One of a Kind: Walid al Damirjiâ??s Antique Fashion

Description

Overflowing shelves in Walid al Damirjiâ??s London studio.

British-Iraqi designer Walid al Damirji is obsessed with fabric. His London studio is bursting to the brim with a fascinating treasure trove of historical textiles, from embroidered Chinese silk to Victorian taffeta, Edwardian linen and 19th century religious robes. This rich archive of collected fabrics is the backbone of his eponymous fashion brand By Walid, which, since its inception in 2011, has focussed on making garments exclusively from vintage textiles, to create unique, one-of-a-kind items. Walid deliberately chooses textiles which are too damaged or worn out to go into a museum collection. He is also deeply fascinated by the depth of history contained within these scraps of fabric, observing, â??What I am working with â?? and making â?? is scarce. Thereâ??s a long narrative to these pieces. They re-tell many, many stories.â?•

Walid al Damirji in his London studio.

Al Damirji has a long history in the fashion industry, having formerly worked as Creative Director for the luxury fashion brand Joseph. For a brief spell, he quit the fashion world, having become disillusioned with its ever-changing seasonal production lines and wasteful practices. When he did return to fashion, it was with an entirely different mindset. Initially, Al Damirji began collecting vintage fabrics with no particular focus in mind. His love of history, storytelling, and craft drove his desire to find rare treasures from markets, auction houses, and international textile suppliers. He says, â??The historical aspect of each piece interests me immensely â?? the romance of its past. From a material point of view, the effort, the handiwork thatâ??s gone into something, intrigues me.â?•

By Walid Antique style fashion.

Slowly, he started making patchwork style jackets for friends out of these vintage finds. Demand steadily grew for these unique, one-off garments, and it was through encouragement from friends that Al Damirji set up his own fashion line, By Walid, in 2011. However, Al Damirji was determined to take an entirely different path from earlier fashion house templates, focussing exclusively on items made from upcycled vintage textiles.

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Bucking the trend for frenetic, fast-paced seasonal collections, Al Damirji takes his time, producing clothing to a schedule that suits him and his team. Today this â??slow fashionâ??, â??zero-wasteâ?? approach has become a widespread, sometimes gimmicky trend, but more than a decade ago, Al Damirji was one of the first to lead the way. For him, however, it is less about making a political statement, and more about celebrating the care and attention that went into making stunningly detailed fabrics that have survived, at least in part, through the ages. He says, â??My approach to design is to step back and appreciate what has already been created and should be maintained.â?•

When making garments, Al Damirji and his team try to be driven by the sensual, material properties of the fabric before deciding what to do with it. The templates they go on to create are simple, classic and streamlined, allowing the fabric to take centre stage. â??The shapes are very studied and very simple and are not meant to be seasonally changed,â?• says Al Damirji. He gives an example: â??We make one jacket that weâ??ve done for 10 years now and keep repeating it and it still sells.â?•

Building on the popularity of his clothing, Al Damirji has gone on to create chair upholstery, wall hangings, screens, fabric heads, jewelry, cushions and more, all from his unique and inimitable fabric collection. Because every piece that comes out of their London studio is made entirely by hand, the process of making items can take a long time, anything from six weeks to up to a year, meaning they really are a labour of love. Above all else, Al Damirji creates from a place of curiosity, fascination, and excitement about the incredible, well-made, yet finite sources of fabric which are already out there in the world. Reflecting on the wonder of his textile finds, he says, â??These things are so beautiful. So irreplaceable.â?•

CATEGORY

1. FASHION DESIGN
2. SUSTAINABILITY

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