

Contemporizing Modesty

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Abstract: “Contemporary Muslim Fashions,” September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019 was organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, shown in the de Young Museum and curated by Jill D’Alessandro and Laura Camerlengo, both curators at the museum, and consulting curator Reina Lewis, a scholar at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. The aim was to represent contemporary Muslim fashions. To this end, they assembled and exhibited a collection of garments from the most popular fashion designers of the day, chosen from a series of shows at modest fashion weeks around the world. Supplemented by key pieces that have gained traction in the news such as the Burkini™ and Nike®’s sport hijab, this exhibit elevated perceptions and highlighted a global view by showing designs from around the globe, honouring the African-American, Muslim-American, Arab, and South East Asian cultures and aesthetics. Supporting the sartorial narrative was a display of visual and multimedia art from hip hop music videos, film, Instagram feeds, photography, magazine covers, and prints. The multimedia “exhibit within an exhibit” complemented the sartorial narrative by providing a contemporary context for the clothing. It reminded the observer that the exhibit was not merely about fashion history or the evolution of modesty in dress but about a contemporary moment. The relationship between fashion and the body was explored through designs that cover the body and intentionally hide the often objectified and sexualized female figure to reveal a contemporary approach to fashion that is empowering.

Keywords:

Modest
Fashion
Exhibition Review
Multimedia

Introduction

Fashion exhibitions are typically focused on costume history or they are a monograph of one designer's work. When neither history nor one designer's work is featured, what kind of fashion exhibition is created? Why is a major art museum interested in contemporary Muslim fashions, especially at a time when politically charged racial tensions are high around the world? As recently as August 2016 we saw the controversial Burkini bans on the small town coastal beaches of France. The current White House administration in the United States maintains a tone of divisive political rhetoric and in 2017 successfully implemented Presidential Proclamation 9645, colloquially known as the Muslim Travel Ban (Hamedy, 2018; U.S. Department of State - Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2018). Why is a secular institution raising awareness around Muslim dress? What appeal does an exhibit about Muslims by an American cultural institution have? It is hard to tell. Regardless, visitors left the "Contemporary Muslim Fashions" exhibit with an elevated understanding of the global Muslim community, how they are expressing their identity, choice and empowerment through fashion, and with the realization that the Muslim fashion market is one of the fastest-growing segments in fashion today.

"Contemporary Muslim Fashions" was organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. It was curated by Jill D'Alessandro, Curator-in-Charge of Costume and Textile Arts, Laura L. Camerlengo, Associate Curator Costume and Textile Arts, and Reina Lewis, consulting curator and Professor of Cultural Studies at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. The exhibit was open from September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019. In the two short months leading up to experiencing this exhibit for myself in November 2018 I read nothing but positive reviews from both Muslim and non-Muslim sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, social media posts and the exhibit's Facebook Group page. I was curious as to how this exhibit managed to elicit such positive feedback from everyone inside and outside the Muslim community. I share quotes from the Facebook Group page below, as no exhibition review is complete without acknowledging the visitor's voice (Palmer, 2008).

The Exhibit

Two years ago, Max Hollein, then Director and CEO of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, approached the textile department with the idea for a fashion exhibit based on what he had seen in Germany before coming to San Francisco, and what he had come to know about modest fashion through his work in Muslim-majority Arab nations. At the same time the textile department was looking for a subject that was exciting and timely and would provide an opportunity to take a contemporary approach to studying costume (J. D'Alessandro, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

The de Young Museum has been exhibiting textiles and costumes since its inception in 1895. Since the new de Young Museum opened in 2005 they have developed monographs featuring one designer's work and had great success with shows such as "Oscar de la Renta: The Retrospective" in 2016. Developing an exhibit about modest fashion as it has been popularized by a generation of young Muslim women provided an opportunity for the museum to bring two sides of their collection, traditional textiles and costumes, into a contemporary dialogue. When work on this show about Muslim modest fashions began two years ago the modest fashion landscape was already quite active. Global brands had launched modest capsule collections and modest fashion weeks were taking place in non-Muslim and Muslim-majority countries around the world (Singh, 2017). It became clear fairly quickly that this was a worldwide phenomenon and that global cultures influenced the style and approach to modest fashion. This is when Reina Lewis, a fashion scholar who had consulted with museums in the past and who is a leading academic authority on Muslim modest fashion, was invited to participate as consulting curator. At the same time, the museum developed a community consultation group with whom they met four times over a period of a year and a half before the show opened. The community group was recruited from the culturally diverse Muslim population in the Bay area. Lewis' vast research within the modest fashion community with both designers and consumers and the community group's input provided the museum with insights into sensitivities and nuances. The community group consulted on the name of the exhibit, got involved in the styling of the headpieces in the exhibit, and helped to promote overall engagement with the exhibit throughout its 15-week run (L. Camerlengo, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

This exhibit differed in two ways from traditional textile and costume exhibits. First, curators typically explore garments through a historical lens because the voices of the individual, society, or culture are no longer available to engage and inform the exhibit. Second, the curator is the person who chooses what questions are being answered; they alone are the convenor of the conversation. This exhibit represented a shift. What the curators did with this exhibit is highlight what is happening in the present, contemporary moment by bringing the voices of top designers and the community together to form the exhibit. The pieces shown in this exhibit were not commissioned. They were selected from modest fashion weeks being held around the world from designers that were being celebrated by the modest fashion community. The purpose of this exhibit was to provide a “conduit to give them a platform to share their voices and perspectives” (L. Camerlengo, personal communication, November 13, 2018). This created a space for conversation and for multiple narratives to be represented toward inclusivity and diversity, allowing the words of the Muslim community and artists to emerge, versus the traditional museum approach where the interpretation of one curatorial voice forms the final exhibit.

The walk to the deYoung Museum’s main entrance includes passing through an outdoor courtyard, where you are welcomed with a reflective wall of glass. Each section of this wall featured a larger-than-life Arabic word drawn in bold white calligraphy strokes, designed by a member of the community group working with the museum. As I neared the large graphic images small words appeared in English that translated the Arabic script: beauty, couture, fashion, faith, style. Words typically not associated with the Arabic calligraphy typically seen on TV, in films, or news stories. As a woman who wears the headscarf and is a daily consumer of modest fashion, it was refreshing to be welcomed into a space representing Muslims, created by a secular Western institution that celebrates an uplifting aspect of my reality as a Muslim that is too often ignored. I do love beauty, couture, fashion, faith, and style.



Figure 1: “Contemporary Muslim Fashions” at the de Young Museum. Photo: Romana Mirza.

As I approached the exhibit hall a series of magazine covers led me to the entrance. Each cover was equally spaced on a long wall. All were modest fashion magazines from around the world giving the first indication of how global the modest fashion phenomenon has become. Reina Lewis (2018) defines modest fashion as “the many different ways in which women clothe their bodies in keeping with their interpretation of what they understand to be the modesty requirements of their faith” (p. 115). Upon entering the exhibit an elevated display of black and white garments strikes the viewer, presenting an eclectic visual array of the expected and unexpected. The lattice backdrop or *mashrabiya* is an expected element associated with Islamic architecture; it is a screen typically used “on the second storey of a building or higher” (Abdelkader & Park, 2018, p. 69) to provide shade from the sun and air circulation. This immediately contextualizes the exhibit within the Islamic world. The long garment on the right looks traditionally “Muslim,” however it is not in black as typically shown by Western media. Rather, it is a white garment covering from head to foot: it is a Malaysian prayer ensemble. The gown front and centre on the round elevated pedestal is from a Turkish brand Modanisa, and exudes an unexpected Western evening gown aesthetic. Similarly, the black and white dress shown behind has a Western business attire aesthetic. As noted on the placard, this dress by Faiza Bouguessa was worn by Beyoncé, supporting the designer’s claim that “...my designs could be worn by any type of woman...” (Bouguessa, 2014). Displayed on the left is a garment that looks typically Western, simply a coat, but the fabric is an intricate pattern matching the *mashrabiya* articulated using the embroidery and cut work typically associated with Eastern traditions. The entrance is bold and striking and the neutral colour palette brings attention to the garments’ silhouettes, contextualizing what lies ahead.



Figure 2: Installation of “Contemporary Muslim Fashions” on view at the de Young museum from September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The exhibit space was designed by Hariri & Hariri Architects, founded by Iranian-born, American-trained architect sisters Gisue and Mogjan Hariri (Lee, 2018). Inspired by the arches in Islamic architecture (Lee, 2018) the architects designed white backdrops with sweeping curves at the top. To this observer the form exuded empowerment and confidence; it was akin to the feeling I get when wearing the headscarf as I sweep the fabric around my face to frame my representation to the world that day. The black walls with white lettering provided a good contrast for reading and did not compete with the clothing. Mannequins were painted grey, which diminished their presence and overt gender identity. Some mannequins were styled with headscarves. Those that were not remained with bare heads.

Organized into three parallel gallery walks, the exhibit's grand finale display was placed perpendicular to the rest. The first gallery walk, themed “Covering” and “The Middle East,” highlighted clothing designs from the Middle East and Turkey on one side. The facing wall featured “Covering,” an exhibit of contemporary art and photography that provided a visual narrative about modesty and covering that supported the sartorial display. This use of mixed media and art continued through the galleries. D’Alessandro spoke to the works of art, stating that “these works were chosen as a means to address complex issues around identity, stereotypes, Orientalism, and consumerism” (J. D’Alessandro, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

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Figure 3: “Contemporary Muslim Fashions” at the de Young Museum. Photo: Romana Mirza.

The second gallery featured “The Middle East,” “Street Style,” and “Sportswear,” a category the community outreach group encouraged the curators to include: “To have sportswear in the same exhibit as haute couture was really important [because] this show is about current contemporary lifestyle not only about ball gowns” (J. D’Alessandro, personal communication, November 13, 2018). The striped ensemble in the photo below, left, is by American modest fashion brand Verona Collection. Founder Lisa Vogl joined a program developed by Macy’s to work with minority women (deYoung Museum, 2018a). In early 2018, Macy’s picked up the Verona Collection and made it available nationally through their online store macys.com. In March 2019 Macy’s introduced the line to its retail location in Dearborn, Michigan. This is the first modest fashion brand to be carried online and in a bricks and mortar retail location by a national retailer in the United States (Wang, 2018). To the right is a solid-pink outfit by Nzinga Knight, who is a US-based fashion designer as well as an early contestant on Season 13 of *Project Runway*. In addition to capturing the surge of modest fashion designs in Muslim-majority countries, the exhibit also picked up on how Muslims are responding to their sartorial needs in places where they are the minority population.



Figure 4: Installation of “Contemporary Muslim Fashions” on view at the de Young museum from September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco / Joanna Garcia Cheran.

The installations in this part of the exhibit featured lower white platforms at eye level, making it easy to engage with the design details. The descriptive text used throughout the exhibit was designed with a non-serif font in a size large enough to read comfortably while standing. At the end of this gallery the staging platform increased in height, raising the mannequins in sportswear to a higher plane, almost as if they were waiting to receive medals. In addition to featuring modest sportswear by Muslim designers, the exhibit included Nike’s sports hijab “Pro,” behind which was mounted a larger-than-life image of Ibtihaj Muhammad who won an Olympic bronze medal on the women’s fencing team in the 2016 summer games, the same year some beaches in France banned the Burkini™. The exhibit included a looping video display replaying news reels from that time period, providing an opportunity for the viewer to be reminded of how globally controversial these bans had become.



Figure 5: Installation of “Contemporary Muslim Fashions” on view at the de Young museum from September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

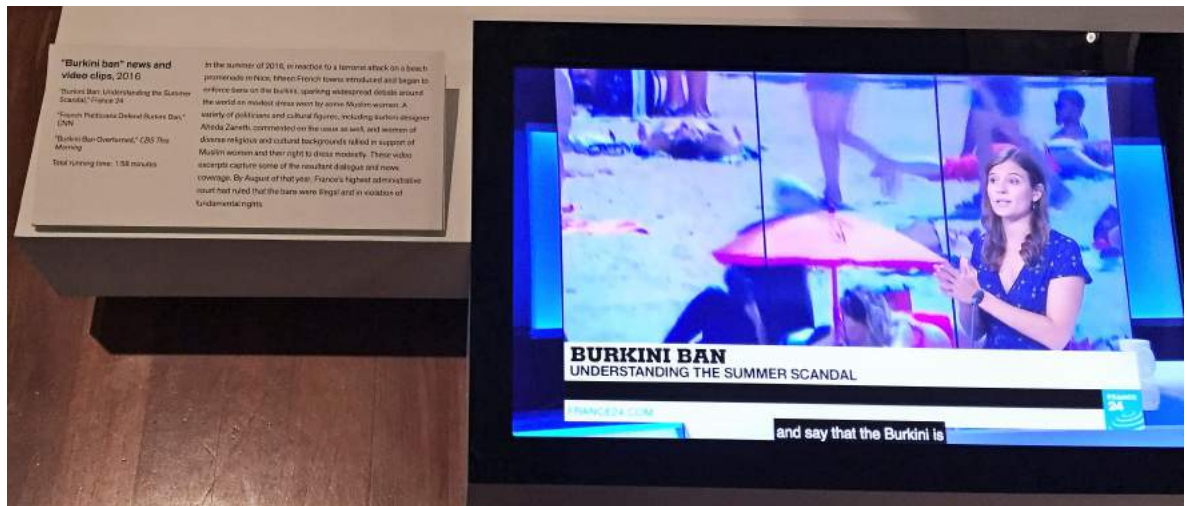


Figure 6: “Contemporary Muslim Fashions” at the de Young Museum. Photo: Romana Mirza.

The third gallery featured “Southeast Asia,” in particular designs from Indonesia and Malaysia. It displayed formal attire and garments with exquisite patterns and embroidery that “draw upon the country’s different cultures and traditional and modern design influences” (deYoung Museum, 2018c). Opposite the display of formal modest fashions from Indonesia and Malaysia were designs featuring African print fabrics and garments that were influenced by South Asian cultures. Although Muslim-majority countries Pakistan and Afghanistan have a strong culture of traditional dress, this was not exhaustively included in the exhibit. Two outfits in the gallery were influenced by South Asian designs and a vintage wedding dress made “back home” in Pakistan was loaned by a member of the community group for inclusion in the exhibit, to represent the connection between the diaspora and the ethnic ties maintained with the countries from which their parents or ancestors came.



Figure 7: Installation of “Contemporary Muslim Fashions” on view at the de Young museum from September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019. Ensembles by FIZIWOO, Melinda Looi, and Bernard Chandran. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco / Joanna Garcia Cheran.



Figure 8: Naima Muhammad (b. United States, 1973) for House of Coqueta (est. United States, 2010), Ensemble: Asymmetric tunic, gathered ankle. Courtesy of the Artist. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



Figure 9: Installation of “Contemporary Muslim Fashions” on view at the de Young museum from September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The grand finale gallery featured vignettes housed under translucent fabric, stretched over metal frames that created an undulating space within a space. It featured long gowns and couture pieces that included designs by John Galliano for Dior and Yves St. Laurent. Here the projection of the Islamic geometric shapes from the *mashrabiya* created an authentic feeling of having the light shine through from above. Couture pieces by Jean Paul Gaultier, Pierpaolo Piccioli for Valentino, and Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel took centre stage on the final display. The designers had altered their vision for these pieces to accommodate the modesty requirements of Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al Missned of Qatar. Multi-media support of the sartorial exhibit continued right through to the end, where video footage of Her Highness wearing these outfits at public events and state visits was shown.

Conclusion

Following in the footsteps of 2012's "Faith Fashion Fusion: Muslim Women's Style in Australia" that first appeared at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia and subsequently toured extensively, there was a strong focus on faith and fashion in museums in 2018. "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination" (2018) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York opened with a high-profile gala in May and had the largest turnout of any costume exhibit in the museum's history; "Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress, from the Collection of the Israel Museum" (2017) was shown both at the Jewish Museum, New York and the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco (2018); finally, "Contemporary Muslim Fashions" opened in September 2018. Visitor feedback for "Contemporary Muslim Fashions" was tremendously positive. Comments on the exhibit's Facebook Group page include: "The exhibit articulates more than words ever could the creativity, modernity, chic, and often playfulness of modest fashion as well as its transnationalism transcending geographical, cultural, ethnic, and even religious borders" (Behiery, 2018) and "What is a better way to counter Islamophobia than an art exhibit showing the diversity of Muslims through fashion" (Hujaij Bata, 2018).

Displaying art and multi-media such as hip-hop artist Mona Hayder's music video "Hijabi" and including a slide show of social media influencers' Instagram posts brought the sartorial display to life and exposed a contemporary, cultural consumption side to the Muslim community that is not often portrayed in the media. This exhibition is a model for being a voice of inclusivity, and of diversity being achieved through community engagement. The institution was not afraid to provide a platform from which to share voices and perspectives. While the curator's traditional role of mandating answers from the questions being asked by the exhibit was abdicated to the individual designers and the community, the curator's role was not made any less important. Difficult decisions had to be made surrounding the geographic scope of what was to be shown. Representation of Muslim majority regions throughout Africa and South Asia was diminished and certain modest fashion brands, such as Ibtihaj Muhammad's Louella, were not represented; however, the curators' decision to base selections on what was trending and being shown at Modest Fashion weeks provided a global snapshot of the state of contemporary Muslim fashion today.

Many ancillary events were held during the weeks the exhibit was open. There was an opening gala event with a fashion show; Friday night events open to the public for free, offering half-price admission to the galleries featuring modest fashion social media influencers and other entertainment; and Beyond the Paint, a Teen Podcast program developed by the museum's Teen Advisory Board. Teens recorded four podcasts discussing "Modest Fashion," "Individual Expression," "Global Exchange," and "Social Media," and they recorded a special audio tour available for free to teens through an online app. A symposium was also held on November 17, 2018 entitled "Faith, Fashion, Identity: Contemporary Muslim Styles" in the museum's Koret Auditorium. The event was well attended and featured a series of lectures by the exhibit curators and scholars speaking to the Muslim consumer, and Muslim dress practices in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States, and Indonesia.

The curatorial reflection in the exhibit catalogue says that "we hope this project will serve as the foundation for future explorations of modest dress" (D'Alessandro, Lewis, & Camerlengo, 2018). I believe that it can indeed serve as that foundation and build on a statement made in the wall text in the last gallery:

The increased availability of modest fashion over the past decades coincides with a larger trend in the fashion industry toward more covered styles that appeal to women across many faiths and cultures. For some, choosing modesty...may be a sign of empowerment, prioritizing individual needs over long-standing societal pressures to convey female sexuality and desirability (deYoung Museum, 2018b).

In my opinion, there has not been enough conversation around the power of women who dress modestly and choose to cover more of their body. In our current climate of over-sexualizing the female body (Michelman, 2003), women who choose to cover up more seemingly take the power away from society to judge our worth against the hegemonic ideals of beauty perpetuated by brands and advertising agencies in the pursuit of profit. Perhaps this is the next conversation to be built upon the foundation set by this exhibit at the de Young Museum.

This exhibit will be traveling to the Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany in April 2019, a decorative arts museum with an interest in social and cultural issues. There are also five more institutions interested in taking the show (J. D'Alessandro, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

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Author Biography



Romana B. Mirza

Romana B. Mirza is a brand strategist, researcher, and scholar. She brings 25+ years' experience in marketing product design and design disciplines to the fashion industry. Romana decided to pursue modest fashion through scholarship and research, with the goal of breaking down growing resentment toward Muslims and the resurgence of society's need to legislate women's bodies. To that end, Romana is completing her Master of Arts in Fashion Studies at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) in Toronto this spring. Her Master's research project titled "Women Undercover: Exploring the Intersectional Identities of Muslim Women through Modest Fashion" studies the sartorial practices of sixteen Muslim women. This research introduces digital storytelling, an arts-based research method to fashion studies. Her research and digital stories created by participants in January 2019 can be viewed at the Centre for Fashion Diversity and Social Change website. This fall she will be continuing her research as a PhD student in the Communication and Culture program offered jointly by Toronto Metropolitan University and York Universities, where she plans to continue her focus on modest fashion exploring beyond the Muslim experience.

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