

Arab, hip – and proud of it

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I have always liked design, but majored in history and archaeology at university in Beirut. Then I saw the work of a friend who was doing graphic design, and I thought, this looks interesting. So I switched to graphic design, and then I realised I am very good at typography and collages. They are my forte. I had no idea until then. My projects included a lot of photography, but it was only moving to Dubai years later that gave me the chance to do something. I started as a photographer for a magazine, and was eventually pushed into showcasing some of my photographic work at the V&A museum in London, in an exhibition of Arabic designers and artists.

I had two months to prepare something worthwhile, so I said OK, and thought about what inspired me the most. It was September 11 and the press was so against the Arabs that people felt they had to hide their identity, and I thought, "No, we need to talk about this!" For me the Arab world is very dear, and something that we are not taking care of properly. We are not speaking Arabic as much as we should be, the kids are not surrounded by it so much and the language is something we need to nurture, to keep it going. So I came up with an exhibition called Meen Ana (Who I am) and used a lot of calligraphy. It said "My thinking is Arabic", " My Love is Arabic". Lebanese, Emirati, Palestinian, we are all Arabs and we are very proud of that. Three thousand people came to the show.

There are other designers who do a lot with Latin calligraphy, and they have really pushed it on. But those using Arabic are doing it in a very traditional, classical way. I wanted to do something more in your face, more modern, more bling. Arabic calligraphy is very graphic and beautiful, so I wanted to just take the letters and work with them. So I started making jewellery. The first ring was the letter N, for Nadine, and I showed it to a friend who said: "You must start making these," so it became a business. I named it **Bil Arabi**, because everything I do is Arabic.

I went back and created the smaller letters that can be worn every day. I want it to be personal. For me it's about being proud of wearing an Arabic letter on your wrist and saying "I am an Arab". This is what makes me keep going.

A client was wearing one of my pieces in the Côte d'Azur, and she was stopped by one of the girls from Destiny's Child, asking about the piece. She learnt that the woman is an Arab. A friend of mine bought one saying "I love you" and she was in Italy in a meeting, and one of guys said, "What is this, it's nice, what does it say?". I love hearing these small stories. For me this is what it's all about.

The first fashion designer that I loved was Kenzo and my mum would allow me to wear a few pieces. I was about 16. My mum always had an edge to fashion. She always wore very nice designers and she had a style of her own. Plus she is a very beautiful woman, which definitely helps.

However, I used to be a tomboy. Jeans, trainers and a beret – and army fatigues. Before university, I used to wear really big designer trousers, structured funky T-shirts, with interesting, asymmetric cuts. Then there was a change in my life; I was forced by my mum to have a nose job, and that was a big change for me. I looked much more feminine.

Now my style is a mixture, a collage, but I don't do trashy stuff. It's a bit elegant, and has to be comfortable, and always has a Japanese, slick feel. And colour. I love colours. I do a little bit with my own clothes – I get tank tops and polo shorts and work on them, with maybe some embroidery, but nothing structural. I love Essa: he is a friend of mine, and I wear a lot of his stuff. And I love Milia M, and Rabih Kayrouz – he is more on the elegant side. I like to promote Arab designers. It fits with my whole philosophy. At big events I always make sure I am wearing Arabic designers. I am always proud to wear Arab.



The jewellery designer **Nadine Kanso**.