

Lebanese jewellery designers are making wave

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Noor Fares celebrated the first anniversary of her jewellery business by throwing a dinner party at a private members' club in London. The dainty 25-year-old designer was surrounded by a flock of equally lovely looking girlfriends wearing pieces from her collection that glinted warmly in the candlelight. She calls her circle of friends her brand ambassadors. Fares naturally was the centre of attention, dressed in a black Givenchy gown and wearing her gold Windows of Love headband threaded through her hair, big ebony and pavé diamond rings on her fingers and a jet bead glove from her Touche du Bois collection.

Noor Fares launched her collection N.oor in late 2009 and within months her distinctive designs were being sold in Harrods and in Beirut (where she was born) and from this month will be available at Zai in Qatar, Boutique 1 in Dubai and very soon Los Angeles. It is no mean feat to be stocked in Harrods less than six months after launching a business.

Her jewellery is modern, innovative and tactile - silky smooth and organic to the touch. It is also discreetly infused with her cultural heritage, both in being part of the grand - and ongoing - heritage of Lebanese jewellery making and in the traditions of the wider society. "Not just in the shapes and forms, but also in the materials I use, such as ebony," she explains, referring to the superstition of "knocking on wood". One of her hallmarks is a little stone-set Evil Eye inside rings or as tiny tags attached to necklaces. "There is a lot of good luck inspiration in my work in terms of the symbols and materials that I use."

Simple and geometric forms and architecture inspire her, too. She has devised a series of flat gold filigree disc earrings drawn from Byzantine stained glass windows. The discs are sold separately from the hoops on to which they are hooked, so the wearer can interchange the different patterned discs to suit her mood. It allows the wearer to become the designer, creating her own unique look. You might imagine the hook and disc could easily become separated, but Fares insists: "I go out dancing in these earrings until 8 o'clock in the morning and I have never lost one."

Nowadays Fares spends her life between London, Paris and Lebanon, a continuation of her very cosmopolitan upbringing: her father, a former leading politician and businessman, travelled around the world and took his family with him. Noor, the youngest, with three older brothers, was partly home-schooled but mostly educated in Paris before going to study history of art at Tufts University in Boston. Rather than return to Paris, she then moved to London where she studied gemmology and did design courses while feeling herself drawn in by the creative melting pot and the international society she found in the British capital.

"I am more attracted to jewellery than clothes, shoes or bags. I've always loved wearing jewellery and thinking about ways I can improve it." Also, she points out, unlike clothes, "jewellery has a meaning that can be symbolic and sentimental - it has always been used in rituals and ceremonies in different religions and cultures".

Her mother Hala Fares, an artist (although she no longer exhibits), is an avid collector of jewellery and other objects such as china and dolls. As a child, Fares was lured by her mother's classical parures of precious stones, the hippy beads and the baroque jewels she found among her mother's belongings. "I used to find all these beautiful pieces and pile on every accessory I could find," she says, "and wander around the house looking like a Christmas tree."

A few years later she started getting bespoke pieces made for herself in Lebanon. "It is easy in Lebanon to design some pieces and go to a factory to get them made; as long as you know where to go, it is quite accessible." Encouraged by the feedback she got from family and friends, she decided to go into business. Her cousin Rasha Shammas, a photographer, oversees the production along with Noor's mother Hala. "It's quite cool having a working relationship with my mother - it's mentally stimulating and fun," says Fares.