

Hijabi US designer dreams of alternative fashion

Raised in Ohio by a Korean mother and a Palestinian father, Sarah Musa shocked her parents when she decided to wear the headscarf at age 17. Today, the 33-year-old Musa works in New York as a ready-to-wear designer but dreams of creating her own label-modest-looking fashion that will be worn by customers regardless of whether or not they are religious. Ten years into her career, she has worked



Sarah Musa, Senior Technical Design Manager at Club Monaco, poses for photos in New York. —AFP

for Ralph Lauren, Anna Sui, Carolina Herrera and now Club Monaco, where she is a senior technical designer.

"I'm making beautiful clothes and women can choose how they wear it," the elegant young woman told AFP in an interview. "I would rather buy a long top from Uniqlo than from a modest clothes brand that's not good," she says in reference to the genre of fashion that is sometimes referred to as "Islamic fashion." When she decided to wear the hijab as a teenager, she says it took her Christian mother three years to accept the decision. At that age, most teenagers just want to fit in. Wearing the hijab as an American high school student was "going against everything that society is telling you," she says.

"With all these companies saying you have to use make-up, you have to show skin, you have to dye your hair, there's still this billion-dollar industry saying you're never going to be good enough." "If I cover, I can express the power of who I want to be," she says. And whatever controversy wearing the hijab or dressing conservatively can elicit in America, she emphasizes that "for a majority of Muslim women in the world, it's a choice."

'Work extra hard'

At 20, Musa launched her own "modest fashion" label, Haya, but quickly put it to one side to concentrate on her studies. She went to the prestigious Fashion Institute of Technology in New York before going to work for some of the city's great fashion houses. But she is still determined to re-launch her own label, having won a nationwide competition to create an Islamic hijab three years ago. "My message is not going to be religious," she says. She named American designer Ryan Roche, fond of pants and sleeves, or the Olsen twins' label The Row, known for long and loose-fitting clothes, as inspirations. "They're extremely modest but because they're not related to religion, people don't see it that way," says Musa, who covers her hair in an elegant style similar to the cloche hats of the Roaring Twenties.

In the 10 years that she has been in the industry, Musa says she has never seen another hijabi woman work in big ready-to-wear labels. Even if the fashion industry in New York is more open-minded than much of the wider American society, she remembers one job interview in which the recruiter openly ruled her out because of her headscarf. "People are always going to hold me to different standards," she admits. "I have to work extra hard but that's what I signed up for when I made that choice."

It is a difference that Musa feels even more when she leaves the microcosm of New York and goes back to her native Midwest. Since Donald Trump won the presidency, the gulf has become even more pronounced. "As soon as I came to Ohio, I could feel the stares," she says. "I'm not paranoid." But her headscarf can also arouse positive reactions. One day a woman came up to tell her: "Your scarf is beautiful." "I could take off my scarf and blend in," she says. "I see my friends that are African American. — AFP

Eric Steffen works in his shop in the borough of Brooklyn in New York. — AFP photos



FINANCIERS TURNED FASHIONISTAS GET CREATIVE IN NY

His small workshop in a friend's house in industrial Brooklyn is a far cry from the glass skyscraper on Madison Avenue where he worked as an investment banker. But Eric Steffen is happy. Aged 39, he's ditched his career in finance to reinvent himself as a menswear designer. At a table in the low-hanging, window-less basement, he unrolls denim and velvet. In a room on the ground floor stand a dozen sewing machines bought from a factory that went bankrupt.

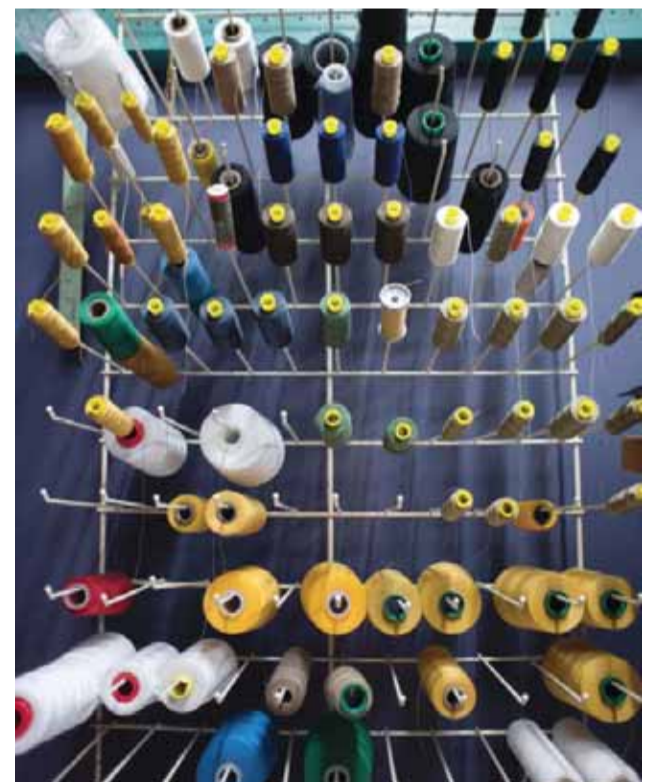
It may have been a difficult leap and the success of his nascent company, Fitted Underground, far from assured. But in a city like New York, where fashion is a major industry and looking smart is a must, Steffen is not the only well-paid professional dreaming of a more creative job. "I really enjoyed it. It was very fast-paced and I enjoyed the skill-set," the former investment banker says of his previous job. "But I was not happy with a business where the model is maximizing shareholders' values. Productivity was my greatest asset: that's great for a machine, but not so great for a human being!"

But why tailoring? Steffen had always struggled to find the perfect pair of jeans for his former footballer legs. After getting a suit made to measure, he no longer wanted to buy ready-to-wear. But with no design experience, he had to get some training: initially through private lessons and at New York's famous Fashion Institute of Technology, which offers relatively affordable night classes. In April 2014, Steffen resigned from J.P. Morgan with the support of his wife, who was prepared to help financially. Nearly three years later, he has around 100 clients, "all word of mouth," and hopes sales of his \$400 made-to-measure jeans will enable him to take on a staff.

'Word of mouth'

In contrast to his former employer, Steffen says he wants a company with a "more holistic business model" that maximizes "all the

stakeholders' values, not just shareholders." Not all fashion converts share Steffen's idealism, but many of them past the age of 30, are looking for personal fulfillment after slaving away round the clock for years at high-pressured New York companies. That's the case for Gauri Sikka, 38, who is preparing to ditch her 10-year career in banking in April to launch a line of luxury dog clothes.



Spools of thread in the shop of Eric Steffen.

"Ever since I was a teenager, I always wanted to get into fashion," she says. "But back then, it was not considered as a respectable profession." Her father insisted she earn an MBA, so she did. "My husband and I, we don't have any kids, we have dogs," she says. "They're like our kids, so we don't compromise: if I like something, even if it's a \$100 sweater, I'll buy it."

After night classes at FIT and thanks to savings and her husband's support, she can now devote herself to her passion and has founded her own company, The Doggie Days. She sees New York as a perfect niche market with so many well-paid professionals willing and able to spend lavishly on their pets. One of her first creations is a cashmere bandana, which her Maltese Dior has already modeled. She hopes to sell them for around \$50. — AFP



Pieces of denim show practice stitches in Eric Steffen's shop in the borough of Brooklyn.