



Reem Azzam at her home in Beirut. She refers to her "sanctuary". Photography by Ward Bishara

Reem Acra on
the balcony
of her Beirut
apartment

Fashionable **LIFE**

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ucked away inside the residential upscale neighbourhood of Saifi, located at the southeastern periphery of Beirut's Centre Ville, is a home replete with Old World Eastern glamour. It belongs to renowned Lebanese fashion designer Reem Acra, who has resided in New York since the early 80s, when she left Beirut at the peak of the Lebanese Civil War. This house in Lebanon, a place she has had for decades, is close to her heart. "It has meant a lot to go back to downtown Beirut where I used to buy my fabrics," she says, remembering how her mother used to take her to the village to go shopping years ago. Saifi, she says, always had a "charm" and Reem was convinced that the area would develop as it has even before it became the art destination that it is today, filled with galleries and design and fashion boutiques. "I knew this would be the right place for me to have a pied-à-terre."

When Reem bought the home it was nothing more than a skeleton and she had to completely reimagine it. "The place had to be a bit of old Beirut and a bit of New York – it had to feel home," she says. "Home for me isn't really just a comfortable home, it has to look good." Walking inside is like stepping into a regal and exotic abode; the walls and décor are awash with bold colours – red, orange, yellow and mustard – references to India, a country Reem loves for its artistic vibrancy. The colours, she explains, evoke those from an Indian wedding, when flowers are placed on the road after the bride gets married. "Some people told me, 'These are really bold colours, are you sure?' and I said, 'Yes, they will look so exotic. The home is going to have a different feeling than your usual and typical apartment.'"

The abode has a majestic air as if it were from another time and place. "I wanted this home to look like a mini palace and that's how it feels," she says. "I love to include different cultures within mine. I didn't want it to be all Ottoman even if I loved the windows in the house that have the Ottoman feel to them – I wanted to also include a bit of New York. It's my personality." The structure of the home is

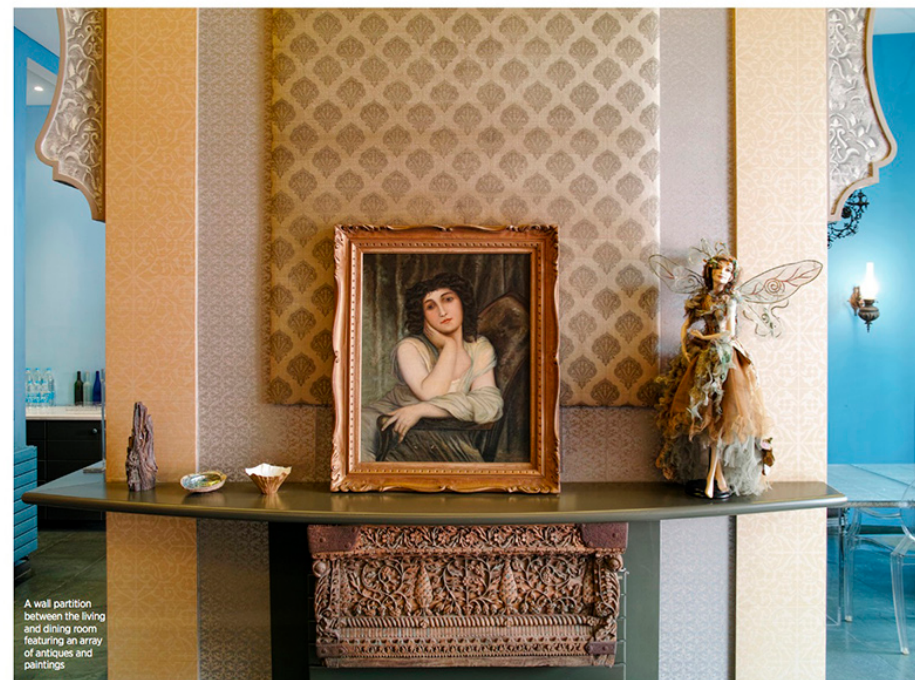
Bella BEIRUT

Reem Acra welcomes us into her home in
*Saifi Village and reveals the delicate balance
between East and West that defines the décor*

Words by **REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR** Photography by **WALID RASHID**



Reem seated in her living room beneath an arched doorway providing entry into the luminously blue painted dining room



A wall partition between the living and dining room featuring an array of antiques and paintings

"WHEN I CLOSE THE DOOR, I JUST WANT TO THINK ABOUT NOTHING, ONLY ABOUT LIFE"

endowed with an exotic flair. The high arches once again evoke India – whisking Reem to a faraway destination as soon as she walks through the door.

The apartment, originally intended to be a three-bedroom, which Reem converted into one, is minimally decorated. The designer didn't want to overwhelm the space with too many furnishings. A statement piece is the dining room table that she brought with her from New York. Made out of Plexiglas, embedded inside are samples of embroidery that date back to the beginning of Reem's career. Most of the furniture is in the form of antiques, which she also transported from New York, upholstering them in Beirut to match her singular vision. "I wanted them to look eclectic," she says of the furniture. The mixture of blues on the wall evokes the Moroccan Tuareg, a large Berber ethnic confederation often referred to as the "blue people" for the indigo-dye coloured clothes they traditionally wear.

An adventurous air pervades even the home's

most intimate spaces. "I wanted the bedroom to look like a tent," she exclaims. "I wanted to be able to go in and feel like I was in an enclosed tent." A multitude of windows with adjacent balconies frame the room. "The windows are dressed with an orange fabric so when the sun hits them from outside, they have that warm feeling as if you were really outdoors in a tent," says the designer.

At once dreamy and sensual, clearly this is not your typical apartment. And the designer didn't want it to be. "It is quiet and calm even though it is in the middle of Beirut," she says. "When you open the windows you see the red roofs of Beirut. It's beautiful. When my husband comes home he says that all he wants and dreams of is sitting on that balcony during the early morning and having a coffee – just that alone is a sensation." He, like Reem, loves the serenity of the space and location.

One of Reem's favourite spots in the home is a place that she calls "her sanctuary." In this room she has put a wooden antique daybed.

"The space barely fits it – it is so tiny, but for me, when I close the door, if I just want to think about nothing, only about life, this is the room," muses Reem. "It is so calm and so serene that you feel you are on your own. I love it so much." As a fashion designer, and one who has consistently traveled between her homeland of Lebanon and her residence in the US, the concept of home becomes multifaceted. Yet Reem insists how important her home is to her fashion designs. "Home is the most important thing. It is where you hide; it is where you think; it is where you dream. For me, home is everything. This particular home in Beirut is like a dream for me." Seven different wallpapers are used throughout the residence and each means something to Reem; they have been aptly placed to communicate with the other furnishings and fabrics that she has used throughout. "It is where I feel the happiest," she smiles. "Whether it is in Beirut or in New York, I love being at home."

The Beirut residence, says Reem, is now the



Reem's bedroom
coloured in a rich
orange palette

"HOME IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING. IT IS WHERE YOU HIDE;
IT IS WHERE YOU THINK; IT IS WHERE YOU DREAM "

space that she feels best represents her eponymous fashion label, now celebrating its 20th anniversary. The designer recently wed Lebanese New York-based plastic surgeon Nicolas Tabbal, and the couple is currently waiting for their new apartment in New York to be completed. "I haven't seen the new place yet and I don't know what it will look like," she says. "But it is nice to have something new. Now that I am married I want a home that tells the story of both of us and not just me." During such a transition, Reem's Beirut abode thus offers much magic – memories from so many years. "Through our professions, my husband and I are dedicated to the female aesthetic and it is a blessing that we speak the same language."

Over the last 20 years Reem has established herself as a staple for the red carpet and the aisle. Among countless other initiatives, the designer celebrated her anniversary this year with a bridal collection completely inspired by American jeweller Tiffany & Co. "The world of fashion is changing at the fastest pace and I am

super excited that I graduated from my 20th year, and in all honesty, I am grateful that the city of New York has celebrated me in many different ways," says the designer. "The collaboration with Tiffany's was amazing. It is a stamp of luxury for my brand." Additionally, the New York Public Library offered Reem a space for her fashion show – a room that had never been offered to anyone before. "It is the most beautiful room that I had ever been in in my entire life," beams Reem, remembering the room's high ceilings, marble and arches. "The echo in the room was so incredible that you felt as if you were in another world – as if the sky had descended on earth."

Another new initiative for Reem is *Fashion Star*, a hit TV show airing on Dubai TV where she mentors the next generation of fashion designers from the Middle East. "It became more than a show – it became a school on its own," explains Reem. "We bring these young designers in not just to compete – we teach them and help them in their work before the

season." In this way, Reem is giving back to her heritage and to her homeland. The TV show gives a behind-the-scenes taste of the fashion industry, introducing buyers to these young designers who then purchase their designs. "I am giving them the power that I have to continue," she says. "It's so nice to see how they wait to hear what I am going to say. I want to empower these young designers."

Reem looks out onto the Beirut city skyline. Its lights are flickering in the distance and the city is coming alive at night. It's a mystical moment; Beirut offers this otherworldly feel that makes one desire to seize the moment. "The future is unknown," says Reem. "One can plan and plan and then something changes. I am happy to be where I am and to move forward organically." In this Beirut residence that Reem calls home the past merges with the new just as the designer's eastern origins combine with her western influences. It is a sanctuary indeed. ■

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Reem
seated in
her living
room