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FROM SURGERY TO STYLING

Fashion designer Rym Menaifi draws on the wealth of her Algerian heritage to dazzle on the runway

When I was little, I hung out with my grandma, who was a seamstress, and my aunts, who used golden thread to make beautiful, traditional *gandoura* dresses in their workshop in Constantine. My grandma passed down her passion by helping me make dolls and dresses for them. By the time I was a teenager, I was designing items for myself, my little sister and friends. I never thought this could become my profession. I wanted to be an architect or a pilot. [My family] persuaded me to study medicine.

To tease me at university, my friends called me 'Dr. Couturière'. When I interned in surgery my stitches were

so good that my professor let me finish operations so they would be aesthetically well done. This is when it clicked what my future career should be! But I still finished my seven years and began to work in the pharmaceutical industry. I wasn't happy. I didn't like hospitals. I was fascinated by colour and materials.

I started researching traditional dresses of various regions. I found this subject so rich. Algerian ancestral costume dates back over two millennia. I wanted to take these costumes out of their folklore context to make contemporary clothes with an Algerian signature. The major fashion designers often seek inspirations in other more 'exotic' cultures, so why shouldn't I be inspired by my own diverse country?

I moved to Algiers, took dressmaking lessons while still working, and in 2007 launched a small collection of 10 outfits inspired by the women in the Orientalists' paintings. After my amateur catwalk show at the Sheraton during Ramadan, I received orders!

I realised that I should launch myself seriously: buy sewing machines, recruit seamstresses, and reach beyond myself. I launched my label, Manouba, in 2008, named after my grandma.

Algerian women like colour and everything that sparkles. Having a beautiful traditional costume in our wardrobe is part of our culture. I love this tradition, while also the idea of creating something that is original, authentic, unique and rare. There's also the question of identity: a print to show that you are from a certain region, and a sense of national pride.

My primary objective isn't commercial but to give Algerian costume international exposure. I've showed in Marrakech, Belgium, Lyon, Paris and the US. When I was at Fashion Week in Washington in 2014, people thought that since I was from Africa I would make *boubou* dresses. They were so shocked by my collection that they called me to the microphone to explain. I want to show Algeria in a different light from how it is portrayed in the mainstream media.

In life we should put sincerity and intensity in all that we do, love with all our force and be the master of our own destiny. I don't believe in the existence of 'no' or 'impossible' – these are just notions we invent in our heads when we give up. ●

Interview by

Ruby Boukabou



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