



THE CRAFT AND THE PROFESSIONAL

There are many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) helping artisans make a living, but there are only a few who have considered the idea of tying up with high-fashion designers to bring the message of crafts and fashion into the limelight. Many designers get their collections embellished and embroidered by artisans in India, but very few give credit to the crafts in their shows. But that's changing, and artisans are very much in the limelight, **Meher Castelino** reports.



Hetal Shrivastav

Anshu Arora

KICKING OFF THE DAY

Day Two at LFW Winter/Festive 2017 was reserved for sustainable fashion, and this time five master craftsmen of Paramparik Karigar were paired with five talented young designers for the opening show, 'Craft Is Cool'. The result was a great fusion of heritage crafts presented in a stylish contemporary mode.

The two-decade-old journey of Paramparik Karigar spans the expanse of the country discovering talented craftsmen, who have quietly nurtured the heritage crafts of our land. The Paramparik Karigar initiative was undertaken to provide sustained livelihoods to the craftsmen, and ensure the participation of their next generation in the continuation of the heritage.

Ratna Krishna Kumar, management committee member, said, "Paramparik Karigar is proud to be associated with LFW Winter/Festive 2017 and would like to applaud its endeavour in promoting our craftsmen and presenting handloom textiles/crafts in an innovative and contemporary form."

Jaspreet Chandok, vice-president and head of fashion at IMG Reliance, remarked, "We are delighted to have Paramparik Karigar on board for this growth and empowerment initiative which brings next generation artisans aligned with emerging new market trends, so that they can sustain themselves in a rapidly changing and evolving retail scenario."

The five pairs created a stylish mélange of crafts, weaves and contemporary fashion. Inspired by peace and harmony the artisans and designers not only highlighted the crafts, but also their creative sensibilities that revealed a graceful hint of Japanese and oriental nuances to match the requirements of the season. The variety of styles, were accessorised with beautiful vegan shoes designed from the fabrics of the show by Kurio. Overall, there were five stories in all.

With the Sustainable Fashion Day that was established at the Lakmé Fashion Week (LFW) a few years ago, the collaboration between artisans and designers has taken an interesting path wherein the former are given due credit for their craft and the latter are able to present an innovative and fresh approach to the collections, thereby creating a win-win situation on all fronts, and helping the crafts get the attention that they richly deserve on the national and international fashion scene.



The Bagh Story

When it comes to block printing techniques in the 'bagh' patterns, there is one name that stands above all. Mohammed Yusuf Khatri, master craftsman from Madhya Pradesh along with his sons—Bilal and Kazeem, has always created wonders on fabrics as well as even bamboo mats and leather. The inspiration has been the fauna and architecture of the land that enchanted lovers of the bagh handblock printing and dyeing techniques.

Teaming up with Mohammed Yusuf Khatri were Vineet Kataria and Rahul Arya with their label 'Vineet Rahul'. Using the fabrics cleverly, the duo unveiled their collection called 'Raag' comprising neo-Indian slim-line kurtas; wrap trench coats, quilted skirts; while the silhouettes moved from kimono sleeves to detailing with pleated hemlines. "We kept the silhouettes simple so that the prints could be brought into the limelight and given more importance," revealed the duo.

Shifts, maxis with side fins, belted soft double-sleeved jacket and kimono over kurta with loose pants, gave the bagh print a perfect backdrop. Working with gajee silk, voile, mulberry silk and chanderi, the duo stayed true to the bagh colours—maroon, black and beige to highlight the craft.





The Dabu Story

When it comes to the intricate technique of mud-resist form in handblock printing, master craftsman Bheru Lal Chippa from Rajasthan is the ace at the art. Teaming up with his five sons, Bherulal created some amazing handblock designs. His two young sons, Pintu and Vikas ensured that there was a fresh fervour added to the patterns to match the modern needs of the fashion industry.

Established in 2015, Poochki is an *au courant* apparel label that emphasises the age-old craft of handblock printing with fauna-inspired prints. The brand by Ishanee Mukherjee and Anirudh Chawla, launched at the Gen Next LFW Week Summer/Resort 2017, is known for its relaxed fashion statements and that is exactly what was presented on the ramp. The Fall Winter collection called 'Renge' showcased exclusive prints inspired from the calm and cacophony that surround a lotus pond. The look used the delicate 'dabu' prints in deep earthy tones to give an interesting angle. Piped dresses, boleros, cropped pants, panelled skirts, blouson and an interesting box-pleated harem pant added to the beauty of the dabu print with the feminine silhouettes. Geometrics and pretty floral designs enhanced the youthful zest of the creations. "Clashing was the order of the season. The extreme construction techniques have been highlighted with contrast binding. The silhouettes are dramatic depicting print-on-print and extreme layering. The waistline has been accentuated using tie details. Hues and textures come together in garments that chant an optimistic and empowering melody," the pair explained.





The Shibori Story

Based in Munnar and started in 1994 under the Shristi Trust, Aranya Naturals of Kerala has been known for its tie-and-dye as well as natural dyes. The 100 per cent natural dyes are extracted from local sources. The colours are derived from indigo, tea waste, eucalyptus and pomegranate, which gave a natural appeal to the shibori.

Shreejith Jeevan's 'Rouka' label has always been a devotee of natural and organic fabrics. Keeping the beauty of shibori in mind and the sensibilities of the craft, Shreejith used a mix of naturally-dyed shibori along with resist dyeing techniques like batik and ombré dyeing to create engineered pieces for his collection 'Into the Lotus Pond'. He also made clever use of arashi, nui and itajime shibori that added to the charm of the creations. "The collection showcased is a capsule of eight looks that is inspired by a calm and serene lotus pond. The idea was to abstract the qualities of water through textile dyeing techniques and created the feeling of a lotus pond with surface techniques. Imagery has been simplified into simple geometry with the exception of a few simple motifs that add the playful Rouka element," informed Shreejith. Inspired by the Japanese Zen styles with minimum harm to the fabric, Shreejith offered asymmetric tops, maxis, easy tunic dresses, Samurai inspired skirts and sheer colour blocked organza jackets. An A-line tent, empire line smock, front tied maxi and layered tunics over maxis were the perfect offering for the craft. The shades were restricted to indigo, blue and madder red along with ivory. The fabric choice moved from pure silk to satin, organza, georgette and crêpe.





The Bandhej Story

From Gujarat, the name Shohel Khatri means the master of bandhej or bandhani. Giving this Indian tie-n-dye technique his brilliant touches the result was a palette of designs in all the rich Indian hues that were ideal for the trendsetting dresser. On the other hand, 'The Pot Plant' label by Resham Karmchandani and Sanya Suri received an enthusiastic response when it first appeared at the Gen Next FLW Summer/Resort 2017 show. Working with Shohel gave the designing duo a new dimension to their styles. Redefining the feminine craft, which is predominantly used for wedding trousseaux, the designers showcased easy gender fluid garments with a versatile appeal. Draped kimono jackets, a flame red sari with a rustic blouse and feminine shapes were the highlight of the womenswear. Menswear appeared in combos of jacket, kurta and pants, a jumpsuit or track pant versions. "The collection is an amalgamation of the intricate craft of bandhani with clever cuts that are fluid and crisp at the same time and go beyond the gender spectrum. The fabrics used are 100 per cent silk and cotton," revealed the designing pair.





Verandah

The Ajrakh Story

Handblock printing with the ajrakh technique is a specialty of Sarfraz Khatri of Pracheen. Using geometrics and astrological motifs the master craftsman has created stunning handloom silk stoles, saris and organic cotton fabrics. Printing with vegetable dyes, the look was beautiful, but also very contemporary in both design and form.

Anjali Patel Mehta's 'Verandah' label incorporated the beauty of ajrakh fabrics for her characteristic high-end boho chic creations called 'The Boheme Zen'. Using heavy silk, organic cotton, mulberry silk, crepe, tussar and dupion along with machine detailing, the eight garments had a relaxed easy vibe with shades of maroon, mustard, grey, indigo and blue.

Tassels, cotton fringing, kimono sleeves and easy silhouettes had a marked oriental flavour with an emphasis on Japanese imagery. The kimono blouse with cropped pants, baggy jackets, bell-sleeved floor-kissing cover; the dramatic tasselled kaftan and unstructured jacket were highlights of the collection. The pleated palazzos and the draped gathered long coat rounded off the look. Anjali however kept the fluid separates perfect for mix and match options.

"The silhouettes are contemporary inspired by vintage kimono design. Drawing inspiration from the costumes of the Han dynasty in China, the Edo period in Japan and vintage Boro kimonos, the modern day kimono and the signature ultra soft separates in our collection draws a parallel to pieces from the fashion revolution in the 1960s to bring out the Boheme in Zen," said Anjali.



MARKING A CRAFT

The Craftmark show by the All-India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association (AIACA) was not only a fashionable showcase of crafts and designers, but also an interesting presentation on the various artisans and their skills, which were beautifully utilised by three top designers.

The presentation of the three NGOs with the three designers celebrated the talent and ensured a sustained livelihood for the women craftspersons thereby also shining a light on the lack of recognition of the women in the artisanal wealth of the country.

AIACA launched the Craftmark certification in 2006 to certify and promote authentic high-quality handmade crafts. Craftmark has developed sector-wide minimum standards and norms for labelling products as handmade, and increases consumer awareness of distinct handicraft traditions. Craftmark is recognised by national and international markets, and its seal is an assurance of authenticity, quality and fair labour practices and links India's diverse artisanal skills and products with conscious consumers.

Moreover, AIACA licenses the Craftmark logo for craft-based businesses and NGOs as product tickets and labels. The Craftmark certification informs a customer that the product has been responsibly and ethically made to produce a sustainable income in a fair trade environment, which also ensures proper health and hygiene of the artisans. Craftmark has brought under its umbrella more than 150 crafts enterprises practicing about 90 specialised handicraft processes, with an outreach to more than 50,000 artisans across 23 states of India.

A Phulkari Fantasy

The Nabha Foundation launched the Phulkari Traditional Textile and Craft programme in 2007 as an income generation activity among women living below the poverty line and to empower them towards a destination of self-sustainability. The focus was to create a long-term business that would provide a feasible and steady income for women, avoiding migration and preserving the integrity of families in Nabha while also preserving the art of authentic phulkari embroidery. As part of the programme, the foundation has provided training. Phulkari Mahela SHG, which was formed under the programme is providing sustainable livelihoods for about 350 women and has been a Craftmark member since 2015.

Bringing the gorgeous beauty of the phulkari embroidery from Punjab, the Nabha Foundation has turned this traditional craft into a home-based self-employment opportunity. About 800 women of Nabha are now experts in the phulkari embroidery thanks to the great efforts of this foundation.

A connection was made with the beauty of silhouettes that is the forte of Sonal Chitranshi and her label 'Soul Roots'; so the collection was a line of easy kurtas in vivid colours along with matching churidars or loose trousers. Using the thread counting method and no tracing on handwoven, breathable cotton, the designer showcased a variety of mix dresses, tunics, kurtas, saris, dupattas and dhotis. The favoured colours were all muted tones of greys, blues and yellows. "I have used the phulkari in an innovative more contemporary manner so that it fits into the trendy style of today," stated Sonal.

The dresses featured the phulkari motif perfectly giving the garments that easy breezy look that was ideal for comfort wear. Using handwoven malkha from Baragaon and different parts of Andhra Pradesh, Sonal added traditional motifs like the gulkhera and mirchi to the understated Indian wear. The colours were natural and earthy and the free and fluid silhouettes spoke the language of a craft that has been lost. Quilted multi-coloured socks added to the beauty of the ensembles.



Sonal Chitranshi



Hetal Shrivastav



Hetal Shrivastav

Mélange of Appliqués and Patchwork

Purkal Stree Shakti Samiti was set up as a social enterprise in 2003 in a small village called Purkal, near Dehradun with the goal of empowering the women of Purkal and the surrounding villages. The mission of the enterprise was to realise the full potential of these women so that they could effectively contribute to the growth of their families, as well as the well-being of their community, and to transform these rural women into confident leaders who could bring about social change.

Tucked away in the picturesque village of Purkal in the valley of Dehra Dun, the women of this region have created the most exquisite cutwork and patchwork quilts under the guidance of the NGO Purkal Stree Shakti Samiti. The women did not have any inherent craft skills, but they knew basic embroidery and stitching. Using this as base, additional skills like patchwork, appliqué and embroidery were taught to them. This helped to develop a whole new range of products comprising quilts, utility bags, kitchen accessories and home furnishings. The Samiti which joined the Craftmark programme in 2010 at present works with about 160 women who showcased their appliqués, which were turned into timeless pieces that will be coveted by the fashion conscious around the country and globe.

Herein, making optimum use of crafts is what Hetal Shrivastav has been doing for her label 'Raas Leela'; and so the garments were a pleasant blend of patchwork and

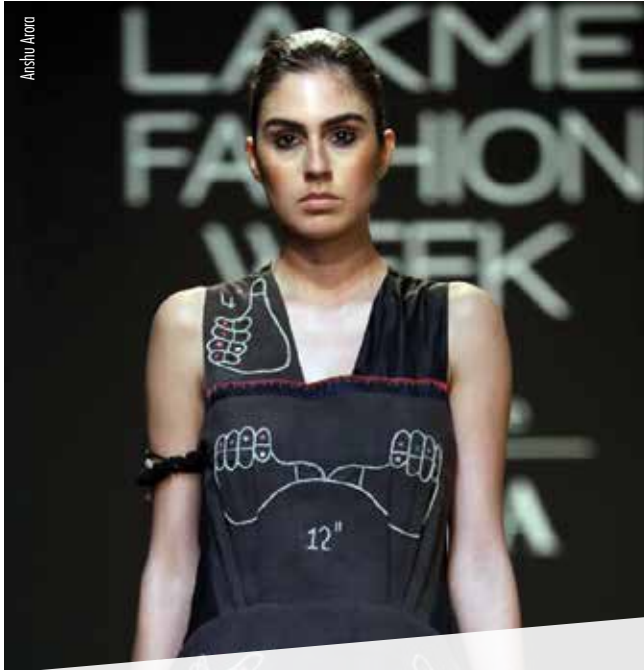
fine embellishments like appliqués. Rustic kurtas, bundies, waistcoats, loose pants, shirts, skirts, dupattas and tunics had a colourful vibe that gave the collection the ethnic stamp.

Showing contemporary Indian basics with minimalism as base, the 100 per cent handwoven cotton stripes, checks and solid fabrics were blended perfectly. There was a clever play of size and direction with overlapping materials, which resulted in unique patterns. With zero wastage every centimetre of fabric was used as a small dot or tikdi and as a sparrow tassel. Geometric patterns played a role with silhouettes ranging from prints of polka dots, stars, squares and stripes to create a stunning collection.

"Fascinated by this, I developed a style of surface by mixing stripes, checks and plains. It is a play of size and directions of lines with overlaps of fabrics that creates the patterns. Placements of these surfaces on the garments are developed by wasting almost none of the fabric pieces. As small as 1.1 cm fabric is used for ornamentation either as tikdi—the small dot or as a sparrow tassel," revealed Hetal.

The mix and match concept was ideal for the layered creations that could work well when creating numerous wardrobe options. The geometric and abstract motifs along with birds and animals were ideal for the tone-on-tone patchwork aimed at the young. With each garment having at least one pop-up coloured appliqué on it, the designer made sure that her body art was traditional and fashionable.





Glamour of Lambani Lore

The Sandur Kushala Kala Kendra was set up in 1984 with 12 local Lambani women with the objective of encouraging the revival of indigenous crafts. It also ensured a better life for the people who make them and helped them to find new markets and make the crafts more relevant to modern tastes and work towards a sustainable production process. Today, it works with about 500 artisans who spin their own yarn, weave their own khadi fabric, print/dye in natural dyes, embroider and stitch in the same facility.

Bringing to the forefront the renaissance of crafts, the Sandur Kushala Kala Kendra has created an avenue to develop the skills of 500 craftswomen who were able to market their creations and make a living with a regular income. An additional 100 are being trained to enable them to lead a comfortable life. Artisans are paid handsome wages along with various benefits such as subsidised ration, bonus, provident fund, free medical facilities and scholarships for children's education. Sandur has been associated with Craftmark since 2006.

The connection here was made by Anshu Arora. Known for her trendy and funky treatment of garments, the line was a great combination of the crafts of artisans and the trendy shapes of modern womenswear. Taking inspiration from the artisans amazing geometric pattern techniques, the designer created a mélange of unconventional designs.

"The Lambanis are a Banjara community, whose embroidery is very much a part of their life; it was and is



primarily used to embroider their own clothes. With time of course it has also become an income generation activity, where the embroidery slipped easily into products like bags /home products and clothing, to suit current markets. At the time of collaboration, I noticed their amazing geometric pattern techniques used for their own choli and skirt had sort of fallen by the wayside. Here we explored and pushed possibilities within their pattern cutting language to create shapes, which are based in this style with a sense of fun and abandonment," explained Anshu.

The blouses, tops, dresses, and pants were the ideal base for the work done by the women of Sandur Kushala Kala Kendra. The unique technique of measuring with hands and forearms but not measuring tapes, was mesmerisingly embroidered on a black double-layered silhouette. The garments shimmered with old mica mirrors and metal bits, which were the basis of the Lambani embellishments. Tassels and embroidered anklets added onto the charm of the ensembles making them trendy and chic.

The dyeing facilities at the centre were utilised by Anshu while the embroidery was created with master craftsperson Shantabai. Horizontal pastel rows were dappled with mirror work and a black embroidery yoke for a smock. A simple black Lambani blouse looked great with a slim skirt, while tiny 3D bits highlighted the pretty rear yokes. Keeping the designs very rustic, the tunic skirts, strappy tent dresses were ideal creations that brought the craft to the forefront.

Art. Craft. Family. Foundation.

The Desai Foundation began 20 years ago as a small family foundation with modest aspirations that wanted to give back to communities that had given so much to the family. But the more involved the foundation became, it realised there was great opportunity to work with communities and fundamentally elevate the health and livelihood. The foundation was converted into a public foundation five years ago so that more people could participate in their work. The foundation currently works with 53 villages in India and two areas in the US. It empowers women and children through community programming to elevate health and livelihood, and focuses on cultivating dignity so that the people served can dream beyond their circumstances. Providing interventions like health camps, hygiene training, vocational training, education, and more is the means to create help.

Megha Desai, president of Desai Foundation who lives in the US, explains how they tied up with designer Payal Singhal for their first exhibition in Mumbai. "This is our first venture into producing a craft and selling it commercially. The women that work with us do create other products like sanitary napkins, candles and other things that they consume themselves and sell locally. We do travel to India a lot, but the women we work with are incredible. Our teams are locally run to begin with, so they generally know the folks they are working with and for." Currently, the handbags—Payal's first ever line of handbags, and the pocket squares are being made by the women.

Payal and Megha have been friends for 15 years, and the latter has been the designer's client since the first day they met. "In fact, my whole closet is full of PS pieces! We have always kept in touch, and last year we connected on a trip and got talking about our passions. Payal's contribution, from her and her team, has been enormous. Aside from donating a portion of her proceeds from two of her signature patterns, we are committed to trying out a whole new line of production with our ladies. She has committed so much time and effort to promote the line, and to really help share our story. We couldn't have asked for a better partner."

"Megha has always been a patron of the brand, and worn our outfits to various events. She was in Mumbai last December and attended a festive trunk show I was hosting. That's when the idea of the Payal Singhal X Desai Foundation collaboration took shape, and has been nine months in the making. Two signature PS prints—the anaar and mor print, and the chidiya print have been dedicated to this collaboration. The Desai Foundation chose these prints not only for their popularity, but also because they feature a lotus, which is their logo too. We then selected the fabrics based on the product. For instance, the ties were made in the crepe we normally use but we sourced a thicker canvas for the pouches and travel cases," added Payal.

The designs are Payal Singhal original prints that she designs and manufactures. A portion of the proceeds



Payal Singhal X Desai Foundation



Payal Singhal X Desai Foundation

of the PS x DF line in her two signature patterns will be donated to the Desai Foundation to support the vocational training programmes. Payal is also paying the wages of the women who are manufacturing her bags, plus donating a percentage of the proceeds from the handbags as well.

The products include scarves, ties, overnight bags, vanity pouches, pocket squares, and notebooks. The foundation left the design aspect and product development entirely to Payal. "I create these based on products that I love, and felt there was a vacuum for these in the market. For instance, the idea for the overnight bags came from my past experience of mini vacations. The vanity pouches are utilitarian in nature too," revealed Payal. "It's a two-fold tie-up. A part of the proceeds from the sale of all products in the two chosen prints from any of our retail points across the world will go towards the foundation. Additionally, the manufacturing cost of the bags will be directed towards the members of the foundation's vocational programme who are making the line of bags, totes, and make-up bags."

When it comes to tying up with other designers, Megha said, "We have no idea! This is the first time we have ever done something like this, and we are so thrilled to be doing this with Payal. We have just launched; so let's see. We know for sure that the partnership has done a great deal to help us spread our story—shedding light on this type of working, and hoping to inspire other people and brands to find the cause they are passionate about to partner with. We are confident that this will be a great tool to help increase funding, so we can impact that many more women."

The money collected from this programme will be used for the vocational programmes—classes like sewing, computers, entrepreneurship, sanitary pad making, candle making, beauty, etc. So proceeds from this partnership will focus on that. Right now, about 25 women are working on these products.

Payal was always keen to partner with a charitable foundation and do her bit for the community for several years now. The brand had reached a stage where giving back to the community and becoming socially responsible was the next step. "But I was looking for a platform that would allow me to get involved beyond mere monetary support and the Desai Foundation is focused on just this. I was excited to associate with the foundation's sewing vocational programme in Valsad, Gujarat. When we visited the centre, I realised that the collaboration is not only providing women employment and financial independence, but also giving them sense of purpose and adding value to their lives," said Payal, who has been working with artisans in Lucknow and Benaras for several years now and will continue to collaborate with them to develop newer fabrics and innovations.

Payal hopes that this will be a long-term association. But at the moment, the collaboration is limited to the two prints for a period of six months. This gives her an adequate window to gauge the response and benefits from the collaboration and chalk out the way forward.**FF**