

# DESIGNS ON BEIRUT

WORDS - LIZZY VARTANIAN COLLIER



OPPOSITE PAGE

OVERLAY I, Paul Matter and Kallol Datta  
Ceiling light in hand-beaten buffed steel,  
burnt brass and glass. Unique piece.  
Dimensions H248 D70cm,  
courtesy of Carwan gallery

—— **Reem** Acra, Georges Chakra, Nour Hage, Zuhair Murad, Elie Saab...Beirut is the birthplace to some of the most sought-after fashion designers in the world. Here, After Nyne, goes beyond couture to explore the eclectic world of some of Lebanon's little known designers outside of Beirut.

Situated in the fashionable district of Beirut's Saifi Village lies *Sarah's Bag*, whose clutches have been worn by everyone from Amal Clooney to *Man Repeller's* Leandra Medine. Amongst the statement handbag line are pieces in the shape of Walkman radios, edible Lebanese delicacies like *manoosheh* and *kaak*, and empowering clutches that have statements like *Women of the World Unite* and *Power to the People* emblazoned across their front. Sarah Beydoun launched the line of colourful and expressive bags in 2000, following research at the end of a sociology degree into an NGO that rehabilitates at risk women and female ex-prisoners. Her research prompted her to set up a social enterprise that would train and employ women, whilst simultaneously empowering both the women who make and the women who wear the bags.

The handcrafted bags mix ancient techniques with modern interpretations that utilize beading, crochet, embroidery and sequins. It can take up to 25 hours to produce some of the pieces in the collection. The team of over 200 women who create the bags are all trained by the *Sarah's Bag* team and are encouraged to pass on their skills to other women in underprivileged communities in Lebanon. As a

result, not only do these women gain skills in a new craft, but their new status helps them reintegrate into society and ease the stigma of being ex-prisoners.

*Sarah's Bag* manipulates materials to experiment with the Perspex, resin, woodwork and marquetry that find its way into the dazzling designs. Another Lebanese designer *Bokja* is even named after fabric. A *Bokja* is a cherished piece of material that is used to wrap a woman's most precious possessions. The word is often used to describe the bride's dowry that accompanies her into the next chapter of her life.

Founded by Huda Baroudi and Maria Hibri, *Bokja* is a textile company that uses fabrics inspired by Levantine and ottoman traditions to create hand-made furniture and lifestyle pieces. Amongst the label's diverse range are cushions embroidered with pomegranates, coats composed of many different patterned pieces of fabric and even dreamy sofas embellished with the story of *Le Petit Prince*.

Lebanon's capital is also working to help promote young designers through foundations like *STARCH*. The non-profit organisation was founded by Rabhi Kayrouz and Tala Hajjar to help launch the careers of emerging Lebanese designers. Its name, *STARCH*, has been taken from the solid carbohydrate used to stiffen and whiten clothes. In the textile industry, this odorless, pure and insoluble substance is used as a bonding or hardening component, and just as it supports fabric, *STARCH* supports its designers. The program guides young



designers through the process of branding, developing, marketing and promoting their collections, operating an annual program that selects between four to six young designers each year. As well as being steered through the design process and business skills, the collections of the *STARCH* designers are also presented at the *STARCH* boutique during their time working with the platform, providing them with the opportunity to sell their work to real customers, and so begin making money from their business. The *STARCH* alumni include such designers as Timi Hayek and marsabēn.

This September, Lebanon celebrated its rich design community with its inaugural *Beirut Design Fair*. Uniting some of the most notable names in Lebanese design, the fair brought together artisans, brands, designers, distributors and galleries

to establish itself as a challenging and high-level platform upon which to demonstrate the legitimacy of Lebanon's place at the heart of the international design scene. The fair also ran concurrently with the seventh edition of *Beirut Art Fair*, which has promoted the artistic and cultural vibrancy of Lebanon and the Middle East-North Africa countries since 2010. Strategically running alongside each other, the two fairs provided a space and opportunities for the creative energies of Beirut to thrive and flourish.

Lebanon is definitely somewhere to be added to the list of places to visit by designer lovers, as Hala Moubarak, co-founder of *Beirut Design Fair* affirms: "The work of Lebanese designers is the fruit of innovative, moving and elegant ideas: research and the desire to preserve ancestral craftsmanship lead to an invaluable creative inspiration."

