

#common designer **AVGOUSTA THEODOULOU**



A computer science teacher from Cyprus who was living in Greece had to move to Paris. This is in short the story of Avgousta Theodoulou, before becoming a fashion designer. It could be just a stroke of luck but seeing her work it seems more like destiny -after all her call had been fashion, all along.





You moved to Paris to study fashion at the age of 30. Before you had a totally different life. How easy was it for you to make this change?

Actually, I moved to Paris in 2013 because my husband found a job there, in academia as a researcher. I was a computer science teacher at that time, and moving to Paris meant that I had to stop teaching too. I really loved that job. I had a feeling that everything was turning upside-down at first... but within a few hours I took the decision to follow my passion for creation and study fashion. In fact, I considered it as a "calling" since Paris is one of the most famous fashion centers. It wasn't easy. I was a teacher who had to become a student again... But the satisfaction I was getting every time I was creating something with my own hands was indescribable, and that is what was giving me the strength to complete the 3 years of BA studies, and then go for my goal to create my own brand.

I believe it's important to be able to redefine our targets based on the new conditions brought each time. This is how I dealt with it and how I got adapted. I didn't want to see it as quitting one thing for another. I had to pause the first and concentrate on the new target, hoping that one day there would be a new situation that would allow me to combine both. Today, I am very glad and satisfied that I managed to create my fashion brand, and I am also teaching Computer-aided Design in a fashion school in Paris.

At your school they believed in your graduate collection and chose you to present it in the school's catwalk in Paris, and also in a fashion event organized by Alliance Française of Washington DC at the Embassy of France in Washington DC, USA, in order to promote French fashion. How did that make you feel, taking into consideration that you are not French and that it was

your very first complete project.

That gave me confidence and courage. Also, when months later I received the "Best New Designer Award" in Greece and the "Bronze Award" in China, it empowered me to move forward to create my own company in Paris. There was, as you mentioned, one first fashion event in Washington, DC. But what made me very proud was that since then the people of Alliance Française continued closely following my work, and they decided to invite me personally to present my whole collection at the French Embassy in 2019, this time as a brand and not as a graduate student.

Before COVID19 you had a very successful course, taking part in exhibitions and catwalks, winning awards, and then it all suddenly stopped. How was that time for you and how did you remain creative?

The pandemic caught me just after having officially created the company of my brand. I was preparing to start producing some products and collaborating with boutiques. All these plans had for sure to be put on ice. I was relatively lucky, though, because till that point I hadn't made big agreements or investments in production, so I didn't experience financial troubles or find myself with indisposed stocks. It only affected me in the sense that these plans had to be postponed. During that period, my mind essentially got freed from the needs of the company, because it was futile as everything was frozen, so I concentrated 100% in the creative part. I used the time to work in the small atelier I have at my place. The storm of emotions caused by the situation, I tried to transform it to inspiration and creativity.



At the beginning of 2022, two years since the pandemic began, I thought that it was about time to start introducing my brand to boutiques. I have already started collaborations with high-end boutiques, and I am working on adding more sales points in the near future. I think that during the pandemic, people spent more time on social media, so through those platforms I had the chance to introduce my brand to a larger audience. Especially during that period, many people encouraged and supported my work, and I am very grateful for that. Unfortunately, we experience one crisis after the other. Right after the health crisis, we couldn't expect the energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. This doesn't allow the societies to find a new normality. Also, the supply chain faces problems and this causes huge production delays, as well as the increase of production costs.

You are based in Paris. How does this favor your work and how do you deal with all that competition?

Paris is a metropolis with many cultural and artistic happenings. Numerous museums, exhibitions, and events everywhere. The influences you get from the city vibes are countless, but above all I value the gothic architecture, which I find inspiring. Fashion events are frequent, and not only during the fashion week. There, you can meet interesting people or get to know about companies that produce materials and supplies. The competition regarding the creative part is not something that concerns me a lot, because I believe that if you are authentic, there will always be room for you. The point where

competition can bring problems is when it comes to production and sourcing of materials, because it increases the demand and can make the costs for a startup company unbearable. Generally, when you start you don't have the size so that the making industry (artisans, producers of materials, etc.) considers you as a possible client, or the market itself to see you as a brand it can trust. It takes some time to convince them to invest their time in your work!

You focus on hand made luxury creations. Each piece you design and make is unique and requires a great amount of effort and inspiration. And although you incorporate traditional techniques into your clothes, your creations were characterized as avant-garde and not folklore. How did you succeed this? What is your innovation?

I like to combine many different elements without letting one overshadow the others. I believe this makes the result harmonious. For the garments you are referring to, I tried to combine handmade techniques with strict tailoring, using luxury fabrics with raw finishing. I mixed complex structures with simple shapes. The innovation of my macramé pieces, which I first developed back in 2013, was that I used the same fabric to create several textures and volumes.

You are an advocate of slow fashion and sustainability -two issues that are constantly discussed nowadays. Is this the future of fashion? Or just a need of the moment?

The fact that not only new brands but also big well-established houses and retail chains that sell mass-produced products, are all making statements favoring eco-friendly materials and sustainable production show that there is a need to go toward that direction now and in the future. However, we all know that many use this only as a communication and marketing strategy, just because they should appear aligned with the trend and need. Each brand sets its own standards, and then tries by all means to present them as sustainable fashion so that it doesn't get out of the game of the market. People are getting really confused. It has started becoming really difficult to understand which material is sustainable and which is not. The answer is that there is not just one answer. It always depends, because in fact there is a trade-off. Each material has its pros and cons. We, the designers, have to choose the best materials each time based on the project and according to their properties. The least we can do, though, is to be honest. For me the only thing that is undoubtedly sustainable is the reduction of the pace of production (i.e., to go slower), the reduction of the pace of consumption, the increase of the quality and the durability of products. We can see that we are still going in the wrong direction, since what is encouraged is the overconsumption of cheap one-use garments. We need to be aware of the environmental costs of this direction.

You manufacture your silk scarves in Soufli. What is so unique about that place and its artisans for you that surpass the "made in France" tag?

I have chosen Soufli to produce my silk scarves because it has a long tradition of producing and processing silk. Also, when I contacted them and had

my first samples, I really appreciated their kindness and professionalism. Besides, it's one of my general goals to develop collaborations with artisans and manufacturers who have long know-how tradition in related fields, mainly in Greece, Cyprus, and France. These three countries have played a huge role in my life and to who I am.

Describe your daily routine to us in Paris and give us an idea of Paris during fashion week. Do you feel the vibe and how does it affect you?

I have a quite busy routine during the week. I work many hours in my atelier, and also out of it when I need to meet artisans that I collaborate with, or to seek supplies and materials. This year, twice a week, I teach in a fashion school Computer-aided Design. This is something very important and -as I said- I enjoy a lot, because I find myself among many fashion students from all around the world that are motivated and full of energy. I like the idea of passing over part of my knowledge into their creative process. In the weekends, I try to spend some time with friends, who again come from all over the world (France, Italy, Ecuador, Greece, China,). We share cultural habits; we usually cook traditional recipes from our countries and enjoy a nice glass of wine together. What I really like, and I try to do it as much as I can, is to visit fashion exhibitions. For example, last month I went to an exhibition about Elsa Schiaparelli at Musée des Arts décoratifs, and to the one at Galerie Dior at Avenue Montaigne. Those fashion exhibitions and the fashion weeks (with the shows of so many famous designers) really keep the vibe of this fashion city alive, and it is a huge boost and motivation.



“ What I like the most in this job is that it allows me to communicate my ideas through fashion shows, exhibiting my collections. Each collection has its own story and during the creative process I can really escape in it. When this story is told in a fashion show, I would like the audience to be tempted to escape in my world, as well.”