

THE FULL STORY

RESORT'S BIGGEST NEWS WAS EXACTLY THAT — BIG, FLAMBOYANT VOLUMES.

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Serafina Sama, photographed outside her atelier in London's North Kensington.



Serafina's Way

The London-based designer of Isa Arfen injects her effortless clothes with a touch of eccentricity.

By KRISTI GARCED

Serafina Sama noticed that her husband, Dimitris, could get ready in five minutes and look great – an easy feat with his small, fixed wardrobe of simple shirts and trousers that fit impeccably. She longed for that ease herself. “After becoming a mother and having less time to think about what I’m going to wear, my life became busier and I wanted to have a few pieces that I could count on at any time,” she said.

So Sama set out to create a similarly streamlined wardrobe for women: flattering, feminine clothes with an effortless appeal. “My initial idea – which is still the idea – was to create pieces in fabrics that feel desirable and are beautifully made, but are also relatable and work in real life,” she said.

That vision manifested as Isa Arfen, a four-year-old, London-based collection that counts Alexa Chung, Emilia Clarke and Lena Dunham among its followers. First out of her home and more recently out of an atelier in North Kensington, Sama, 33, creates her line with two requisites in mind: a relaxed attitude and a touch of eccentricity. A third, more subjective quality – Sama’s good taste – has propelled Isa Arfen onto the international stage, where it is gaining momentum as one of the chicest young labels to break out of London.

Sama began in 2011 by designing a test-run collection just for family and friends. “They were one-size-fits-all, very commercial, and I never showed them to any buyers,” she said of the small selection of summer dresses. Through word of mouth, women outside of her personal circle started to place orders. That early reaction inspired confidence, and from there, she decided to launch her own brand from home. By September 2012, she was showing the collection in a hotel room in Paris.

The Isa Arfen moniker – an anagram of her first name, Serafina – was born out of shyness. “I didn’t like the idea of seeing my own name on the labels every day,” she said. Isa also happens to be the name of her maternal grandmother.

Speaking by phone from London, her Italian accent betraying her Ravenna roots, Sama credited two maternal aunts for sparking her initial interest in fashion. “They had an eccentric sense of style, and it was through them that I discovered clothes, especially more ethnic pieces,” she said. “Because of them, I have always found older women inspiring and chic.”

Later, when studying Ancient Greece in school, Sama said she imagined what the mythological goddesses would wear, sketching their outfits during class. “I never connected at the time that it could one day be my job,” she said. “It was just a pastime.”

Sama’s parents considered design a pastime, too; years later, convincing them to support an education in fashion proved futile. “They just were like, ‘fashion?’” she said. “Fashion is frivolous to them. I was a good student in school, and they thought it would be a waste and that I should get a more serious degree.”

She appeased her parents, studying architecture for two years at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London, located not too far from Central Saint Martins, which she would walk past nearly every day – a sort of cruel tease. “It’s something that I’m still very interested in, but I never for one second thought of myself as an architect,” Sama said. After applying to Central Saint Martins on a whim, she had to stage

“a little revolution” to convince her parents to let her switch. They conceded.

While at the design school, Sama held a series of internships, first at Marni in Milan, then at Lanvin in Paris, and finally at Marc Jacobs and Vogue in New York. “It was the first time I really saw fashion in a realistic way,” she said. “In fashion school, it all seems very radical. You’re playing around with the more creative, experimental side – the dream – but never the reality of it.”

Upon graduation in 2006, she landed her first job at Chloé in Paris, where she stayed for two years and worked under Paulo Melim Andersson and then Hannah MacGibbon. “Two different teams and two different phases, both equally great work experiences,” she said.

Having wrapped seven seasons with Isa Arfen, including her first resort collection last month, Sama has fine-tuned her label’s identity – a mix of minimalism, voluminous silhouettes and feminine whimsy – based on her love of the imperfect. “I like when things are a little off,” she said. “Part of my aesthetic is very clean, but done in rich fabric or with a particular embellishment – always with an eccentric streak.”

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Serafina Sama



Looks from the Isa Arfen resort 2016 collection.

Sama is known, for example, for constructing dresses with one strap deliberately designed to fall off the shoulder and for incorporating exaggerated proportions into sweater sleeves and trouser legs.

When asked to name her favorite designers, Sama cited a litany: Miuccia Prada, Phoebe Philo, Jonathan Anderson, Marta Marques and Paulo Almeida, Simone Rocha, Arthur Arbesser and Romeo Gigli. She also said she was influenced by Italian Vogue in the late Eighties and early Nineties. “What I love about that period is there was still that excess in Italian fashion, but it was also the beginning of minimalism and grunge,” she said. “That intersection really inspired me.”

Retailers have taken notice of Isa Arfen’s quirky yet wearable style. The label is stocked throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Australia – including at Opening Ceremony in Tokyo, Los Angeles and New York, and Alex Eagle in London – as well as online by Net-a-porter, The Corner, Avenue 32 and Stylebop. While still a small enterprise, growth is more than steady. From the spring 2014 collection to the fall 2015 collection, sales tripled, Sama said, and in the past year business has grown 70 percent.

For fall, Nordstrom picked up Isa Arfen for five of its U.S. stores and online. “I love the ease and femininity of the brand,” said Olivia Kim, Nordstrom’s director of creative projects, whose job involves discovering new talent. “Serafina’s collections are beautifully constructed and have a sophisticated casualness, as well....I love when clothes play with being both formal and casual.”

Opening Ceremony has been a supporter of Isa Arfen since its first season. “They were the first to even respond to my e-mails,” Sama said. Carol Song, the retailer’s head women’s buyer, recalled the first time she saw Isa Arfen. “I was at my hotel room in London, and [Serafina] trekked all the way over with heavy garment bags,” Song said. “I had no idea what to expect and as she unzipped and pulled out each piece, I was blown away by her use of fabrics like shantung and taffeta, rendered in simple silhouettes that were both bold and chic. She also started the culotte trend way before anyone else,” Song added. “I must throw that out there.”

Moda Operandi hosted its first Isa Arfen trunk show in the spring of 2014. “What has struck me most is Serafina’s ability to create pieces that are strongly feminine in nature, but always done with a playful hand,” said Mary Chiam, vice president of merchandising and planning. “Season after season, her collections have great separates that feel both refined and relaxed.”

After several seasons of presenting her line in Paris and “hoping someone would show up,” Sama landed a spot on the New York Fashion Week calendar for fall with support from Milk Studios, where she will return to show her spring collection in September. And while she would love to eventually turn Isa Arfen into a full lifestyle brand – including accessories – Sama is taking it slowly. “It’s still young,” she said. “I dream about making some jewelry, but also need to be realistic at the moment. We’re a really small team.”

For now, she’s still delighting in little things. “When I saw a random woman wearing one of my coats on the street,” Sama said, “I was like ‘Ah, so exciting. Someone actually went and bought that.’” ■