



I Was A Sari

Fashioning artisans

Artisans, of late, have been increasingly making appearances at fashion weeks in India. The Lakmé Fashion Week Summer/Resort 2017 this time had devoted its Sustainable Fashion and Textiles Day entirely to artisans, **Meher Castelino** reports.



Charmen Sijo



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Smriti Dixit



Somaiya Kala Vidya



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The Stitching Project



Somaiya Kala Vidyapeeth



Sufiyun with Madame Hall



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Smriti Dixit



Dharavi Project



Sufiyun with Madame Hall

Lakmé Fashion Week (LFW) started its first Textile Day during its Winter/Festive 2013 edition, and has now institutionalised it in the week-long event. This year, LFW, which is jointly organised by Lakmé and IMG Reliance Pvt Ltd, devoted an entire day to artisans. The Sustainable Fashion and Textiles Day saw artisans from across the country showcasing their handiwork, and many designers using the platform to exhibit their own innovations. Though there were artisans from across the country, those from Kutch held centrestage.

Jaspreet Chandok, head-Fashion at IMG Reliance, elaborated, "Each season, we plan to shortlist a region to highlight. Last season it was Assam and this time Kutch. IMG Reliance's fashion curators then spend time in these markets to find the best stories at the grassroots level. We now plan to make this a featured show focusing on a region each season. Also, we will continue to support the artisans who have already showcased their work, by creating multiple opportunities for them to build their businesses over a period of time."

With the response to the artisans/craftspersons' shows being so encouraging, Chandok continued, "Our primary intent is to turn the spotlight on them, and create an interface with buyers and the media. We add an additional thrust from our end to expose them to buyers with a dedicated stall area, as well as use our public relations machinery to best push their stories. In fact, you can see this focus with the only IMG Reliance sponsored show being the 'Artisans of Kutch' show when we could have

easily worked with any major designer instead. We are dedicating additional stall space at the event for artisans, as well as creating multiple interface opportunities for them this season. We also organised a panel discussion hosted by Hemang Agrawal which deliberated on artisan-related issues."

According to Chandok, the show that was curated, had designs that were all-contemporary, though using influences from the craft that has been around for centuries. "I think this will be the road ahead. We now need to focus on enhancement of the business of these Indian handloom stories and brands. We would be looking at creating a dedicated interfacing mechanism for the artisans from across the country," he said.



Jambudweep



Somaiya Kala Vidyapeeth



Shrijon



Dharavi Project



Jambudweep



The Stitching Project

Artisans holding centrestage

The opening show on the second day of the Week was by Artisans' Centre, which is not just a venue, gallery or shop in the historic heart of Mumbai's Kala Ghoda art district. The show titled 'Reincarnations—Life After Fashion', supported by the Mantra Foundation, was conceptualised and curated by Radhi Parekh, the woman behind Artisans'.

The idea, ever since the brand was launched in 2011, was to create a marketplace based on the lasting value of India's craft heritage and inspire consumer consciousness as well as influence their choices. Artisans' Centre is uniquely aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are aimed towards maximising benefits for people and communities, while minimising impact on the environment.

"We partner with artisans as empowered owners of the creative process. They earn up to 75 per cent of the proceeds," informed Radhi Parekh, who had an interesting expo titled 'Think + Make' by designer Gaurav Jai Gupta of Akaaro, as part of the Green Wardrobe initiative.

In August 2016, Artisans' Centre had showcased the 'Please Touch—The Handloom Experience', which was an expo about farm-to-sustainable fashion.

For the 'Reincarnations' show, there was a presentation by 'I Was A Sari', which was a unique show created from old saris. 'I Was A Sari' is a lifestyle brand offering a premium line of upcycled textile and fashion products made all over again from saris and crafted for fashionable and ethically conscious people. "For every beautiful upcycled item that 'I Was A Sari' makes, there's an equally beautiful transformation happening in the daily lives of the Indian women who made it. When you wear the 'I Was A Sari' brand, you look and feel good knowing that your unique product was made with respect for people and the planet. 'I Was A Sari' does not just upcycle products, it upcycles lives," says Stefano Funari, who along with Natalie



Frost collaborates with 'Fashion in Process' at the Polytechnic di Milano University.

The creations conceived in Milan, but born and brought up in Mumbai, was by a group of likeminded individuals from diverse backgrounds united by their desire to upcycle and conform to social inclusion. Funari lives in Mumbai, where he works with the NGO Community Out Reach Programme (CORP), which runs vocation training programmes for disadvantaged women around the city, and emphasises on tailoring.

The other show—"The Stitching Project"—by Fiona Wright and Praveen Nayak started in rural Rajasthan with the aim of helping local women earn some extra money. Khadi, block prints and vintage silk saris were given a new life. Wright, who is from Australia, is a textiles teacher who runs a stitching workshop with a group of women.

"We started operating Creative Arts Safaris, hands-on textile, and creative arts tours in 2004. Since then we have established a home near Pushkar in Rajasthan. Textiles are our major focus. We run textile tours, and with support of Fairtrade and the beautiful workmanship that

you see, we operate 'The Stitching Project'," says Wright.

Wright and Kanhiya Lal (Praveen Nayak to his mates) live in a beautiful area on the edge of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan. "The place is a desert, and life can be quite difficult for many of our neighbours. For me, textiles have been a major interest since I was a child, and was also a career in various guises for much of my life. Praveen has been a late bloomer in this field, starting to get hooked, as we researched for our hands-on creative arts tours. It was when he discovered the existence of Fairtrade projects here in India that he really became inspired by what you could do for others while building your own business.

"We are very interested in knowing the people and the methods of production in the garments we make. We ensure that all people we deal with are fairly remunerated for their work, and want to create as much work as we can for as many hands as possible. Living in India, we are blessed with a huge wealth of textile traditions at our fingertips and want to use this to create arty, stylish clothes, homewares and craft supplies," says Wright.

Footwear, fabric and jewellery

Balancing the creations of 'The Stitching Project' were the shoes by Kurio brand designed by Megha Rawat. Kurio is derived from the word 'curio', which means something unusual and worth collecting. Says Rawat, "We strongly believe that lifestyle and sustainability go hand in hand. Our vision is focused on creating products that are comfortable and elegant without compromising on morals and ethics. Our journey began two years back with footwear, and since then has expanded to a wide array of products and accessories.

"Each pair is aesthetically designed with the finest fabrics sourced from different parts of the country, stemming from our love for hand-spun and traditionally printed textiles. Those are manufactured by hand with utmost attention through local artisans and workers using eco-friendly upcycled materials. It is through this approach that we ensure a unique and comfortable experience driven by thoughts, feelings and

love in a world that is increasingly dependent on heavy machines and an assembly line mentality. Each pair is the epitome of simplicity, sophistication and conscience. Our products range from formal to casual, traditional to contemporary with no compromise towards quality or finesse."

Smriti Dixit's work, on the other hand, revolves around a collage of fibres, fabrics and assorted objects that are stitched, sown, folded and knotted into jewellery, which is entirely from textiles. Her collection at the Week was a stunner. Dixit was born in Bhopal, and completed her BFA from Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda. She is the recipient of the Jackson Pollock Grant for 2012-13, and the Raza Foundation Award for 2003.

Dixit's work aims to deconstruct the labels that make an object a work of art, craft or design. "In art, we say, everything is individual. But who decides what can be worn on the body or worn around the neck? Where do art, craft, and design converge,

and where do they stand apart?" she wonders aloud. An element of the ritualistic has always been an integral part of Dixit's art, and she brings this same energy to her wearable work.

"The textiles used to drape the gods in the puja room, and for religious occasions became the first material used in my art. When I started, it was the availability that drew me to textiles, and then I started seeing the possibilities," adds Dixit. There is a fun energy to her work that invites the audience to touch, feel, and drape the jewellery the way they want to and play around with it in the same way that she herself does. Her designs are bright and bold shades that enchant the wearer, while changing one's perception of what jewellery is, and where craft ends and art begins.

"In this exercise of creating jewellery, I have been creating jewellery, rings, and bracelets — products where the creative engagement gets over in a matter of hours. I am, in a way, trying to understand the difference in my own creative processes—one that goes on for months and another that finishes within hours—and how I react to both exercises," she concludes.

Earthy stones, giving life to waste

'Wandering Whites' by Gaury Pathare was the other jewellery brand that caused a stir, but was created from stones, which the designer had collected on her many travels. Having the habit of collecting stones during her travels through the mountains, Pathare was fascinated by their forms and the stories they may have brought with them. She never thought she would use the stones for something purposeful. But then, like most happy accidents, one day she started conceptualising jewellery designs with these stones and metal with a fusion theme. Now, she also uses brass, waste and scrap as material, making her art truly organic.

"My designs are a reflection of my thoughts and my individuality, and the amalgamation of a person who can be immensely caring yet completely detached like a vagabond in love with the mountains," said Pathare.





Jambudveep by Shubhi Sachan, on the other hand, is a brand that makes waste materials come to life whether it is a rebirth of materials from overflowing landfills or incinerators.

"Mining and the industrial era brought about an obsession with virgin materials. Industries see raw material go into powerful machines that turn them into shiny new products, turning a blind eye to the little pieces of industrial scrap produced with each manufacturing operation. Not only is this catastrophic for the environment; but large quantities of materials that require highly sophisticated processes, copious amounts of energy and resources to get manufactured in the first place, are wasted. The Indian subcontinent has a rich tradition of recycling," explained Sachan. This largely informal sector collects and segregates profuse amounts of industrial waste on a daily basis. "Many of the materials we regard as waste have the potential to become raw materials for new products and processes."

Sachan is focused on rethinking the use of industrial waste materials by combining the knowledge and skills of traditional crafts with modern



materials. "The sophistication of traditional craft is capable of turning the most unrelenting of materials into fluid surfaces through complex weaves. Jambudveep is this organic transformation of industrial waste to a usable product," she added.

The experts from Bhuj

Somaiya Kala Vidya (SKV), a division of KJ Somaiya Gujarat Trust, is an institution for traditional artisans of Kutch, Gujarat. Combining over fifty years' experience of Somaiya Vidyavihar with eight years of design education for artisans, it offers sustained, coherent programmes in design and business to provide effective, relevant and practical education.

SKV honours and incorporates existing traditions, and its advisors are Master Artisans. The faculty includes national and international educators, and SKV outreach offers workshops to the world and courses in craft traditions taught by artisan designers. The trust manages Somaiya Vidyavihar, Mumbai, and runs over 30 educational institutions. The institute serves over 30,000 students and employs more than 1,500 faculty members. SKV seamlessly blends

tradition with the contemporary by honouring the rich cultural heritage embodied in craft traditions. In a year-long design course, SKV students reconnect with the power of traditions that have endured for centuries. They learn to cherish the deep essence of their heritage, and to vary it with individual style. They learn to increase value, not volume.

Founder director Judy Frater received an Ashoka Fellowship to found the Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (KRV), the first design school for artisans. In 2009, she received the Sir Misha Black Medal for Distinguished Service to Design Education for her work. After successfully operating KRV for eight years, she joined forces with the KJ Somaiya Gujarat Trust to expand the programme to the status of an institute.

The alumni of SKV, the Kutch-based institute for artisan education, showcased for the first time new collections of saris at the Week. Graduates of a course in design, the seven traditional artisans were both designers and creators of the collection. In a cloud of craft designed by professional designers and executed by craft technicians, the work of these artisan designers was a breath of fresh air. The woven, ajrakh printed, bandhani and embroidered saris were imaginative innovations of their own cultural heritage.

And all the others

The bandhani expert: Abdulaziz Alimamad Khatri learnt the art of woollen bandhani from his family, who have created bandhani for generations. His proficiency with dyes was in great demand among weavers, NGOs and companies. But after studying design, Aziz and his brother Suleman began making high-end silk bandhani for urban and international markets. They created exquisite traditional classics, as well as exciting innovations. Aziz's imaginative and skilled work has brought him opportunities to work with designers, scholars and customers from all over the world. In 2015 and 2016, the brothers attended the International Folk Art Market (IFAM) in Santa Fe, where their work

was well appreciated. Subsequently, they shared their knowledge at workshops across the US. They will attend IFAM again in 2017. For LFW, Aziz's collection that was co-designed with his daughter Tayna, was inspired by the villages of Kutch. They depicted fields, houses, animals, and also the migration of villagers to cities. Though they would not like to leave, Aziz said the villagers are forced to do so in order to find education for their children and income for their families.

Suf embroidery masters: The families of Laxmi Kalyanji Puvar, Tulsiben Purshottam Puvar and Taraben Vijay Puvar migrated from Sindh, Pakistan in 1972 and settled down in Faradi, where they were born. The three young women studied till Class VII, the maximum that they could in the village, and subsequently learnt traditional 'suf' embroidery from their mothers. The intricate work can only be done by young women because it is worked on the warps and wefts of fine fabrics. All three did commercial embroidery for a while, but did not enjoy it. In 2011, Laxmi and Tulsi studied design, and in 2012 Tara followed. Laxmi dreamt of becoming a designer and teaching others. She joined the faculty at Somaiya Kala Vidya, and all three women took the Business and Management for Artisans course at SKV in 2014. They gained the courage to start a joint business, and to travel without needing male escorts. The team mentored chikan embroiderers in Lucknow, and inspired by the experience developed exciting new suf work by revising the forgotten jalli work. In 2016, Tulsi and Tara participated in a co-design project with American students. The trio's collection was inspired by the branches of trees, and geometric, random motifs. The trio explained, "We need to keep making new designs. We want a high-end market, and we want to do custom work. Design is key to competition. We work as a team."

The ajrakh expert: Aakib Ibrahim Khatri's family has been making ajrakh for generations. Aakib began working when he was eighteen, and believes that to be a good artisan

one should have patience and love for the craft. Aakib wants to break the limitations of natural colours and use them in a way that has not been possible till now. His dream was to begin his own autonomous hand block print business. After studying design, Aakib began a niche practice, with his small-scale, technically skilled production. He prefers to sell directly, and his specialisation is large, one of a kind complex geometric textiles. In 2013, Aakib participated in the fashion show 'Co-Creation Squared' in Mumbai. He has also taught ajrakh printing to students of Somaiya Kala Vidya's Craft Traditions courses. Aakib's collection was inspired by Islamic geometry and Islamic architectural patterns, particularly radiating stars. Aakib said, "I don't do production work. I only do what I myself can do. I make sure to follow my passion. I have more ideas than I can produce!"

Crafting beauties: Monghiben Rana Rabari passed the seventh grade and learnt embroidery from her mother and neighbours. She has never done job work embroidery. In 2010, Monghiben studied design, and in 2013 participated at 'Co-Creation Squared'. In 2014, she joined the Business and Management course at Somaiya Kala Vidya. After graduating, Monghiben held workshops and courses, and began her own business. She now ventures on her own for sourcing and marketing, and is a Design Craft member. In 2016, she participated in an international co-design project. Monghiben's collection was inspired by 'Ludi', the traditional woollen veil of Rabari women. The sari is also the traditional dress. By using the ludi aesthetic on the sari, Monghiben has given tradition a new face. She reveals, "Doing my own work I feel free. I will tell a story, and keep tradition (alive)."

Weaving gorgeous fabrics: Dahyalal Atmaram Kudecha belongs to a traditional weaver's family. He worked under a master weaver, and earned his livelihood by weaving traditional and contemporary designs for over 25 years. But he always had two dreams: higher education for his son, and to become an independent artist. After

studying design, Dahyabhai learnt to innovate within his tradition, and to take creative risks. Since 2010, Dahyabhai has taught design to traditional artisans, and weaving to international students. In 2014, he joined the SKV faculty, and graduated from the pilot course in Business and Management for Artisans. Dahyabhai has grown from being a job worker to entrepreneur. He attended the Tinkuy weavers' conference in Peru, and has participated three times in the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe. At SKV, he helped forge an effective partnership with weavers from Bagalkot, Karnataka. Today, his son has joined him in weaving. Dahyabhai's collection was inspired by winter fog, and he said, "I am proud that my success has set an example for young people to continue or return to weaving."

Indo-Australian fusion fantasy:

Sudha Patel of Shrujan, the brand that works to empower women, worked on the 'Easton Anaphora Spring/Summer 2017' collection by top Australian designer Pamela Easton. It was a great line designed in Australia but Made in India that highlighted shadow work with hand embroidery and tiny





Chaman Siju

beads on handwoven cotton and chanderi. Layered over white voile, the water colours were ivory, eau de nil and black for dresses, skirts, shirts, pants and kurtas with skittle prints, lots of heavy cotton thread work and zigzag insertions. The collection comprised white minis, delightful kurtas over dresses with jacket and striped cropped pant with a tunic. The black section glittered with mirror work for ornate boleros worn with a miniskirt.

Other weaves of Kutch: When it comes to traditional weaves, there are not many who can compete with master weaver Chaman Siju from the Handloom Design Centre. One of the most respected names in the textile weaving industry, Chaman Siju's work has been exhibited at top textile events in the country. Using cotton/wool and cutting silk, the expert weaver has also added organic cotton, which was handwoven, natural dyed and of course hand-spun to display some stunning textiles. The palette was a riot of Holi colours along with white and indigo that created a perfect festive mood on the catwalk. The saris were striped or plain with beautiful colours and worn with some of the most



Sufiyan with Madame Hall

dramatic, creative blouses with fabric detailing, cold-shoulder silhouettes or asymmetric in shape.

Sydney street style and Indian craft: Block printing in traditional ajrakh with minerals and natural organic processes was the highlight of the 'Sufiyan with Madame Hall' brand. Designers Lisa Hall and Sufiyan Khatri presented their collection 'Flamingos' inspired by the regal birds. The duo's diverse creativity worked really well for the ensembles. Hall brought in her 'Sydney Street Style' look, while Sufiyan added the ajrakh expertise. With the characteristic blue and red hues of the craft as the focal point, the pair added shades of pink and indigo along with clamped, stamped, shibori and sun bleaching that completed the beauty of the collection. Bringing in intricate geometrics and florals—printed at times on both sides of the fabrics—the 14-step production process with wooden carvers, printers, dyers and washers, added to the sustainable theme of the collection. Jumpsuits with geometric prints and jackets, flared midi over skirt and breeches with ruffled shirts were some of the exciting entries.



The Dharavi project

The Dharavi project: LFW has always endeavoured to create social, cultural and traditional awareness along with fashion. At LFW Summer/Resort 2017, the popular Fashion Funda event was moderated by Parmesh Shahani, head-Godrej India Culture Lab in collaboration with Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA), an NGO which has done extensive work in India's largest slum Dharavi. The topic 'A Dharavi Design Dialogue' comprised a thought-provoking panel discussion on the subject; along with a fashion presentation by designer Jay Ramrakhiani who joined hands with Mohammed Ismail Ansari and Shaikh Alam, embroidery artisans from Dharavi, to create 11 ensembles. To highlight the work of the experts and give a new dimension to their work, Ramrakhiani presented his innovations on garments comprising eveningwear in georgette, silk, net, tussar and brocades with striking laser cutting, and beautiful multi-coloured embroidery. Ansari and Alam shared their experiences of working with Ramrakhiani, and how the trio proved that sharing of knowledge helped in creating a forward movement for the craftsmen.**FF**