

Queen of quirk

Described as “one part English eccentric, one part Betty Boop”, handbag designer Lulu Guinness is bringing her inimitable British style to Dubai

Words: LARA BRUNT

“**I**rrresistible, glamorous and mischievous.” These are the words Lucinda ‘Lulu’ Guinness uses to define her quirky British accessories label – and they could just as easily describe Guinness herself. At just 5ft 2in tall, the diminutive designer – immaculate in her signature 1940s-style tea dress, vertiginous heels and a slash of red lipstick – is the living, breathing embodiment of her brand.

After launching her eponymous label in 1989, Guinness is celebrating a quarter of a century creating



flamboyant, yet feminine, handbags and accessories. And with stores from Tokyo to Thailand, she's showing no signs of slowing down either. "I am always looking for the next step on where my designs can take me," Guinness tells AIR. "With my 25th anniversary this year we have lots of exciting new ventures in the pipeline."

These include her first standalone store in the Middle East, which is set to open in Souk Madinat Jumeirah at the start of July. "We have been stocked in Etoile and Harvey Nichols in Dubai for quite a few years now and have been very well received. As Dubai is an ever expanding market I wanted to be part of it and I'm very excited for our new store to open," she says. "I recently visited Oman on holiday and had a wonderful time – it allowed me to get a real feel for the culture."

Born in 1960 in London, Guinness spent her early years in Malta, followed by a stint in Singapore, thanks to her father's career as a Royal Navy commander. Enrolled at boarding school from the age of nine, she dreamt of being an actress, ballerina or singer – "I was always searching for glamour." At 16, she discovered the vintage racks at London's Portobello Market and began experimenting with the feminine style of the 1940s and 50s that would soon become her trademark.

After completing secondary school, Guinness planned to go to London's Central Saint Martins College to study theatre design. Instead, she spent

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a year studying graphic design at the University of Cape Town, after her father, who had now switched to a career in banking, was posted to South Africa.

Soon after she was talent-spotted, became a model and moved to Paris, which proved to be a pivotal moment in her style evolution, she says. "This is where I got to get a real sense of what my personal style was, this was the time I started to wear red lipstick and I seemed to get noticed for it. Since then that has formed into my signature look and, of course, shines through in my designs."

She returned to London in 1980 where she met – and later married – Valentine Guinness, scion of the great Irish brewing family with whom she has two daughters (the couple, who separated a decade ago, officially divorced last year and remain close). A few years later, at the age of 29, the Lulu Guinness label was born. "Well, I started off working in my basement where I designed a briefcase called the Lulu Bag," she says. "It ended up selling fantastically well and I really enjoyed having an outlet for my creativity so continued to design more bags."

Her dainty, whimsical designs – from handbags in the shape of floral baskets to totes appliqued with Scottie dogs – quickly caught on and were soon stocked in some of the world's most prestigious department stores. Why does she think her unique brand of Britishness translates so well across the globe? "For me, I believe it is our sense of humour. The slightly eccentric way we live our lives and I definitely allow my designs to represent this," she says.

The distinctive Dali-esque lips clutch remains the brand's staple accessory, while her 1993 Florist Basket, a black satin vase-shaped handbag with red velvet roses on top, has achieved iconic



status as part of the permanent fashion collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. "With a lot of support along the way from the likes of the late fashion designer Joseph, as well as fabulous support from the V&A Museum, the business has gone from strength to strength," says Guinness.

Despite having no formal training in fashion design, in 2006 Guinness was awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) in recognition of her contribution to the fashion industry. An honorary doctorate followed in 2012 from University of the Arts London, home of renowned fashion colleges Central Saint Martins and the London College of Fashion. "My most recent proudest moment would have to be seeing Kate Moss wearing my lips clutch during last season's London Fashion Week," she says.

Guinness credits Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli as her inspiration and says she lives by her motto: 'Dare to be different'. "She wasn't afraid to push boundaries and her avant-garde designs were truly inspirational," she says. "She's been my muse for the duration of my career. I put it down to her unrivalled combination of humour, wit, sophisticated intelligence and elegant style."

The new Dubai boutique will follow the same aesthetic as Guinness' flagship London store, with a black and white colour scheme and splashes of red. It will showcase classic designs alongside her latest autumn/winter 2014 collection inspired by Henri Matisse's paper cut-outs – an eye-catching period in the late 1960s which saw the French artist swap painting for cutting into painted paper with scissors. "His bold and simple artworks are the basis for my earlier designs and I have had the joy of revisiting them in my 25th year of design," she explains.

And while the fashion industry can sometimes be

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accused of taking itself a little too seriously, Guinness says she wants "to bring a little bit of light heartedness to women's lives". She says: "A lot of my personality goes into my designs and I often hear back from customers that my bags add a little bit of happiness and enjoyment to their lives. I believe they provide a form of expression and hope this will be the same for our Middle Eastern customers."