CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM FASHIONS
Contemporary Muslim Fashions is the first major museum exhibition to explore the complex and diverse nature of Muslim dress codes worldwide. It focuses especially, but not exclusively, on clothing that responds to individual and collective interpretations of modesty. The exhibition examines how Muslim women—those who cover their heads and those who do not—have become arbiters of style within and beyond their communities and, in so doing, have drawn broad attention to contemporary Muslim life.

With approximately one billion Muslim women worldwide, such a topic is both wide reaching and highly nuanced. The variety and changeability of Muslim women’s engagement with fashion, modesty, global trends, and local cultures cannot be captured in one overview. This presentation does not aspire to be a definitive survey but instead offers a current snapshot of Muslim women and fashion by spotlighting key themes, locations, and garments. It focuses on various corners of the globe where designers are creating, and consumers are wearing, highly fashionable garments that adhere to concerns for modesty and related aspects of Muslim religious cultures. As Islam is a multicultural faith, the dress of its practitioners is shaped not only by religious traditions but also by local customs and global fashion trends. By connecting international styles to local tastes and modes, this exhibition showcases both select regional particularities and the commonalities found in dress codes across the Muslim faith.

Throughout the exhibition you will see full ensembles as provided by the featured designers.

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Exhibition design by Hariri & Hariri Architecture
"Muslim fashion and Muslim clothing is not a uniform . . . it’s more than that. What we see here are great women, open-minded, willful, strong women showing the world that they care about fashion and they have a great sense of style."

— Kerim Türe, CEO, Modanisa

Modest fashion worn by Muslim women has often been painted as a monochromatic picture within American popular culture, with images of heads, faces, and bodies concealed beneath swaths of dark fabric. But in the past decade, the combination of highly stylish dress with varying degrees of body cover has become one of the most pervasive national and international fashion stories, with immeasurable media coverage illustrating the diversity of modest styles around the world. The rise of this fashion sector is often attributed to the spending power of Muslim women, intensified by the rise of the empowered Muslim millennial woman and further amplified over the past decade by Muslim women fashion bloggers. Global brands have begun to acknowledge the size of the market for modest fashion, valued at $44 billion per year, or eighteen percent of the estimated $243 billion spent by Muslim consumers on all clothing.

The profiles of emerging and established Muslim international fashion designers have been boosted by the interest of major Western retailers. Modest-fashion weeks, held in cities around the world, offer designers global platforms to share their collections, and the number of Muslim modest-wear designers being included in mainstream fashion schedules is growing. In 2017, Muslim modest wear was prominently featured in New York Fashion Week, Torino Fashion Week, and Paris Fashion Week as well as Fashion Forward Dubai, a showcase for Middle Eastern designers of all genres.

The ensembles on view in this gallery attest to the range and vitality of the Muslim modest-fashion market and encompass designs made for capsule collections and modest-fashion-week presentations.
“Just as Muslims have the right to argue that the hijab is not religiously mandated, they should also have the right to argue that it is religiously mandated.”

— Shadi Hamid, senior fellow, Project on US Relations with the Islamic World in the Center for Middle East Policy

The headscarf is often perceived as the most identifiable element of Muslim women’s dress—by Muslims and non-Muslims—yet as the photographs in this gallery illustrate, there is a high degree of diversity in head coverings (and lack thereof) among regions, generations, and individuals around the world. Important to our understanding of modest Muslim dress codes is the understanding that not all Muslim women wear a hijab (headscarf) and few wear a niqab (face veil). For example, in the United States the number of Muslim women who consistently wear a head covering in public has remained at about forty percent for the past decade, lower than in other Muslim-minority nations.

The headscarf is worn for various reasons; it may express personal piety, the conventions of a community, or any of a variety of political positions. Like all clothing, the headscarf can have multiple meanings to different observers at the same time. While in a few regions, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Indonesian Aceh province, head covering is regulated by law, in most others it is not. The heightened visibility that Muslim women experience when wearing headscarves may cause some to feel a responsibility to act as ambassadors for their religion or community, especially in Muslim-minority countries.
The Middle East was the home of the Prophet Muhammad (ca. 570–632 CE), the founder of Islam, who was born in present-day Saudi Arabia. In this region, where an estimated ninety-three percent of the population is of the Muslim faith, many different forms of head and body covering are worn. For women, one of the most common is the abaya (abāyah in Arabic). Traditionally, this simple, loose overgarment is shaped as a voluminous floor-length robe, black in color, and designed to cover the body from the neck to the feet, with sleeves extending to the wrists. It is often accompanied by a covering for the head or the head and face.

With a centuries-old history, the abaya serves numerous functions throughout the region, including as religious dress for countries that follow more conservative interpretations of Islamic law, and as cultural heritage and practice, transcending ethnic and national boundaries. For example, Saudi Arabia has required women to wear the abaya as covering in most public spaces; for other countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, the abaya is official national dress.

Inspired by their transcontinental lifestyles and informed by fashion educations in the United States and Europe, many young fashion designers from the region have offered new interpretations of the abaya over the past several years. By infusing elements from regional textile traditions, the materials and techniques of French couture, international fashion trends, and diverse folk costumes, among other sources of inspiration, they are creating new garments that suit the needs of both local and global audiences.
“Social media (has) played a significant role in bringing women together globally—they are congregating into a fashion community online who exchange style ideas—so a Malaysian fashionista can be inspired by a trendy student in London, or a New Yorker might be influenced by fashionable women in Dubai.”

— Ghizlan Guenez, founder and CEO, The Modist

Today, those seeking to showcase their style online increasingly use social media as their conduit, including Facebook (established 2004), Twitter (2006), Tumblr (2007), Instagram (2010), and Snapchat (2011). Among arbiters of Muslim modest style, developments in social media have enabled their ability to foster dialogue with their followers. Like many of their non-Muslim peers in modest fashion, early Muslim fashion bloggers and social-media leaders often say that they began their engagement with blogging and commercial practices because existing mainstream media and retail outlets lacked the diversity they sought.

Although various social-media platforms have been embraced globally, the photo-sharing application Instagram is currently a preferred platform for many digital style influencers—among them Muslim modest dressers—who distribute their photos and videos with short text captions and searchable hashtags. As the Instagram content shown here reveals, among Muslim modest fashionistas today, personal style can serve as a medium for discussions about contemporary fashion as well as a tool for positive social change. Clothing allows them to draw attention to issues of sustainability and ethical production in fashion; to gender, racial, and religious inequalities; and to other societal concerns.

#ContemporaryMuslimFashions
"Some women must still choose between their sport and their religious observance."

— Ibtihaj Muhammad, US Olympic fencer

Although many Muslims regard physical exercise as part of a religious obligation to stay healthy, keeping fit can be a challenge for women in some cultures. It is sometimes deemed inappropriate for women to engage in sports in public, and women-only facilities are rare. Criticisms from within Muslim communities often focus on the apparent transgressiveness of displaying women’s bodies and on the movements and clothing choices related to sport. In addition, in regions such as the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, women may traditionally spend more time in private rather than public spaces, further decreasing their opportunities for physical activity.

In recent years, however, observant young Muslim women have been challenging these norms, asserting what they see as their right to sport. For this new global generation, faith and modernity go hand in hand; the two are seen not as contradictory but rather as complementary. Women’s increasing participation in sports is viewed in conjunction with women’s greater freedoms and social engagement, and the development of appropriate sportswear to fit their athletic aspirations has followed a similar trajectory.

Muslim women have self-fashioned their own sportswear for generations, but since the turn of the twenty-first century, female entrepreneurs have been creating new garments for a rising generation of Muslim female athletes who dress modestly. In recent years, recognizing the size and importance of the Muslim consumer base, major retailers have also begun to create collections geared toward the Muslim athlete.
"Young Muslim women in Southeast Asia are coming of age at a time of societal flux. They are more devout than their parents’ generation—as seen by the spread of the hijab, or Muslim headscarf—while at the same time more professionally ambitious and more cosmopolitan in outlook."

—“The New Muslimah: Southeast Asia Focus,” Innovation Group, J. Weller Thompson, 2017

Indonesia—the largest majority-Muslim country in the world, with over eighty percent of its 240 million citizens professing Islam—is today one of the leaders in the contemporary Muslim fashion sector. This is in stark contrast to the 1980s, when dressing visibly Muslim by wearing loose, long dresses and headscarves was a statement of democratic resistance to the authoritarian rule of President Suharto, who governed from 1967 to 1998. Middle-class college students, forbidden from formal political organizing, adopted the style, which increasingly came to be viewed as a pointed moral critique of the regime. Suharto saw such expressions as a threat and banned headscarves in schools and civil-service jobs. This ban was lifted in 1991, in part to neutralize the political message.

The past two decades have seen the growth of an urban middle class with the highest recorded levels of consumer confidence in the world: within the Indonesian fashion industry, stylish modest dressing for Muslim women is now the fastest-growing segment. The Indonesian government today sees modest Muslim fashion as a potential driver of national development and actively supports traditional textile industries, such as batik and weaving, and the modest-wear industry.

Similar trends are found in neighboring Malaysia, where the rise of millennial-generation Muslims has combined with an explosion of social-media platforms and e-commerce to produce a rapidly growing market for halal fashion, beauty, technology, and food. Malaysian designers reflect the rich cultural and religious diversity of a secular country in which approximately sixty percent of the population is Muslim alongside significant numbers of practicing Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus. Fashion-forward designs cater to Muslims’ concerns for modesty while drawing upon the country’s different cultures and traditional and modern design influences.
GLOBAL FASHION

“In today’s global village, a woman’s freedom of choice plays an increasingly important role in how she chooses to present herself to the world, asking us to look beyond the fashion to see the individual.”

— Her Highness Deena Aljuhani Abdulaziz

Since the second half of the twentieth century, elite Muslim clients have been important patrons for the couture houses of Paris, where designs have often been adapted for regional and religious sensibilities. True to the spirit of haute couture—the creation of exclusive, custom-made clothing with the finest hand sewing—this industry has long shown a willingness to modify its garments to suit the needs of clients who wish to dress modestly. Today this tradition continues among leading couturiers as well as top European and American fashion design houses who fashion clothing to suit the faith-based needs of young, professional Muslim women. Some designers offer limited-edition collections for the Muslim high holidays of Ramadan and Eid, while others adapt current styles to accommodate Muslim concerns for modesty by altering the hem or neckline, closing slits, adding sleeves, or substituting a sheer fabric with an opaque alternative.

The growing desire for modest and stylish fashions among Muslim women has given rise to a market that serves diverse needs beyond Muslim communities. Indeed, the increased availability of modest fashions over the past decade coincides with a larger trend in the fashion industry toward more covered styles that appeal to women across many faiths and cultures. For some, choosing modest styles in comparison to body-conscious fashions may be a sign of empowerment, prioritizing individual needs over long-standing societal pressures to convey female sexuality and desirability.
GRAND FINALE

"People tend to believe that to be modern you have to disengage from your heritage, but it’s not true. We don’t see the global citizen as someone with no identity, but rather as someone who has confidence and is proud of his culture and history (and) open to the modern world."

— Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser

Around the globe, First Ladies and royal consorts use fashion to reflect the confidence, sophistication, and significance of their home countries, especially in a world that is increasingly connected through social and news media. For Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, her humanitarian work in education, health, and youth empowerment first stemmed from her position as consort to the former Amir of Qatar. Locally, Her Highness cofounded the Qatar Foundation, which spearheads human, social, and economic development in Qatar through education and research projects. Internationally, Her Highness advocates for the rights of all marginalized children through her work with the United Nations. Her foundations Education Above All and Silatech empower millions of children and youths across the globe who are affected by conflict and economic and cultural barriers.

Her Highness’s role as a champion for the right to education has drawn international attention, and consequently, so has her personal style. A fixture on Vanity Fair’s Best Dressed List, Her Highness is often outfitted in custom ensembles, altered for modesty, by leading couturiers. For Her Highness, such garments allow her to traverse diverse cultures as she takes on global challenges in education and community development. The garments on view in this gallery were worn by Her Highness to various educational events and official state visits, as seen in the nearby video.