada from Nomad, a true oasis. His clean, geometric, sophisticated modern designs stand alone when it comes to style.

At my incredulous first sight of Walizada he struck me as the “kooolest kat in Kabul”. In a country where men uniformly wear shalwar kameez, Walizada stepped into his showroom as if he had just come off the Milan catwalk, dressed in a khaki coloured chunky Replay sweater, matching knitted cap and fashionable trousers.

Internationally recognised, his shop acts as a magnet for everyone passing through. I found myself compelled there on a regular, almost daily, basis. Of all the designers I encountered in Afghanistan, his work translates most effortlessly into any market. After 9/11 he too returned to Kabul, leaving his Manhattan shop also called Nomad.

As in so many warzone locations, the international community is small [and somewhat incestuous]. On one occasion Walizada invited a large group to his family home near the old Daraluman Palace just outside of the town centre. There he hosted a huge Afghan-style lunch where we sat on carpets amidst fields of fragrant, giant spring roses. Another guest turned out to be Tom Freston, founder of MTV, who had returned to Afghanistan for the first time since living there in the 1960s. His travelling companion sold Nomad’s carpets on New York’s 5th Avenue.

Chicken Street isn’t exactly 5th Avenue or Bond Street, but it is the main shopping drag in Kabul for expatriates looking for Afghan items (although there are new shopping centres popping up). Merchants sell mostly traditional clothes, rugs and jewellery. Past the heavy silver rings, the lapis necklaces, carved boxes and street children, a few quite fabulous pieces stand out, such as necklaces that could easily have been designed in London or Paris.

Traditionally, Afghan-style homes have little furniture, kilms cover the floor, and mattresses instead of couches are used to sit on. Homes in Kabul rely heavily on local crafts.

“Modern Afghan design,” says Takesh, “the kind of ‘look’ you see in the homes of so many expats and Afghan returnees alike, distinguishes itself from traditional Indian or let’s say, Moroccan (another well-known

“eastern” look) by being a lot more minimal and hearty.”

“Afghanistan,” she adds, “is first and foremost a tribal country and in tribal settings, design is simplified and naive, while still being saturated with soul and warmth. The colours are fewer, the wood carving far less intricate, but the high altitude and exotic mixture of races that create the objects lend an elusive, hard-to-categorise element to the crafts that emerge from there. Afghans are a mixed people and that leads to a uniquely charming style that is not quite here nor there. I think that is the true romance of Afghanistan and central Asia in general – mud, wildly painted ceramics, walnut chests and cedar columns.”

The flip side of all this beauty is the absolutely appalling. In Sherpur, a district of Kabul, ‘narcotecture’ rules. While many people scrounge around trying to simply feed themselves, there is a building frenzy fuelled by drug money, which has created its own style. Here the huge hideous houses are colourful, inlaid, often with mirrors, inspired by the gaudy architecture of Pakistan, and are quite simply crimes against architecture.

Yet at Bamiyan, where the giant buddhas overlooked verdant valleys for centuries until they were destroyed by the Taliban, there is Lake Band-e-Amir, one of the most pristine and beautiful in the world. So much is incongruous in Afghanistan, and nothing more so than the sight of swan boats, those old fashioned ones, delightful and, dilapidated, colourful, and graceful even in decline.

Across the ultra-conservative capital female mannequins parade from shop windows in what can only be described as a deviant strain of 1950s prom dresses. They have fitted bodices with big hoop skirts in ghastly colours – from mint green to yellow and tangerine – made for weddings and sometimes worn to expatriate theme parties – and in flammable acrylic, they are something to behold.

The design scene is admittedly limited, and Zolaykha would say non-existent. Most items are aimed at expatriates who can afford the high prices (often \$100 for a top), who need and want clothes that are fashionable yet functional and who support local efforts.

Invariably, Afghans themselves wear cheap imported clothing. However, should the political and security conditions improve, design might prove an intriguing area to watch. ■