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Modest Dress


Contemporary Muslim Fashions, Exhibition Catalog of the eponymous exhibition, September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019, de Young Museum in San Francisco, curated by Jill d'Alessandro, Reina Lewis, and Laura L. Camerlengo, Munich, DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2018, \$50.00 (cloth)

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This sumptuous 26 x 32cm catalog of the eponymous exhibition at the de Young Museum in San Francisco (September 22, 2018 – January 6, 2019) includes a series of essays, among them those by the three curators, Jill d'Alessandro, Reina Lewis, and Laura L. Camerlengo, that make explicit the ties between the world of fashion and the worlds of politics, culture, and global media.¹ In the current political climate perhaps more than ever “the personal is the political.” This second-wave feminist slogan, almost half a century after its coinage, declares the individual experience of getting dressed to be an inevitable foray into the gendered, classed, ethnicized and politicized worlds of transnational fashion networking, commenting and critiquing.

The *Catalog* opens with joint “Editorial Reflections” by the three curators who highlight the many dimensions of the project, from gender, religion, fashion and design to economics and the role of the Internet as global connective tissue: Islam is a global religion with dress codes ranging from very strict to fairly relaxed interpretations of *modesty*, expressed in styles rooted in many ethnic and national traditions. The scope of the articles therefore expands beyond *Muslim* fashion into the fast-growing field of *modest* fashion more generally, a trend toward *covering* that counters the infinite Western fashion plays on baring and exposing that are part and parcel of that system’s endlessly shifting design trends. The plural in the title, *Muslim Fashions*, is thus significant, notably also for today’s America where a highly politicized perception of Muslims and Muslim dress code is almost automatically linked to its most austere Saudi version, the face-covering niqab or the full-body covering burqa. Fashion often also reacts to political events, both global and local, and resulting design changes can have significant economic consequences as the rising interest in modest fashion illustrates. There are crucial historical, generational distinctions, too, between Muslim mothers who ditched the hijab in the mid-twentieth century in a turn toward modernity and liberation, and their daughters who are putting it back on, in a move toward personal choice, self-expression, and the trend for modest dressing.

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The volume promises “a snapshot of Muslim women and fashion now, spotlighting key themes, locations, and garments, and focusing on select areas around the world where . . . highly fashionable garments that adhere to modesty and related Muslim religious cultures” are being designed (16). It delivers richly. The de Young’s, for all these reasons, has been an important exhibition at a critical political and cultural juncture.

The *Catalog’s* first part, the *Essays*, provides the intellectual heft of the volume, eleven illustrated contributions, including the establishing set by the three curators, with Reina Lewis’s article opening up the theoretical and conceptual territory that lays out a *political* landscape as much as a *fashion scene*.² This tension between the stunning beauty and diversity of the unfolding landscape of global modest fashion and the political anxiety in the West over the threat of Muslim expansionism, runs through the whole volume in various forms and is present as a rift between the politics of its texts and the aesthetics of its images.

The theoretical, conceptual, and political framing that the essays provide is followed by the *Catalog* section that features the visuals: captioned images, arranged by designer and grouped under the heading *Covering*, illustrate a broad range of interpretations of covering styles with examples from around the globe. This general theme is pursued further in four geographical areas (Middle East, Europe and the USA, Malaysia, and Indonesia). *Streetwear photography*, the next section, is again global in outlook and consists, with one exception, of a series of street fashion photographs by the American Langston Hues. The one exception is an image by Hoda Katebi, a US-based Iranian-Muslim activist, photographer, and blogger.³ It is followed by *Streetwear*, a display of designer work of a higher-end type and one on modest *Sportswear*, a category that big brands, such as Nike, have only recently bought into. This section presents images from a modest fencing outfit to swimwear, including versions of the controversial burkini. A short final section records *Artists’ Responses*, with artists like Shadi Ghadirian taking a critical-humorous position on the burqa or Wesaam Al-Badry playing on high-end Western designers’ scarves, refashioned into full face-covering niqabs. The volume concludes with an extensive list of mostly female contemporary designers, a glossary, and an index.

In the opening essay, Reina Lewis notes that Western fashion houses and department stores are waking up to Muslim/modest fashion and notes that it is now an asset for a global brand to also be associated with and present in Muslim culture, style, and fashion venues.⁴ Lewis’s is a substantive article, providing background to a cultural history of veiling and fashion around the hijab, the headscarf in its many forms, which has become controversial in Western contexts. She emphasizes the overall success that modest fashion currently enjoys, and the globally growing power of the “Muslim dollar” in fashion (45).⁵

Jill D’Alessandro, too, points out the power of the “Muslim dollar” that has led major Western designers to offer (Muslim) modest dress lines, thereby launching a rapprochement between Western and Muslim fashion events globally. Such integration is helping to blur the lines, notably among a younger generation of women, between religious dress code, modest fashion, and personal style. The emergence of (young, female) Muslim designers, based mostly in Western Muslim-minority cultures but including fashioners who bridge the gap between East and West from the other side, has given additional force to this movement. Many of these designers are present in the exhibition and included in the *Catalog*. Female empowerment, the desire to distance themselves

from the dictates of fashion in favor of individual choices, is significantly shaping the terms of dressing as a field of independent and personal choice far beyond just Muslim women, often at the high end of price scales and design. In this broader sense, the global modest fashion movement is about more than fashion; at its center is also a political agenda of female empowerment beyond sartorial choices. E-commerce, blogs, online influencers, often activist with feminist voices, the launch of *Vogue Arabia* in 2017, all contribute to the global trend of Muslim and modest fashion becoming more visible.

However, as D'Alessandro in a historical backstory points out, modest fashion has never been exclusively Muslim; it exists in Christianity and "it's very instinctive" for women, she writes, even beyond religion (55). In support of her claim of such overlap in faith-based dress codes (53) and intended personal/gender expression among modest dressers, D'Alessandro references Rosie Assoulin, a Brooklyn designer of Sephardic-Jewish heritage whose designs appeal both to Orthodox Jewish and Muslim modest dressers. To broaden transcultural appeal is also the explicit goal of the Islamic Fashion Festival in Kuala Lumpur, which was launched in 2006 with the official mission "to build an updated visual and cultural reference from which Islam can be related to the modern world through the creative arena of fashion divorced from the political, economic and social strife" (57). While the *Catalog* gloriously illustrates the success of the first part of this program, the separation from politics and social contention has turned out to be considerably more difficult—a fact that every essay assembled here testifies to. But there is hope that drawing on the colorful tradition of "Indonesian fabrics and techniques such as batik, tie-dye, and *songket*" (woven-in gold thread), combined with Western cuts and silhouettes may eventually be able to "change people's perception of Islam and Islamic fashion" in the United States (59). This is a high desideratum given that in the current deeply anti-Muslim mood in American politics even empty bus seats are misread in manners both hostile and frightened, as reported recently in the *Washington Post*.⁶ Looking at the present positively, however, one might say that America's politically conservative mood may in fact offer an opening for modest fashion to gain greater traction in the mainstream, whether its impetus is religious, a point of personal choice, or feminist empowerment. This might help against automatic anti-Muslim sentiment, broaden political tolerance, and promote greater individual sartorial choice.

The diversity in fashion and culture, so colorfully and variedly on display in this volume, thus cuts both ways: for Islamic wearers it assembles ideas and means to push the envelope and broaden the palette of what's allowed and acceptable; for non-Muslim women it provides innovative stylish choices in the world of modest fashion. Religiously toned in the first, style-choice oriented in the second case, in both views what is happening in Muslim fashion design increases opportunities, broadens avenues of self-expression and stylistic diversity, and offers a degree of liberalization from cultural constraints, be they predominantly religious or the result of consumer-culture and short-lived style-driven imperatives.

Alex Aubry adds to D'Alessandro's historical background in a contribution that offers a quick tour through 200 years of West-East fashion interchange, focused on the history of Turkish and Egyptian high-class women and their predilection for Paris fashion going back to the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, over the years, Western couture houses have come to rely on Middle Eastern patronage (71). These cross-cultural sartorial ties illustrate "shifting notions of national identity in the wake of colonialism, interpretations of faith,

emerging feminist movements, and evolving social mores” that have shaped “the ‘Muslim world’ during a period of sweeping modernization across the globe” (64). Aubry urges us to take the pluralism among Muslim societies seriously because it challenges “narratives that overlook the diversity and complexity of Muslim identities, histories, and accommodations in the modern world” (64).

Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor deepens the historical dimension of contemporary Muslim and modest fashion trends in a different direction and looks for motivation in religion itself. This angle provides a counter-narrative to the currently dominant story of modern Muslim fashion, as “a story of young Muslim women, often in the West, who are inspired by ethical trends in fashion to create their own versions of ethically modest clothing” (84). Parsing the dimensions of “Islamic” and “ethical” or “righteous,” Cheruvallil-Contractor reveals a line of thinking about aesthetic influence that runs “through Islamic theology, history, and culture” (84) and suggests that *this* is what these young designers draw on. And they do so to address their specific position in the West “where two mutually antagonistic ontologies—Muslim patriarchy and secular plurality—doubly marginalize them as outsiders” (87). Their designs highlight a less austere Muslim aesthetic than the Arab version by referring to Sunni *hadith* texts that characterize Allah as a beauty loving god (85). In their understanding of global Islam as “a multicolored mosaic,” Islamic garments are designed to reflect this diversity (85).

Carla Jones’s contribution shifts attention to Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim-majority country, with precisely such colorful sartorial traditions, starkly different from the Middle East. For Indonesia, too, “in the past two decades the fastest growing and perhaps most vibrant segment of Indonesian fashion has focused on modest and stylish dressing for pious Muslim women” (74). What is interesting here—and applies in Iran, too, where the 1979 revolution turned fashion conservative—is that for an older generation of women, for whom Western styles had meant liberalization and social progress, the new “pious dress is still a bit new and unusual” (75). Is the past really going to be the future? If so, these women will be all the more interested in *stylish* modest dress. In her 2011 book, *A Quiet Revolution*, the Egyptian-born, UK-educated and American-based gender-studies professor Leila Ahmed speaks to this generational shift of perception.⁷ Jones points out that historically, “Indonesian Muslim women have not worn religiously marked clothing,” and the appearance of the headscarf, that controversial piece of Muslim clothing in the West, is less directly associated with “oppression, backwardness, patriarchy, and limited mobility outside the home.” In fact, it is emerging as a signifier of “fashionable autonomy” (76). As a corollary, therefore, it makes sense, in the Indonesian context, “to think of [the] motivations and meaning [of Muslim dress] as less about directly adopting Arab aesthetics and much more about cosmopolitanism and national aspirations” (77). This aesthetic outlook combines well with the textile traditions of Indonesia and leads to breathtakingly beautiful sartorial results. It is also in line with Indonesia’s economic concerns as a country with a “large export-oriented garment industr[y]” as a means to “achieve credibility as a source of fashion design” with a transnational appeal that bypasses “the exclusionary institutions of the Western fashion system” (77).

Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, an American academic, artist, and activist, trains yet another lens on the intersection of fashion, race, gender, class, and Muslim identity (90). In her 2016 book on mostly black Muslim culture in America, she coined the concept of *Muslim Cool*.⁸ She counters anti-Muslim sentiment, with its persistent element of a look- and dress-

based antagonism, with a revaluation and historical reintegration of Muslim aesthetics in the larger context of American fashion and style. Muslim sartorial semiotics then serves the purpose of identity creation and self-fashioning. Khabeer explicitly also includes male dress and has identified the “Muslim dandy” (94) as a style icon “at the intersection of blackness and Islam” (95). This makes her the only one among the authors to also focus on men.⁹ She has adopted the terms *hoodjab* and *hoodjabi* (combining the currently popular *hoodie* with the Islamic dress item, the *hijab*) to express the linkage “between style, race and class” (93). *Hoodjabi* is a form of cultural appropriation she accepts even from “non-black young Muslim women” because it represents for her at least a “commitment to social justice” (93).

Laura L. Camerlengo writes about her Muslim-ness, fashion and faith and foregrounds what all other contributors tacitly accept but don’t fully thematize: social media, the indispensable and critical role of the Internet in the contemporary world of fashion design, style, and global influence.¹⁰ Indeed the rise, spread, and self-reassurance of Muslim/modest/covered fashion that we see as a global phenomenon today is unthinkable without the Internet, and Camerlengo emphasizes the importance of social media platforms as “a key conveyance” for “Muslim modest fashionistas” and their messages and design ideas (98). She lists several in her essay—Hoda Katebi’s JooJoo Azad, Fatima Abdallah’s Instagram @AllThingsFatima, or the body-positive oriented @lvernon2000. As confirmation of this deep mutual interpenetration of fashion and social media, many of the designers in the “Selected Biographies” of the *Catalog* (278–94) have their own brand name and maintain a web presence, highly aware of each other in a global media world. For many of them the Internet is a channel to present and discuss fashion, but the reverse is true too: fashion provides an important, widely accessible channel in which to address broader questions of culture, religion, identity, ethics, consumption, and aesthetics. Hoda Katebi’s blog, for one, raises such issues assertively, if not aggressively.

In her short contribution Remona Aly, too, stresses the role of social media in shaping a global “online community of stylish women who want to combine their faith values with fashion” (111). For her, it is this very global exchange of ideas and trends that finally broke the automatic mental link of “modest” style with “conservative” and “boring.” Her contribution, focusing on the UK scene, addresses the global surge of interest in modest fashion—“modish modesty” as she calls it (108)—hijab styling, and *mipster* (Muslim hipster) styles and trends. She points, as an example, to the British Bengali designer Shapla Halim whose career as a fashion stylist for the UK’s first Muslim lifestyle magazine, *emel*, has opened a world where dressing modestly and dressing fashionably are no longer mutually exclusive (108). A slightly different contradiction between modesty and fashion and certainly between modesty and functionality is at the center of Shelina Janmohamed’s essay on Muslim sportswear. From the story of the American Muslim fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad, winner of the bronze medal in the Olympic sabre competition in 2016 (214), Janmohamed segues into the struggle for modest sports clothing that has caught its combatants between the standards of Western female sports dress and Muslim communities’ resistance against any kind of display of the female body. However, the conflict seems on the verge of a solution, as the photo of Australian lifeguards in DHL-

branded bright red and yellow burkinis shows (260); and with Nike coming on board with its *Pro Hijab* in 2017, there are now also significant commercial interests at stake.

Shiva Balaghi's sketch of the Iranian-American photographer and filmmaker Shirin Neshat is only tangentially related to fashion, but it deepens the cultural-historical background. Although Neshat has been perceived as a stylistic icon of the well-dressed Middle Eastern woman, she is an artist rather than a designer, engaging the constantly evolving but always tension-filled situation of Muslim women between orthodox traditions (in post-revolutionary Iran, for example) and liberal fashions. Dress is generally one, but not always the central issue in her work, as in her 1996 video, *Rapture*. Raised and educated between a changing Iran and the liberal West where she has been living since 1979, she is a representative of the generation and life experience that are at the center of Leila Ahmed's arguments in *A Quiet Revolution*, mentioned above.

"The non-Muslim world often presumes that modest dressing is exemplified by the all-black, head-to-toe abaya that is associated with the Arabian Peninsula. Taken out of context, the abaya is regarded as a sort of 'uniform' that identifies the wearer as a Muslim" (133). With this true-sounding statement Deena Aljuhani Abdulaziz, in the last essay, points to the very *raison d'être* of the exhibition and catalog: to disprove this culturally and aesthetically reductionist point. Unfortunately, much damage has already been done and peaceful cultural potential lost through the ascent of this tendentious and limiting view and its political instrumentalization. But we know that Abdulaziz's other simple statement, at the end of the *Catalog*, is also true: "What Muslims wear varies around the world" (133).

It is one of the great merits of the de Young Museum's exhibition and *Catalog* that it makes this point impressively, intelligently—and in vibrant shapes and colors.

Notes

1. Link to a selection of catalog images:
<https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipMz5QtOTfDjTo5Si2ZZHiSjfl78M2gEhEiXVUYB8Y9G3sh0Qvyn9EeD22DtQRWuBQ?key=Ti12ejZFOURxTmFuTjKxb1B6Q19jNTJMU0JsaFRn>.
2. Lewis is also the author of a recent monograph on consumer culture, modesty in fashion and its commercialization in Muslim lifestyles and beyond, *Muslim Fashion*. In the introduction of this book she comments on the growing ubiquity "of visibly 'Muslim' women" (1), but adds that despite the "ever proliferating versions of modest fashionable dress," Muslim fashion remains "underrepresented in the style media" and "overrepresented in the news media" (2). This persistent use of the traditional veiled woman, often in burqa, serves to communicate a picture of alterity and foreignness. But Lewis is optimistic, even if perhaps a bit cynically so, that the link of "veils and sales," the title of her introduction, may help change that balance in the long run.
3. In 2016 Katebi published her own slim volume of street fashion photographs, *Tehran Streetstyle*. The fifty-some pages of photographs of both young women and a few men, is complemented by just a couple pages of text, where the author lays out her program: "Iran is ahead of the game in the international fashion world" as a "slow fashion" metropolis; "fashion is being used as an art form for personal expression with the potential to transcend borders, politics, and animosities." She made her book in order to illustrate that "wearing hypersexualized clothing is not a prerequisite for beauty or fashion" (n.p. [1]). She identifies the

- Iranian revolution of 1979 as the moment that established a national restrictive dress code, and the years since as its slow undermining by adaptive, creative, personally styled wearers and ever more lax rule enforcement.
4. Lewis repeats this claim in “Why Mainstream Brands Are Embracing Modest Fashion” (October 3, 2018), which also uses images from the de Young exhibit: “a connection to Muslims is seen as an asset” now in the fashion industry. <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/muslim-fashion-industry/index.html>.
 5. The global economics of fashion simply cannot be overlooked. The Website FashionUnited, a fashion-industry watchdog, provides some numbers: the USA domestic fashion market is approaching \$400bn annually. The global markets, including categories such as luxury, men’s, women’s, bridal, children’s fashion, and sports footwear, is close to 3 trillion dollars! <https://fashionunited.com/global-fashion-industry-statistics/>. As regards the market for modest fashion, the *Washington Post* titled an online article, written by Louisa Loveluck and illustrated by Natalie Naccache, “The Big Business of Modest Fashion.” It lists sales projections of \$37bn by 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/amp-stories/the-big-business-of-modest-fashion/>.
 6. Adam Taylor, *Washington Post*, August 1, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/08/01/how-a-photo-of-empty-bus-seats-triggered-an-anti-muslim-fear-fest-on-facebook/?utm_term=.299b31c167e0. The image was used by anti-immigrant groups, seemingly in ignorance of its actual object.
 7. Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*. Ahmed points to the rise of hijab both in the West and in Muslim-majority countries not as a phenomenon of fashion but as a marker of political change, the rise of Islamism, the pressures of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the patriarchal resurgence in the Muslim world since the 1970s. Being part of an older generation for whom unveiling meant liberation and secularization, hijab in her biographical and historical context, is not something to be taken lightly as “mere” fashion. It has serious political repercussions. It’s a symbol of Islamism and not a fashion statement or only insofar as fashion can serve as a form of political expression rather than a way of showing personal sartorial taste and individual identity. She uses the term *Islamism* as the outwardly expansive and internally (gender)repressive form of political and politicized Islam, which she is opposed to. But with her experience of an Islamic and Islamist resurgence (she was born in 1940), in other words, to some extent simply on account of her generational belonging, the veil for her is the symbol of a retrograde development.
 8. Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*.
 9. The extent to which the global trend toward modest fashion is *female*, driven by an eclectic global community of women (rather than being male and institutionally imposed) may account for its liveliness, diversity, and creative buy-in.
 10. These key terms are in the title of her essay, “My Muslim-ness: Fashion, Faith, and Social Media” (98–107).

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