



Hatem Alakeel

Fashion Designer | toby

*Model features  
toby's new men's  
collection Gris.*

**INDVSTRVS**

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## Hatem Alakeel - Design Without Borders

*We spent a delightful evening unveiling layers of meaning behind the fabrics of Saudi Designer and Entrepreneur Hatem Alakeel of fashion label, toby. With a diverse fan base from the likes of Christian Louboutin to Snoop Dogg, to Royalty, there's a reason why Alakeel's threads are turning heads. His signature style merges highly structured lines with restrained detail on delectable fabric. Think baroque meets mid-century modern, and you'll understand why we're all in a tizz over Alakeel's east-greets-west whizz.*

By Joanne Leila Smith | June 2017

According to a major fashion industry report between McKinsey & Co and The Business of Fashion, 2016 was particularly difficult for luxury and mid-market players, who felt the slowdown in China and the US. According to the BoF-McKinsey Global Fashion Survey, 67 percent of respondents—a mix of top fashion execs, creatives, investors, and other industry insiders—believe that conditions for the fashion industry have become worse over the past 12 months. The top three words selected to describe industry sentiment were: uncertain, changing, and challenging.

Even though volatile shifts in the global economy, followed by competition from online players, decreasing foot traffic, and the speed of changing consumer demographics dominated concerns for industry performance in 2017, the industry remained positive about growth opportunities, highlighting digitisation and e-commerce as the single biggest opportunity.

With major shopping malls folding into online retail stores around the globe, it appears that market dynamism, demographic complexities and degrees of cultural appropriation in fashion are now the new norm. As the world moves towards a global closet, one entrepreneur who understood the inevitable convergence of east meets west was Fashion Designer Hatem Alakeel of Middle East fashion powerhouse, toby.

Born in Saudi Arabia, Alakeel, now [age] says his parents were adamant their two sons received an education abroad, and were subsequently schooled in Switzerland, moving to the US to complete secondary and tertiary education. After completing his Bachelor of Science and Marketing at Northeastern University in Boston, Alakeel worked with different agencies in New York City in modelling, and says his first fashion show gig in 1998 enamored him. Alakeel returned to Jeddah, Saudi with a global outlook and a local ambition.



Model features  
toby's Femme  
Peon Collection

"I never studied fashion, but I found my calling through that experience. It wasn't until I came back to Saudi, after working in advertising, with Leo Burnett, and then banking... Having to wear suits or thobes, I was like, I have to wear the same thing everyday? I couldn't find the quality and execution that I wanted in the pieces, so I found some good tailors and collaborated with them. I started making small changes to the collar, to the detailing, to express myself. I was wearing these tailored pieces to work and colleagues were loving it, and asked me to make it for them, so I started doing it as gifts, and then I thought corporate isn't for me, why don't I try to bring Saville Row to Saudi?" says Alakeel.

In 2008, Alakeel entered his first collection into Dubai Fashion Week and made quite the impression. At that time, Sheikh Majed Al Sabah, member of the Kuwait Royal Family and a favourite media personality among millennials (known for his instagrams of high teas with Queen Elizabeth II in Buckingham Palace), was also the owner and operator of the first Luxury Fashion House in Dubai, The Villa Moda.

"Villa Moda was the first retailer into the region that had Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, Vivienne Westwood and others. Sheikh Majed came to my show and bought the entire collection! It was a major turning point for me. He had a store in Bahrain, Dubai and Kuwait...to have toby hold its own among such company was very exciting to me," says Alakeel.

As an affordable mid-luxury brand, toby offers both menswear, womenswear and kidswear, all featuring Alakeel's signature hallmark of structured, tailored lines, in-house, hand-stitched embroidered motifs on tactile fabrics.

"My exposure to European and US culture certainly developed my aesthetic during my formative years. When I returned to Saudi I felt a strong desire to merge my aesthetic with the roots of my culture. Having said that, I'm very much inspired by other traditions too... The embroidery is something we are very proud of. I'm very much inspired by Japanese Kimono art and its history. I also enjoy Indo influence too. I'm very careful to not limit myself to one culture, one tradition, but rather, I'm curious to see how I can reimagine and build on other traditions. To achieve this, I tend to focus on a motif and synthesise it in a modern way; so a jacket may be a classic French cut, but feature a traditional Japanese embroidered motif. My recent Peon Collection is an example of this," says Alakeel.

According to Alakeel, while women's fashion affords fluidity and creative experimentation, for menswear, there's definitive aesthetic boundaries that must be adhered to...if one wants to be commercially viable. "As an entrepreneur, you have to balance creative impulse with commercial reality. This is my advice for young designers. In the early days, I was stubborn, but I found ways to accommodate my clients' desires,



***“Fashion should never have an ideology or religion attached to it because it compartmentalises the designer, which is unfair,” says Alakeel.***

*Model features  
toby's Femme  
Fleur de Lis  
Collection*

without compromising artistic integrity. Nothing is black and white, be flexible to meet your market, add variety with subtle familiarity. I source a lot of my fabric from Italy, Japan, and every couple of years I travel to look at textiles and latest trends, but it's all centred on what my clients want and my personal philosophy of quality with design in execution," says Alakeel.

Alakeel's design philosophy has paid off, winning a number of industry awards and recognition along the way. Named Forbes Arabia's 'Inspiring Entrepreneurial Elite Award' for fashion in 2014, and winning the Esquire Award for Best Regional Designer, Alakeel is also notable among peers, being credited as an inspiration for US Designer Tom Ford and German Designer Jill Sander.

As an affordable mid-market luxury brand, we asked Alakeel to share his thoughts about the new state of play in consumer push towards online retail and its impact for brands like toby.

"Sure, online opens up the market, creates competition and opportunity. But clients don't change. Clients are discerning. They still want quality to differentiate them more than everything. A lot of fashion brands are going back to Italy, and moving away from China as there's only so much you can achieve, quality wise. Plenty of clients want items to last beyond the season. While online retail is great, players in the mid-level luxury market still needs to have at least one flagship store, where the client can feel the product and be served with a brand experience. I have a boutique in Saudi and my clients love it," says Alakeel.

According to the BoF-McKinsey 2016 Report, as a whole, the fashion retail market offers sizeable new opportunities for mid-market and luxury players; particularly highlighting an overarching consumer lifestyle need for personalisation and customisation. Some brands have started to respond to this need in innovative ways, leveraging consumer data to offer digital personalised shopping services at a mass-market level— something only a few years ago was the preserve of only high-end luxury players.

The McKinsey Report claims that fashion brands are rapidly responding to a cultural shift towards body positivity and a growing appreciation of curvy figures, by designing specifically for a larger range

of sizes rather than just expanding size ranges as an afterthought. Modest wear also gained in prominence in 2016 highlighting the needs of Islamic consumers, especially from the Middle East and South East Asia. This was led by brands such as Uniqlo and Dolce & Gabbana which unveiled hijab and abaya collections in Europe. Valentino and Alberta Ferretti have also dropped hemlines to the floor and sleeves to the wrists in their Spring 2017 runway collections.

According to the Global Islamic Economy report, the modest wear market alone is forecast to be worth UD327 billion by 2020. While big hitters are driving this opportunity the market itself is expanding. When we asked Alakeel on his thoughts about toby being perceived as 'modest wear' he was very candid in his rejection of the label. In his view, a designer is simply a designer of fashion, and, to attach any ideology to it, is disingenuous.

***"Fashion should never have an ideology or religion attached to it because it compartmentalises the designer, which is unfair. There is an abundance of ladies who do not identify with the term 'modest wear' or 'Islamic wear'. They simply want to wear longer cuts not because of an ideological position, but because they feel more comfortable personality-wise, or, it may be more flattering to their form, or they just love that personal aesthetic. A good example of this frustration, is when a collection is labelled as modest wear, or Islamic wear, a buyer may not even look at the craft of the work. But if you say look at my line, without that label, they look at the collection, and see the beauty of the piece, rather than be blinded by pre-conception. It's very important for our industry, and all designers to establish that design is simply design," says Alakeel.***

Alakeel's position is food for thought. If we look at the Star Wars franchise, all costumes were originally inspired by the film's shoot location – Tunisia. No one identifies the Star Wars outfits as being 'Islamic' or 'modest wear'. In this example, we can understand that context is everything.

It also invites a further question. If we are going to label longer hemlines as 'modest wear' or 'Islamic wear', what shall we label the kind of designs that feature very short hemlines?

***Indeed, up until 100 years ago, if we consider Western European fashion – from the well-heeled to the poorly-mealed, all designs featured floor length clothing for women, rising to the calf towards the end of 1920s, and taking another 40 years to rise to the height of hemline rebellion, the mini skirt, in the 1960s... Shorter hemlines is a very recent cultural phenomenon. It may be argued that while certain design elements may be politicised as way to galvanise support, fan outrage, speak against the 'establishment' or confirm it, there is another narrative that, while not as alluring, may speak closer to the truth of things... that sometimes cultural shifts are instinctively seized upon by savvy entrepreneurs, who simply sense a market opportunity – and position their product accordingly. After all, history has shown that brand loyalty is driven by brand likability where the 'values of the brand construct', if aligned with the buyer, drives big sales.***

Perhaps an example of this cynicism is the feminist notion that hemlines are somehow tied to female empowerment, and emancipation, and to opt to 'cover' is maligned as oppression, and subjugation.

Where is the natural relationship between the length of the cuff to a cultural cuff? A semiotician worth his signs will affirm that there is none. It is constructed, and like all constructs, it can be deconstructed, and re-constructed again.

For Western sensibilities, the idea of the 'Madonna Ciccone' aesthetic, for example, as somehow being rebellious in all the fleshiness of her personal brand – perhaps is not so rebellious after all, but rather, it's a tired re-affirmation of the narratives we tell ourselves about female personal agency which has little resemblance to how things actually are.

If one was to truly rebel, wouldn't it mean to go against social norms? Does this require the middle eastern person to derobe, and the westerner to clothe in a thobe? Or perhaps true emancipation is simply just the freedom to express yourself in a way that reflects one's own sense of comfort, body shape and personal aesthetic.

This is why we find Alakeel's work so exciting. His commitment to design excellence is simply just that. A commitment to design excellence. The rest of the narrative, is for the wearer to determine.

In thinking about Alakeel's purist position on this subject, Poet Charles Bukowski's No Leaders comes to mind -

invent yourself and then reinvent yourself,  
don't slough in the slime.

invent yourself and then reinvent yourself,  
stay out of the clutches of mediocrity and  
self-pity.

invent yourself and then reinvent yourself,  
change your tone and shape so that they can  
never  
find you.

recharge yourself.  
accept continuance  
but only on the terms that you have invented  
and reinvented.

be self-instructed.

invent life,  
it is you,  
the history of its past  
and the presence of its presentness.  
there is nothing else,  
nothing.

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