INTERVIEW

It Starts With a Name

An Interview with Helen Yarmak, Designer

Helen Yarmak

Would you provide an overview of your collections and range of products?

It starts with my family name, which has a great story behind it. It comes from Yermak, a Russian explorer who has been as important to my country as Christopher Columbus has been to America.

Yermak's epic discovery of Siberia brought many precious resources to Russia. Among them was Siberian sable, which became one of the most recognizable treasures of the Russian empire. At that time, sable coats were reserved only for the Tsar and his family. Sable fur keeps you both warm when it's cold and cool when it's hot, which helps preserve energy and vitality.

Fur is a cult in the Russian tradition; it is part of our national identity. This is why Russian fur is a dominant aspect of our collections.

We also offer jewelry collections. Our pieces are crafted with large and luminous gemstones, each jewel having its own rich energy and character.

In addition, our accessories collection includes everything from pillows to handbags to blankets. These pieces are crafted from the finest fur, crocodile, and python.

How do you define the target market for the brand and what are the key countries in which you operate?

We are targeting people who seek the highest quality and eternal values in all aspects of life, regardless of where they come from. Our customers are a very international set, with a wide range of ages.

Every single product within our main line is made as a unique masterpiece, distinct and one of a kind. Our friends and customers often regard them as collector's items. Our collections appeal to anyone who appreciates the beauty of luxury. They truly fit with any lifestyle, whether worn with jeans or while walking down the red carpet.

How do you differentiate Helen Yarmak from other leading luxury brands?

Our pieces have their own distinct and recognizable style, but are also set apart by the extreme devotion to quality. Besides the art of style, we pay utmost attention to the fur itself. We never miss a fur lot from a top broker, even if it was collected and kept for years as a treasure. This passion for the highest quality materials is the essence of our fine collections.

The other side of our collection revolves around large gemstones, adding another dimension of brilliance and energy. We have been pioneers in pairing fur and jewelry pieces to fit a customer's personal style. Through this process, we've combined bespoke fur pieces with big gemstones to center a whole composition and overall aesthetic. What was once unique when we began has now become our signature style.

Another way we distinguish ourselves is by creating products that are simple but versatile. Our pieces can be converted into something completely new through easy transformations – flapping collars, unfastening sleeves, or simply turning them inside out, which offers many new looks that we've meticulously designed. Some of our pieces can be made into 20 different looks through simple and small transformations that someone can make in a minute.

You are known for women's collections. Do you have a men's line?

Absolutely. We have male products from sable to sheepskin coats, jewelry, and accessories. Our collections are fit for both rock stars and refined businessmen.

Do you foresee opportunities for brand extensions into other categories?

Some amazing things are in the works for our very new collections that will leave even our most dedicated customers awestruck, but revealing too much would ruin the surprise.

How did you start the business?

My name has always given me strength and energy. I moved to Moscow from Kiev in the early '90s, probably the most dramatic time for the tumultuous Russian economy and society. I had a Ph.D. in mathematics with a specialty in mathematical algorithms. At the time, money was scarce, and there were no jobs for scientists. My ray of hope and inspiration came one day when I saw a pair of bland and ugly women's pants made from gorgeous lace fabric that were lying in the window of an empty shop, and I decided to make a dress from this wonderful fabric. I went to a cloth factory, made up a story about some new international joint venture looking for a local production site, and placed a "trial order" with my own design. They made it, were amazed by the model, and asked for more designs to start production; I had started a franchise without even knowing the meaning of the word. Just a few years later, I won the award for International Fashion Designer of the Year in New York.

Could you have imagined in the early days that this brand would have grown to have such awareness and impact?

When we started the business in America, it was tough, because there was no one but me who believed that an unknown Russian designer could be successful on the international scene. I was so caught up in designing and running the business that I didn't have time to doubt myself. Today, our New York headquarters is located on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th street – one of the best locations in the world, in the penthouse of the legendary Crown Building, where Playboy was previously located. Eventually, we opened another boutique at The Plaza, as well as a showroom at the Via Montenapoleone in Milan. We are selling our collections with Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus. Our pieces are seen in well-known movies and on TV including in *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Sex and the City*, *Ugly Betty*, and *Confessions of a Shopaholic*.

What are the key priorities for the brand as you look to the future?

We hope to keep innovating and designing pieces that are truly paramount in luxury. ●

Helen Yarmak Necklaces and Rust Dyed Silver Fox Vest