

THE ZAY INITIATIVE PRESERVING THE RICHNESS OF THE ARABIAN HERITAGE

A CONVERSATION WITH DR. REEM TARIQ EL MUTWALLI

By Victor Gee

A published author with over 40 years of experience in art and cultural heritage, Dr. Reem Tariq El Mutwalli has invested in a collection of historic dresses over the course of the past decades. The core of the collection is based on UAE traditional dress, in addition to key examples from Yemen, Morocco, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and others.

Dr El Mutwalli has established The Zay Initiative which aims to promote an understanding of the evolution of regional culture and empower women regionally and globally by bringing their untold stories to life.

Why did you first decide to launch The Zay Initiative and where did the idea come from?

The Zay Initiative, established in 2018, is a UK registered non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and sustaining Arab culture. Its mission is to safeguard tangible and intangible heritage by collecting, documenting, conserving, and exhibiting traditional Arab costumes and bodily adornments. Textiles, clothing, and jewelry hold a vast array of valuable resources that are currently at risk of being lost or misclassified due to insufficient documentation. These artifacts carry the stories of people from various walks of Arab life, especially women, leaving behind traces of their history. The Zay Initiative houses over 2000 of these precious pieces, playing a crucial role in fortifying, encapsulating, and preserving a significant part of Arab history.

One of the organization's proudest achievements is the creation of the largest online bilingual (Arabic & English) digital archive. This resource contains over 626 articles, providing a wealth of intricate details about Arab culture. Additionally, our dual dictionary terms have expanded remarkably to over 696 terms, further enriching the comprehensive resource. The Zay Initiative is not only focused on preserving the existing collection but also works diligently to contextualize the remaining articles through the efforts of a small but dedicated team of researchers and contributors. Furthermore, the collection is enhanced by featuring a series of blogs written by guest contributors and lending parts of the collection to exhibitions in museums and institutions within the Arab region and globally.

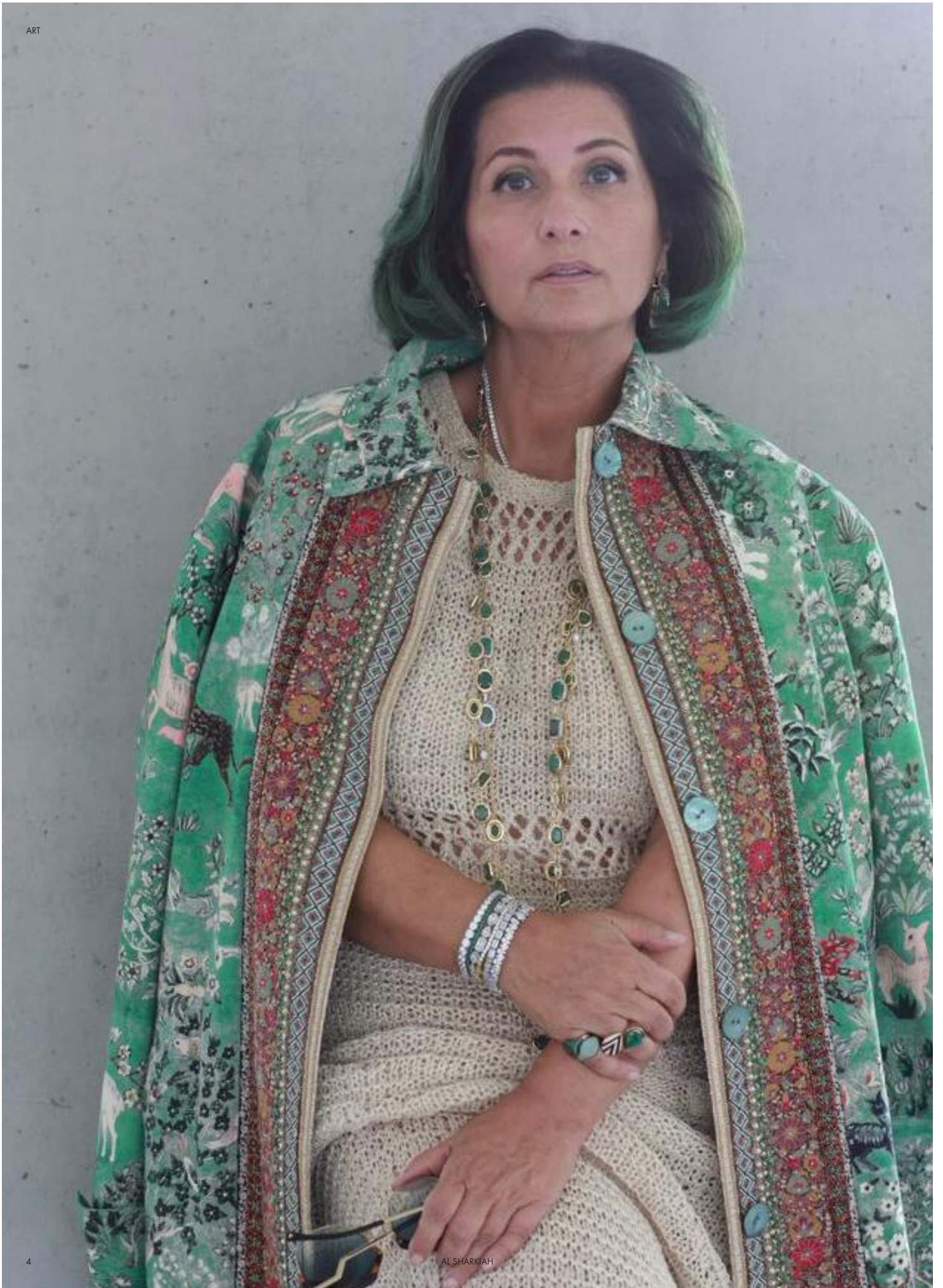
To shed light on the origins of the Zay Initiative, it all began with my passion for preserving the UAE Dress Collection (Sultani) during the course of my doctoral research. As I worked on my thesis, I was fortunate to receive many of the dresses that were later featured in my published work titled, "Sultani, traditions renewed; Changes in Women's Traditional Dress in the UAE during the reign of Shaykh Zâyid bin Sultân I Nahyân 1966-2004," which was released, as the first edition of the book, in 2011. The book remains a comprehensive reference on the evolution of dress in the UAE, standing as the first to showcase the only published collection of UAE traditional dress. Back then, the Sultani Collection comprised 180 traditional UAE dresses. However, it has evolved to over 800 pieces today, seamlessly merging into the larger 2000-strong (and growing) Zay Initiative collection. This assemblage encompasses artifacts from various regions across the Arab world, making it a significant repository of Arab cultural heritage. As the book and collection gained recognition and garnered followers, I took the initiative to establish the Instagram account @sultanibookuae. This step was driven by the realization of how new technologies and social media play a role in promoting and preserving national heritage and culture. Through this platform, I created a daily interactive space where people from all walks of life could engage in live dialogues about this culturally and historically significant collection.

The positive response and increasing engagement encouraged me to broaden my outreach by creating @thezayinitiative. This enabled me to gather more facts, document cultural nuances, and delve deeper into the rich history of the Arab world. This journey ultimately culminated in the development of a blog and the gradual buildup of a digital archive, which took shape as, 'The Zay Initiative.'

And how were you able to collect all the archive costumes and pieces?

What began as an organic personal collection is fast growing into a formidable museum collection. This growth has been made possible by generous individual donations from people worldwide who have encountered our work through exhibitions, social media, and published articles, becoming inspired by the Zay Initiative's ethos. Among our donors are Arab immigrants





who are eager to preserve the heritage of their mother countries. Additionally, there are Arabs residing in the Arab world, who wish to honor the memory of their parents or grandparents by contributing their stories along with cherished garments. Many expatriates, who once lived in the Arab world, have also chosen to send us clothing items, cherishing the significant time they spent working and living in the region.

While some articles are acquired through auctions and dealers to complete specific outfits or fill gaps in the collection, we highly value donated items due to the priceless names and personal narratives that accompany them. Therefore, we warmly invite your readers to connect with us and send us tokens of their loved ones to further enrich the Zay Initiative's growing collection.

What were some of the challenges of this process?

Where should I begin? There are so many tasks to undertake! The process is extensive and often solitary. Much of the work happens discreetly, behind the scenes, and at the back end, as they say nowadays. Cataloging, researching, writing, verifying, and publishing demand significant effort and long hours, all lovingly provided by volunteers and dedicated individuals that make up the Zay Initiative team.

Securing funding is a daunting challenge, as the Zay Initiative relies on individual contributions and personal support. Thus, I extend an invitation to your readers to join our community and support the platform by becoming a "friend" of the Zay Initiative. Yet, the most formidable hurdle lies in fostering a culture that comprehends the essence of philanthropic giving, where people recognize the value of donating to a cultural platform focused on general benefit without expecting an immediate return.

The Zay Initiative includes a collection from the UAE and different parts of the Arab world, what are some particularities you have discovered in some regions?

Perhaps I can entice your readers to explore the Zay Initiative's blogs, of which there are more than 140 blogs, so far. Each blog delves into various facets of dress in different regions of the Arab world and beyond, examining similarities, influences, and contradictions. We explore a wide range of articles of dress, such as the Tarbash, the Qaftan, the Kashmiri shawl, and the Japanese Kimono, providing in-depth insights into their unique characteristics.

What are some stereotypes that the West might have about Middle Eastern costumes and that are far from reality?

Probably that the Arab world, with 200 million Arabs spread across 22 countries on two continents, shares a common, or just one, dress culture. Many don't realize that being Arab is a cultural trait, not strictly tied to race or religion. Within the Arab world, there is a rich diversity of communities, ethnicities, religions, and cultures, including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Yzidi's, Kurds, Armenians, Amazigh, Barbar, and other minorities. This diversity is evident not only among countries

but also within them. Therefore, Arab clothing reflects individual preferences, cultural beliefs, and personal styles, whether in the Middle East or globally.

Arab dress, particularly women's dress, has faced stereotypes. What is referred to as modest fashion has often been misunderstood as being synonymous with traditional Islamic clothing. However, over the past decade, scholars, journalists, fashion designers, entrepreneurs, and bloggers have highlighted the emergence of modest fashion as a niche market embraced by various faith groups, including Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, as well as secular individuals. Factors like social media, growing affluence among Muslim women consumers, and increased awareness of modest fashion among non-Muslims have contributed to the rise of modern and stylish modest fashion. As a result, modest fashion has become mainstream, appealing to people of all faiths and cultures.

Meanwhile, the hijab, worn by Muslim women, has been unfairly stigmatized and used as a symbol of fear. Women wearing hijab risk being stereotyped, socially excluded, judged, and, at times, even abused due to misconceptions. However, it's crucial to recognize that the hijab is often a matter of personal choice, reflecting modesty, privacy, or respect for culture, religion, and tradition. Veils come in various forms, serving practical purposes such as protection from the elements and even empowering autonomy. To promote a clearer understanding and appreciation of Arab and Islamic cultures, The Zay Initiative's website offers insights into these cultures, and interested individuals can register for the monthly newsletter to keep up with updates to the blog, the collection, as well as related events and programs.

How do you think the Zay Initiative will support Arab fashion students and enthusiasts?

The Zay Initiative offers valuable resources to support students in reaching their academic goals. These resources include a free Digital Archive and Digital Dictionary accessible worldwide. Additionally, registered individuals can access a digital library of webinars, videos, and podcasts. Bimonthly blogs concentrate on various aspects of Arab culture. Furthermore, for those who wish to study up close and in person, there is an available physical collection, accessible upon request.

What are the criteria for joining your scholarship program?

The Zay Initiative collaborates with academic institutions individually, tailoring our engagement on a one-to-one basis. Each university operates its unique scholarship programs, with specific criteria for selection.

And speaking of contemporary fashion, what are your thoughts about the emerging fashion scene in the region?

The emerging fashion landscape in the Arab region is a thrilling development in the global fashion industry. It is experiencing rapid growth and increasing influence, attributed to factors such as the region's rising affluence, the power of social media, and





the diverse array of styles and influences in Arab fashion. A crucial aspect contributing to this growth is the empowerment of Arab women, granting them significant purchasing power and enabling them to leave their mark on the global fashion stage. Prominent Arab fashion brands like Elie Saab, Zuhair Murad, and Reem Acra are widely recognized for their unique and innovative designs, which seamlessly blend traditional Arab influences with contemporary trends.

The future of Arab fashion looks exceptionally promising. As the region continues to prosper and evolve, its fashion industry is bound to follow suit. With its distinctive fusion of traditional and modern elements, Arab fashion will undoubtedly remain an inspiring force for fashion enthusiasts worldwide. In this regard, the Zay Initiative plays a pivotal role by providing a platform for designers and consumers alike. By imparting knowledge and promoting creative solutions, it facilitates informed decisions that contribute to a sustainable fashion future firmly rooted in tradition.

You mentioned women empowerment, how do you think our region has empowered women throughout history?

The Arab region has a rich history of empowering women, who have played pivotal roles in their societies as mothers, educators, community leaders, and entrepreneurs. During the early days of Islam, women were actively encouraged to pursue education, as stated in the Quran: "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim, male and female." While, Arab women have traditionally worked outside the home, mainly in agriculture, trade, and manufacturing. However, in recent years, more and more Arab women have entered the workforce in professional occupations, such as medicine, law, and engineering.

In a positive trend, more Arab women are now being elected to office, significantly influencing the political landscape of the Arab world. Nevertheless, despite these advancements, women in the Arab region still encounter numerous challenges. These include persisting gender inequality, violence against women, and restrictive laws that hinder their progress.

And what are your thoughts about the current situation of women in the Arab world?

The prevailing situation of women in the Arab world is multifaceted and intricate, arising from a blend of historical, cultural, societal and economic factors, contributing to a nuanced and multifarious landscape that shapes the roles, rights and opportunities available to women across the region. Despite notable progress in recent years, several challenges persist, requiring comprehensive efforts to foster skilled individuals capable of facing the future. Nevertheless, there is optimism that the region will continue advancing in empowering women. Despite the hurdles, significant strides have been made in women's rights, with more women pursuing higher education and entering the workforce. Legal reforms have also contributed to these improvements. While we are on the right path, there is still much work ahead. With persistent dedication, we can unlock the full potential of women in the Arab world.

Supporting organizations like The Zay Initiative is a crucial step in the right direction. It ensures accurate information is readily available to those seeking knowledge, both within and outside the Arab world, helping to dispel misconceptions and challenge stereotypes. ▽