



# Couture queen, literally!

You may remember her as the “mystery guest” who took the Internet by storm with her MET Gala 2024 look—and at the recently held British Fashion Awards—but Indian entrepreneur Mona Patel’s style journey started much before.

By Stuti Agarwal

Image: GETTYIMAGES.COM

Here’s an OG question—joke on journalists: What is one sentence that gets them excited?

Answer: “I have never told this to anyone before.”

When in my recent interview with investor, entrepreneur, philanthropist, and haute couture connoisseur Mona Patel precluded an early answer with “I don’t usually share this, but I am going to with you”, I knew for the joke to be true, because boy...was I excited to hear what followed.

The question was simple.

Tracing her childhood back to Baroda for me, the “mystery guest” who took the Internet by storm with her MET Gala look in the May of 2024 spoke about growing up a tomboy. “While I was fortunate to have very progressive parents who fueled my rebellious tendencies, outside of this fortress I was very aware of the inequalities between men and women.” As her way of finding equilibrium for herself and embodying the role she saw her father hold while making sure she wasn’t relegated to that of her mother, she decided to dress more like a boy, until it started to change when she turned 15.

The question then was what led to that change. “I went to an all-girls Catholic school, so I never had much interaction with boys other than those in the family or the neighbourhood. But I remember I was about 15 or 16 when someone asked me if I was a lesbian. I didn’t know what it meant so I went home and asked my mum. And once I understood I was able to distinguish immediately that it wasn’t sexual for me. The reason I chose to be who I was and dress the way I did was purely to do with the empowerment it gave me and my choices.” That stayed with Patel, and soon enough she started wearing earrings, growing out her hair, waxing her legs. It all slowly evolved...“that’s also when I waxed my moustache that I was totally rocking as an accessory until then!”

But there was a long journey from even that to the position of a haute couture savant that Patel now holds.

**Cosmo India: So when did you truly embrace your femininity and style?**

**Mona Patel:** It wasn’t until my 30s. We all enter a different phase in life then. The more empowered and successful I became, the more I allowed myself to be explorative, experimental, and frankly, more vain. Because I realised that my intellectual capabilities, my strength did not come from this facade. And I understood that I can be as vain as I want and as beautiful, embracing fashion, and still be empowered and intellectual. I think that realisation allowed me to explore a lot more, and led me to actually have fun.

**C: And what has the journey from the tomboy in your teens to you in your 30s owning your feminine power been like?**

**MP:** Pretty flat. I was a regular girl, not focused on fashion, especially not

Indian fashion, because I didn’t think I had what it took to to pull it off and I associated it with a lot of elegance and grace. Between 16 and 30 years, mine was the basic evolution of a girl next door. I wasn’t focused on what I wore. In the years I was building my work, my education to entertainment ratio was very skewed. I was working on myself in order to build my dreams, and neither fashion nor how I looked was a priority. As long as I looked presentable, I was okay. And even after I moved to the US, as someone in real estate, I was in rooms filled with men. So I tried to embody that strength. I had a suit on, no make-up...I was very conscious about how I was perceived and I never wanted to signal weakness. I stayed away from anything that was fashionable through my early journey as an entrepreneur and CEO.

**C: From that to ‘Couture for Cause’ (a nonprofit fashion-meets-philanthropy initiative) is a leap...**

**MP:** Yes! Coincidentally this was early in my 30s, when I was





reflecting on what I want, who I am. It was my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday when I was at the MET, visiting the Alexander McQueen exhibition in 2011, and it—the romantic warrior aesthetic—really resonated with me and sparked that curiosity for the fashion world. I began to think about what fashion meant as art, and the Costume Institute really embraces that—not fashion as a trend but fashion as art—and that is the outlook that I started with and still embrace. I started with semi-couture, ready-to-wear runway pieces. The couture world is hard to penetrate if you are an outsider, so my initial pieces were what I saw and those which resonated with me. It is in the last five years that I have really embraced and enjoyed couture.

**C:** And you found yourself so steeped in couture that you decided to find a way to give back.

**MP:** ‘Couture for Cause’ was born out of almost my guilty pleasure. I was collecting at a very disproportionate rate and wasn’t giving back. And I remember having a very soulful conversation with my mother about it. We were discussing how I could use my couture collection as a medium to give back, because just selling them or not consuming them was not an option. The question was how could I sustain my love for couture but also do something to give back. And the cause of me supporting girls in India through education resonated with me.

**C:** We can’t not talk about your MET Gala look...

**MP:** I call it Project MET, because for me, everything is methodological. I had been manifesting this for a long while. I resonated with the theme this year so much; it had such great scope for creative freedom. When I did get the invite, I knew I wanted to represent India in the best way possible. It started with finding Indian designers, but when that didn’t work out, my next thought was that it must be a woman. That’s when



Iris van Herpen happened. It was serendipitous that her first internship was with McQueen and she is very inspired by him. As far as the Lotus Temple inspiration goes, I attached a photo of the Lotus Temple in my first email to her. For starters, it is our national flower, and also signifies rebirth, which coincided with the theme. My only request was that I needed the piece to be embroidered in India, and I knew I wanted zardozi embroidery. I had seen my mother and grandmother get the work done growing up, and it was very close to my heart. So we went through the learning curve together. Law Roach [stylist] came in when I felt like I needed an advisor and a strong holding ground, and what he brought also was with these two other backup dresses, archival pieces that we put together.

**C:** How did Casey Curran (Seattle-based artist) and the kinetic gloves happen?

**MP:** Only three weeks before the MET is when I heard of Casey and his first reaction was that he couldn’t do it. It was a short time, in addition

to him thinking my vision of incorporating kinetic petals on the train would be a conflict with Iris. ‘Maybe next time’ was what he told me, but I never take no for an answer. So I went back to the drawing board to come up with another design to bring in the multi-sensory experience I wanted it to be and convinced him to do it.

**C:** A question you ask yourself often is ‘how do you scale and evolve what we are doing?’. What would your answer be to scaling from the love that you received at the MET?

**MP:** The MET allowed me to reach places I did not know and represent my country in a way I hadn’t imagined. That has inspired me to give back more to India. My passion is empowering young girls from small towns, like me, who have big dreams and don’t know how or what it takes. I am still figuring how, but the scalability of what I can do for them is what I want to achieve—inspiring millions to embark on a journey to be the highest version of themselves (what I call the haute mindset). ■

Images: GERMAN LARKIN