

## GLOBAL STYLE: A SERIES



Colourful notecards, carved bookends and trays with traditional Islamic screen patterns are among the Afghan offerings at [www.jalidesigns.com](http://www.jalidesigns.com).

## THE BEAUTIFUL, FUNCTIONAL SIDE OF AFGHANISTAN

An Ontario-based woman is marketing chic artisanal wares from the country normally associated with war, empowering local artisans and revitalizing traditional techniques in the process. Sales have been so brisk, **Sonia Verma** reports in the final instalment of a series on global style, that she's considering adding designs from other parts of the world

As a reporter, I've made more than 10 trips to Afghanistan over the past 10 years, covering war, poverty and politics. But Afghanistan is also a place of rare, striking beauty – something that is difficult to convey to people who have never experienced it first-hand. It is a place that makes you catch your breath at the sight of a brightly designed kite – banned under the Taliban – against the pale blue sky, a place where the intricate design of something as mundane as a wooden door can offer odd respite amid the bleakness of a muddy village.

Hedvig Alexander knows these things well, having spent eight years in the country. The Danish-born Yale graduate first moved to Kabul as a soldier serving with the International Security Assistance Force in 2002. She left as managing director of Turquoise Mountain, a non-profit organization for which she oversaw the remarkable regeneration of the old city of Kabul and four training schools where young Afghan artisans learned traditional crafts.

In between, she met and married Chris Alexander, who served as Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan and is now running as the Conservative Party candidate in the Ontario riding of Ajax-Pickering. For Alexander, the move from Kabul to a Canadian suburb was jarring. "I thought: I don't belong here at all. I belong in places like Afghanistan. That's what I know," she recalls. "Then I real-

the artisan and more long-term benefit that is sustainable. We don't work with middle men," Alexander says.

Instead, she works with artisans like Humaira Mohmand, a young calligraphy student whose family remained in Afghanistan through civil war and Taliban rule. When the Taliban were overthrown, Mohmand attended high school and nurtured an interest in drawing. This year, she is graduating at the top of her class from the Turquoise Mountain Institute for Art and Architecture in Kabul. Jali Designs sells her brightly printed note cards, embossed with Islamic geometric designs evocative of those found on historic mosques.

Another Afghan artisan, Masoud Abdul Baqi, spent the first 10 years of his life as a refugee in Pakistan. Upon returning to Afghanistan after the ouster of the Taliban, he completed high school and learned the art of jali screen-making – a form of lattice woodwork – from a mentor who had previously worked for the late King Zahir Shah. Jali Designs sells Baqi's jali trays and tray tables, elegant examples of how he has adapted the art traditionally used to make window screens in Islamic homes to something contemporary for Western markets.

"People buy things because they are beautiful or functional or both," Alexander says. "The trays were originally window screens to shield women and children from the eyes of outsiders, but who needs that in Toronto? I thought,

## You'd like to try that on? It'll cost you

A chain of Australian stores is looking to monetize the changing-room experience. Personally, I think I already pay dearly for it



KATRINA ONSTAD  
[konstad@globeandmail.com](mailto:konstad@globeandmail.com)

Would you pay \$50 to try on a pair of ski boots? A chain of Australian sports stores is throwing this "try-on" fee at customers who saunter in to find the perfect fit, then purchase the actual boots online at a tax-reduced cheaper price. If the skier ends up buying the boots in person, the \$50 is refunded. According to the Sydney Morning Herald, other high-end boutiques are following suit, their bricks-and-mortar livelihoods ravaged as shoppers go online.

The plight of the small-business owner is serious, but I'm waiting for the day when stores pay me to endure the indignity of changing rooms. While I bemoan the electronification of all experience – oh, the loneliness of a bus ride where every person is clicking and looking down rather than up at the 3-D world – I can muster no tear for the sad and deteriorating little box that is the changing room.

It is no coincidence that the changing room is a lot like a vertical coffin, except with salespeople scratching to get in rather than zombies scratching to get out. Studies show that the ideal lighting for trying on clothes is natural and frontal, while most changing rooms use fluorescent overhead lights, designed for that dead, lumpy, waxen look. And where shall I hang my purse? On this stale piece of gum?

Inside, you must contend with Hostile Salesperson, who views your needs as an inconvenient distraction from a burning all-staff conversation on how that tweet even got that promotion and – what? You need an even bigger size? Hostile will then vanish while you shiver in your underwear.

But the indifference is preferable to Chipper Salesperson's bark of artificial concern: "Hi, I'm Jessica! What can I get started for you today?" This conjures an unpleasant mental image of an after-hours corporate-training event where salesclerks are pounded with the edict to "personalize the experience! Personalize it, Jessica!" So Jessica scrawls my

you must burst forth, ham-like, to learn, before a group of staring strangers, that you, too, look ridiculous in batwings.

Recently, an online retailer called isme.com – which therefore has a vested interest in these results – cited a condition called "Changing Room Rage" (not in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*). After surveying 1,200 women, isme found that 75 per cent claimed not to try on clothes at all because the mere thought of the changing room was too traumatic. According to Metro.co.uk, "the study also reveals that there are long-term effects of CRR, with chronic sufferers losing their tempers with friends and family and feeling gloomy for lengthy periods of time." (These effects are also caused by Christmas.)

Some stores are taking heed by making rooms bigger to accommodate groups, which is called "social retailing." Victoria's Secret is testing buttons that connect shoppers to sales-staff headsets. Prada has experimented with an eight-square-foot glass booth that fogs over for disrobing, then clears for the big reveal.

The one thing that changing rooms have going for them – the reason some people will pay the try-on fee – is that they're a real-world occurrence. At best, we get the tactile, physical experience of a piece of clothing on the body and a sensitive, knowledgeable human voice outside the door. Yet the shopping future is high-tech: virtual dressing rooms where a customer stands in front of a camera and sees the clothes on her body on a screen. Three-dimensional body scanning and interactive mirrors are reportedly only a few years away.

But what about the sample sale? Only our passwords are private in the electronic age, and maybe a new ambivalence about privacy will allow for the rise of the communal dressing room. I love a shared dressing room, with its diminishing of shame and parade of real bod-