



CRAFTSMANSHIP 02.19.14T1:45AM ET



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High Fashion Made in India

Craftsmanship may be a trend in the high-fashion world, but in places like India, it's how garments have been created for centuries. An exhibit in New Delhi explores the deep tradition.

For many of India's top fashion designers, going to work involves navigating the makeshift tea stands and the cows that wander freely through the streets of Noida, an industrial area on the outskirts of India's capital, New Delhi, where many designers have their studios.

Inside these mom-and-pop workshops, scores of young men from local villages sit at small tables using age-old techniques to sew garments and patiently position sequins onto both traditional saris and funky designs to be shown on the runways in Paris and New York.

This tradition of craftsmanship is on display to a wider audience this month as part of the Be Open exhibition "Made In India," which runs until February 28 at the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts in Delhi. For the show, twenty-three designers spanning fashion, jewelry, and interior design were asked to create pieces using ancient practices in designs with a global appeal.

More than just another fashion exhibit, "Made in India" embodies Be Open's mission to preserve artisan crafts worldwide.



The organization is backed by Yelena Baturina, a Russian philanthropist and businesswoman. "We feel that the future of the handmade is about keeping it out of the moribund museum space and instead making it live and breathe by becoming part of the market economy," she said. "Be Open looks at today's most promising Indian designers, giving them the opportunity to present their work from a completely new perspective, so that it appeals to a much wider international audience."

India was chosen as the location for the launch event because of its strong tradition in artisan craftsmanship. "Made in India...is launching here because there is a tremendous legacy of skilled work and a willingness to take it forward into the future," Baturina added.

Indeed, while fast fashion factories across Asia often employ young villagers to create mass products on machines, many of India's top designers are choosing to preserve the beauty of their cloth-making traditions, using the old skills of hand-embroidery, hand-sewing, and dying techniques. This craftsmanship is not only affordable in the country, but also necessary to create refined garments that meet the demands of the vast Indian wedding and sari market, and also distinguish young designers like Rahul Mishra or Gaurav Gupta overseas. Craftsmanship—and all things artisanal—is all the rage in the fashion world, especially in the global luxury market.

Some of Delhi's hippest dressers are presenting pieces at "Made in India," like the design duo Thukral & Tagra who have taken the current trend of color in men's fashion to heart with their ultra-loud suits. In this exhibition, they are presenting designs like an iPod stand made of an ancient-looking red clay material, that look like a piece of pottery gone deliberately wrong.

Central Saint Martin's graduate Gaurav Gupta, whose all-but-naked dress caused a storm when Lady Victoria Hervey wore it to the Golden Globes last month, presents sculptures partly clad in resin dresses. "It is an amazing opportunity to be showcased to a wider audience and to create something original," said Gupta.

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Rahul Mishra who is competing in the International Woolmark Prize in Milan later this month, has created some extraordinary jackets and dresses which are hand-embroidered, and decorated with a rough-looking organic wool harking back, he says, to ancient times. One took seven days to hand embroider.

Mishra is known for his work with the handloom. "It is important to think about how one's actions will affect the poorest people in society and working with villagers to create hand-made garments is giving something to some of the poorest people. Some of my craftspeople can even afford iPhones now," he said adding that his philosophy is inspired by Gandhi.

Samant Chauhan, who works with hand-woven, ethical silk, and the label

Pankaj & Nidhi, both of which are carried by Anthropologie, also designed pieces for the show. Chauhan created a pleated dress that looks like it was made from handmade Japanese paper, while Pankaj & Nidhi designed monotone geometric dresses that were woven in descending shades of gray and are in contrast to the bright, colorful creations and embroidery the brand usually presents.

The work of Ashish Soni, the first Indian designer to show in New York, was also on display at "Made in India." Mr. Soni created a range of white clothing and cushions with embroidery using safety pins, melted pearl beads, and fabric strips.

Sunil Sethi, the charismatic head of the Fashion Design Council of India, served as the chief advisor to the project, and designed some giant floor cushions for the exhibition through his company Sunil Sethi Design Alliance, which looked as if he had skinned a coarse-haired cat and stuffed the fur.

A follow up exhibition is in the works for Japan in Fall 2014, and a global hand-craft design selection will be shown at Expo Milan in 2015. Organizers are currently researching locations in Japan where cities like Kyoto have equally strong handcraft traditions and scores of kimono and weaving companies, dating back several hundred years, still exist. Some of the results could be seen recently on the Paris runway in the collection of Japanese menswear designer, Miharayasuhiro who collaborates with one of the oldest houses in Kyoto, Hosoo, on an ongoing basis to craft his pieces.