

# Moroccan Fashion Designers

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Encyclopedia entry

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DOI: 10.2752/BEWDF/EDch1711

October 2013

## Abstract

Since the last decade of the twentieth century and with the turn of the twenty-first, a new generation of Moroccan fashion designers and photographers has played a part on the international fashion stage, combining Western-style fashions with elements of traditional Arab and Berber dress to subvert both European and Moroccan sartorial conventions. While notable names such as Amine Bendriouch, Alber Elbaz, Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, Hisham Oumlil, Aziz Bekkaoui, Samira Haddouchi, and Hassan Hajjaj are not the earliest Moroccan fashion innovators, their fusion of Western-based training and Moroccan-centered identities makes them initiators in the production of hybrid designs, neither “Moroccan” nor “Western.” The work of these designers uses the medium of dress to express, in various manifestations, artistic, cultural, and political ideas concerning Morocco’s cross-cultural contact with the West.

As commonly accepted, dress is not simply cloth but a complex system of communication that is informed, however subliminally, by human contact in and with the forces of the surrounding world. These elements of communication are not discrete entities but are all interrelated in a process of collision and difference, which incorporates interaction, learning, and exchange between cultures. Occupying the northwestern corner of Africa, Morocco stands at a crossroads between three continents, and Moroccan dress can be understood as documenting the different cultures that have encountered one another as a result of contact between Europe, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa.

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Occupying the northwestern corner of Africa, Morocco stands at a crossroads between three continents, and Moroccan dress can be understood as documenting the different cultures that have encountered one another as a result of contact between Europe, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. Dress is not simply cloth but a complex system of communication that is informed, however subliminally, by human contact in and with the forces of the surrounding world. These elements of communication are not discrete entities but are all interrelated in a process of collision and difference, which incorporates interaction, learning, and exchange between cultures.

Since the last decade of the twentieth century and with the turn of the twenty-first, a new generation of Moroccan fashion designers and photographers has played a part on the international fashion stage, combining Western-style fashions with elements of traditional Arab and Berber dress to subvert both European and Moroccan sartorial conventions. Five designers who stand out for their international commercial success are Hassan Hajjaj, Amine

Bendriouich, Nouredine Amir, Hisham Oumlil, and Alber Elbaz. These five are not the earliest Moroccan fashion innovators, but their fusion of Western-based training and Moroccan-centered identities makes them initiators in the production of hybrid designs, neither “Moroccan” nor “Western.” They are distinguished from their predecessors in that they have not lived consciously under severe political, social, and cultural censorship but have used their increasing freedom to express, in various manifestations, their own ideas concerning Morocco’s cross-cultural contact with the West.

Their main, shared objective is to launch a global brand through which they can reflect their Moroccan identities and histories without being limited by these associations. In producing work for national and international markets, these designers seek contact with Western tastes and global trends while simultaneously applying their indigenous heritage and local craftsmanship to the elaboration and realization of their designs. They do so through a fashion event called Festimode (later renamed Casablanca Fashion Week), created in 2006 to provide an international platform for Moroccan and North African fashion designers. Designers who showcase their work at this event do not wish to limit themselves to the design of Moroccan urban dress but rarely have access to the network of European fashion shows that dominates international fashion marketing. Fashion researcher Maria Angela Jansen has pointed out Casablanca’s potential to become an international fashion capital in the twenty-first century due to its “exceptional positioning between ‘The East and The West,’ its rich cultural heritage including skilled artisans, its openness to the world but also its rapid economic and political developments.” The event’s predecessor, Caftan, launched in 1996 by the Moroccan fashion magazine *Femme du Maroc*, was less interested in creating a fusion style than in promoting an “indigenous” aesthetic that encouraged new local talent to use traditional Moroccan dress, such as the caftan, to gain attention from Western markets. These two events illustrate the development in attitudes toward Moroccan fashion over a decade.

While some early-twenty-first-century designers produce garments that are recognizably Moroccan, others take a more abstract approach. Western ethnocentrism presupposes a desire on the part of Westerners to own “exotic” clothing, and non-Western designers answer this desire by looking at their own culture through what they suppose to be Western eyes and producing such clothing. This process is called auto-exoticism, a term coined by anthropologist Dorinne Kondo in her book *About Face*, which examined the success of Japanese designers in the international fashion arena in the early 1980s and referred to the “auto-exotic gaze” that many non-Western cultures cast on themselves. Hajjaj and Bendriouich, whether consciously or not, fulfill this Western desire by making use of distinctly Moroccan forms, adapting and reinterpreting textiles, patterns, design elements, and iconography traditionally associated with their indigenous culture. These designers’ success demonstrates that they have used Western stereotyping to their advantage, engaging with and responding to what they understand to be the West’s representation of Morocco. On the other hand, Amir, Oumlil, and Elbaz, with an even higher profile in international fashion markets, appear to do the opposite by producing collections that provide no direct reference to forms and materials one might interpret as Moroccan. These designers are not trying to deny their cultural heritage so much as to interpret it freely against a global background and make it accessible to an international audience. As fashion researcher Victoria Rovine has pointed out in her analysis of sub-Saharan African fashion designers, this approach might be characterized as “conceptual rather than literal.... These are designers who draw inspiration from African approaches rather than African forms.” Their work is no less Moroccan than that of the other designers, having materialized out of their diasporic experiences and identities, even if these elements do not appear explicitly.



HH Ladies by fashion photographer and designer Hassan Hajjaj, Marrakech, 2000. Hajjaj creates and photographs a fusion style that combines traditional forms of Moroccan women's dress with ubiquitous Western-style fashion fabrics. Photograph by Hassan Hajjaj for Rose Issa Projects.

## Hassan Hajjaj

A commercial example of auto-exoticism is visible in the work of fashion photographer, designer, and installation artist Hassan Hajjaj, who was born in Larache, Morocco, in 1961. He migrated to London with his family in the late 1970s and became involved in London's emerging music scene as a club promoter, absorbing the music and urban street styles of reggae, hip-hop, and world music. In 1984 he opened a shop in Covent Garden in which he stocked Western fashion labels including Vivienne Westwood, John Galliano, and Destroy next to T-shirt designs from his own clothing and accessories label, RAP. He returned to Morocco in the 1990s to establish a studio in Marrakech and to be closer to the urban lifestyles and street cultures of Morocco, which remain his chief sources of inspiration. As he explains in his chapter in the book *Arab Photography Now*, work encapsulates his own cross-cultural experiences of Africa and Europe: "It is a reflection of my life journey: arriving in London from a small fishing town in Morocco as a teenager, embracing the urban lifestyle, my involvement in the fashion and music scenes, club promotion, design, travel, and finally going back to Morocco to check out where I came from and find my roots." By 2012 Hajjaj had studios in London and Marrakech, where his work attracts Moroccan women desiring Western-style fashions as well as Western women drawn to the exoticism of his designs. His work attempts to convey an idea of Morocco fashioned, at first glance, from clichés and consisting of traditional veils, djellabahs (short- or long-sleeved outer garments with hoods

and slits at the bottom, usually modified for women with the use of brighter hues and colorful embroidery), caftans, and babouches (slippers). However, on closer examination, these local forms of clothing reveal themselves to be covered in counterfeit designer logos or constructed from ubiquitous Western-style fashion fabrics and patterns such as polka dots, leopard print, or camouflage. By adapting and transforming indigenous dress into fashionable forms, Hajjaj conveys a supposedly authentic Moroccan look through products that are thoroughly familiar in the West.

In addition to fashion design, Hajjaj is known for his fashion photographs that document his hybrid creations and can be considered works of art in their own right. His images embrace the people of twenty-first-century Marrakech in a carnivalesque spectacle of boldly printed fabrics (either designed by the artist or selected from the souk) and handcrafted wooden frames that contain recycled empty Moroccan packaging (mini soft drink cans, boxes of matches, makeup bottles, plastic blocks, or little boxes of kohl). The designer blends, overlaps, recreates, and transforms all of these items to produce seductively aesthetic and humorous compositions. The subjects, either friends of the artist or people selected from the street, are occasionally relaxed and pensive, but frequently they dance, tumble, and spill out of the frame, presenting themselves as neither fragile nor static in the face of European dominance but able to transform outside influences (principally, the superficial attractions of Western consumerism) to their own ends. The maxim expressed by Hajjaj in *Arab Photography Now*—"I feel I am protecting the people I portray and want them to be active players in my pictures"—is made manifest in his use of costumes, props, lighting, and backdrops to create mini stage sets on which theatrical narratives and Orientalist stereotypes concerning North African Arab society are performed. Hajjaj creates and photographs a fusion style: a mixture of traditional clothing and modern trends, to a certain degree embedded in his own culture and yet adhering to Western-style fashions at the same time. Using local clothing as a starting point for innovative designs that draw on international styles, he challenges the dichotomies of Moroccan/Western, traditional/modern, and local/global and puts forward a new, cross-fertilizing definition of fashion.

## **Amine Bendriouich**

Fashion designer Amine Bendriouich provides another example of combining Moroccan-ness—in terms of color, shapes, and numerous visual or stylistic references—with international wearability. Bendriouich grew up in Marrakech, received his fashion education at the French school Esmod International in Tunisia, and moved to Casablanca in 2007 to work for a textile company. During this period he pioneered a T-shirt line called Stounami, well known across North Africa for its controversial slogans, and used the proceeds to launch his international prêt-à-porter brand ABCB (Amine Bendriouich Couture & Bullshit) in 2008. As a 2009 finalist in the Goethe-Institut's Createurope fashion competition, he was awarded the use of an apartment, showroom, and workshop in Berlin for one year, where he has remained ever since, although his production is still based in Morocco—a means of ensuring his brand has deep roots in local culture. Consumers do not need to know this to appreciate his work, but for those who know something of the history and production techniques of the materials he uses, wearing Bendriouich's designs may acquire an added layer of meaning. With a distinguished unisex style, Bendriouich's designs make candid reference to his Moroccan heritage—he often incorporates traditional Moroccan garments such as the djellabah and babouches—at the same time as he draws on elements of Western urban streetwear. He explains his ambitions to meld elements drawn from local sources into designs that have a broad appeal: "Morocco has no fashion scene as we know it in Europe, but I want

to build a bridge between the two places.” As he states in journalist and fashion stylist Helen Jennings’s *New African Fashion*, his designs can be viewed as commentary on his cross-cultural encounters and the materialization of a hybrid mix of influences: “Fashion is the result of the people I meet, the places I go and the music I hear.”



Malicious Look by Hassan Hajjaj, Marrakech, 2000. Photograph by Hassan Hajjaj for Rose Issa Projects.

Bendriouich's Autumn/Winter 2012/2013 collection, *Winter in Africa*, was a sardonic take on the effects of global climate change on the weather and seasons. He brought cotton T-shirts, nightshirts, simple vest dresses, and shorts in pastel pinks and crisp yellow to Arise Magazine Fashion Week, held in Lagos. Arise, Africa's leading international style magazine, launched a yearly fashion event in 2011 to highlight African achievements in fashion, music, culture, and politics and Africa's contribution to twenty-first-century society around the world. The prints on the T-shirts were handmade reproductions by Moroccan illustrator Yassine Nbel, transformed into T-shirt designs by New York artist Ebon Heath. Playing with forms, Bendriouich melded Moroccan influences into modern shapes by adapting the shape and silhouette of long, outer robes into short and lean silhouettes and cuts. He understands his designs as reflecting the changes taking place in Moroccan society and the fashion world in general. He explains in *New African Fashion*, "Since King Mohammed VI's ascension [in 1999] there has been more freedom of artistic expression. We now have Casablanca Fashion Week and young designers are beginning to realize that clothes can go beyond the caftan. The balance is changing and the future of Moroccan fashion is going to be very interesting indeed." His work challenges the notion that indigenous clothing is a stable form of dress that is oriented toward tradition and exists on the periphery, in opposition to fashion, which is often considered a phenomenon of change that emerges only from Western urban centers. For Bendriouich and Hajjaj, both seeking to make a Moroccan contribution to international fashion, local sartorial markers such as pattern, material, form, and color are not monolithic and unchanging but continually recycled to inform and inspire fashion design in the early twenty-first century.

## **Noureddine Amir**

While some designers directly borrow from indigenous forms, others take a more abstract approach in which they refer indirectly to their Moroccan identities. Noureddine Amir, who was born in Rabat and studied fashion in Casablanca, has received international attention for his conceptual artworks as well as for his fashion designs. After graduating in 1996 he began working for the film and theater industry, collaborating with Iranian film and theater director Shirin Neshat on successive occasions to produce eight art house films and a play in New York. He returned to Marrakech in 2000—"I needed that," he explains in an article for *Dalia Air Magazine*, "First off, I feel good there, and secondly it was still a virgin country in the world of fashion"—to create his first fashion collection, participating in the fashion event *Caftan* as a new talent in 2002. Amir is distinguished from his peers in that he has showcased his work at both *Caftan* and Casablanca Fashion Week, although his experimental approach to fashion design has left him with many local critics, largely because he presented his avant-garde creations at the event *Caftan* while claiming not to make this traditional style of Moroccan dress. Much of his work makes indirect rather than explicit reference to Morocco: he is more interested in making use of the skill and expertise involved in the craftsmanship of local Arab and Berber dress than in incorporating indigenous forms or stylistic references from these dress customs into his designs. This is one of the main reasons he would not consider working abroad permanently and has deliberately and consciously sought to find employment for craftspeople in Morocco—using their skills and materials, even if not their designs. He makes innovative and artistic use of local materials—"I like to work in the souk.... I accumulate piles of materials. Then I touch, I mix, I experiment"—but rarely those commonly used in Moroccan women's dress; instead, he favors materials such as raffia, jute fabric, and muslin, which were associated with poverty during the French Protectorate (1912–1956). His description of his working methods can be seen in many ways as an attempt to evade any reference to geographic or cultural specificity: "I start from the medium,

the belly, around which the dress is created. And I never know at which time I stop. The form creates itself. It is born from the matter.”



A three-piece suit in royal blue by Casablanca-born and New York-based designer Hisham Oumlil injects a splash of color into traditional men's suiting (Autumn/Winter 2012 collection). Oumlil is best known for recasting European tailoring with unusual fabric textures and unorthodox color combinations derived from his Moroccan roots. Photograph by Eva Mueller for Hisham Oumlil, 2012. Taken in New York.

Although Amir does not make his Moroccan identity a central component of his work, his conceptual approach to fashion is inevitably permeated by his location and everything around him. He clearly alludes to this when he acknowledges that "one does not create in isolation. It is exchange and dialogue which make us make headway." Many of his creations are centered on the notion of wrapping or shrouding, using lengths of material to envelop the body, in a technique not dissimilar to the traditional style of Moroccan women's dress, the haik. The haik is a draped outer garment made from a large rectangle of white wool, eighteen feet (five to six meters) long and seven feet (two meters) wide, sometimes striped with silk; it was commonly worn by Moroccan women until the 1950s, when it was replaced by the djellabah. Although simple and consisting of few components, the haik, which would be wrapped around the body and head and thrown over the shoulder so that it enveloped the arms, nevertheless had a widely varying appearance, produced by the different pleats and folds of the drapery native to each Moroccan city. Amir's interest in enveloped forms, and their technical subtleties, culminated in 2006, when he produced an all-black collection in stark contrast to the strong, vivid colors of the other collections presented at Caftan that year. The absence of color was less an aesthetic than a political choice that made use of the conspicuous color in the work of his peers to render his own vision of the future: the growing impact of globalization, the increasing threat of religious extremism, and the mounting social segregation in Moroccan society. He is recognized sufficiently at an international level that his designs have been displayed in a number of European museums, including the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille, the Fashion Museum in Antwerp, and the World Museum in Rotterdam.

## **Hisham Oumlil**

Hisham Oumlil, born in Casablanca in 1972 but based in New York, has also achieved prominence internationally, although rather than working across artistic media like Amir, he represents fashion in the more classical sense. Oumlil is a skilled tailor, trained under the renowned Rocco Cicarelli at his atelier in New York City and best known for producing custom-made suits for a discriminating clientele who request not only a highly individualized look but also an outstanding custom fit. Following more than a decade of fashion industry experience in the United States, he launched his eponymous label Oumlil in 2006, using vibrant colors and unusual details to introduce "a new sense of luxury menswear," in the words of Patricia Mears, author of the exhibition catalog *American Beauty: Aesthetics and Innovation in Fashion*, put out by the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology. In 2008 Oumlil was awarded the Fashion Group International's "Rising Star Award" in menswear. Whereas Jason Wu, the winner for women's wear of the same year, has since rapidly progressed to dressing high-profile clients such as Michelle Obama, Oumlil has quietly commenced the lengthy and ultimately more significant business of creating a globally recognized fashion house, while at the same time designing and producing a succession of innovative collections. His work may not look Moroccan to an international audience, but that is not of great significance to Oumlil. As he notes in an interview for *Departures* magazine, he believes that first and foremost fashion should be international and fulfill international taste criteria: "I want to embrace global sensibilities, instead of local sensibilities.... I really want men to be much more universal ... don't act, don't dress, don't

talk like you come from one place. The world is yours. You have to open up to it.” At the same time fashion is inevitably rooted in local culture, as he explains in So’Chic magazine: “Morocco has always been a cultural crossroads and this is reflected in my choice of materials, my love of certain tones and my contrasting linings.” The cultural crossroads that is Morocco is manifested in Oumlil’s work through vibrant colors, such as royal blue or spicy red, and unusual fabric textures, such as cable-knitted wool or a quilted lapel, which he applies to traditional men’s suiting fabrics.



A model wears a cable-knitted wool creation in vibrant yellow from Hisham Oumlil's Autumn/Winter 2012 collection, presented at Mercedes-Benz New York Fashion Week. Amy Sussman (Getty Images Entertainment) for Getty Images.

Collections such as *Weather in Transition* (Spring/Summer 2008, showcased at the New York Fashion Week) revolutionized European tailoring by recasting traditional silhouettes and forms with asymmetrical closures, crafty folds, sweeping and vertically curved fronts, and unusual details such as button closures in place of pocket flaps. Through this approach, Oumlil does not passively adopt Western influences but adjusts and translates them to address Moroccan sensibilities. As part of the late-twentieth-century diasporic generation of Morocco, he is familiar with European tailoring and American popular culture, but the total adoption of Western-style fashions in his collections would deprive him of his own indigenous identity. His bespoke tailoring shows a fascination with Moroccan craftsmanship and follows the production techniques executed by traditional tailors and fabric merchants in anonymous workshops in Morocco's old city centers, where clothing is made for each individual client without using a pattern. Like Amir, Oumlil makes it clear that twenty-first-century fashion design need not look Moroccan in a traditional sense to be genuinely Moroccan.

## **Alber Elbaz**

Perhaps the most important designer of Moroccan origin is Alber Elbaz, creative director of the French fashion house Lanvin's luxury collection since 2001. He has won numerous awards including the Council of Fashion Designers of America's International Designer of the Year award in 2005 and France's prestigious Legion of Honour in 2007. Elbaz—who was born in Casablanca in 1961, grew up in Israel from the age of ten, and is living in Paris—has never been associated with his Moroccan roots by the press and critics, nor has he made his identity a defining element of his work in the ways Hajjaj and Bendriouich have. According to a *New York Times Magazine* article by Lynn Hirschberg, his collections present a global perspective toward fashion, reiterating his mantra that “fashion is important all over the world” and encapsulating an extensive fashion career that has taken him around the world. Elbaz studied fashion design at Shenkar College of Textile Technology and Fashion in Tel Aviv before moving to New York in 1984, where he was appointed assistant director at Geoffrey Beene. He arrived in Paris in 1997, where he became head designer at Yves Saint Laurent before the Gucci Group took over the label and placed Tom Ford at its helm. Following this, Elbaz worked at Krizia in Italy for three months, prior to spending two years traveling around Asia and the Far East. He finally returned to Paris in 2001 to secure his position at Lanvin, where his cross-cultural and multidisciplinary approach to fashion has proved a financial success. As Kristin Knox, author of *Culture to Catwalk* and the blog *The Clothes Whisperer*, has observed, “he is credited with reversing the fortunes of Lanvin, one of the oldest of the classic French fashion houses, breathing new life into a moribund but still revered name and transforming it into one of the most coveted luxury brands worldwide, whose influence can often be felt trickling down the high street to mass market.”

His designs for Lanvin are quintessentially French in their conception—simple, feminine, and sophisticated—yet they evoke the sporty, casual character of American sportswear while drawing on, among other things, the jewel-like decorative semiprecious stones and coins that rural Moroccan Berber women wear for their associations with wealth and prestige. This recurring leitmotif of heavy embellishment in Elbaz's work at Lanvin can be understood as a subtle reference to Morocco's former history as a protectorate of France, when the French

perceived the Berbers as the original and “pure” inhabitants of Morocco and coveted their artistic forms. Elbaz has acknowledged that his fashion choices must in part reflect his Moroccan identity—the use of the color blue, for example, whether on a necklace or a pair of pumps, reminds him of the sky in Casablanca, where he spent much of his childhood. He has also described the inspiration for his first collection at Yves Saint Laurent in 1999 as looking at his own culture through what he supposed to be Western eyes, engaging in his own Orientalist narratives: “I thought, how would a blond lady feel in Marrakesh? How would she feel in high heels in a dark street with young boys looking at her?” Even though Elbaz’s clothing bears no explicit resemblance to Moroccan clothing traditions, he, like Amir and Oumlil, reinvents and redefines Moroccan sensibilities—for example, Berber women’s practice of layering pieces of heavy jewelry over each other—to link up with constantly evolving international tastes.

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