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The Man Who Put Color Back in Saudi Menswear

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JIDDAH, [Saudi Arabia](#) -- About 10 years ago, Saudi fashion designer Yahya al-Bishri decided he had had enough of the plain, long white robe worn by men here.

Bishri, who had previously designed only for women, came up with a line of men's robes, known here as thobes, that featured elaborate geometric embroidery or patches of jean or leather. Some were made entirely of colored fabric.

But Saudi Arabia, a traditional society that places great emphasis on conformity, was not ready for Bishri.

"Many people were shocked that I was developing the thobe, which is considered the national costume. I was accused of trying to destroy our culture, of promoting homosexuality and of trying to make men resemble women," he said. "Some said nobody in his right mind would wear my designs."

And for a few years, nobody did. But little by little, his male clients became more daring, encouraged in part by the positive reaction of women.

Today, Bishri, 46, has a two-floor luxury boutique for men and women in Jiddah, where he lives, one in Riyadh, the capital, and a showroom in Paris. His client list is a who's who of Saudi high society that includes the Saudi monarch, [King Abdullah](#), and other members -- male and female -- of the royal family.

Bishri, who in the late 1980s was one of the first Saudis to enter the world of fashion, was used to overcoming barriers.

His father, shocked and disappointed by his son's choice of profession, initially cut him off, hoping he would return to a more conventional line of work. So Bishri supported 2 1/2 years of fashion design studies in Italy and [France](#), including a stint at the fashion house of Jean-Louis Scherrer, by writing and selling poems and freelancing for local newspapers.

He returned to Saudi Arabia in 1990 and opened a small boutique on a quiet side street in Jiddah. The religious police, or mutawa, raided his shop half a dozen times, accusing him of violating a ban on the mingling of unrelated men and women. His fashion design magazines were confiscated or torn up in airport

customs, and the mannequins he tried to import were destroyed or thrown out because of a religious ban on statues.

"I would get depressed for weeks, sometimes months, after each episode. But my love for fashion was greater than the challenges I was facing, and I always went back," said Bishri, who is divorced and has two sons.

Bishri said he refused to give up because he also wanted to prove to his father, and to Saudi society, that design is art, a respectable vocation.

He got his break in 1997, in the form of a phone call from the royal court. Abdullah wanted to see his designs, and Bishri went prepared. In his research into men's fashion in the Arabian Peninsula, Bishri had discovered that in the 1940s and '50s, King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, founder of the kingdom and father of Abdullah, had worn elaborately decorated long-coats, or diglas, that men wear on formal occasions.

Bishri said Abdullah asked him why there was a storm of criticism about his work. "I showed him the book and the coats worn by his father. I explained that the forbidding white we wear now was not part of our tradition but something new to society, something that dated back only three or four decades."

In the 1960s, he said, the kingdom's new oil wealth resulted in a more modern country and a less harsh lifestyle. White robes, which reflect heat, became more practical and easier to keep clean, he said.

"When people started wearing the thobe, everybody was convinced it was part of our culture. But our fathers did not always dress like that," Bishri said. "I was looking for how we dressed in the past because I knew we had no material and no clothes industry here, only what we imported."

Bishri told Abdullah that his designs were inspired by Arabic and Islamic art, including the geometric drawings on the houses in the central Najd and southern Asir regions, and the latticework on windows and doors in the western region of Hejaz.

Bishri said Abdullah asked him to make coats similar to the ones his father had worn and thobes in bright fabrics.

Newspapers published photos of Bishri and Abdullah at an annual cultural festival in which Bishri had been commissioned to design 1,000 diglas for a show that included several famous singers, and television footage showed Abdullah introducing him to regional royalty. Soon after, Bishri received a phone call from his father.

"He had never called me before," Bishri said. "He congratulated me and said he'd always been proud of me, despite what people had been saying. It was one of the proudest moments in my life."

Ahead of the Eid holiday, when Muslims buy new clothes, Bishri's modern boutique has been crowded with men being fitted for thobes and going through the racks. On a recent day, Bishri sat on a black leather chair, passing a pencil over a yellow pad, designing a new line embedded with leather snippets and patches for a group of young clients.

"I was bored of the classic thobes, and Yahya's designs were special, original and attractive. He created a revolution in menswear," said longtime client Mahmoud Abdul-Ghaffar, 46. "My sons now buy their thobes from Yahya. But theirs are more daring."

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