

# A new generation of designers

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The rising stars of Egyptian fashion are mixing traditional fabrics with cutting-edge design

There's a radical change underway within the Egyptian fashion scene. Tired of the flowing gowns of Gucci, Christian Dior, Valentino, and bored by the mainstream affordability of Zara and Mango, a new generation of designers is looking closer to home for inspiration, drawing on traditional Egyptian fabrics, patterns, and clothing.

They're discovering that the country's millenarian cultural heritage is not only a source of artistic inspiration, but that it makes sound commercial sense as well.

Leading fashion journalist Mona Afifi can take much of the credit for helping promote the new Oriental look over the last couple of years, overseeing the rise of Middle Eastern brands with ethnic appeal such as Dinz and Amina K. "There are lots of young Arab designers out there making gorgeous things," says Ms Afifi, "and the biggest shops here and all over the world are buying them." Afifi highlights her clients' Oriental style, creativity, and talent, setting them apart from the haute couture that has long dominated Egyptian fashion. Her clients' lines can now be found in the country's top outlets.

Amina Khalil, the 24 year old designer behind Amina

K, is passionate about tradition. "I've always loved Egyptian styles and fabrics. There is so much we have here in Egypt that no one is aware of – and someone needs to bring it out," she says.

What sets Khalil and her ethnic-conscious contemporaries apart from the crowd is their mix of traditional fabrics, such as *Kbeyameya*, which is used to make tents, as well as locally produced silk and wool. The *galabeyya*, the traditional gown worn by Egyptian men, has even been appropriated, and now combines floral, striped or Islamic patterns and an array of materials.

Four young women who are celebrating authentic Middle Eastern fabrics by transforming them into cutting-edge designs for clothing and accessories are Heba Elawadi, 22, Hana Elawadi, 24, Dina Sabet, 24, and Meram Maafa, 25, who have joined forces to create El Horreya (freedom), a fashion design project that produces hand-crafted scarves, bags, and personal and home accessories. "We wanted to work together because we're all creative in different ways," says Heba El Awadi, a fashion designer with her own clothing line, Hebz, which is separate from El Horreya. Her sister Hana is a jewellery designer, while friends Sabet and Maafa are a



Cairo-based designer Rime Magdél working in her atelier on her eternity dress, shown at Cairo Forum 2010

painter and architect/interior designer respectively. “Our idea is to help promote Middle Eastern material,” Ms El Awadi explains. “Everything we produce is inspired by the Middle East.”

The four use fabrics such as the *keffiyeh*, or Palestinian scarf, *kelim* (thick woven carpets), *kbeyameya*. Elements of Bedouin, Pharaonic and rural cultures have inspired their designs as well. “I think the market in Cairo is accepting of Egyptian products because Egyptian products have begun to prove themselves. At first, people weren’t ready to accept Egyptian designers. It has taken a lot of hard work to produce high quality products and slowly change the consumer’s mind,” says El Awadi.

Reem Shaheen produces high quality handmade ethnic clothing and accessories for women; tunics, tops, kaftans, blouse, dresses, hareem pants, wedding dresses, scarves, jalabiya and more. Using quality fabrics and materials from all over Egypt, Shaheen blends modern high street fashion with traditional ethnic patterns, embroidery and sewing techniques handcrafted by women from the Siwa Oasis, El Arish, Sinai, Asyut, Nagada, and other areas of Egypt. Shaheen has been training and counseling Egyptian City, Bedouin and Village women (particularly the women from the Siwa Oasis and El Arish) for more than five years.

Through out the training classes and when designing something new Shaheen always keeps in mind that what is produced must respect and keep traditional techniques, colours, patterns or cultural symbols (in the form of embroidery) of the location from which the product comes. By doing so, not only do the women

produce incredible products but they are also working to preserve their culture, environment and traditions.

Rime Magdél is a Cairo-based designer who also draws on her country’s traditional designs and textiles.

Combining aspects of traditional Egyptian clothing and design with a modern approach, she is creating something unique and appealing. “I’ve always loved Egyptian styles and fabrics. There is so much we have here in Egypt that no one is aware of – and someone needs to bring it out,” says Magdél.

The Egyptian government has also been doing its bit to encourage designers in other fields to look to their roots for inspiration. The annual Cairo Forum showcases the exceptional arts and crafts of Egypt’s cultural heritage and their strong potential in the international market. The two-day event promotes greater awareness of the importance of arts and crafts and the role they can play in economic development.

On a practical level, it provides marketing opportunities for artists, crafts people and producers, allowing them to develop an international network for dialogue and information exchange on issues relevant to arts and crafts production, marketing, preservation and best practices, as well as nurturing a spirit of cooperation and sharing between artists, crafts people and producers.

Such official support for the initiatives and efforts of home-grown talent reflects the government’s welcome awareness of the importance of fostering small and medium-sized business capable of providing employment, boosting exports, and promoting Egypt’s image internationally. **F**

**Egypt’s fashion community is discovering that the country’s cultural heritage is not only a source of inspiration but also that it makes commercial sense as well**



Fabric seller in the new souk, Luxor