

A Great Success Story

An Interview with Reem Acra, Designer

EDITORS' NOTE In 1997, Reem Acra launched her fashion business with a bridal collection, the success of which led to the introduction of her ready-to-wear collection six years later. The Reem Acra flagship store in New York City opened in 2003. Clients that Acra has dressed for weddings, red carpet appearances, and awards ceremonies include Angelina Jolie, Halle Berry, and Catherine Zeta-Jones, as well as royal families



Reem Acra

around the world. Acra's ready-to-wear and bridal collections are carried by 150 of the world's most exclusive retailers including Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus, and Saks Fifth Avenue in the United States as well as Saks Fifth Avenue and Harvey Nichols in the Middle East. Her designs are also available at top specialty retailers across the world in Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Istanbul, Egypt, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Korea. Acra was discovered while attending the American University of Beirut, and later studied at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and its Paris counterpart at Esmod.

How you were able to build the Reem Acra business initially?

It all started by making one wedding dress for a friend. After the wedding in Paris, there was a great reaction to the dress, so I took a picture of it and sent it to some magazines. To my surprise, it caught the attention of *The New York Times* and was published.

I had no money or backing, but I had an American Express credit card so I bought \$20,000 worth of fabric and notions, designed a few dresses, and showed them to Saks Fifth Avenue and Kleinfeld.

I received an order of 30 dresses from the start, but I didn't have the production knowledge or available credit to continue, and I had only three months to fulfill the order.

I was referred to a gentleman named Max Kane who had a factory that manufactured wedding gowns on 39th street; he was 89 years old then. I went to see him and showed him my orders, and asked for his help. He handed me \$800, sent me to buy fabric, and told me the factory would support me. He said he believed in me. He was my guardian angel and immediately we became best friends.

After three years working together, he could not handle the increase in orders and amount of work, so I had to expand to additional factories and open my own production offices. It all generated its own profits and I never needed to borrow more. It was, from the beginning, a great success story.

What was your vision early on, and has it changed over time?

I always have a vision in mind. I believe in the future and I go for it. I always knew I would be successful. Attending FIT, I was encouraged by my professors during my school years there, which enabled me to have the confidence to start my own design company. I came out of school feeling I would be successful because I felt different from everyone else there. I had my own style, and I was street savvy.

Bridal, which you're known for, has brought you into ready-to-wear and accessories. Will bridal always be that core for you?

My whole life, I was always thinking evening wear and ready-to-wear, but I had to focus on one category at the very beginning. Bridal can open many doors. When a bride gets married, everything else happens at the same time. For instance, she buys her home furniture, her china, and crystal. There is a lot behind bridal besides wedding dresses.

But evening wear and ready-to-wear can put you on a different level professionally, so I'm focused on making sure that the evening wear and ready-to-wear collections are as successful as bridal. It will balance out.

Do you define your target market as high end or is it somewhat broader in terms of the range of what you're offering?

It is high-end, but it looks more expensive than it is. There are many affordable pieces that have a luxurious feeling because that is the essence of the brand and my style.



We are also launching a collection for Home Shopping Network (HSN) this fall, and this is another way of expanding into affordable offerings.

How was it to open your own boutique off Madison Avenue, and was it tough to believe you had come that far?

No, I can't believe it. I took a path in my life that is very difficult and almost impossible to achieve. But I was determined and I'm proud to say that I've been successful.

I was dreaming about the store flag above my shop for a long time. I had seen it in my mind long before I opened my store.

Is it important for you and the brand to have additional stand-alone boutiques or, from a distribution point of view, are you happy with where you are today?

I'm ambitious and looking ahead. I'm opening my second store as a franchise and I'm excited that we're starting to franchise the name. The most recent store opening was in Beirut, Lebanon so everything is happening at the same time.

How broad do you envision going with brand extensions?

I love home and home products. I did the interior design of my own houses in New York City, in Lebanon, and in Nashville, Tennessee. I also gained three years of experience working as an interior designer before I opened my own company. I know I will expand into home one day.

Do you ever take the time to reflect on how far you've come since the early days?

I spend a lot of time alone because I like to stay centered. I perceive fashion as an art and a business, and I'm very serious about my work. At the end of the day, no matter how difficult my day is, I like to reflect and feel grateful, even if it's a bad day. ●

Reem Acra dresses on Hollywood stars Eva Longoria Parker, Halle Berry, Angelina Jolie, and Marcia Cross