



view

UNDER WRAPS:
HIDING
BENEATH THE
TRADITIONAL
VEIL MIGHT BE
THE LATEST
PRADA—OR AT
LEAST A WELL-
KNOCKED-OFF
CHANEL.

IS THE VEIL OLD HAT?

Underneath their black chadors, Tehrani women are flaunting fashion—from power suits to sexy slips. Hadani Ditmars reports.

Q As the evening call to prayer echoes through the dusk of the northern Tehran neighborhood of Motahari, several well-dressed Iranian couples arrive for dinner at a stately, colonial-style European embassy. The crowd is composed of a mix of well-known filmmakers and artists and several businesswomen. But you would never know that by what they're wearing. The men, in dinner jackets and light overcoats, are easily identifiable, but their wives appear almost anonymous in their chadors—the long robes that have become mandatory postrevolutionary apparel.

Inside the embassy, however, a strange transformation takes place. The women slip quietly into a vestibule and emerge unveiled and surprisingly chic. Several wear French couture: a brand-new Chanel suit, a Dior ready-to-wear suit from last season, and a reasonable fac-

simile of a recent Valentino dress (copied from smuggled issues of *Vogue*, no doubt). One striking woman with aquiline features shows off a skinny black Romeo Gigli dress purchased on her last trip to London. Another strides out in a fitted mauve silk dress that looks like pre-McQueen Givenchy. Most also wear carefully applied makeup and red nail polish. The issue here is one of illusion; these women have simply shifted from one ideal (Islamic) to another (European).

The transformation is unnerving: It's a ritual that traverses cultures, religious traditions, even centuries, in a matter of minutes, and yet the women are completely nonchalant. This switch from public modesty to private expressions of individuality has become an inevitable part of daily life in Iran. In fact, the whole scenario is typical of a highly regimented society where some merely pretend to follow the rules—or, as one Tehrani woman suggested, “the only an-

archistic theocracy in the world.”

The chador, once a potent symbol of the Islamic Revolution, has undergone something of a sea change. In the last two decades, in the eyes of the West, it had come to symbolize everything oppressive and repressive about Muslim societies—the Oriental veil revisited with a defiant, anti-Occidental twist. For revolutionary idealists and fervent mullahs, it represented female Muslim purity and a rejection of “Western,” body-conscious fashion. But in the late 1990s, after years of revolution, war, and disillusionment, many Iranian women have resigned themselves to it as a sort of mandatory second skin.

So what is underneath it all? Increasingly, the answer is something sexy and trendy and, for those who can afford it, something with a designer label. “Iranian women have always been fashion-conscious,” says Charles Philippe, a manager at the Gianfranco *view* ▶ 320

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Ferre shop on Paris's Avenue George V who caters to several regular Persian clients.

"It's the nouveau riche," claims a popular Tehrani couturiere, who insists on anonymity to avoid hassles from the religious police (the *Pasdar*). "They're the ones with the money now, and what they want is slightly over-the-top." She's referring to the wives and daughters of Iran's *bazaari*, the bold new consumer class, many of whom made their money on the black market or in dodgy real estate deals during the Iran/Iraq war. For them, buying French couture has become a status symbol, something to rack up along with their brand-new BMWs and their hacienda-style villas in northern

Tehran. Whereas women from the old-moneyed, pre-1979 families would stick to classic, conservative clothes, the new Iranian couture client is more daring.

"My theory," confides the couturiere, "is that after the Revolution, women's taste in fashion became wilder and sexier. It's reverse psychology. When you're forced to cover up publicly, what you wear in private becomes more revealing. I have clients who come in with clippings from the latest *Vogue* and ask me to copy designs by Versace and

Gaultier. The skimpier the better."

The result is a strange, slightly schizophrenic fashion culture: By day women wear the chador or manteau (a long black overcoat acceptable as a chador substitute), but at night, at private parties, they

transform themselves into veritable fashion victims in mini-skirts, lingerie-inspired dresses, and transparent

shirts. Although Iran's dress code (*hijab*) is by no means the strictest of Islamic countries (Saudi Arabia is the most stringent), Iranian women still face run-ins

with—and even occasional beatings by—the religious police if they don't keep proper *hijab* in public. Their transgressions can be as slight as showing too much hair or too much (lower) leg. And yet many Tehrani women pull off subtle, cheeky forms of rebellion: leopard-skin head scarves, printed trim on manteau sleeves, and patterned black stockings.

For working-class women, such small statements may be their only chance to express a sense of style. In nineties Tehran, many are forced to put survival necessities like food and shelter before clothes. For the dwindling middle class, local couturieres offer reasonable copies of Western designer looks. Some local manufacturers even reproduce trendy products like Calvin Klein underwear or Gucci shoes and ship the counterfeits to a nearby Gulf state like Dubai so they can import them back into Iran and sell them as "foreign" goods.

Wealthier Tehrani women shop at stores stocked with last season's ready-to-wear bought in bulk from London and Paris and sold at inflated prices. And for the very rich "connected" enough to travel out of the country (women have to get signed permission from their husbands to travel), Paris is the shopping destination of choice. The *bazaari* women prefer Chanel and Versace but usually end up buying several

What's underneath? Something sexy and trendy, with a designer label

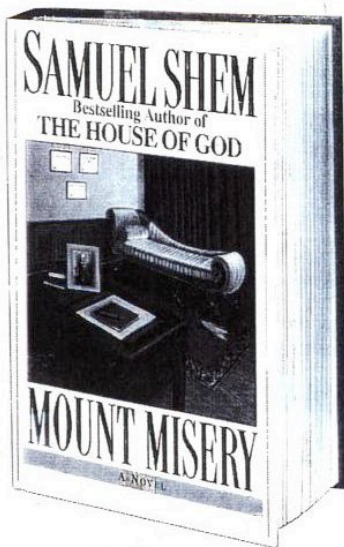
There's one color that always works with a monochromatic wardrobe: red. Backstage at the fall shows, splashes of scarlet revved up neutrals.



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ready-to-wear outfits rather than one genuine couture piece. Even so, couture "smuggling" is still officially frowned upon. The wife of a wealthy Tehrani businessman who shops in Paris confided that it was simply a matter of having one's luggage searched at the Tehran airport. "And if they find a few Chanel suits, so what?" she said casually. "You just offer them a blouse or a skirt or something to keep them quiet."

One explanation for the continuing interest in Western fashion, even after the post-'79 deluge of revolutionary values, is boredom. "Women are more lim-

Iranian women still face run-ins with—and even occasional beatings by—the religious police if they don't keep proper *hijab* (dress code) in public

ited in their daily activities now," explains a Tehrani businesswoman. "So dressing up at night to attend dinners or private parties has become something of an obsession." She recounts a recent social event where two women arrived in the same outfit. It ended badly, with one of them leaving the party in a huff. "Since the introduction of compulsory *hijab*," she admits, "clothes have become very important."

While French and Italian designers have long been the choice of Tehran's chic set (it used to be Saint Laurent and Valentino; now it's Versace and Chanel), a few Iranian designers have successfully lured discerning Iranian women to shop at home. But like their customers, Iranian designers walk a fine line between what is *haram* (forbidden) and *halal* (allowed). After granting an interview to a BBC television crew last year, Maryann Madhavi was harassed and questioned by the authorities. Even photographing models in her clothes is problematic since women are not allowed to pose unless properly covered. One option is to host fashion shows in private homes. This is *halal*, as women are allowed to see one another unveiled.

Although many Westerners claim that women dress more for approval from other women than from men, in the unique socially segregated environment of Iran, this theory is easily proved. Apart from formal fashion shows, there are

many all-female social events where dressing up is practically a competitive sport. On my last trip to Tehran, I was invited to an official dinner for 40 women—some foreign, some Tehrani—hosted by President Hashemi-Rafsanjani's daughter Fatimeh Hashemi. We arrived en masse by minibus wearing *hijab*. The ritualized transformation from public to private attire took place in a matter of minutes. Some of the Iranian women, beautifully coiffed and wearing elegant evening clothes, were barely recognizable out of their dour chadors.

Live music was provided by an all-female band playing traditional Persian instruments, and the atmosphere was freer than usual since there were no men. Although most of us were dressed in Chanel suits, one young woman was wearing black jeans, Dr. Martens, and a lime-green T-shirt.

When it was time to go, we all systematically donned our veils. In the bus on the way back to the hotel, the conversation inevitably turned to clothes. One Iranian woman wearing a Louis Feraud suit under her chador asked me where I'd bought my dress. Another woman lifted the hem of her chador to reveal a beautiful green silk skirt she'd had made at a local tailor.

Spirits were high, and one woman broke into song. Soon the whole bus was clapping and singing along. Another woman from the Gulf area in the south of Iran started to dance, at first moving just her hands and shoulders but finally giving way to the rhythm with her whole body. A few of us joined in until the bus driver, embarrassed and afraid of being caught by the *Pasdar*, screamed to a halt and ordered everyone to stop. But we were too caught up in the moment to notice.

Although dancing is still forbidden in public, many Iranian women hope that the recent election of a moderate cleric as president will bring less stringent social codes and greater fashion freedom. In the meantime, dressing well is still the best revenge, no matter how strict the religious code. And for many Iranian women, the freedom to dress as they please is not something they will allow a mere chador to curtail. Pushing limits and dancing around rules are simply survival tactics in their struggle for (fashionable) self-expression. □ *view* ▶ 328