

High fashion for the modest woman

In an often misunderstood area of fashion, the Malikah Festival catwalk show in Redmond is aimed at celebrating female diversity and bridging cultural barriers

BY LISA EDGE
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Fashion shows began in dressmaker shops in Paris in the 1800s. Today they've evolved into well-produced, high-energy public events. They're an opportunity to show off the latest must-have items produced by designers from casual clothing to formal wear to swimsuits and more. On Oct. 9, a group gathered at the Redmond Senior Center in Redmond for the inaugural Malikah Festival, an event aimed at celebrating women and bridging cultural barriers.

Malikah means "queen" in Arabic.

The main event of the festival was a fashion show featuring modest couture clothing.

"Modesty means wearing something that covers the body, not transparent and does not show the shape of the body," said producer of the show, Chema Jamel Oh.

As the owner of a modest clothing boutique in Redmond, she added, "Women are so much more than their bodies and pretty faces."

Also emceeing the show, Oh described to the audience various garments on display, including the *abaya* – a robe-like apparel – worn by the first model to hit the stage. As a couture collection, the items are regarded as high-fashion, custom-fitted clothing.

More models followed wearing clothing with intricate designs around the neckline, sleeves and along the bottom of the long flowing garments. Some of the pieces included beading, jewels and Swarovski crystals sewn by hand. One teal and black piece included Arabic calligraphy in gold thread across the bodice. As the models walked through the audience to upbeat pop music, each piece became more elaborate and beautiful.

"There are a lot of details on the edges of the fabric like the sleeve that you need to see up close," said festival organizer Lee Mozena. "This is about fashion. It's not about religion. The bottom line: women really love fashion and this is a way for us to get together."

Mozena produced the festival, which was funded by the Redmond Arts and Culture Commission. The models were women of all ages and sizes, with a few men participating as well. Two Redmond firefighters also modeled clothing. On the catwalk they wore Thobes, an ankle length garment.

The women wore *abayas*, *kaftans*, and *jilbabs* – a loose-fitting garment that covers the body and head but not face. With a laugh, Oh told the audience one of the benefits of wearing modest clothing was "there's no panty line with *abaya*." With each piece well-made and costing thousands of dollars, every item on show was unique in its own way.

Modest clothing isn't a monolith. Each region has unique styles, colors and patterns in its fashion. Items featured in the show were by designers from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia and

Indonesia.

"Not just Muslim women are modest. Other cultures are too. There are a lot of faiths and religions that are modest," said Oh. "We are more similar than different."

Modest clothing is also big business, according to a Thomson Reuters report. "Globally, Muslims in general spent \$266 billion on clothing and footwear in 2013. That's more than the total fashion spending of Japan and Italy combined. That's huge," Oh said. "The report also said the figure is going to be about \$484 billion by 2019. Yet the industry watchers say the market for Muslim women fashion is still untapped."

She'd like to see more designers create clothes for people who prefer modest fashion. Oh used to be a technical designer for Nordstrom, and she has her own line of clothing.

Mozena wanted those in attendance to appreciate different values.

"On one level this festival is about fashion but it's also designed to challenge your assumptions and help you learn more about your neighbors," Mozena said. "Create a counter-narrative that maybe neutralizes that 'otherization' that's been going on in our public dialogue that I think is so harmful. Mainstream media is perpetuating this simplistic negative stereotyping of certain American communities."

The festival also included vendors selling jewelry, clothing and Cairo Khan quilts. A mannequin wearing a burkini and another wearing a bikini greeted visitors when they walked into the senior center. A cartoon taped to the display shows two women – one in a burkini and the other in a bikini – saying both are victims of male-dominated culture. Visitors were asked to share their thoughts on the burkini ban that recently raged in France.

Mozena hopes that the festival will grow and become an annual event.

Oh said she'd like for people to keep an open mind about people from other cultures. As a Muslim woman from Tunisia, she said people should not be judged by what they are wearing or not wearing; who you are as a person is more important.

"Why are we judging the modest woman? Why are we judging a person who wears a scarf and not a hat? Or a beanie?" she asked. "If you don't know who we are, you will never understand why we do the things we do."

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