

THE ABAYA

IN MODERN ARAB CULTURE

The once plain, black, cloak-like over-garment worn mostly by women in the Arab Gulf has undergone many Transformations over the years, but none more so than today as the Abaya becomes a fashion statement, hits the London catwalk and goes Couture

BY MAYE OSTOWANI PHOTOGRAPH BY NOEL MILLER

A visit to Hanayen store in Mall of the Emirates reveals an abundance of abayas of all styles and descriptions. Row upon row of shoulder-to-floor length, multi-coloured and multi-fabric abayas meet the eye. Many are loose, black-on-black creations with minimalistic black or conservatively coloured embroidery around the neckline and on the sleeves. Others are also black-based but with splashes of coloured fabric on the bodice, down the front or on the sleeves in blues, greens and reds. Still others are a lot more intricate and elaborate in form, style and adornment. Prices range from AED250 for a simple design to AED10,000 for a custom-made Swarovski crystal-embedded Hanayen abaya. Two abayas on display in the store window are particularly

eye-catching: one is made of a satiny, lime-green fabric, embellished with two rows of small crystals and slightly larger turquoise stones down the front and on the sleeves. The other has black satin sleeves and sides and an intricately designed, brightly coloured crepe fabric down the front, with small pleats, a plunging v-shaped neckline, and a belt studded with tiny crystals of deep pinks, reds and yellows.

The majority of Hanayen's customers are Emirati. They will buy the simpler, black-on-black versions for everyday use or for work and the fancier, often bejewelled and hence more expensive abayas for special occasions such as Eid and weddings. But the store also welcomes a considerable number

of Western tourists who often buy the abayas for themselves because they are "different" or as a unique gift for their loved ones back home.

Traditionally, women in the Middle East and mainly in the Gulf countries of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen and Kuwait, wore their abayas over their clothes only rarely because they didn't leave their homes often. Its main purpose was to cover them from head to foot in public places or in the presence of male non-family members and was seen as a gesture of modesty.

The abaya dates back hundreds of years. Originally, it was made of one large silk or wool piece of material and was worn draped from head to

toe, covering the entire body except the face and hands. Its first known use is said to date back to 1836.

Only in the past 20 years or so, has the traditional simple, black abaya begun its transformation to include colour, embroidery and embellishment in tandem with the changing lifestyle of many young women in the region who are increasingly attending universities and entering the workforce for the first time in their society's history. Those working in the public sector and often in mixed-gender environments are required, culturally, to wear their abayas all day.

'The abaya has changed a lot in its purpose and its

look,' says Emirati national and Abu Dhabi resident Shatha Al-Noaimi. 'It's a cultural obligation that girls have changed to fit the times. Our culture dictates that I have to wear an abaya, but I'm going to do it my way.'

Al-Noaimi, who owns and runs a school in Abu Dhabi, says that the style and shape of abayas like her grandmother's, worn over the head, very loose and open at the front, would not be practical in today's working environment. 'The one I wear to work is partially closed with buttons so I have ease of movement and at the same time ensures I am covered at all times,' she says. 'In the old days, women had one abaya for everything. Now, they wear their abayas everywhere except in their own

homes. If they go to weddings, even women-only weddings, they don't remove them. That's why there are now dressy, formal and fashionable designs.'

Saudi national Nada Alatas clearly remembers breaking with tradition in the early 1990s when she started designing and wearing abayas with colour. 'I was going to college and spending lots of time outdoors. I had to wear my abaya all day,' the native of the port city of Jeddah recalls. 'So I started thinking: why does it have to be black? Traditionally, the abaya was always black but the point of it is to cover up. There is no rule that says it can't be colourful.'

Alatas transformed her solid-black abayas, at first by adding just a little colour. 'In public and on the street I used to get some strange stares,' she says.

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