



Haute Couture in Tehran: Two Faces of an Emerging Fashion Scene

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Abstract

This article sketches a map of the formation of taste in Iran and the circulation of desire across class and geographic borders. Focusing on *haute couture* production in Tehran, it focuses on the careers of two designers. Discussing their sources of inspiration and the expectations of their clients, it illustrates different understandings of fashion in the city. Ideas about modernity, tradition, and the West are reworked according to the aesthetic approaches of each designer. Modernity and mobility are linked in fashion design practices, as they negotiate the tensions between state restrictions and consumer desires for fashion, modernity

and bodily mobility. The ways in which designers rework or reinterpret Iranian traditional aesthetics brings to the fore the connections between Western sensibilities and those of the upper classes in Tehran. With Western taste and desires rather than Western dress informing high-class subjectivities in Tehran, dress inspired by traditional clothing is held in high esteem among the privileged classes in Tehran and in the Diaspora.

KEYWORDS: Iran, consumption, haute-couture, modernity

Focusing on *haute couture* production in Tehran, this article uses two designers' careers to illustrate different understandings of fashion in the city. Ideas about modernity, tradition, and the West are reworked according to the aesthetic approaches of each designer. Mobility and modernity are discursively and materially linked in and by fashion design practices, as they simultaneously negotiate the tensions between state restrictions and consumer desires for fashion and bodily mobility.

This article is based on eighteen months of ethnographic research (2002–4) that took place in Tehran and Paris, and concentrated on fashion practices in the two cities. The research revealed that between these two locations there are strong material and symbolic exchanges, Paris acting as fashion referent for some Tehrani designers, not only in terms of the creation of styles, but also in the organization of their fashion calendar. Some designers from Tehran displayed their work in Paris, while Parisian designers consciously modify their designs to adapt to the tastes of their Middle Eastern clients. Also, members of the Iranian diaspora living in Paris are faithful clients of Tehrani designers. For the experienced eye it is clear that the “ethnic” style in Paris periodically passes through a reworking of traditional central Asian clothing, cuts, and colors. The similarities between some of these Paris-based productions and the work of the Tehrani designers can be explained in terms of this dynamic diffusion of styles and their common sources of inspiration.

Long-term Dynamics

To understand the contemporary Iranian fashion scene it is necessary to have an idea of the country's sartorial history and its link to political change. Throughout most of the twentieth century, a policy of sustained modernization was pursued, mainly understood as Westernization. The Constitutional Revolution of 1904–6 and the formation of the first Iranian parliament were signs of the beginning of this new era. The commercial classes from the *bazaar* and the *shi'i* clergy were the main actors in this movement. The adoption of the Constitution in 1906 created a new political landscape. The political class's desires to

construct a modern society brought about a series of reforms designed to give a modern look to Iranian society. Key to this aim was laws that targeted *men's* attire. The first law, in 1923, concerned the obligation for government employees to wear Iranian-made clothes during office hours.

After he visited Turkey in 1934 and met Kemal Atatürk, Reza Shah became determined to accelerate his reforms towards modernization and to generalize the wearing of Western attire. Some women of the upper classes and at the court were already wearing European hats and were participating in public gatherings. In 1935 a decree forbade the wearing of the veil in schools both for students and teachers. In the same year women were required to appear uncovered when dealing with the public administration (Baker 1997: 185). In 1936, Reza Shah promulgated a law forbidding veil wearing in public spaces. For many women, this law meant confinement to their homes. At the same time, various new regulations on women's behavior came into use under the guise of training in training in "good manners," prescribing a mode of behavior that embodied "veiling in the absence of the veil." Before women could participate in public their bodies needed to be disciplined (Najmabadi 1993).

After the forced abdication of Reza Shah, in September 1941, many women resumed veiling. Under the pressure of the *ulama* (the religious authorities), who had partially regained influence, Muhammad Reza, the new Shah, abrogated the law forbidding the veil. Nevertheless, the years of forced unveiling left a deep mark on the society. Veiling habits became not only indicators of education and class difference, but also the means by which such differences were constructed, through the limitations on behavior and mobility that they imposed. For the entire period of forced unveiling, access to education was practically impossible for women coming from traditional social environments.

The Islamic Revolution erupted in the late 1970s as civil unrest. Whereas the Shah's policies, including dress regulations, were associated with Westernization, after the first violent repression of the regime's opponents on September 8 1978, wearing non-Western style clothing was interpreted as spontaneous resistance against the Shah. However, with the installation of the new government led by Ayatollah Khomeini, women working in governmental positions were required to wear a form of covered dress. In the Spring of 1980 big demonstrations against head coverings swept Tehran. A period of unrest followed. On March 13 1980, the Ayatollah announced publicly that women should consider it a moral duty to wear the *chador* (all-enveloping cloak). The restoration of *shari'a* law on May 30 1981 established a punishment of imprisonment for up to one year for all women, Muslim or not, who did not cover sufficiently in public.

For the period that follows, studies about women's dress in Iran are scarce, the subject itself being a delicate one. Notable is Fariba

Adelkhah's book, *Revolution under the Veil* (1991), which shows how the veiling policy had the effect of empowering a large number of women, who were now able to attend schools and become educated without the pressure of their families restricting their mobility outside the home. This increased social mobility among the lower classes, and contributed to the formation of a new middle class, attuned to Islamic sensibilities.

This article reconsiders the connection between Western sensibilities and upper classes in Tehran through observations of how designers rework or reinterpret Iranian traditional aesthetics. The dynamics of a class system based on access to fashion become evident. Dress inspired by traditional clothing is held in high esteem among the privileged classes. This article sketches a map of the formation of taste and the circulation of desire across class and geographic borders. The sources of inspiration for designers' work and the demands and expectations from their clients are also discussed. In this dynamic, access to Western taste and desires rather than to Western dress informs high-class subjectivities in Tehran.

Time and Fashion in Tehran

In Tehran I was fortunate enough to meet many of the most famous local designers. The designers I interviewed formed part of a cosmopolitan network, with links to capital cities around the world, such as Paris and London (Figure 1). According to the designers' accounts, and the opinions of some of their clients, there are no more than ten to twelve well-known designers in Tehran.¹ Following a brief overview that outlines the main characteristics of *haute couture* in Tehran, I will focus in particular on the workshops and the production strategies of two designers in more detail.

References to the "traditional" and "the modern" will appear throughout this article, as the interviewees used them. I will point out how these categories refer to a specific aesthetic and mode of clothing use that contribute to the system of distinction in the urban environment of Tehran. Contemporary designers emphasize the modern aesthetics of the body's mobility, but this does not necessarily mean embracing "Western styles" of clothing for reasons I will discuss later. There are "modern" ways of looking at tradition, such as modern uses of "traditional clothes;" simultaneously, there are "not so modern" ways of wearing modern, Western-style clothes. As will become evident, being modern in Iran also means being attuned to the sensibilities and the aesthetic preferences of the upper classes.

In Tehran, one may easily find tailors ready to cut clothes to measure. In Enghelab Street between its intersection with Vali Asr and the Ferdousi Square there is a long series of tailors' shops for men. Zaratousht Street,

Figure 1

Tehrani fashion designer show in Paris.



west of Vali Asr is the well-known textile quarter, and there are also tailors for both men and women in this neighborhood. These shops usually offer their clients suits and dresses, cut to measure, that are copied directly from Western fashion magazines. They are open to the public all year around and are very much considered to be part of the fashion scene.

There is also a special category of fashion designers, who can be considered, along with the ready-to-wear boutiques, as the generators

of the aesthetic canons of Tehran's urban style. While it is hard to speak of a well-established fashion industry in Tehran, there are constitutive elements of such an industry in the form of workshops belonging to local designers, and the development of brand names. An incipient fashion advertising industry, which includes fashion photography, is also part of this emerging fashion scene.

I first met a local fashion designer, when a friend invited me to the presentation of her private collection at her house. It was early March, just before *norouz* (the Iranian New Year), which is when all of the designers in Tehran present their Spring/Summer collections, because this is when people buy clothes and replenish the contents of their wardrobes. Men were not allowed in before 8.00pm, allowing women the chance to try on clothes undisturbed earlier. Not all of the clients who attended such functions were intimate with the designer, even though the sales take place in her house. On these occasions, the house of the designer becomes an *ad-hoc* showroom offering an informal atmosphere for clients with clothes, jewelry, and bags displayed on the couch and around the room. On my first visit, a television was on in one corner of the room discreetly broadcasting the Moscow Fashion Week. With the television on, clients could simultaneously browse the cosmopolitan spaces of fashion (Moscow entered the circuit not long ago), while at the same time feeling the touch of local fabrics and the look of local designs. Different aesthetic proposals mixed in the same room and created an odd feeling of physical dislocation. The aesthetics of the two localities (Moscow and Tehran) are linked in the imaginary, the actual and the virtual brought together by the clients' gestures, their eyes moving back and forth from the television screen to the clothes on the hangers where mainly *mantoha*,² are displayed, which mix what the designer calls the "modern" with the "traditional" (Figure 2).

This type of seasonal presentation of collections is an element specific to the fashion industry in Tehran, where each designer organizes between two and four collection shows a year. One particularity of the seasonal presentation is that the displays are privately organized. As in the example above, the presentations take place in the more or less spacious houses of the designers, and publicity functions mainly through "word-of-mouth."

Most of the designers try to offer collections every season, but this is never guaranteed. Different reasons, often personal, may prevent a designer from being able to do this. The shows usually start in the early afternoon and last late into the night, with the men joining towards the end. Sometimes women model the designs, usually friends or relatives of the designer. Every designer I talked to told me that they did not have a fixed date for their presentations. Less constrained by competition than fashion designers in Paris and London, or by the capitalist acceleration of production and the fever of searching for the "newest, hottest, hippest" look, the designers organize their creations and sales in a less rigid time

Figure 2

Private showroom in Northern Tehran, March 2003. Moscow Fashion Week is on television.



framework. Family events or religious celebrations frequently play a major role in scheduling events. Working in this flexible timeframe, the designers of Tehran develop individualistic approaches to an emerging industry.

Mahla: Fashion as Business

Unique in the Tehrani fashion scene is Mahla who organized two public fashion shows in Tehran during my fieldwork, one in January 2001, the second scheduled initially for August 18–22 2003; a death in her family two weeks before the show caused her to postpone the event to September 30. Mahla also has a permanent strategy of model recruitment. She recruits her models by herself, among her daughters' friends, and on the street. If she sees somebody she likes, she introduces herself and her work, and invites the potential model to come to her workshop with a guardian, usually the mother. Over a cup of tea in her workshop, Mahla explains the nature of the employment, presents her journal, and asks if the girl would be available for modeling.

Mahla lives in the wealthy northern part of Tehran in a salubrious apartment decorated in baroque style, juxtaposing faux Louis XVI furniture, wonderful miniatures, and paintings dating from the Qajar period (Figure 3). There was also a display of thirteen early-twentieth-century dolls, presenting the costumes of different regions of Iran. Next to the dolls, textiles and fabrics from the same Qajar period were displayed. When I visited her apartment there were flowers and a number of evening dresses arranged on the big dining table. Two young women, covered with floral *chadors* were looking at the dresses. They

Figure 3
Framed photos from *Lotous*
magazine and traditionally
dressed dolls.



were sisters, students of Mahla, who had come from Kerman (a city about 1,000 km southeast of Tehran) for a short visit accompanied by their mother.

From two small incidents that occurred during my visit one can get a sense of the nuances of how a public fashion designer deals with the issue of bodily exposure in Iran. On the first of these occasions, three visitors were covered with *chadors*, but Mahla and the photographer who accompanied me did not wear any head covering. After obtaining permission, I began photographing the scene. At one point, I took a photograph of Mahla and one of her students. After the flash went off, Mahla angrily told me “Look, look, I don’t have a headscarf!” Then she retracted and said, “Oh, you are not a journalist, it’s OK.”

At some point in our conversation, one of Mahla’s two daughters entered the room and asked for permission to “go out.” I was surprised to recognize her as one of the models in the photographs of the Tehran fashion show in 2001. She was dressed in a nicely cut gray overcoat, *pateff* trousers, with a white scarf over her shoulders. I asked permission to take her picture. She asked, “would you like it with or without my scarf on my head?” I answered, “Anyway you feel comfortable.” “I don’t care,” her daughter replied (Figure 4). To this, Mahla reacted strongly: “You should care, dear, you should care, because you are Muslim.” In further meetings with Mahla, I realized that she is not somebody who is particularly invested in *russari* (headscarf) wearing. Another incident, while at her studio, confirmed this impression. While carrying some dresses to her car, she forgot to put her scarf on. She came back laughing radiantly at this incident.

Figure 4
Street scene in Tehran.



In fact, her reaction to my photo shoot and her insistence on her daughter wearing the *russari* may be explained through the contextual conditions of these incidents. My camera represented a possible exposure to a larger public view, creating a different regime of dress than the context of our private meeting. The social position of Mahla as a *public* fashion designer did not permit her to expose herself publicly other than in conformity with the Islamic rules of dress. At that time, her fashion journal was still under the surveillance of the censorship commission. In addition, she was trying to receive approval from the Commission of Islamic Guidance for a new public fashion show. During the second incident, in the back alley of her studio, the risk of public exposure was less and she was able to enjoy a small act of everyday resistance.

On one occasion Mahla showed me *Lotous*, which calls itself *the first Persian fashion quarterly journal*. Edited by her own fashion house, it mainly presents her own designs. The first issue appeared in January 2003. The second was scheduled to appear in March. Due to *ashoora*,³ which took place in March 2003, the journal appeared three months later, in June (Figure 5). *Lotous* fashion magazine is an important means of advertising in a society where women's clothing advertisements are rare. Though there are billboards all over Tehran advertising various products, clothing is very seldom their focus. Only men's clothing is advertised, while billboards about women's clothing appear only when Mahla has her public fashion shows.⁴ Officially, following *shari'a* moral rules, bodies are not to be shown in their entirety, especially women's bodies. So, commodities are advertised using photos of the objects themselves, and sometimes displaying part of the body like eyes

or hands. They are usually accompanied by bilingual texts (Farsi and English), and sometimes parts of the body, like eyes, or hands. Due to these regulations, *Lotous* has had a difficult birth. In order to be able to publish this locally produced fashion magazine, Mahla needed to develop a strategy. She registered the journal as a journal for professional use, officially dedicated to those involved in the fashion industry. It is the first post-Revolution magazine showing the faces of Iranian fashion models and Mahla was initially concerned that it may not be accepted for this reason. In the past, photographs of female models had their faces erased, sometimes with paint. Likewise, the plastic female mannequins in shop windows lack facial features, or the upper half of their heads altogether. By contrast, the male mannequins have distinctly drawn features, painted eyes and hair, and individual facial expressions (see Balasescu 2006).

During our first extended conversation, Mahla showed me her manner of working. She did not feel the need to draw, but rather cut straight into the fabric.⁵ Like other designers, Mahla employs tailors to stitch the clothing. She works with fifteen employees, most of them students in the art and design faculty at the University of Tehran.

Besides ready-to-wear collections, Lotous house also provides uniforms for air hostesses, universities, schoolteachers, and schoolgirls, and for Hotel Dariush on Kish Island.⁶ In this respect, Lotous house is unique in Tehran, being the only design house that produces for clientele on this scale, and that plays such an important role in constructing a public image. It also benefits from occasional international press coverage. The public show in January 2001 was heavily commented on in the European press, and the second issue of *Lotous* magazine has been covered in the *Financial Times Europe* (March 17 2003). The article took the usual journalistic approach of presenting Iranian fashion as if it were in the “Dark Ages.” Temporal and historical references were used to suggest that Iran was lacking, or lagging behind, modernity.

Other designers in Tehran characterize Mahla’s manner of working as industrial. Some see her more as a businesswoman than a designer. The new economic conditions, partly determined by the global networks in which local designers are embedded, creates a distinction between designers who prefer to keep their craft small in size (often explained as an artistic preference), and those dedicated to business—Mahla’s case belonging to the later category.

Many of Mahla’s designs are adaptations of regional or historical dresses, (the Turkman style⁷ and the Qajar period are her favorite sources of inspiration). The main products are tunics and overcoats, with embroidered borders around the collar and at the end of the sleeves. She also produces evening dresses. In relating to the public at large, Mahla legitimates her work by reference to national history. When I asked her about the name of her brand, Mahla said:

Figure 5
Cover for the second issue of
Lotous.



Lotous. Lotous is the name of the magazine, and Lotus is a flower, and it is Iranian. It is a symbol of the ancient religion, the Zoroastrian. It is the symbol of the three precepts: Good deeds, good talking, and good thinking.

The name of Mahla's brand is one of the multiple instances of tradition, more precisely pre-Islamic history, being invoked as an underlying principle by the contemporary stylist. The first issue of her magazine

starts with an editorial entitled “Dress is the Living Museum of the Country.” Modern dress, in her vision, is something that must be conceived in direct relation with history.

The governmental restrictions are also taken into account in this equation. It is interesting that, in her view, national identity and Islam are separate from one another. In her interpretation, history and national identity belong to the pre-Islamic era, while Islam is identified with the current governmental political orientation.

Many authors observe that members of the Iranian diaspora and the upper classes in Iran use Zoroastrianism as the referent in their claim to both national history and modern secularism. In modern Iran, during the Constitutional Revolution (1906) and in the post-Constitutional period, Zoroastrian intellectuals shaped the secular current of thought in Iran, and created a form of opposition to the clerics (Bayat-Philipp 1981). *Shi'i* officials in turn identified Zoroastrianism with negative influences from the West. The two poles of identity construction are constantly used in different configurations of power, depending on the historic moment. While during the Pahlavi dynasty Zoroastrianism became the major official landmark of national identity, after the Islamic Revolution, officials emphasized Iran's Islamic identity. In this dialectical dynamic, many who left Iran during or after the Islamic Revolution are likely to reorient themselves towards Zoroastrianism in their claims to Iranian national identity. Also, some local forms of resistance are expressed through the recuperation of Zoroastrianism.⁸

Mahla's aesthetic and commercial strategies are now easier to understand. The choice of Lotus (a Zoroastrian symbol) as the brand of the fashion house somehow distances it from the Islamic regulation, while the products in themselves (at least the ones destined for the public) meet the requirements of the government. “Mixing culture with modernity” is both responding to the requirements of the Islamic government and meeting the consumers' desires for fashion, elegance, and “modern dress.” In her discourse, “culture” refers both to Muslim and to Zoroastrian traditions, depending on the context. Mahla calls her eveningwear “modern dress” or “Western dress” interchangeably, thus using the generally accepted symbolic geography that equates the West with modernity (Figure 6).

Parissa: The Privilege of Exoticism

Unlike Mahla, Parissa, who lives in the same area of northern Tehran, cuts almost exclusively “Iranian style” designs. She does not use a label or brand name because, she says, “everybody knows me.”

Parissa's own style of dress has been her source of inspiration. She used to wear, and she still does, clothes inspired by traditional designs from different regions of Iran. This was, she says, a response to the

Figure 6

Page of *Lotous* magazine no. 2, 2003. The modern/traditional juxtaposition is visible in the interplay between the pupils' uniforms and the "Barbie" handbag they carry.



clothing restrictions imposed after the Islamic Revolution, and the dominance of black and dark brown that followed for outer dress in urban areas.

I used to wear a little bit of rustic things. And everybody kept saying, "oh, how beautiful that is!" I mean every village woman

was wearing such things, but wearing them out in big cities ... was very unusual. They were quite Islamic, long skirts, and covers ... but colorful you know, like the village women, full of colors and everything.

The “fashion effect” of her clothing was based on its dislocation between the geographic and symbolic borders of the rural and the urban. In Tehran the terms “village” (*dabat*) and “villager” (*dahatie*) are used to designate an inferior social position, along with the term *amalleh* (worker). There is a significant difference between the two terms. *Amalleh* designates a low-class person, living and dwelling in an urban area; *dahatie* are people who belong to rural settings. While in villages their presence is considered “natural,” and therefore justified, in the urban setting the villagers constitute an illegitimate presence. The privilege of the upper class resides in disregarding these symbolic hierarchies and the capacity to appropriate rural objects, commodities, and dress.⁹ While the “villager” is discursively stuck in his or her social and geographic position, and at best laughed at in urban settings, those in a privileged position can appropriate rural clothing as a privilege of power. In Tehran, this appropriation and the parallel diffusion of modern taste amongst the lower classes results in the progressive outmoding of things previously considered modern (that is, Western-inspired commodities) amongst the elite.

Uses of language related to fashion products mark this distinction in a similar way. While women from the middle classes and many young fashionable women prefer to use the French-inspired term *manto*, the intellectuals and the upper classes employ the Farsi word *roopoosh* for the same item of clothing. The recuperation of tradition among upper classes in Tehran may be interpreted at first glance as a nationalist reflex, combined with a revindication of pre-Islamic origins. While Mahla explicitly describes this tendency in her *Lotous* editorials, the role of Western aesthetic models and taste should not be underestimated. All of these designers are close to European expatriates in Iran, mostly working at the embassies. For European expatriates or tourists, Joomeh Bazaar, the Friday Flea Market, where one can find, among other handicrafts, Turkman textiles, is one of the main centers of attraction. Their taste is also appropriated by local Iranian friends. I do not mean to imply that designers make traditionally inspired dress solely because their foreign friends like them. But it should not be overlooked that many of their clients began to like and appreciate those clothes once foreigners (Europeans) showed interest in them.¹⁰ Joomeh Bazaar is one of the few public spaces in Tehran (alongside hotels and fashionable restaurants) where one can hear foreign languages spoken, and frequently see foreigners. In other words, Joomeh Bazaar provides a cosmopolitan flavor in an all too homogenous Tehran, offering alternative aesthetic visions and tastes.

There is a similarity in the power relation and social hierarchy established between urban centers and rural areas and between center and periphery on a global level. Exotic or rural-inspired clothing (e.g. the 2002 “savage tendency” in fashion) styled in Paris and signed by famous fashion houses identify their wearers as *avant-garde*, rather than marking them in ethnic terms. Without the brand name, the same kind of clothing, which may have been the source of inspiration for a stylist, identifies the wearer in ethnic terms if worn in an ethnically marked neighborhood of Paris. It may also place him or her in a socially disadvantageous position, de-legitimizing his or her presence in the public space (see Niessen *et al.* 2003).

Parissa sees her “ethnic dress” as something different from fashion. Asked what fashion is to her, she replied:

What I am not doing. I am not up to date with fashion, I mean I make some clothes and things like this, which are never up to date, and never out of date, you know ... Fashion for me is something that is changing all the time ... something that in two–three years you cannot wear anymore.

Temporal references are at the core of the distinction between fashion and apparently unchanging dress. In fact, Parissa’s clothes do gradually change in style, form, and color, but not with the speed of the fashion seasons in Paris. While browsing her portfolio, I could see how she has reworked styles over two decades.

The style of Parissa’s creations closely follows the forms and cuts of the nineteenth-century Qajar period, merged with a series of modifications in order to make them more “wearable” or practical. That means, in her own terms, reducing the quantity of the fabric used in each dress and closing up holes that some dresses used to have under the armpits, in other words, adapting the clothes to a *mobile body* that needs to move continuously, a *modern body* circulating in an urban environment.

They were wearing trousers made from so much fabric, and the skirt was what, fifteen meters. It’s not so practical to drive and to walk around in, not with the life we lead now ... So I used less material, fifteen meters is reduced to three meters ...

The strength of Parissa’s style resides in her ability to combine colors and motifs that suggest the “Iranian tradition,” while at the same time appealing to a certain type of clientele. Her formulation of what constitutes “Iranian tradition” is particularly interesting. Parissa takes biannual trips to India, Delhi or Karachi, where she buys saris *en gross* from local producers. The retail price is very low. Parissa takes the laces and borders of the saris back to Tehran. In Tehran she buys fabric of foreign provenance, European or Asian, from vendors on

Zartoosht Street. She chooses them for their quality and colors, not for their place of production. Once at home, she combines colors, fabric types, and borders, and decides on the model of dress she wants to make (for example a tunic, a two-piece Turkman-style cut or an evening dress). Once a week, her tailor comes to her house, discusses the models with her, and together they cut the material according to Parissa's measurements.

He [the tailor] is living downtown. Usually he understands what I want, after twenty years of working together. If he does not, I will draw it for him. But actually I mostly tell him; I put the material on myself and tell him exactly what I want. With drawing alone, he does not get it.

In this process of creation, there are no designs, no standard patterns, no tracing paper involved. The combination of Indian borders, European or Asian fabrics, and innovative cuts and color mixing, gives birth to the Iranian style clothing for which Parissa is so well known among fashion consumers and for which she is recognized in Tehran and in the diaspora.

Dress can be an important way of coping with nostalgic feelings. Many of Parissa's clients are part of the Iranian diaspora from Southern California. August is a popular month for visiting the home city, and an occasion for renewing one's wardrobe: "Well, they usually come in the summer to see their families, and when they go back they buy 2–3 dresses ..." What attracts them to her work is the symbolic link her designs create with their homeland.

They like my colors because they are a little unusual, but at the same time the styles are Iranian, so when they are living outside and they feel a little nostalgic, they wear these clothes.

In the case of Parissa's creations, dress is a prompter for times past, and spaces lost. Mahla's claim that "dress is a living museum" comes to live in the actions of Parissa's clients who preserve the color and forms of Iranian dress even if the material comes from various other geographic locations. What makes her dress "Iranian" is the intersection between the style, the place of production, and the use and meanings that the clients attach to the clothes. Used as a mnemonic device, invested with the power to evoke particular spaces, Parissa's clothing appears to traverse the ephemera of fashion.

Although emotionally invested in by the clients, this style sets Parissa at a commercial disadvantage, since the clothes she makes do not meet the commercial logic of fashion. On the contrary, she says:

[Fashion] it is something that in two–three years you cannot wear anymore. You have to throw it out, or leave it for another twenty years [and] maybe it comes back again. But my clothes are always there. And this is the problem. Because they never get out of fashion, people don't keep on buying them. If they have four or five dresses, they can wear them all their life. It hurts my pocket.

While in Paris or other Western locations, “ethnic” styles are incorporated into the fashion system, following the rhythm of going in and out of fashion, the clients' use of Parissa's creations, even in Western locations, do not participate in this logic. The 2003 Summer collections in Paris suggested Oriental embroideries, including those of Iranian provenance. But Parissa's clothes escape the ephemera of the fashion system through their use as a depository of memory among the Iranian diaspora.

Nevertheless, Parissa's elevated prices compensate for this commercial disadvantage. As a consequence of her prices and styles, Parissa has a well-defined category of clients: high-class established ladies from Tehran or the diaspora, young theater and film actors, and various artists from Tehran.

Nostalgia and atemporal aesthetics merge in the taste of Parissa's clients from across the borders. However, the local clients' preference for the “ethnic style” has different resonance and meaning. Here, it is associated more with the avant-garde, people who have the courage to bring elements of older styles into the new. Playing with time, as well as playing with geographical locations (as Parissa does with her “rustic style”) is the privilege of the few, and adds prestige to the object, be it dress or some other commodity that attains some sort of timeless added value. Nevertheless, in her discourse, Parissa makes a clear distinction between the fashionable and the eternally elegant.

The dynamics of taste in Tehran follow patterns that are familiar elsewhere. As anywhere in the world, easily and light-heartedly bringing the past into the present also affirms one's separation from it, one's ability to play easily with those categories without feeling linked to them more than through a privileged relation. In this sense Tehran is not a place with a particularly “deviant” dynamic, but is an interconnected city, attuned to the dynamics of global fashion, but retaining its local particularities.

Acknowledgment

This article is based on research funded by The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

Notes

1. In total, I interviewed seven designers and I built significant ethnographic relations with five.
2. These are outer garments (plural), with the name derived from the French “*manteau*.” They vary in designs and colors. Wearing covered dress, that is *chador* or *manto*, is compulsory on the streets of Tehran.
3. National holiday with public mourning of the death of Imam Hossein, one of the most important religious figures in *shi'i* Islam.
4. This particularity is due to the manners of body representation in public in Tehran, for a detailed discussion see Balasescu (2006).
5. After being accustomed to the standards I have met in Paris couture, this procedure seemed peculiar to me (only few designers use it in Paris).
6. Kish is a free-trade Island in the Persian Gulf, annexed to Iran by Mohammad Reza Shah. The free-trade status (*Azadeh*), allows the development of commerce and exchange with Dubai, and makes the Island a main tourist target for Iranians. Dariush Hotel is a project finished in 2003. Constructed by a multimillionaire Iranian from Germany, it reproduces to scale the city of Persepolis in a Las-Vegas-like manner.
7. Turkman dress is identified as a tribal costume from the Turkmenistan region, that “until the 1970s...formed the most elaborate tribal costume still used in Persia” (Yarshater 1992).
8. The Zoroastrian minority remains nonetheless at the margin of the contemporary Iranian society (Keddie 1995).
9. For example, during my first visit to the house of Bahar, a successful interior designer from Tehran, I saw a variety of objects and furniture mainly from India and Thailand arranged in a minimalist decor, combined with high-tech music equipment. Near a coffee table, there was a rectangular wooden piece of furniture on the floor, with a low border on one side, and a kind of pillow on it. Bahar said: “Ah, you like that? It is a Filipino woman’s bed. I don’t use it myself (laughs), but I like it.”
10. Emma Tarlo (1996) observes a similar dynamic in contemporary India.

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