



From left: Aya Haidar, Alaya Moore, Fatima Dhaif, Lea Semadoni wear Chloé creations

## BRIDGING CONTINENTS

*As Chloé opens its archives to the public, Bazaar discovers a new generation of globetrotting Arab women who embody the house's cosmopolitan legacy*

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“I’ve been thinking about the Chloé girl for quite some time now,” says Judith Clark, the noted curator and professor of fashion and museology at the London College of Fashion, as she walks past the brand’s headquarters on Avenue Percier in Paris’ 8th arrondissement. Her destination is just a few steps away at 28 rue de la Baume, where she stops in front of a stately Haussmann-era building, its recently restored façade glowing in the sunlight. Inside, workers, conservators and exhibition handlers are putting the finishing touches to the Maison Chloé before its grand opening in July. Although the building will house the label’s showrooms, VIP fitting rooms and a photo studio, it’s in a gallery space to the side of the Maison’s grand staircase that Judith has conceived an intriguing installation showcasing highlights from the house’s historic archives.

“I wanted to reimagine the archive as an interactive experience where visitors can discover elements of the house’s history as they move through the space,” says the curator of Maison Chloé, which will also host a year-round programme of exhibitions and events showcasing the label’s 65-year history. For Judith, the new facility is a far cry from her first encounter with the house’s archives, when she was initially tapped by Chloé to conceive its 60th anniversary retrospective at the Palais du Tokyo in 2012. Shortly after arriving at the house three years earlier, the brand’s chief executive Geoffroy de la Bourdonnaye realised an archive had never been established. Having long understood the important role heritage can play in defining a brand’s image, he set about filling the void by searching through the house’s storage facilities.

“They found a treasure trove of unpublished materials that included over 10,000 drawings, hundreds of which were attributed to Karl Lagerfeld, in addition to clothing, accessories, catwalk videos, show books and photographs spanning the house’s history,” says Judith, noting that by 2011 Chloé had established an archive department to preserve the legacy of its founder Gaby Aghion, who passed away at 93 in September 2014. “Her name may not be as familiar today, but she was an important player in the fashion world,” says the curator, who was amazed by the attention and resources that had been poured into building the archives, housed on Maison Chloé’s fifth floor. Among her favourite items is a 2001 pineapple print swimsuit by Stella McCartney, as well as a surreal shower dress sporting a spray of Lesage embroidered crystal beads, designed by Karl Lagerfeld in 1984.

“The process of researching and exploring the archives was an enlightening experience for me, as it contradicted my initial preconceptions of Chloé as a brand built on a bohemian spirit of diaphanous dresses, when in reality it’s much more than that. What I found instead were quite provocative and powerful clothes inspired by a range of references,” says Judith, whose installation at Maison Chloé includes a rich selection of archival pieces and imagery that invites visitors to explore the evolution of the Chloé woman over the past seven decades. Carefully opening a drawer, she pulls out a show book similar to those given to clients and buyers at fashion presentations. “I commissioned the New York-based artist and novelist Leanne Shapton to create a fictional show book based on the Chloé Alphabet, inspired by Gaby Aghion’s own creative process for naming her collections and garments,” says Judith of the house’s founder, who in 1958 began naming each look in her collection after places, composers, artists and literary figures from popular culture, all beginning with the same letter.

Leafing through Leanne’s beautifully conceived show book, she stops at a page to point out captions of text representing fragments of conversations between two women. “It’s similar to a little novel narrated by diverse voices representing the Chloé girl. My approach to conceiving the installation was to start with the historic collection and then commission new elements to bring that history to life and create new



Maison Chloé, housing the brand’s archive, opens this summer

fiction and ideas around who this person is,” says Judith, who also curated Maison Chloé’s first temporary exhibition in the building’s mezzanine gallery space. Titled *Femininities*, it explores the work of legendary fashion photographer Guy Bourdin, the brand’s most important visual collaborator. “From the 1950s-’80s, Chloé was the ready-to-wear brand he photographed the most, producing a body of work that allows us to create a debate around the definition of femininity. Everyone assumes they know what that term represents, but at its core the Maison Chloé project is about understanding the ‘other’ and questioning what it means to be feminine today,” notes Judith of an approach to celebrating hyphenated identities that mirrors that of the house’s founder. “As a creative and intellectually engaged woman who was born on one continent and lived on another, she was constantly having these

multiple conversations and living a feminist life. In many ways, she was the original Chloé girl.”

The daughter of a wealthy Greek-Italian cigarette manufacturer, Gaby Aghion was born Gabrielle Hanoka in Alexandria, Egypt on March 3, 1921. At the time, the Mediterranean port city was a cosmopolitan metropolis boasting tree-lined boulevards as well as grand villas and palaces overlooking the sea. Her first lesson in chic dressing came from her elegant mother, who regularly called upon a local seamstress to copy the latest Paris styles from the pages of fashion magazines. The youngest of seven children, Gaby attended a French school, eventually making her first trip to Paris at 18, shortly before the outbreak of World War II in 1939. The French capital was an epiphany for her, as she had never seen such elegance in her life. From that day on fashion and France became inextricably linked in her mind, but with Europe on the cusp of war, she returned to Egypt where she married Raymond Aghion in 1940, whom she first met on the school bus when they were seven years old.

The son of a wealthy cotton exporter, the fiercely intelligent and politically active Raymond helped found Egypt’s Democratic Union in 1939, a legal association for young intellectuals. At 24, they moved to Paris shortly after the end of the war in 1945 and soon became part of a growing bohemian circle, which gathered in Left Bank cafés, counting amongst their friends the artist Picasso and the poet-novelist Lawrence Durrell. “Ironically, their life in Paris wasn’t that far removed from how they lived in Egypt, where they also surrounded themselves with local artists and intellectuals,” observes Judith, noting that Raymond would eventually open a modern art gallery in 1956.

“Even though she was getting on in age when I first met her, I got the sense that she never forgot where she came from,” says the curator, noting that for Gaby, Egypt was a colour that recalled the rose-tinted beige of the desert sand dunes of her youth, one that would eventually become part of the house’s signature logo. “Gaby was an intriguing combination of femininity, intelligence and humour. Although she wouldn’t have described herself as such at the time, she was very much a feminist in a male-centred arena where certain expectations were placed on women of her class,” observes Judith, recalling the day in 1952 when Gaby announced to her husband that she no longer wanted to live off his money and would earn her own. “It was a bold statement for a wealthy woman to make at the time, and she initially received pressure from both family and friends who looked down upon others of their class going into the ‘trades,’” she adds of the Egyptian-born designer, who foresaw a day in the not-so-distant future when women would enter the workforce en masse, forever altering the fabric of society.

Unfazed by her critics, Gaby hired a seamstress who had worked in a couture atelier and set about creating six sporty dresses in lightweight cotton poplin. Knowing that her family would strongly object to the use of her name on the label, she borrowed that of a friend, Chloé Huymans. Initially approaching stores she shopped at with her samples, she had ►

Chloé's A/W 1973 collection photographed by Guy Bourdin



Chloé's A/W 1971 collection photographed by Guy Bourdin

"GABY AGHION WAS AN INTRIGUING COMBINATION OF FEMININITY, INTELLIGENCE AND HUMOUR. ALTHOUGH SHE WOULDN'T HAVE DESCRIBED HERSELF AS SUCH AT THE TIME, SHE WAS VERY MUCH A FEMINIST."

*Judith Clark, curator*

the audacity to insist they not replace her Chloé labels with their own, which was customary amongst boutiques at the time. Gaby's dresses sold out immediately, fulfilling a desire amongst young women at the time for wearable, well-made clothes in fine fabrics that required minimal alteration and were an antidote to the stiff formality of haute couture. "Gaby invented the revolutionary idea of luxury prêt-à-porter, taking the craftsmanship of haute couture and making it available to a wider audience," says Judith of the designer, who worked primarily with fine fabrics, including prints on soft crepe and chiffon, to create fluid silhouettes that women could move in freely. Early on, she also favoured geometric and Art Deco patterns, as well as flattering colours such as midnight blue or rose-tinted beige that are still house signatures today.

Her profile as a designer would grow in 1953 when she teamed up with her business partner Jacques Lenoir. In its early days the label operated out of her home, where she employed half a dozen seamstresses who worked diligently in her living room to keep up with demand. By 1956 Chloé's reputation had grown sufficiently to hold its first fashion show for press and buyers, which was presented over breakfast at the Café de Flore on the corner of the Boulevard Saint-Germain. A notable gathering spot amongst Paris' young intellectual crowd of the '50s, it reflected Gaby's informal approach to showing clothes, one that stood in contrast to the formulaic couture presentations of the period.

The show was a breath of fresh air and an instant success. By 1957 Chloé had become a recognised brand whose clothes were being featured in the pages of noted fashion magazines of the period. Although Gaby continued to design the label up until 1959, she was already on a quest to seek new talent to invigorate the brand. Encouraged by Maïme Arnodin, the influential editor of the fashion magazine *Jardin des Modes*, she began to recruit new talent to carry Chloé forward, such as Maxime de la Falaise, Graziella Fontana, Tan Giudicelli and Gérard Pipart,

who went on to design couture at Nina Ricci. "One important aspect of Gaby's history that isn't often brought up is that she was essentially an outsider and a foreigner working within the French fashion establishment. That was also reflected in the freelance designers she hired, such as the German-born Karl Lagerfeld, who joined the Chloé studio in 1963," observes Judith, noting that as outsiders they brought a fresh perspective to the brand, which was key to its success.

Initially working with the label's other stylists from their cramped communal workroom, by 1966 Karl would eventually become Chloé's lead designer, working under Gaby's supervision as she edited his piles of sketches to select the most directional designs. Although he was her junior by more than a decade, addressing her as Madame Aghion, he regarded her as one of his early mentors. More than the other designers, Gaby saw Karl as her intellectual equal; a cultivated art lover and a prolific designer who could produce up to 20 sketches of ideas in a day. She also encouraged him to move beyond his formal couture training by exposing him to a lighter and freer approach to dressing. Their special working relationship included rides home in her car, during which they would discuss designs or observe the way Parisian students dressed on the street to generate more ideas.

By the early '70s their collaboration had transformed Chloé from a niche brand catering to the French intelligentsia into an international business. During this period, the house became famous for its vaporous chiffon dresses and softly tailored suits, that attracted a new clientele of well-heeled women from the Gulf, as well as bold-faced names such as Jackie Kennedy, Brigitte Bardot and Grace Kelly, who made the pilgrimage to the label's Paris boutique on the Rue du Bac. Karl went on to log a total of 25 years at Chloé in two separate stints, from 1963-1983 and 1992-1997. Gaby eventually sold her stake in the brand in 1985 to Richemont, the Swiss luxury goods conglomerate. Although retired, she maintained close ties with the fashion house, attending almost every runway show, followed by a phone call to its CEO to offer constructive advice. A longtime advocate of promoting women in the fashion industry, she saw clearly that former Chloé designers such as Martine Sitbon, Stella McCartney and Phoebe Philo were the best candidates for the job. It is a legacy that lives on at the house today, poised for a fresh chapter under its new creative director Natacha Ramsay-Levi, who will oversee a company where women make up 80 per cent of its employees.

*To celebrate Gaby Aghion's legacy as an Egyptian-born designer who came to infiltrate the French fashion establishment, Harper's Bazaar explores a new generation from the Middle East and its diaspora who are redefining the Chloé woman on their own terms. ►*

Chloé's S/S 1970 collection photographed by Guy Bourdin



THE GUY BOURDIN ESTATE

**ALYA MOORO**

28, Egyptian/British, journalist & blogger

“London is such a multicultural city that you can get away with wearing anything here, which is great for people-watching as well as getting inspired,” observes Alya Mooro, while seated at a table outside a cosy coffee shop not far from her flat in Earls Court. She’s nursing a large matcha latte in her hands to help her get over jetlag, having just flown back from Cairo the night before. “I travel to Egypt three to four times a year, and during this last trip I worked with a team of Egyptian photographers modelling up-and-coming local designers against a gorgeous desert landscape,” says the journalist, adding that Egypt’s 2011 revolution and economic crisis have had an unexpected effect on its creative industries. “We’re seeing designers emerge, who are using their brands to promote traditional Egyptian crafts, by sourcing local materials and supporting Egyptian craftsmen and women,” adds Alya, who turned to social media to bring attention to Egypt’s design scene.

“I’ve always had a strong sense of identity as an Egyptian and I want to support the creative industries there any way I can,” says Alya, noting that as a writer, she also feels a responsibility to bring to the surface stories that highlight the role art, culture and design can play in humanising the other at a time when the world is witnessing a rise in isolationist rhetoric, radicalisation and Islamophobia. “I choose to focus on mediums such as music and fashion, because they allow us to connect in ways that look beyond differences in skin colour, religion or nationality and instead focus on our commonalities,” she states, pointing out that the media still has a long way to go when it comes to portraying Arab and Muslim women in a more nuanced manner. “What’s lacking is an acknowledgment that we represent a spectrum of diverse experiences that are neither completely conservative or liberal, but somewhere in the middle,” says Alya, noting the importance of providing alternative narratives about Arab women living within and outside the region, a perspective informed by her own multicultural upbringing.

Born in Egypt, Alya moved with her family to Geneva at the age of five, where she attended an international school. “During that time, we continued to visit Egypt on school holidays, so I never felt disconnected from my roots,” notes Alya, who was eight years old when her family moved to London for her father’s job. “When I was 13, we moved back to Egypt to be closer to my grandmother towards the end of her life,” recalls the journalist, whose year in Egypt allowed her to connect with her heritage. “Looking back now I’m very grateful for that period in my life, because I built strong bonds with my classmates at the British International School in Cairo, friendships that continue today,” says Alya, who also cherished the time she spent with her grandmother before she passed away.

“I was a bit of a tomboy while growing up and preferred playing video games, and when it came to clothes it was all about comfort for me. I think my love of fashion was born during the time I spent with my paternal grandmother in Cairo, as she was one of the most immaculately dressed woman I’ve ever seen in my life,” remembers Alya, who inherited her grandmother’s wardrobe filled with vintage Saint Laurent and Chanel. “She wore some amazing designers and she even made her own clothes when she couldn’t find exactly what she wanted. What I love most is reimagining her pieces in a way that she wouldn’t have necessarily worn them,” adds the journalist, who customised a camel jumpsuit from Chloé’s pre-fall collection with her grandmother’s corset belt and a pair of gold Balenciaga boots for *Bazaar*’s shoot.

Fluent in English, Arabic and French, Alya went on to attend London’s City University, graduating with a degree in Sociology and Psychology in 2010. “I didn’t fully realise it at the time, but I think my interest in understanding human behaviour eventually led me to a career in

journalism. I particularly enjoy exploring how people’s interactions have changed in this age of social media,” notes Alya, who took a year off to teach English in Tanzania before returning to the UK to pursue an MA in journalism at Westminster University in 2011. “As a writer, I hold a mirror up to myself and others, and having a psychology background allows me to dig a little deeper into the human condition,” she adds, noting that while at school she found opportunities to write professionally through social media. “It was very normal for me to be active on Twitter since I grew up with social media, and I was able to get my first jobs through it,” says Alya, now an established freelance journalist.

“I remember while studying journalism, I had one professor who was instrumental in making me understand how to get ahead in the profession. On the first day of class, he told us that if we didn’t have a blog then we might as well go home. He was making the point that if you really have a passion for writing, then you shouldn’t wait for others to give you a platform but to create your own,” recalls the journalist, who also took a proactive approach to landing a coveted internship at *Grazia* UK, after attending a talk given by the publication’s digital editor. “I introduced myself to her after her talk, reached out to her again on Twitter and began my internship the following week. I think what impressed her was how I used social media to get what I want,” says Alya. Since then she has written for publications such as *The Telegraph*, *The Washington Post*, *Refinery29*, *Marie Claire* and *i-D*.

“Over time I realised the responsibility I have as a writer to give a voice to those we may not often hear about, whether it’s Muslims, feminists or women of colour. We also shouldn’t underestimate bloggers who are creating authentic and meaningful content that fills a void left by the mainstream media,” says Alya, who likes to blur the line between her role as a blogger and journalist. “It’s a reflection of the world we live in today, where more people have hyphenated identities. It’s not unusual to encounter individuals with multiple skills or titles, who can’t easily be placed in a neat box,” adds the journalist, who today uses her site *Moorizzla.com* to tackle issues impacting her peers. “Young women still face pressure to

conform and look a certain way, and I enjoy encouraging a healthy discussion around topics that aren’t often covered in the media, such as hair loss and plastic surgery amongst young women, or the preference for lighter skin within communities of colour,” says Alya, who cites her love of reading as a critical part of her development as a writer.

“Travelling and living in different places also allows me to grow as a person and as a writer. I recently spent two months in LA which was an amazing experience because it was an opportunity for me to live outside of my comfort zone,” says Alya, who is currently writing a book about growing up bicultural. “There are so many different definitions of ‘other’ and millions of people who have lived in different countries or come from multiracial families, so the purpose of this book is to not simply talk about my experience as a British Arab, but to share a universal story that many can relate to,” says the Egyptian-born writer, recalling a moment during her flight back to London from LA: “I was reading *Love Warrior*, Glennon Doyle Melton’s moving memoir, when I came across a passage that resonated with me: ‘We know what the world wants from us. We know we must decide whether to stay small, quiet and uncomplicated or allow ourselves to grow as big, loud and complex as we were made to be. Every girl must decide whether to be true to herself or true to the world,’” recalls Alya, noting that she thought of Glennon’s words while trying to articulate what the Chloé woman means to her. “What resonates with me the most about the brand is the ethos behind it, which celebrates the freedom that comes with being oneself and that confidence is the best thing one can wear.” ▶

“I REALISED THE RESPONSIBILITY I HAVE AS A WRITER TO GIVE A VOICE TO THOSE WE MAY NOT OFTEN HEAR ABOUT”

*Alya Mooro*

Alya Mooro wears: Jumpsuit, Dhs6,510, Chloé pre-fall '17. Bag, Dhs5,065, Chloé. Belt, vintage. Balenciaga boots, Alya's own. Jewellery, Goldie Rox. Sunglasses, Illestava

## FATIMA DHAIF

30, Bahraini/Danish, university admissions manager & travel blogger

“My sense of identity is linked to the many places I’ve lived in,” observes Fatima Dhaif, as she digs into a fluffy wedge of polenta, orange and almond cake at Kin, the minimalist vegetarian café tucked away in a side street behind London’s Goodge Street station. Having flown into the UK a few hours earlier from her hometown of Copenhagen, she’s eager to take advantage of her one day off in the city before attending a conference. “I’ve always been attracted to cosmopolitan cities like London, and I’m happy when I can explore different neighbourhoods between work,” says Fatima, who moved with her family to Denmark from Bahrain when she was four.

“My fondest memory is growing up in the suburbs of Copenhagen surrounded by nature,” recalls the blogger, who still feels very connected to her birthplace. “My parents kept our heritage alive through the Arabic language, food and music, and part of my heart will always be in Bahrain. As an island nation, it’s historically been open to different cultures and you sense that in its people,” says Fatima, who regularly travels to Bahrain to visit family. “I grew up surrounded by strong women and I’ve always admired my mother, who juggled a career and raising a family in a culture and language that was far removed from her own. But I’m also inspired by my paternal grandmother who became the director of a school in Bahrain at a time when that wasn’t common amongst Bahraini women,” she adds, noting that her multicultural upbringing helped shape the person she is today.

“Like most school children, I really wanted to fit in with my Danish peers. But as I got older, I began to understand the benefit of having a sense of culture and being from somewhere else, because it made me sensitive to others and gave me the ability to adapt to different settings,” says Fatima, who attended a French school. “I basically spoke Arabic at home, Danish when I went out and French at school,” adds Fatima, who is also fluent in English and Spanish. “My love of travel began at school where there were 13 nationalities represented in my class. Being around kids from the Ivory Coast and Syria gave me this curiosity to learn more about where they came from.”

After graduating from high school in 2005, Fatima enrolled at the Copenhagen Business School; moving to Brighton in the UK shortly afterwards to take part in an exchange programme with the University of Sussex. “I was interested in sociology and wanted to combine it with my business major, so I took courses in cultural studies while there to learn about how societies function,” notes Fatima, who embarked on another exchange programme at San Diego State University, graduating in 2009 with a degree in Advertising and Creative Marketing. “It was my first experience living far away from home on another continent, but it taught me to be independent and rely on myself. I bought my first car and lived with individuals from different countries, many of whom have become lifelong friends,” says Fatima, who while in San Diego took the opportunity to travel throughout the United States and Mexico.

Back in Denmark, she pursued a Master’s in Strategic Market Creation at the Copenhagen Business School, where her thesis advisor encouraged her to expand her education beyond the classroom. “Tore Kristensen was my marketing professor who taught a course called Experience Economy. He took us on a lot of fieldtrips because he didn’t want his students to simply listen to a lecture. He also encouraged me to explore a thesis that would allow me to bridge my two cultures,” says Fatima, who created a marketing strategy for the Danish furniture design firm Fritz Hansen as it entered the Gulf market. “It was an amazing opportunity for me as a student. They not only funded my research travels throughout the Gulf but allowed me to use their showrooms to orchestrate new ad campaigns and photoshoots,” recalls Fatima, who in 2010 landed an internship at the Danish Consulate in New York.

“I was over the moon when they offered me the position as I’d always dreamt of living in New York,” says Fatima, who moved into an apartment on the Upper West Side and worked in the trade council division of the consulate assisting Danish design companies to establish a foothold in the US market. “That experience opened many doors for me and my year there made me realise that I wanted to live in as many amazing cities around the world as possible,” notes the creative, who would spend her weekends taking in the Manhattan skyline from the Brooklyn Bridge or brunching with friends at Reunion in Williamsburg.

After graduating with her masters in 2011, Fatima was hired by Danish tech company 3Shape to work in its marketing and business development department. “While there, I had the opportunity to travel because of my language skills and became responsible for the company’s Arabic, French and Spanish-speaking markets,” says Fatima, who after a few years decided to switch careers, applying for a job in the admissions and recruitment office of an American university that was opening a branch in Bahrain. “I realised that if you don’t feel challenged in your job any more then you shouldn’t be afraid to move on. When I heard about the position at the university, I saw it as an opportunity to experience living in Bahrain as an adult,” says the travel blogger, who, during her year in the Kingdom, served as the university’s international relations manager.

Her introduction to the field of higher education would lead to her current position as admissions manager at the Copenhagen Business School. “What I love about my job is the opportunity to travel to college fairs and conferences. It’s also a work environment that encourages innovation and creativity, which allows me to network with people from around the world,” says Fatima, who decided to launch her own travel blog *Vogue ’n Vagabonds* to share her passion with others. “Ever since I was in high school I was always saving money to travel and had already visited Spain, Italy, France, Morocco and the Netherlands by the time I was 17,” recalls Fatima, who regularly posts images of herself shot in breathtaking locations around the world, such as the top of the Hafeet Mountains in Oman, exploring the ancient streets of Zanzibar’s Stone Town or strolling along Cartagena’s beaches on the north coast of Colombia.

Her role as a travel blogger isn’t simply about firing up the imagination but also a journey of self-discovery. “For me travel isn’t escapism, but a form of life education in that it expands one’s world view and teaches tolerance. You never return home the same person you were after a trip. There is always something new in our mind as it gets rewired each time,” says Fatima, noting that one of her most memorable destinations was Cuba in 2016. “It was amazing visiting a place that is on the cusp of opening up to the world after being isolated for so long. I loved Havana’s historic centre and Cuba’s restored colonial towns, but it was the way people lived that left the biggest impression on me,” she says.

“Travel feeds into everything I do, even when it comes to the books I read or the clothes I wear. There are always allusions to a faraway destination, which is why the Chloé brand resonates with me, because it reminds me of being somewhere in the Mediterranean,” notes Fatima, who counts Chloé’s signature floral perfume as one of her go-to scents. “I don’t think intelligence, strength and femininity are mutually exclusive, and you can be all those things even in the way you choose to dress and present yourself,” says Fatima, who gravitated towards an ivory grey chiffon dress from Chloé’s pre-fall collection, pairing the look with pearl drop earrings from Bahrain for *Bazaar’s* shoot. “I love the idea of incorporating hints of my heritage into what I wear. In the case of Chloé, the beauty of the clothes lies in their hint of nostalgia that triggers a memory from the past, which is why I think the brand appeals to women across generations.” ▶

“TRAVEL FEEDS  
INTO EVERYTHING  
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COMES TO THE  
BOOKS I READ OR  
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*Fatima Dhaif*



Fatima Dhaif wears:  
Dress, Dhs14,740, from  
Chloé’s pre-fall ’17  
collection. Earrings,  
Fatima’s own

Aya Haidar wears: Skirt (worn as dress), Dhs7,910, Chloé pre-fall '17. Vintage abaya, jewellery, trousers and shoes, Aya's own



**AYA HAIDAR**

*31, Lebanese/British, director of Al Madad Foundation & artist/activist*

“It’s hard to describe my upbringing as bicultural because I was born in Texas, grew up in a Lebanese household in London and attended a French school, so I was interacting with three or four different cultures on any given day,” says Aya Haidar, whose family left Lebanon at the height of the civil war in 1982. Shortly afterwards, her parents relocated to Jeddah for her father’s work, where she spent the first six years of her life before they moved back to London in 1990. “I think those early experiences definitely shaped me as a person, but I also remember my parents making sure I never lost sight of my Lebanese heritage.”

While growing up, Aya would travel to Lebanon with her family during the summer, spending her days playing in her father’s orchard overlooking the ancient ruins of Baalbek or catching fish from rock pools by the sea. “Living in London, my sense of culture was very foreign to kids I went to school with, but as soon as I landed in Lebanon I would immediately feel at home even though I had never lived there permanently,” says Aya, noting that her grandmother and mother became important role models for her early on. “I come from a family with a strong matriarchal lineage, and I have a very close bond with my grandmother, mother and sister. I would stay at my grandmother’s home every weekend where she would teach me how to knit while telling me stories. In hindsight, she was passing down her heritage, principles and values to me,” recalls the artist of her 97-year-old grandmother, one of the first women in Lebanon to receive a university degree.

“She’s an educated, emancipated woman who travelled the world at a time when that wasn’t expected of her, and she went on to pursue a masters in psychology at the American University of Beirut,” says Aya, who enrolled in a foundation course at London’s Chelsea College of Art and Design after graduating from high school. “I was lucky because my parents were very supportive of my choice to pursue my passion,” says the artist, who was exposed to diverse artistic disciplines for the first time while at Chelsea, where she explored welding, sculpture and silk screen printing. In 2004, she enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art, where she spent her first two years moving between painting and sculpture. It was during her third year at the Slade that Aya would take part in a year-long exchange programme at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) that became a pivotal moment in her development as an artist.

“At the Slade, I felt limited by painting and sculpture because my art practice has always been about the concept behind a work rather than the medium. But when I arrived at SAIC in 2006, I was blown away by the variety of media and courses on offer,” recalls Aya. “When I got there I initially wanted to take animation and digital courses, but those were oversubscribed, so it was a happy coincidence that I found myself in the fibre and material studies department,” says Aya, who shifted her focus to textile and fibre arts thanks to the school’s extensive resources which included large weaving and screen printing studios.

“I always enjoyed weaving and knitting, which I saw as practical pastimes. It never occurred to me that they could be incorporated into my art practice until I went to SAIC,” notes the artist, who also took the opportunity whilst there to enroll in courses with engaging titles such as Propaganda and Decoration. “By the time I returned to London from Chicago, the way I looked at art had completely changed and I was much more confident as an artist and a thinker,” adds Aya, who was picked up by the Bischoff Weiss Gallery in London shortly after her graduation show in 2008. “At the time, I had just been accepted to the master’s programme in NGOs and development at the London School of Economics (LSE), so I was able to continue producing art while going to graduate school,” recalls the artist, whose interest in travel and social justice began at an early age.

“Ever since I was 14, I saved money from part-time jobs for

humanitarian travel, which has been a big part of my life. So much of the subject matter in my art practice also deals with socially- or politically-engaged themes such as displacement, forced migration, borders and identity,” adds the artist, who also became inspired by her professors at LSE, who showed her that the arts and activism were not mutually exclusive. “It opened my eyes to the possibilities of defining my own career beyond clear-cut categories. I had professors such as David Lewis, who taught social policy and was also a musician. It made me realise that I could merge my creative practice with advocacy work.”

Shortly after graduating and getting married in 2010, Aya moved with her husband to Jeddah for his job. During their two years in the Saudi port city, she curated shows at the Athr Gallery while continuing to develop her art practice, producing a body of work inspired by the hours she spent exploring Al Balad, the historic quarter of Jeddah where coral stone houses sport intricately carved wooden mashrabiyas. “I used to go to Al Balad’s souk to source fabric and thread for my work. I was absolutely floored by how beautiful the buildings were and began researching Saudi culture and history,” says the artist, who discovered that beyond the dark abayas of today, the tribes of Arabia were known for wearing vibrant colours. “I found it fascinating that not all women necessarily veiled or wore black, as many worked in the fields, owned property and were the equals of men in the tribe,” adds Aya, who began taking images of Al Balad’s historic buildings, which she then silk-screened onto linen and strategically embroidered with colourful threads similar to those used in traditional costumes.

“It’s a reminder that women have long sewn histories into their clothes, and I love the idea of using craft as a medium for sharing feminist narratives,” says Aya, noting that she also creates opportunities for discussion and reflection through her art. “When I address regional conflicts in my work, I never mention a country or faction fighting against another. It’s more about the stories of separation between mothers and children and the human cost of these conflicts, which are so far removed from the cycle of global politics,” says Aya, who has taken part in art fairs and exhibitions around the world including FIAC, Art Berlin Contemporary and Art Dubai.

A year after she moved back to London, Aya was appointed the new director of Al Madad Foundation. Established in 2001, the UK-based charity focuses on education and literacy programmes for refugee and disadvantaged children. In her role as director, the mother of two young sons travels six times a year to refugee camps in Jordan and on the Syrian-Lebanese border, where the foundation has established a centre. “I take my two-and-half-year-old and seven-month-old baby on these trips, because all too often we distance ourselves from the plight of refugees and dehumanise them. I want them to grow up knowing that these are people just like us,” says the artist, noting that in 2006 Al Madad also partnered with Art Dubai to launch START, providing art education to disabled and disadvantaged children in refugee camps.

Her work as an artist and humanitarian has also influenced her approach to dressing. “I’ve always embraced looking different and not conforming to a standard of beauty. I also love to play with the idea of clothing and how it’s worn,” says Aya, who transformed a Chloé skirt into a strapless dress, which she paired with a 60-year-old hand embroidered silk abaya by Artisan du Liban, inherited from her grandmother. “Everything I own has sentimental value, and recycling materials is such a big part of my art practice as well as something I encounter in refugee camps,” observes the artist, who accessorised her look with a necklace of Acai seeds acquired during a trip to the Amazon, angular wood bracelets purchased by her mother as a 15-year-old and a gold spear ring made by a Syrian street vendor in Beirut. “For me, true style is about embracing difference and mixing references and that’s how I interpret the Chloé spirit.” ➤

“I LOVE USING CRAFT AS A MEDIUM FOR SHARING FEMINIST NARRATIVES”  
*Aya Haidar*

**LEA SEDNAOUI**

*32, French/Lebanese/Armenian/Egyptian, branding consultant & culinary entrepreneur*

“This is one of the reasons I chose to move to this neighbourhood,” says Lea Sednaoui, surrounded by London’s Barbican Centre’s 1970s brutalist architecture. Walking through the multi-level complex which houses a theatre, concert hall, exhibition spaces and a cinema, she makes her way to the second-floor public library. “I love coming here because it’s a quiet spot in the city to work in. It’s also a great resource for my research, because they have a separate arts library,” says the branding consultant, who is still in the midst of unpacking boxes, despite having moved into her new flat a few weeks ago. “I had to travel to Beirut for work and just got back,” says Lea, admitting that she may not get to unpacking just yet as the start of the month will find her crisscrossing the city’s many cultural venues to attend events during London’s Shubbak Festival of Arab Contemporary Culture.

“It’s an amazing event that provides a much-needed counterpoint in a world where the benefits of cultural-pluralism are being questioned,” says Lea, who spent her childhood living between Paris and Beirut. “While growing up I always found the question ‘Where are you from?’ somewhat burdensome, because implicit within it is a declaration of identity, and mine never seemed so clearly defined,” observes Lea, whose Egyptian/Armenian family left Cairo following the fall of the monarchy in 1952 and moved to Lebanon, which became their adopted country. At the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war her parents moved once again to Paris, where Lea was born in 1985. “I’ve always been intrigued by how people go about defining their complex identities without having to revert to one word or place. In my case, am I Egyptian, Armenian, Lebanese, French? If I pick one over the other then I’m somehow denying a part of who I am,” notes Lea, who also spent a large portion of her childhood in Ghana visiting relatives who own flour mills there.

“I have family members who have lived in Africa for over 40 years. They were part of a much earlier wave of economic migrants from Lebanon and Syria to French-speaking West Africa in the late 19th and early 20th century,” says Lea, noting that some 250,000 Lebanese live in Africa today. “Even though I never lived there permanently, Ghana feels like home to me because I’ve been travelling there regularly since I was a child. That experience opened my mind and made me realise that home could be anywhere,” adds Lea, who completed high school in Beirut before moving to London to pursue a BA in fine arts at Central Saint Martins from 2004-2008. Returning to Beirut after graduating, she spent eight months producing large scale sculptures out of a welding studio and vast garage behind her family’s factory.

“I realised that I also had an interest in promoting other creatives when I met a talented Swedish artist through friends and asked her if she’d allow me to exhibit her work. That’s how I launched my career as a gallerist,” recalls the branding consultant, who converted her studio space into The Running Horse Gallery in under two weeks. “The gallery was in the Qarantina district which was an industrial part of town and I think that made us stand out,” says Lea of The Running Horse, which became a destination for discovering young emerging Lebanese artists, many of whom are established names today. “It also had a lot to do with timing. When I opened the gallery in 2009, Bonhams had established a Dubai office the year before and a market started emerging for regional artists,” adds the entrepreneur, who took part in art fairs in Dubai, Korea, Taiwan, Paris and Madrid to promote the gallery’s artists.

“It was an amazing experience but after a successful five-year run I decided it was time to close the gallery,” says Lea, citing the war in neighbouring Syria and Lebanon’s economic downturn as reasons behind her decision to reinvent her career. Returning to London, she pursued a master’s in branding at the London College of Communication.

“My decision to go into branding was really based on combining two of my passions,” notes the creative, who enjoyed being behind the scenes curating exhibitions and bringing ideas to life. “At the same time, I loved to cook and took classes at Alain Ducasse in Paris. It struck me that Ducasse wasn’t simply a chef but a lifestyle with a publishing house, as well as a network of schools and restaurants. I realised it all came down to the power of branding and that you could define an entire culture around food,” observes Lea, who today specialises in branding for the culinary industry.

Recently, she spent the past year working with the Missoni family on a cook book of their seasonal recipes. “We did most of the photography at their houses, shooting autumn and winter at their home outside Milan, while the spring and summer recipes were shot at their villa in Sardinia,” she adds, pointing out her fascination with understanding how artists and designers see the world. “I remember looking at photographs from the previous autumn shoot with Angela Missoni. She zeroed in on one tree and began describing its colours in a way that recalled the distinctive Missoni pattern. That’s when it clicked for me and I began to understand where her unique vision and aesthetic comes from. Those are the moments when I truly love my job.”

In her twenties, Lea had already begun investigating the nutritional impact of food on the human body, eliminating food intolerances from her diet that were making her ill. “A year before turning 30, I realised I had lost quite a few family members to cancer, including my father. I became obsessed with finding healthy alternatives to fight the disease by eating the right foods,” says Lea, whose research lead her to Dr Peter D’Adamo’s bestselling book *Eat Right 4 Your Blood Type* in 2015. “I spent the next six months following my blood type diet religiously, which was a life changing experience for me. I decided to share my recipes and research through an Instagram account I named ChewChoose, to make the point we have some control over our health through what we choose to eat.”

Lea is now focused on growing the brand beyond social media to include supper clubs, cook books and pop-ups centred around healthy eating. For the entrepreneur, travel will also play an important role in ChewChoose’s development as a lifestyle brand, featuring her favourite destinations such as LA, where she spends one month out of the year working and exploring its culinary scene. “For me travel and food have always been intertwined, and I love to experience a new place through its restaurants, farmers markets and artisanal produce,” says Lea, who recently flew to Santiago, Chile. “I visited a friend to go hiking for five days in the Atacama Desert, which was one of the most awe-inspiring landscapes I’ve ever encountered. I got emotional at one point, because being there makes you realise how small we are as human beings in comparison to the vastness of nature.”

When it comes to her personal style, Lea honed her approach to chic dressing while growing up in Paris. “I was always attracted to an effortless sense of style that isn’t necessarily linked to trends,” says Lea, who recently purchased her first Chloé dress at the brand’s London boutique for a wedding this summer. “It looks like nothing on a hanger, but I feel transformed when I put it on. In a sense Chloé is about real clothes designed by a woman for women, as opposed to creating a fantasy of what she should be,” observes the culinary entrepreneur, who infused Chloé’s earth-toned ’70s-inspired print dress with a shot of electric blue, thanks to a pair of Moroccan slippers purchased during a stay in Marrakech, and oxidised tendril-like earrings by LA designer Annie Costello Brown. “I love dressing down a formal outfit by adding an unexpected element of quirkiness or humour. It’s one of the reasons I have such reverence for the Alexandria-born Gaby Aghion, who built a house that didn’t take fashion too seriously.” ■

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ALL PRICES APPROXIMATE

Lea Sednaoui wears: Top, Dhs5,385; skirt, Dhs11,465, Chloé pre-fall '17. Earrings and shoes, Lea's own. Photographed at The Barbican, London