

Emerging Lingerie Trade Wins Customers

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In Syria, professions are usually handed down from one generation to the next. But deep within the Hamidiyeh market in the old town area of Damascus there exists a little shop where tradition has been cast aside in favour of sequins, feathers and secret desires. In the budding lingerie industry, innovation marks a break with the past.

Ahmed comes from a religious working-class family and did not finish his high school education. Now in his late twenties, he makes his living as an assistant in a popular lingerie shop in the Souk al-Hamidiyeh.

"We sell 30 to 40 items a day, especially the flashy styles decorated with things like singing birds or flowers made of feathers," he said. "Most of our customers are Syrians, while others are from Morocco, Algeria and the Gulf states."

As one walks through the narrow winding alleys of the souk, bright and colourful windows of the lingerie stores contrast with the black headscarves of the female shoppers.

In this outwardly conservative country, Ahmed said, it might come as a surprise to find that most of the customers are veiled Muslim women.

"Every day, mothers and daughters come to shop for the daughter's wedding night," explained Ahmed. "Sometimes the girl is shy and lets the mother choose for her. Other times, she's less bashful and chooses what she wants."

It is traditional for girls to buy lingerie before they get married. "It plays such an important role," said Ahmed. "Parents even save up money to buy dozens of items before the wedding night."

Wedding lingerie has become a uniquely Syrian phenomenon and an industry that has grown increasingly prosperous in the last few years, Ahmed said. The tradition developed following the 1973 Yom Kippur war, when investors from Gulf states put a lot of money into the country, and products including underwear began to be manufactured in Syria for the first time.

Not all of the customers are brides-to-be. Ahmed often sells to couples who wish to spice up their sex lives or to women concerned at their husbands' wandering eye. Also, some wealthier Syrians buy the more tacky and flamboyant items as comedy presents for birthday parties.

Styles range from sweet and innocent to gaudy and exotic, featuring singing birds, coloured feathers, plastic cell phones and other toys, and edible chocolate. Ahmed said a typical item sells for 10 US dollar but prices go up the more elaborate the embellishments, including remote-controlled thongs and bras that open like curtains.

Asked whether he was embarrassed to sell some of the more outlandish garments, Ahmed said he wasn't,

adding that he even helped women select their purchases.

Demand has increased so much in the past few years that at least five factories in Syria now produce lingerie products.

In the mountains surrounding Damascus, Khaled runs a small workshop in a spare room with the help of his wife and family.

Khaled said his profession does not embarrass him in front of the neighbours, and local men sometimes drop in to buy things for their wives.

He also ships garments to Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, and at times to the Palestinian territories, where he said “sales increase when there is peace and fall when Gaza is blockaded”.

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