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Presentation Notes  
AAM Conference, Seattle, WA.  
May, 20, 2014

## **The Development of Costume Collection in Arabian Gulf Region**

### **Slide 1: Intro:**

James Laver, the pioneering fashion historian and curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum once noted that: "clothes are never a frivolity- they always mean something. They are nothing less than the furniture of the mind made visible."

One can deduce from Laver that garments have long played a key role as cultural markers, providing insight into how societies evolve over time.

Yet the meaning of clothing in the context of the Arabian Gulf region has been somewhat murky as it barrels forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although museums have become the monumental cornerstones of the region's cultural ambitions, it has yet to be determined whether any of these institutions will be dedicated to the study and display of costumes.

The Gulf has only recently begun to explore its own past and heritage through its traditional costumes, thanks in large part to emerging costume collections in the region. I set out explore some of the most significant collections in the Gulf and interview collectors in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, the U.A.E and Oman.

What I found is that some of the finest costume collections in the Gulf do not reside within national or established cultural institutions. Instead the stewards of such collections tend to be private collectors or charitable organizations.

### **Slide 2: The Collectors:**

The story of costume collecting in the Gulf is one that spans three continents and involves a diverse cast of collectors: amongst them members of royal families, American oil executives and a group of visionary women, both local and foreign who took it upon themselves to preserve this particular aspect of the region's past.

I wanted to interview as many of these collectors as possible, as each had a unique story to tell about their experiences in this emerging field, as well as providing insight into the development of costume collections in the Arabian Gulf region.

In the case of the Gulf, early on foreign collectors played pivotal role in preserving this history, especially following the oil boom of the early 1970s which witnessed an accelerated process of de-accessioning artifacts from the its past during a period of rapid modernization.

These are just a few of the collectors I interviewed or covered during my research and they represent a diverse group of women from different nationalities, ages, backgrounds and education. Yet what bound all these individuals together was their passion for collecting costumes as an act of cultural preservation.

Many of these collectors were connected in some instances. An intriguing case study revolves around the largest collection of traditional costumes from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which was originally amassed by Heather Colyer Ross, an Australian collector who came to live in Saudi Arabia in 1969 with her husband. She would later move the collection with her to Switzerland in the early 80s where it remained until it was purchased by Princess Haifa Al Faisal, the wife of the then ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Washington. It would remain in the United States for over two decades before it recently returned to Riyadh, where it resides in the collection of the Al Nahda Philanthropic Society.

So one begins to see that there are a number of twists and turns when researching the movement and development of costume collections in the region.

### **Slide 3: Research & Scholarship:**

Through a number of interviews it became clear that these individuals not only collected historic garments, but devoted considerable time in researching their origins and provenance. I consistently came across collectors who were very articulate in terms of explaining a garment's history and construction.

While some relied on available literature to augment their knowledge, others conducted field work, gathering oral histories from elders who formed the last repository of this vanishing culture.

One of the biggest challenges for most of these collectors was understanding how these pieces were worn, as they typically came with multiple components and layers.

One way they were able to do this was by studying historic photographs. The only challenge with this is that women in the Gulf were typically not photographed until the 1950s, so collectors had to find inventive ways to source images for their research.

One example is Dr. Reem El Mutwalli in the Abu Dhabi who relied heavily on images taken by the late Gertrude Dyke, a Canadian nurse who had worked in the UAE from 1962-2000.

Another example is the Jeddah and London based Mansoojat Foundation. Part of its research efforts include reaching out to individuals through its website, by asking them to donate vintage photographs of their relatives wearing traditional dress.

#### **Slide 4: Storage & Conservation:**

I was also interested in learning how these collectors were addressing issues of storing and caring for these artifacts, especially since within museums, textiles tend to be the most challenging materials to conserve.

In the 60s and 70s, some early collectors such as Heather Colyer Ross happened to be skilled dressmakers as well, and they would learn through trial and error when it came to cleaning, conserving and repairing garments.

Throughout my interviews and travels I've found different levels and methods of storage and conservation being used for these collections. They ranged from climate controlled rooms and archival boxes, to the other end of the spectrum where they were neatly folded and placed in cabinets in a designated room within a house.

I also found that although most collectors did not come with a background in conservation, they were eager to learn about correct storage and conservation practices. While I visited Riyadh, for example I worked with the Al Nahda Philanthropic Society to assist them in assessing their conservation and storage needs.

#### **Slide 5: Cultivating an Audience:**

I was also interested in understanding how these collectors are using these garments in order to cultivate an appreciation amongst larger audiences, and I found that they were doing this in a number of ways.

1. Some collectors such as Heather Colyer Ross, published books on their collections, while others opened their own small museums, such as Jehan and Tarik Rajab in Kuwait. The Mansoojat Foundation choose to create an online database of its collection to make it accessible to as many people as possible.

But I also found collections being used in unexpected ways.

2. For example as a form of cultural diplomacy, which was the case with Princess Haifa Al Faisal, who organized the exhibition *Palms and Pomegranates : The traditional dress of Saudi Arabia*, which toured the United States from 1987-89.

In Riyadh the Al Nahda Philanthropic society used its historic costume collection as a learning tool to teach traditional embroidery techniques to underprivileged and handicap women, who receive income from selling the products they create.

Another example is the collector Sheikha Souad Al Sabah in Kuwait, who is also a well-known designer who creates modern versions of traditional caftans. In her case, she uses her collection of historic dress as part of her creative process.

### **Slide 6: Emerging Trends:**

Since we are discussing the future of collecting in the region I also wanted to explore emerging trends in costume collecting in the Arabian Gulf that could have an impact 20-30 years from now.

And what I found is that there is a young generation of costume collectors emerging who are tentatively beginning to amass collections of vintage western fashions.

There were three prominent factors that contributed to this emerging trend:

1. The Internet's role in transforming fashion from a rarified world into a cultural phenomenon accessible to individuals around the world. This has played a big role in changing perception about the meaning vintage clothing within the Arabian Gulf region, where it was traditionally viewed

as old clothes that were disposable and had little meaning attached to them.

2. A number of collectors had also noted visiting costume exhibitions at western institutions such as the Met and Victoria and Albert. These experiences made them reconsider clothing and look at fashion as cultural or artistic phenomenon worthy of being studied.

3. The third and most interesting factor I found is that most of the collectors I spoke too (who were in their 30s and 20s), consistently mentioned going through family albums where they saw images of elegantly dressed relatives taken in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. This was during a period when the Gulf was experienced rapid economic and social change thanks to the discovery of oil.

Oil wealth also brought about increased opportunities for women as well, and you began to see the emergence of schools for girls and a number of young women who were sent abroad to study in places such as Beirut and Cairo, which were considered regional and cultural centers at the time. Through increased opportunities for education and travel women in places such as Bahrain and Kuwait, began to adopt western dress as early as the 1950s.

For a lot of these younger collectors, there is a curiosity about the region's more recent past and early engagement with modernity, and for some that interest translated into the clothes worn during that period. Some began by going through their mother's and grandmother's closets, gradually acquiring pieces through vintage stores and auctions as far a field as L.A., Paris and London.

It should be noted that in most cases these collectors were buying pieces to wear as apposed to storing or exhibiting. This is particularly interesting in the case of the Gulf where women have been purchasing haute couture since the early 60s. I met several women during my research who continue to acquire couture pieces each year to not only wear but also augmenting their collections.

From a curatorial perspective it is important to consider these collections because they may some day form the raw material for exhibitions that offer an alternative narrative on life in the Gulf at particular moment in time when it was experiencing a period of rapid social and economic change.

**Slide 7: Finding a place in Museums:**

The big question now is what role these costume collections can play within the region's museums as well as traveling exhibitions that shed light on one aspect of culture in the Arabian Gulf.

Most of the collectors I spoke too all agree that although there is still a lot of work to be done to educate people about the importance of this cultural legacy, they are nevertheless noticing an increased appreciation for costumes in the region. They attribute this shift in large part to the popularity of costume exhibitions at institutions such as the MET and the V&A in London.

In the last 30 years costume-focused exhibitions at noted western institutions have helped legitimize fashion in the eyes of the public, demonstrating that a museum environment can infuse garments with a sense of cultural gravitas.

In the case of the Gulf region, this will also mean taking a more nuanced approach in the way garments are interpreted and exhibited, in order to move beyond traditional ethnographic exhibitions and use costume as a link to other disciplines, such as contemporary creation in the region or as an occasion to explore the Gulf's early exposure to modernity and globalization.

**Slide 8: Marwah Al Mugait Film Clip:**

As a curator, what I find particularly interesting is how a new generation of artists in the Gulf are approaching historic costumes as a link between their past and present.

I want to leave you with a short film clip by a young Saudi artist and photographer named Marwah Al Mugait, in which she documents her process of interpreting the regions' traditional dress through her photography. In the upper half of the last slide you can see two images from the series, which she named *Avant Garde Arabia* and exhibited last year in Paris.