

Nour Najem

A Tale of the Orient



Young and beautiful, born and raised in her beloved Beirut, the talented Nour Najem has been living her well-deserved success story. From a scientific background to a complete shift into the world of fashion, the designer has come a long way after interning for the biggest names in the Lebanese fashion industry. Today, her brand, along with her social enterprise project, are respected and recognized. We sat down with the young designer to learn more about the behind-the-scenes of the collections, the story of the brand, and Nour's view on fashion in the Middle East.

Tell us, why did you choose to become a fashion designer?

Well I grew up in a household with both my parents being architects, so I've always been into arts, history of arts, and culture. I had an interest in textures, materials, colours and how they blend and mix together. But I always had that idea that the fashion industry did not have a soul while all I wanted to do was save the world. So I decided to become a doctor. After graduating with a B.S in Biology, I knew it was not for me; you really can't escape a vocation when you have one. So I went to fashion school while enrolling in a Master's of Business at Lebanese American University (LAU) at the same time. During my time at LAU, one of my courses entitled "entrepreneurship" highlighted the study of social entrepreneurship; how to do something good for society while remaining a viable commercial company. I would say that was the light bulb in my head that gave me the idea for my company.

Describe your design and brand aesthetic.

I believe my main influence is my heritage, which is huge. My brand is inspired by the oriental culture, by craftsmanship, by artisans... I would say my heritage is a message I want to convey through my brand. We have such a strong Lebanese culture

with different habits and traditions. Everything in our values has a symbolism and I try to include that in my collections.

Tell us more about the Kenzah project and how it came about?

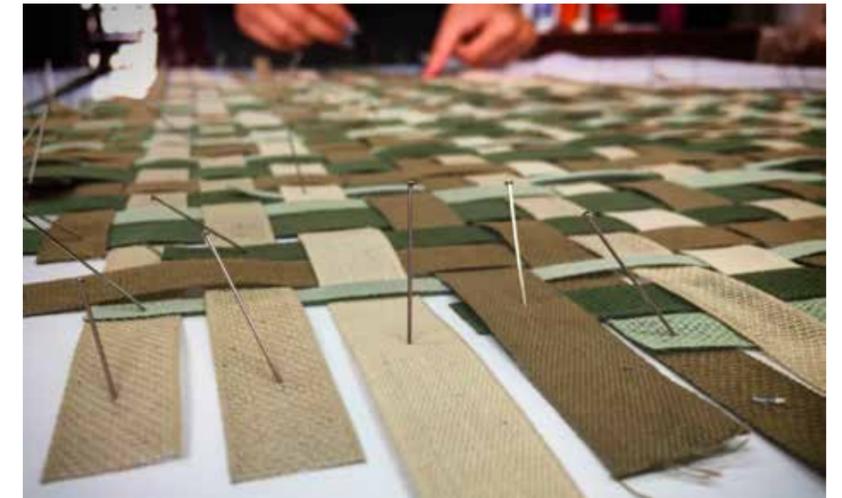
Basically, Kenzah came to life at the exact same time as my brand; I wanted them to work together. It started with me finding a few women in the streets of Burj Hammoud, marginalized women who were not given the chance to work. Word of mouth did the rest and I had almost twenty women wanting to join Kenzah. It was a hassle at first, but then everything was established with those who really wanted to work and give an example to their daughters. They are the strongest most genuine women I know. Most of them work from their homes, and for every collection I create for my brand, there are parts of the works done by Kenzah that are included. There is, of course, a lot of trial and error as the women are constantly learning, but the pieces added to my collection are labeled "Kenzah". It is all about women empowerment.

If you had to select one piece from your own creations, which do you feel most attached to?

I can't really say as every collection and every piece I create becomes my new favourite! It's maybe as impossible as choosing between the fingers on your hand!



Starch Foundation Show at FFWD



What's your take on the influx of female designers in the Middle East? What would you like to see more of?

I think people have forgotten that designers are there to find solutions to problems such as inequalities, the struggle for freedom of expression... They think it is all about the aesthetics, and fashion being a world of glitz and glam. I believe the first responsibility of a designer is to allow women to express themselves the way they truly are. We should cater to their comfort and enabling, we should be giving them that confidence boost that they sometimes need.

What would you say is the driving force behind your work?

I've always had that part of me that wanted to change the world. Fashion is a universal language that everyone speaks and I think that helps my quest. Fashion is not just pieces of fabric sewn together; we should never forget the hours of work behind it. I would love for each person to wake up in the morning and be proud of what they have accomplished so far instead of going through life as a rat race.

What's it like to be part of the fashion industry, especially being based in Lebanon?

It is as challenging as it is rewarding. On so many levels, you feel you are not taken seriously because of the stigma there is against designers, especially female designers in an industry dominated by men. You hear it a lot: "Oh, there's yet another designer" and that does not allow much encouragement for young designers.

What is the most surprising thing that inspires your work?

I am really inspired by feelings. Every collection I create starts with a feeling I want to convey to women. Sometimes it's a feeling of ease; other times it's about catching your breath in such a busy world. I want to relate a feeling of security in the sense that everything will be ok in the end.

What are the most challenging about having your own fashion line?

As I said before, it is very challenging to assert yourself and be taken seriously as a young and rising designer in a very competitive industry. My collections are also named in Arabic: Nafas, Zaman, Baraka... That is also some kind of challenge for European customers to be able to pronounce the sounds we have in Arabic that they don't have in their own languages. But I think it could be a way of attracting them even more.

What are the happiest and memorable moments you have as a designer?

I remember my first fashion show with Fashion Forward. As I was walking out after my collection was showcased, I had a mixture of feelings, from happiness to nervousness not to trip on the runway; it was such a powerful feeling for me; I knew that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. As for happy moments, waking up every morning is a joy for me; sometimes I dream of a piece I want to create and it just works itself out afterwards. It really is happiness when you wake up every morning wanting to create something and live your dream.



Name three essential items every woman should own?

A white dress, a pair of high heels, and a white T-shirt.

If Nour Najem could have a spokesmodel, who would it be?

Right now, I would have to say Amal Alamuddin. I want strong women to be linked to my collection, to be the face of it; women who want to change the world.

What makes the city of Beirut great?

Definitely its contradictions, the fact that there is a conflict everywhere you go, but there is always a silver lining to it.

In your opinion, in order to succeed in life you need...

Well my mom used to tell me: "you can get whatever you want in life if you do whatever it takes to get it". So I would say own up to what you want, go after it, and don't back down.

What is a message would like to share with the Arab women of today's society?

I think we should go back to our humanity. We as women are givers, we tend to care a lot for others and sometimes, we forget who we truly are. We need to take care of ourselves first in order to do better and give even more to the world. Through empowering each other, we can build a community of strong women who can convey so many messages linked to our values and our culture.

By Dana Mortada