



Master of the Evening

Elie Saab in his workshop in Beirut

The king of red-carpet glamour remembers his roots

When the lights go up on an Elie Saab runway show, the most glamorous women in the world put down their Blackberries to watch the parade of their sartorial fantasies come to life. Well – not their’s, exactly: the vision belongs to Elie Saab, but the designer has proven year after year that he knows how to produce exactly what women want.

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Saab’s interest in clothing design was ir-repressible from a young age. “Since I was a child, I’ve enjoyed designing clothes and making dresses out of my mother’s tablecloths and newspapers that I found around the house.” The budding talent was honed much to the delight of those around him, and his talent was encouraged by their responses. “I was always surrounded by beautiful women, from sisters to cousins to neighbours, so the desire to dress them and make them look stylish was my constant inspiration. I then went to Paris to pursue my studies in fashion.”

After less than a year in Paris, he returned to Beirut to make fashion design his full-time career. Drawn by the opportunity to work directly with the clothes and clients, he opened his first eponymous atelier. He considers himself to be self-trained; “I did not seek help from anybody at that time. My early influences were the people that I was surrounded by and the society I was brought up in.”

Unlike many young designers, who begin their careers with a large, established house, or else begin producing clothes that are more accessible to the average consumer, Saab has always worked in this highest of high-end businesses. “Couture was my unique choice at that time. When I started, there were no fashion designers in my country; there were tailors but not designers, so I initiated custom tailoring and started making dresses as per the client’s measurements, preferences and occasions and it developed into a career.”

This lineage of customisation and tailoring has provided him with a

constant stream of stimulating work, and allows him to keep his creative edge sharp. “I still love couture, it has no boundaries on the creative side and it gives me pleasure to interact with the clients and helps me understand women and what appeals to them. I love luxury and fanciful styles; I like to see a woman elegant at all times.” To aid in this effort, he began offering a ready-to-wear line in 1996, maintaining his vision of a more polished and refined way of dressing. “It still consists of cocktail dresses, elegant tops and trousers; my way of perceiving women,” he says, and to complete the look, “I also have accessories, shoes and bags that are sold at my stores.”

Couture has always been an international business, but Saab’s presence in the Middle East means that he is an established force in one of the fastest-growing regions in the world, but he has moved significantly beyond his roots. “Our global clientele for couture is ever changing. It has grown beyond the Middle East and the US to Asia and Russia. The clients coming from the Middle East as well as the United States have existed for a long time and are probably the most faithful ones. Over the past years we have witnessed the increase of clients coming from the emergent countries: Turkey, Greece, Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine etc.,” and this rush of new fashion blood is an exciting contribution to the world of couture clients. Saab welcomes his new buyers, saying, “My ideal woman is the one who has beauty within.”

It is no surprise that Saab inspires this kind of loyalty; there is an authenticity and originality to his clothing that evinces how deeply he feels the inspiration behind his work. “We are the fruit of our cultural and past heritage. The Arab culture is my background and I am definitely inspired by the richness it offers, the elegant women surrounding me, our love of luxury and generosity and the sunny weather almost all year round. In general, this is reflected through my choice in fabrics, rich materials and warm colours like, sand and natural tones.”

In regards to his most recent couture collection, for fall 2009, he says, “My latest inspirations have been architecture and how a body in-

teracts with volume and line within the strict parameters of one ultimate colour.” On the runway, this translated a deeply textured and surprisingly engaging collection of all-white gowns, which managed to avoid looking like any typical wedding-dress confections – the highly designed Art Nouveau styling, as well as a plethora of detailing techniques: pleating, draping, sequins, embroidery, quilting and more, made these gowns red-carpet ready, especially with some shorter dresses in the mix.

With a clientele that is constantly seeking new and exciting options, he’s learned to provide them with the originality they want, draped in the technical excellence and good taste they need. “The vision for my line as a whole is prosperity, continuous success and to bring happiness and fantasy to my clients...in past seasons, Haiku poetry has been another inspiration with its balance of contrasts in soft colours and sharp, strong silhouettes.” The intellectual in him provides depth to his collections, and tapping into these larger concepts is arguably part of what makes his work translate so well around the

world. “There is no difference in designing for my various clients, especially between the Middle Easterners and Westerners. My client is the same everywhere. She is a woman who wants to be glamorous, elegant and distinguished.”

With the demands of multiple collections a season, plus the challenge of combining one’s various influences into high-quality designs and



concepts, many designers are tempted to retreat from the quotidian concerns of building their brands. But in this competitive market, Saab’s business instincts have given him not only the ability to help grow his company, but to enjoy doing it. “I have always been keen on and involved in both aspects of my business; creativity and strategy with all its different categories,” he says, dating back to the early days of founding his



serve and absorb the architecture and spirit of new cities. “I currently live between Beirut, Paris and Geneva, where my wife and three children live. My favourite way to travel is going somewhere, anywhere on a boat. I usually love to do the South of Italy and every summer I go and enjoy their foods. I also like exotic islands such as the Maldives and other Indonesian islands; these are my favorite destinations. I am Mediterranean and therefore I have to always be near the sea. It gives me a great peace of mind and a wonderful sense of relaxation. I also love the buzz and energy of New York, it is very contagious.”

As he has returned from the summer holidays and is back into the swing of business, preparing for the next round of fashion weeks and shows, Saab is looking straight ahead, focused on the things that have brought him success in the past and how he can reinterpret them for the future. Growth is the key word for his goals, both geographic and creative, and the love and passion he has for his work and his clients stand him in good stead all over the world. ■

label. “Both aspects show a different type of challenge which I enjoy combining and working on.” Like many motivated businessmen, he has a routine that works for him: “Before anything, I like to take it easy in the morning so that I can set a great mood for the day. I start with my coffee and exercise, then head to my office where I go and do the usual: meet with my couture clients and work on new collections. Everything there is exciting. I have been doing this work for decades and I still enjoy every minute of it – the interaction with my clients, the creation of a new collection.” Being on the front lines of his business has kept him grounded in what his customers need and expect, and he delivers clothes that keep them coming back for more. “I create wearable clothes; clothes that highlight the woman’s body at best. I tend to work on each woman’s body and not on the dress,” a concept that was once standard in fashion design, but has been lost in the rushing tide of ready-to-wear options. “I believe it is the woman who wears the dress and not the dress that wears her and this is very important in my creativity process. We all change and evolve as per the trend and styles of the time. When my style evolves, my clients do and vice versa.” In order to keep his style evolving, he is constantly seeking out inspiration – but for a creative mind, it’s not hard to find. “Everything is inspiring to a designer; every detail can bring up new ideas; but behind everything lies the woman, an elegant woman with a desire to be distinguished and unique; that is my constant inspiration.”

Above all, he is inspired by architecture and travels frequently to ob-

