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REKHA
A RARE SITTING WITH BOLLYWOOD'S
ETERNAL ICON

THE YEAR OF THE
MERMAID

With a live-action Disney film, a Netflix docu-series, and a social media culture that's making waves, the mermaid is in for its biggest year yet

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GEORGES
HOBEIKA *gown*

Every June, on the Saturday closest to the summer solstice, thousands of people dressed like mythical sea creatures flood the streets of Coney Island in Brooklyn. Known as the *Mermaid Parade*, this theatrical event is as famous among New Yorkers as the nearly 100-year-old roller coaster serving as its iconic backdrop. With no shortage of glittery merfolk, bejeweled monofins, and coral-inspired accouterments, the annual spectacle is a celebration of self-expression, art, and community. And while the *Mermaid Parade* has been going on since the 1980s, this year's festivities are particularly evocative of the cultural zeitgeist in 2023.

Even before the live-action retelling of the 1989 animated Disney film *The Little Mermaid* (starring Halle Bailey as Ariel) hit theaters in late May, it was already one of the most talked-about movies of the year. Days before its release, Netflix dropped a four-part docu-series titled *MerPeople*, which explores the half-billion dollar (USD) mermaiding industry through the lens of underwater performers – those who have made careers in entertainment out of their passion for these marine creatures. Add to that Huda Kattan transformed into a mermaid for *Vogue* Arabia's February 2023 cover, and there's no question about it: Mermaids are everywhere right now. What was once

garments. "Personally, I find the mermaid aesthetic captivating and inspiring, as it allows for endless creativity and storytelling."

It is this fantastical element of mermaid culture that likely resonates with a growing number of people across the planet. This is especially true among younger generations and marginalized communities who can identify with the struggle of *The Little Mermaid*'s Ariel, an adventurous protagonist who is still discovering who she is and where she belongs. What's more, as members of a global society seized by conflict, compounding health crises, climate chaos, and inequality, escaping into some imaginary realm beneath the sea offers a temporary refuge from reality that appeals to just about anyone. When Beyoncé spent part of her 2010 work hiatus near the ocean, for example, she had this to say about it in her *Year of 4* documentary: "I'm always happy when I'm surrounded by water. I think I'm a mermaid or I was a mermaid. The ocean makes me feel really small and it puts my whole life in perspective. It reminds me I'm a very little piece of this huge earth and it humbles me and grounds me. It makes me feel almost like I've been baptized and I'm born again when I get out of the ocean."

The megastar's inclination to call herself a mermaid was a prescient revelation considering the explosive interest in the subject this past

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a niche subculture – fueled by fans of films like *Splash* (1984) starring Daryl Hannah and Tom Hanks, *Mermaids* (1990) starring Cher and Winona Ryder, and *Aquaman* (2018) starring Jason Momoa and Nicole Kidman – has struck the mainstream like a tidal wave, from the silver screen to the runway. "I believe the allure lies in the sense of escapism and fantasy that mermaids represent. The mermaid aesthetic allows individuals to tap into their inner child and explore a world of magic and wonder. It's an enchanting escape from reality, and the fashion world and consumers alike are drawn to its transformative and whimsical nature," says Swiss-Lebanese designer Sandra Mansour, whose spring/summer Estuary collection translates the fluidity, grace, and mystery associated with underwater dimensions into couture-adjacent

year. In the lead-up to the live-action movie, a recent report found that Google searches for "mermaid style" have risen 736% worldwide. On Pinterest, searches for "mermaid core" – which refers to the trend of emulating the mythical sea creatures through clothing, makeup, hair, and accessories – skyrocketed 614%. On TikTok, the same term has amassed over 300 million views and counting. Turn to Instagram and you'll find post after post from brands including Zara, Cult Gaia, and Andrew Gn (a favorite of Jordan's Queen Rania) with images of models in metallic tails, garments shaped like starfish, and kaftans embellished with coral motifs. Influencers like Aureta Thomollari are also embracing the aesthetic with verve, donning surrealist poolside ensembles and red carpet looks fit for Ariel's underwater home of Atlantica.

The ripple effect of a rising interest in mermaids has undoubtedly reached the fashion industry at the moment, but it's not a new phenomenon. Designers such as Versace, Mugler, and Jean Paul Gaultier have been experimenting with oceanic influences for decades, from asymmetrical hemlines and cascading ruffles to evoke the movement of waves, to iridescent fabrics reminiscent of fish scales, to intricate embroidery of marine flora and fauna. In 2001, Jeremy Scott sent a model down the runway dressed like Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* in aquatic shades of turquoise and purple-ish blue. Photographers have long had an affinity for mermaid-like imagery too, including Steven Meisel who, in response to the 2010 BP oil spill, shot model Kristen Mcmenamy laying on jagged rocks, tangled in netting like a dying sea creature for *Vogue* Italia. The artistic duo Pierre et Gilles, known for their whimsical depictions of pop culture icons, has been combining painting with photography since 1976, famously drawing from their fascination with *The Little Mermaid*, among other fairytale figures.

There's dressing like a mermaid, and then there's wearing an actual swimmable mermaid tail, as merfolk do. According to Netflix's *MerPeople*, high-quality, custom designs can cost upwards of AED18 300. "The first time I tried on a mermaid tail for an underwater photoshoot, I felt this unique energy that emerges when there is a mermaid," says Marielle Hénault, founder and creative director of AquaMermaid, the world's largest swimming school with 10 locations across North America. On the AquaMermaid website, tails are available for purchase and for rent. "Kids and adults around me were smiling, curious, happy, giggling. Becoming a magical creature created a positive atmosphere full of joy and I wanted to share this experience with people around me," Hénault says of starting her business in 2015. She describes mermaiding as a sport that fuses synchronized swimming with monofin swimming (when both feet are inside one fin) and free diving (holding your breath underwater). It can be practiced recreationally or professionally through performances at aquariums, pool parties, and international competitions that judge participants on technical swimming skills, acrobatic figures, breath holding, artistry, and costumes. The best part of her job? "Bringing magic into people's lives. Making them smile and laugh. Allowing them to feel beautiful and empowered as a magical creature," Hénault says.

FROM LEFT *Huda Kattan transformed into a mermaid for* Vogue *Arabia's February 2023 cover photographed by Pierfrancesco Artini, Louis Vuitton Resort collection, Mugler fall 1997 couture, Moschino spring 2023 RTW, Versace SS21 RTW*

While modern engagement with mermaid culture ranges from training courses to mermaid-themed bachelorette parties, human intrigue surrounding these creatures goes back centuries. Disney's 1989 animated musical fantasy film *The Little Mermaid* was originally influenced by a literary fairy tale of the same name penned by the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen in 1836. But folklore of this nature was around for hundreds of years prior to that. "Hans Christian Andersen was deeply influenced by *The Arabian Nights.* His dad famously owned a copy and read the stories out loud to him, as was the custom at the time. That's how so many writers of that period were brought up," says Paulo Lemos Horta, a scholar of world literature at NYU Abu Dhabi and author of *The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights.* Horta points specifically to the story of Jullanâr of the Sea, an enchanting creature who is exiled from the ocean and becomes the most cherished companion of King Shahrimân. "Jullanâr's tale isn't unique to her alone. It weaves into the fabric of both pre-modern and contemporary fables of bewitching mermaids. These aquatic enchantresses, whether by chance or design, found themselves marooned in the world of mortals. One can't help but draw parallels with the beloved Hans Christian Andersen tale that continues to bewitch the hearts of romantics worldwide."

The secret to the enduring popularity of such stories about characters who are half-human, half-fish, may lie in what those undefinable characters represent: Possibility, self-discovery, and self-acceptance. Mermaids aren't only deserving of the parades organized and the films produced in their honor because they're beautiful to look at; they take the experience of otherness and turn it into magic, and that's a message that will forever stand the test of time. □

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GEORGES
HOBEIKA *gown*

HAIR *Remah*
Jammoul
MAKEUP *Sharbel*
Hasbany **MODEL**
Theresa Hage at
Local Vice Model