

The Oregonian

Fashion forward, not untoward

Garments were loose-fitting, longer and sporty but as stylish as clothing on any runway. The difference? These conformed to Islamic modesty

Friday, November 24, 2006
VIVIAN McINERNEY

The hall went dark and a hush fell over the crowd. But when the music started and the spotlight shone on the catwalk, the all-woman audience cheered to see a slender model hit the stage in a chic designer dress . . . and hijab.

FACTBOX

- Faith and fashion

About 320 women attended The Muslim Educational Trust's first benefit fashion show Saturday night at Portland State University, an event that put the mod in modesty -- and proved that hijab, modest dress worn by Islamic women, can be highly stylish.

Islamic theology requires modesty in thought, behavior and dress. That's not always easy when surrounded by pop culture that encourages the opposite.

"We have a hard time finding what we need," said Majeda Hodroj, who is originally from Lebanon but now calls Oregon home. "We have to buy extra-large so it won't be (immodestly) tight, and then it is too big at the shoulders."

At the fashion show, Muslim vendors from Oregon and elsewhere who specialize in modest clothing showed their wares on the runway and sold them in the foyer afterward.

The fashions honor ancient tradition but were certainly made for modern life: A red-and-navy track suit from Prima Moda looked like the sort of thing a sporty young woman would wear to class or coffee. But the zip-front jacket reached modestly to mid-thigh.

Any fashion-savvy college student probably could see the influence of Vivienne Westwood in the black skirt with pockets, tabs and red plaid inserts by Rebirth of Chic. But instead of a sky-high mini length, the skirt fell to the ankles.

Lavishly embroidered fabrics cut into evening jackets and skirts by Artizara looked thoroughly modern. But the fabrics are woven and embellished by artisans around the world trained in traditional crafts.

"We wanted to assert that there is beauty in modesty," Asra Razzaque said of the philosophy behind the Artizara line, which she started with Sarah Ansari. Both women are from San Diego.

One segment in the fashion show featured modern takes on traditional costumes from parts of Africa, the Middle East and India. The women watching the fashion show cheered to see the garb of their heritage.

"There are so many different countries here, I don't recognize all the clothes," said Shazia Malik, an engineer originally from Kashmir region of India who now works in Portland.

The audience represented a global community, including Islamic converts of European descent and non-Muslims who came to support friends.

"After 9/11, we reached out to the Muslim community," said Setsy Larouche, a board member of the Portland chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. "We didn't want them to experience what our families did during World War II, when it seemed no one was there for us."

Afterward, women of the world shopped in the lobby. Not exactly world peace, perhaps, but still a bonding experience.

Vivian McInerney: 503-294-4076; vmcinerney@news.oregonian.com



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Wajdi A. Said, executive director of the Muslim Educational Trust, a nonprofit organization with a mission to educate the larger community about Islam, offered a few ideas about faith, fashion and the Muslim dress code of modesty called hijab:

- "Islam wants modesty of the mind and behavior for men and women. The mind and behavior is more important than the clothes."
 - "Hijab liberates women from male scrutiny and standards of attractiveness."
 - "It's simply a woman's assertion that judgment of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction."
 - "Women are recognized as individuals who are admired for their minds and personality, not their beauty or lack of it, and not as sex objects."
 - "The Quran teaches us that men and women are equal. The only thing that makes one person better than another is his or her character."
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