



Images from the fall issue of Vogue Hommes International: Six cities, six points of view, six stories

Fashion loves the Middle East: Vogue Hommes International devotes fall issue to region

'People have appreciated that it's not a folkloric exercise and is really contemporary expressions of the culture'

Olivia Snajje
Special to The Daily Star

Autumn means fashion to a small community of Parisians. But even the unfashionable noticed the posters advertising Vogue Hommes International's fall/winter issue. The cover features a headshot of Olympic champion flyweight boxer Brahim Asloum. Were those diamonds in his teeth? And what was the significance of the title, Ch'adore?

The Paris-based fashion magazine, often referred to as the style bible for men, directed by its American editor Richard Buckley, has taken a

bold step into culture and politics by publishing an entire issue devoted to the Middle East.

Brahim Asloum is actually wearing a customized Swarovski-crystal gum-shield and Ch'adore is a play on words referring to lifting a veil but also Christian Dior's J'adore slogan.

"How can you not think about the Middle East?" says Buckley during a recent interview in Paris. "Even before Sept. 11, 2001 the Middle East has been on television, in newspapers, and magazines, always presented in a political way."

But the more information we're given, the less we actually know about the people who live in the region - what's im-

portant to them, how they see themselves and the world."

A year ago Buckley presented his idea to the president of the magazine's parent company Conde Nast France. "He immediately started talking about Lawrence Durrell's The Alexandria Quartet. So he's thinking romantic and exotic, and I'm thinking 'that's not very modern.'"

Buckley pushed his idea along though and the outcome is a brilliant, fresh issue that doesn't fall into any of the usual traps. "People have appreciated that it's not a folkloric exercise and is really contemporary expressions of the culture," he says.

The magazine starts off with a profile that Buckley is partic-

ularly proud of. He and Mohammed Salmawy, editor of the Egyptian daily Al-Ahram Hebdo, managed to convince the 93-year-old Nobel Prize winning writer, Naguib Mahfouz, to pose for a portrait, accompanied by an interview.

The magazine includes profiles of Iranians Shirin Neshat, the contemporary artist and Sorour Kasmai, a novelist, and then essays on subjects such as the narrow vision of the Arab world in the Western media, plus sections on art, photography, music, cinema, and architecture. The fashion pages are shot in Cairo, Tel Aviv, Beirut, Istanbul, Ramallah, and Kuwait City.

"In the beginning I met re-

sistance from both Arabs and Israelis," Buckley says. "They were suspicious. But they began to hear about the project through the grapevine and by the end of the summer people were coming out of the woodwork wanting to be a part of it."

With the exception of a few, Buckley chose photographers from their own countries for the fashion shoots. Vogue Hommes' fashion editor and fashion director began a marathon four months of production.

For the Ramallah shoot, fashion editor Leila Smara and photographer Nadia Benchallal flew to Tel Aviv and then talked their way through several check points until they reached Ramallah, dragging with them mammoth suitcases on wheels containing men's winter clothes.

Buckley recounts that "the Israeli soldiers would ask them 'what are you doing here' and they'd say 'vacation', and then they'd ask 'where are you going' and they would answer 'Ramallah.'"

When Smara got to Kuwait in early June it was 46 degrees centigrade "and she had to tell some guy 'can you just slip on this sweater and leather coat?'" Buckley says chuckling.

The Cairo shoot was no less strenuous. Customs officials at the airport confiscated the clothing for five days and the crew's taxi ran out of gas on the Cairo highway. But the dreamy, photographs retouched with color are among Buckley's favorites. He had originally asked Egyptian photographer Youssef Nabil to photograph gay men in Cairo.

"I terrorized Youssef," Buckley says. "He almost panicked in front of me. Everyone told me oh no no no, people will be arrested. I don't mind saying I'm gay and don't believe in that kind of harassment or persecution but in the end it would have been a big political thing so I let it drop."

Buckley wanted the Beirut shoot to be approached differently from that of other cities. "It's a happening place with a lot of cultural things going on so I wanted to do people who are pushing the culture forward from inside."

He persuaded renowned photojournalist Fouad Elkoury to do the job, giving him free reign to experiment with a new style of photography for him.

"I was very happy to work on this project because I'm not used to fashion photography," says Elkoury, who recently moved back to Lebanon permanently.

"It was a form of fiction instead of photos taken in real life. There was a lot of production involved and it made me see photography differently. I'm grateful to Richard (Buckley) because he gave me carte blanche. In the Middle East photographers are seen more as technicians than artists."

In contrast to the other cities in the magazine that show photographs of models (often not professional), Elkoury shot well-known Lebanese, ranging from architect Bernard Khoury or Karl Bassil and Nadim Zablit of Mind the Gap design agency, to the trip hop duo, Zeid and Yasmin Hamdan.

"It's obviously not the definitive list of who's who in Beirut," Buckley says. Not everyone on the original list could be featured because of

lack of space and certain people refused to pose for pictures.

Buckley regrets in particular a calligrapher who didn't want to change out of his traditional clothing into fashion wear. He also wanted Chibli Mallat, the lawyer who filed a complaint in Belgium against Ariel Sharon for war crimes, to be included. But Mallat requested to be on the cover of the magazine and Buckley couldn't indulge him.

"If Vogue Hommes were a political magazine we could have done it. I wanted to show someone important but I couldn't make an overt political statement. It was all about opening up, not about closing or accusing."

Bernard Khoury, best known for his B018 dance club, the Centrale restaurant and more recently Yabani restaurant, is also the subject of the architecture section.

"I just love that man's work," says Buckley. Khoury has this to say about his city: "I would describe 'post-war' Beirut as a hyper-contemporary version of the capitalist city in a state of anarchy, a fantastic but terrifying product of Western influences gone out of control."

Working on the Middle East edition was a "big education for me and I didn't even begin to scratch the surface," Buckley adds. "It broke down the stereotypes in my head. Like the one that an Iranian woman in a head scarf is oppressed. They see themselves as extremely strong and confident."

The This is Teheran feature is a joyous study of men and particularly women in the Iranian arts scene photographed in black and white by Magnum Agency's Abbas.

But Buckley also says that people in the Middle East, whether Christians, Muslims or Jews "don't feel as if they have a voice, they have no way of expressing themselves."

In his editorial comment Buckley writes that he has attempted to offer a "unique cultural perspective through the expression of... artists, an ethnically diverse group that includes Arabs, Persians, Israelis and Turks... Whether they live in their countries of origin, adoption or exile, politics - ethnic, religious, nationalism, gender or sexuality - is inescapable. It is practically tattooed on their DNA, and can't help but be reflected in their work. This often creates an internal identity crisis for people who want to change the system without sacrificing existing, and often ancient, cultures."

Buckley evidently put heart and soul into the Middle East edition. Citing time constraints and space, he laments the fact that he had "three more weeks, two more weeks even one more week, I could have done a much stronger issue."

Indeed, two pages in this edition are filled with names of photographers, authors, actors, politicians and fashion designers that Buckley would have liked to include. Even though three more magazines could have been filled with additional stories and images, Buckley's Middle East edition is a milestone in today's Western media. And this coming from a magazine supposedly restricted to fashion.

Vogue Homme is available in bookstores around Lebanon

STAR SCENE



Nizar Khoury, Saadallah Agha and Pierre Achqar



Aiman Jaber, Hala Achqar, Georger Achqar and Tarek Qoleilat



Ali Abdullah and Karim Rassi



Michel Yazbek and Amin Moukarzel



Rania Mayyal



Chawki Farhat, Sabine Awais and George Younes

Gala lunch for tourism syndicates

Melina Konstantinidi
Special to The Daily Star

The Union of Syndicates of Tourism in Lebanon held a gala lunch at the Monroe Hotel on Tuesday bringing together presidents and members of tourism syndicates from around the Arab world.

The various representatives held talks over lunch about the tourism industry in their respective countries and in the overall Arab region.

Photo by Mahmoud Kheir

JUST A THOUGHT

It is the characteristic of the most stringent censorship that they give credibility to the opinions they attack

Voltaire,
French author philosopher (1694-1778)

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