

# France's Courtesan Couture: Zahia Dehar

BY [REBECCA BENHAMOU](#) 3/5/13 AT 12:00 AM



Zahia Dehar has peddled her tabloid scandal into a fashion fairy tale, attending the presentation of her fashion line during Paris Haute-Couture Fashion Week, Jan. 2013. CONSTANDECORDE/WIREIMAGE

As the woman at the center of one of the most high-profile sex scandals ever to hit French sports, Zahia Dehar has become the ultimate tabloid sensation. It all started in April 2010, when—at age 17—she was reportedly presented as a “birthday gift” to national football star Franck Ribéry by an alleged pimping network at a Paris VIP nightclub. The scandal broke in the press when Dehar was quizzed by French police investigating the illicit ring. Dehar told the cops that Ribéry and fellow footballer Karim Benzema had paid her for sex even though she was underage (prostitution is legal at age 18 in France). Set to stand trial in June, both men now face a possible three years’ imprisonment and a \$60,000 fine.

But while the allegations continue to tarnish their career and the image of French football, Dehar has capitalized on her notoriety, shifting her saga

away from the crime pages and into the fashion section. This past year she launched her own brand of lingerie with the help of the Hong Kong–based First Mark investment fund, and the line has become a darling of the French fashion industry’s glitterati.

“Since I was a little girl, I’ve had this passion for fashion and for what makes women look beautiful,” Dehar says. “I’m very proud of what I’ve achieved so far ... I’m concentrating on my brand for the time being, but I’ve got so many other dreams, and I’m constantly brimming with ideas.”

Between fashion shows and television appearances, this year is shaping up to be a busy one for Dehar. Last month *Zahia, From Z to A*, a documentary directed by Hugo Lopez, aired on French national television. Giving a peek into Dehar’s pink-colored world, it focuses on the creation of her latest lingerie collection. “Zahia is sort of contemporary myth, which is both sad and beautiful,” Lopez wrote in a letter to French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* the day the film aired. “She is a media icon, perhaps the most scrutinized French personality at the moment, the person that people most fantasize about.” A day later, on January 23, Dehar showcased her second couture lingerie line at the Palais de Tokyo during Paris Haute Couture Week. The line received mixed reviews in the press, as did its creator—while some people see Dehar as a modern-day Cinderella, others believe she is an opportunist. Though she rarely gives interviews, Dehar still wishes to defend herself from the negative publicity. “The one thing that I’m truly proud of since the scandal broke is that I’ve made my dream come true,” she says. “I no longer feel oppressed by the media. My brand created jobs in France and gave me the opportunity to work with the best craftsmen.”

On January 31, Dehar was again in the headlines after announcing that her next collection would be made in a French studio founded by former workers for Lejaby, one of France’s best-known lingerie brands, which went into liquidation in December 2010 (it has since been reborn as Maison Lejaby under new ownership). “I made this choice because I wanted to support Lejaby and also because I was looking for the best possible savoir-faire,” Dehar says. “I’m looking forward to having my whole line produced here, because it’s the best quality.” (A smart move, considering that President François Hollande’s government has been exhorting customers to buy “made in France.”)

While her wildest dreams may be coming true, Dehar's life hasn't always been *la vie en rose*. Born in Ghriss, Algeria, in 1992, she emigrated to France with her mother and younger brother when she was 10 years old and didn't speak a word of French. Raised in Champigny-sur-Marne, a commune in the suburbs of Paris, she fell into prostitution when she was 16. "I'm still the same person that I used to be, with the same passions and the same dreams. The only difference is that I've become a media target," she says, declining to talk at length about her past.



*vie en rose*: Dehar's fashion concoctions have attracted fans such as Karl Lagerfeld. ALFRED/SIPA

Soon after the prostitution allegations came to light in 2010, Dehar landed a gig as a lingerie model. The following year, she fronted the Spanish edition of *V* magazine and appeared alongside actor Eric Roberts in the Italian *Vanity Fair*. Dehar has even become a muse to the art scene, a new Kiki de Montparnasse. In May 2011 she starred in a futuristic short film, *Bionic*, staged by director Greg Williams. "She is a sort of extraterrestrial nymph, and that's why I wanted to work with her," Williams has said. She also posed as Eve in a piece named *Zahia in Paradise* for the photographer duo Pierre and Gilles.

By last February she'd become ubiquitous enough to stage an exhibition at Pierre Passebon's gallery, retracing the last two years of her artistic progression. "Zahia has a relationship with art that rejoins a very common tradition," Passebon had stated. "It is the place where emblematic figures like

Lady Hamilton, Marquise Casati, La Castiglione, and of course Gertrude Stein, with her numerous portraits, intermingle.”

“My meeting with Zahia was at first an aesthetic shock,” Passebon added. “Her body is a living sculpture.”



Dehar's style: "feminine and playful," displaying a love of the rococo. DOMINIQUE MAITRE

Now reinventing herself as a lingerie designer, Dehar has become one of Karl Lagerfeld's young protégés. After he shot her debut couture collection last year, he even compared her with Coco Chanel and 18th-century courtesans. “It is a tremendous compliment. I'm so flattered. And I've got so much admiration for Karl. He is my friend, my role model, and my mentor at the same time,” Dehar says.

Her collections—with their rococo avalanches of tulle, lace, and embroidered crystals and beads—feel like a fantasy world. “All the couture designs were inspired from a fairy tale that I wrote once, or from some personal anecdotes and history,” she says. “It could be anything, from a beautiful landscape to a mouthwatering pastry.” Defining her style as “genuinely feminine and playful,” Dehar likes her designs to be both humorous and sophisticated. “I opted for couture because it is the only way to make the most spectacular designs and embrace a richer, creative world while transcending the limits of

fashion trends.” She also prides herself on being a perfectionist, hiring top French craftsmen, from corset designer François Tamarin to feather specialist Eric-Charles Donatien and embroiderer Jean-Pierre Ollier. Her last collection even aroused the interest of photographers Terry Richardson and Ellen von Unwerth.



With Jean

Paul Gaultier during Couture Week. FOC KAN/WIREIMAGE

Despite the help of A-list fans and collaborators, Dehar hasn’t quite conquered the hearts of the French public. Last summer, she shocked the Twitterverse after posting a picture, while on holiday in Corsica, that showed off her bottom in a provocative pose. The French press has even dubbed her *la scandaleuse*—a nickname given to Marie Antoinette, who shared the same taste for extravagant outfits and baroque style. The French never forgave their queen for her over-the-top lifestyle. Will they ever get over Dehar’s controversial past? Only time will tell.

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