

DARLEEN WILKERSON AMERICAN ARTIST IN YEMEN

by Nancy Dughi

Some women fill their closets with dresses. Darleen Wilkerson covers her walls with clothes. Not your or my workaday outfits, but the exotic kalfans and zennas and abayas and pantaloons she has collected since she came to Yemen four years ago.

'It's like a hobby for me... I collect these things.' She waves her hand at her clothes when she is complimented on the way she has taken a jacket from Bali, added it to pantaloons from Yemen and a blouse from California and created an outfit that makes other Western women seem pale and dull beside her. She wears heavy silver and coral necklaces she finds in the suks of Yemen and seems to enjoy the feel of the long dangling earrings that are almost a trademark for her. She is a small young woman, but her flair gives her a certain weight and when she says 'I love the Yemeni dresses... I even hang them on my walls.' It makes you want to know more about her and to see those clothes-hung walls.

The Wilkerson-Karpowicz apartment is modern but Darleen has petitioned their large living room into two areas: one is a *mulraj*, the other is an American sitting-dining room. Yemeni and Western friends all feel at home here. But this two-world decor is not what first hits your eye when you walk into the apartment. What impresses are the paintings. Paintings, not dresses, for Darleen Wilkerson is an artist before she is a collector.

Large oil canvases and fine mounted color photographs line her walls. They all reflect her interest in the clothes and in the women of the Middle East. Her paintings are almost all pictures of Yemeni women, expressionless, stylized, their faces and personalities unimportant above the bright embroidered robes which spread about them as they recline or sit cross-legged on some vaguely defined cushion or rug. The costume is all, and in focusing on the costume the artist has expressed a feeling for the women who have created an art of their own. She reaches across the miles and the cultures and the years which separate her from her models and show that she respects them as sister artists. It is an impressive display of work: bright decorative, evocative.

It is only after admiring these strong paintings that one turns to the dresses which indeed, as she has said, are hanging on the wall... on hangers, ready to wear, but meanwhile, between wearings, available for appreciation. They come from

every corner of Yemen, in every color and quality. Darleen has spent much of her time here traveling and everywhere she has gone she has noted the local women's dresses. How are they unique to the area? Who makes the dresses? Where do the materials come from? She buys what she feels is authentic if it is available, or tries to find someone who will copy a particular dress locally.

Her passion has turned into a study and she is preparing a book of photographs and drawings of Yemeni costumes. She has found women in remote villages wearing dresses which are never seen in other parts of Yemen. Yemeni city women are amazed at times to learn that some unusual outfit Darleen is wearing comes from their own country.

Which is her favorite dress? 'It is hard to choose... Mostly I pick the dresses for color combinations. Purple and orange and red! Or for the patterns. I can't really say. Wait for the book. And the photographs! I have some wonderful photos!'

The samples on her walls show that Darleen is as skillful with a camera as she is with a paintbrush. Whether she illustrates the 'definitive book' on Yemeni costume with photos or paintings the 'definitive book' on Yemeni costume promises to be beautiful as well as informative.



Paintings almost as large as she is illustrate the artist's interest in Yemeni costume.

'I collect these things...' Darleen Wilkerson explains her wardrobe that is both a hobby and a study.

