

SPECIAL REPORT: JEWELRY

## Translating Violence into Beauty

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Selim Mouzannar and Ranya Sarakbi had barely set up their stand at the Vendôme Luxury trade show in Paris in October before buyers started picking over the pieces.

Mr. Mouzannar and Ms. Sarakbi, jewelry designers from Beirut, were showing here for the first time, introducing fresh, high-quality collections that combined very limited series with one-of-a-kind creations.

Reactions to their work, shown in the Park Hyatt Hotel on Rue de la Paix, around the corner from the Place Vendôme, heart of the Paris Haute Joaillerie world, was encouraging, to say the least. “This is the first year we are showing our collection outside of Lebanon. The response has been extraordinary. We are amazed,” Mr. Mouzannar said.

“Selim and Ranya are part of a new generation of Lebanese artists that has focused attention on the creativity emanating from Lebanon,” said Laure d’Hauteville, a French art fair organizer and consultant based in Abu Dhabi.

Born in Beirut, Ms. Sarakbi and Mr. Mouzannar are both children of displacement and war who have joined forces to export their talents. Their business partnership is based on a shared desire to expand internationally beyond their Lebanese base.

If not for the bombings of Beirut during the 33-day siege in the summer of 2006 by Israeli forces, neither one might have thought about establishing a presence outside Lebanon.

“Life was normal. Suddenly, overnight, it became hell. We were hostages in our own land. The zones that were leveled were just a few miles away, and we could not move. The airport was bombed, the infrastructure destroyed,” Mr. Mouzannar said. “After that, I thought for the first time about establishing a base abroad.” The Paris show was a first step, to gauge European reactions, he said.

For an entire generation of Lebanese born in the 1960s and ’70s — like Mr. Mouzannar and Ms. Sarakbi — periods of relative calm and prosperity have always been punctuated by war.

When Mr. Mouzannar was 13, a 15-year civil war broke out. Following a period of reconstruction in the late 1990s, the military conflict three years ago between Hezbollah and Israel was a brutal reminder of the traumas of a life lived in fear and danger.

“The paradox is the beauty that emerges in the midst of all the violence,” said Mr. Mouzannar, who is today well-established in Beirut’s jewelry industry, as a member of the board of the Lebanese Syndicate of Expert Goldsmiths and Jewelers, and owner of a company employing some 50 craftsmen.

Though it took the 2006 war to turn his marketing focus outward, he had, like many Lebanese, long been internationally minded.

In 1979, Mr. Mouzannar, scion of a long-established Beirut jewelry family, left home first to study in Europe, then to work and find inspiration in different world cultures.

“I took a scientific approach to jewelry. I studied mineralogy in Paris, at the Institut National de Gemmologie and Université de Nantes,” he said.

From there, he traveled to the Far East, settling in Thailand where he worked for a precious stones mining company.

“For six months during that stay, I worked in an open-air ruby mining pit near the Thai-Cambodian border. It was an unforgettable experience,” said Mr. Mouzannar, who next traveled to Yemen and Saudi Arabia where he spent four years working for the jeweler Robert Mouawad, known for having one of the largest stone collections in the world.

In 1993, Mr. Mouzannar returned to Beirut and started his own company, choosing not to join the century-old family business.

“Returning to Beirut was for me a return to the source. As much as it can be ugly and violent, Beirut’s history and positive energy are a part of me,” he said.

Ms. Sarakbi also returned to Lebanon in the early 1990s to attend the American University of Beirut, after years of wartime absence. A self-taught painter and sculptor whose works are exhibited at the Lebanese National Museum of Beirut, she turned to jewelry after a chance meeting with Mr. Mouzannar which led to a collaboration in 2004, when he produced for her some jewelry pieces that she had created to complement a friend’s fashion line.

“Selim first produced my designs in his workshops. Then he convinced me to continue designing jewelry,” she said.

Today, Mr. Mouzannar is an equal partner in the Ranya Sarakbi jewelry label. Yet despite their close collaboration, their respective collections are as distinct as their sources of inspiration.

Mr. Mouzannar’s jewelry collection is inspired by the history of Lebanon and the influences on a society at a crossroads of cultures and religions.

His Terra collection, modern but imbued with ancestral traditions, uses flat-cut sapphires, rubies, amethysts or tourmalines set in yellow or white gold. “The flat rose-cut was an Ottoman tradition brought to Lebanon. It creates a shine that is much softer to the eye,” he said.

Mr. Mouzannar also uses flat-cut stones in his Beirut line, inspired by Ottoman jewelry that he found in his grandfather’s collections.

His Links collection, meanwhile, combines contemporary design with the symbolism of bonding and bondage, using wood and metal, Feng Shui conductors of creative energies.

“Links joins silver with wood, set with pink sapphires and black diamonds. The handcuffs are set with white sapphires,” he said.

For Ms. Sarakbi, who studied sociology and anthropology in college, the sources of inspiration are more primordial. In her first collection, Flora, she drew directly on life and nature to shape by hand one-of-a-kind pieces that take the shape of leaves and petals.

“I sculpt the pieces directly, without a preliminary drawing. When the piece is finished, I sketch it,” she said. For an occasional molded piece, like a magnolia-leaf bracelet, she used real vegetation to mold the prototype.

Her floral designs capture an almost primitive delicacy, a quality she has carried through to her second line, Fauna.

“For Fauna, I started with Man as the first animal,” she said. “The pieces are inspired by prehistoric tools that man used — blades, axes, primitive weapons and sacrificial tools.”

Both designers are negotiating with high-end departments stores to show their jewelry in New York next year.