



A Rahul Mishra collection

Reviving India

The young mind's need to go beyond traditions is fed by a convenient curiosity. Neha Gupta finds the reason for India's strongest forms of dance, textile and art fading into history

GLAD RAGS IN THE CLOSET

It would be a shame if your wardrobe doesn't flaunt a genuine korvai, madhubani or handloom sari; especially if you're one who fancies a good drape every once in a while. And if you enjoy fabrics pieced together in innovative cuts, don't deprive your collection before it's too late. Take for example Chanderi – the authentic weaves almost fell off Earth's edge till designers threw it a strong rope. The beginning was Wills India Fashion 2010 when the world saw a first-of-its-kind collection made entirely from fierce Chanderi constructions. A foresighted designer used lotus motifs for which this fabric is known. Being true to the nature of this weave, Rahul Mishra induced as little stitching as possible to it. And stirring away from the sari,

he created a contemporary collection by stretching its scope for a bigger audience.

It was in 2009 when Mishra had made a trip to Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh's historic town. His agenda was to revive the place's woven fabric. Mass-producing cities like Coimbatore had stolen its thunder and were wrongly assumed to be the prime suppliers. Their machined products are but naturally less expensive as compared to those tediously woven by hand. So during that trip when Mishra encountered a weaver, adept in weaving Chanderi, he was surprised to notice his lowly condition. "It was a very small hut where Hukum Koli's walls were erected from loose stones and the roof was covered in blue barsati (plastic). In spite of these conditions, his father and he

possessed amazing workmanship."

Truth is, artisans like Koli have produced bales of Chanderi for designers in the past. But in most cases, people like him are expected to be exclusive. In such scenarios, with a much-needed steady order in hand, and not enough contact with the industry, they helplessly agreed to meagre rates. It seems the entire village was struggling for recognition, but didn't have the means or aptitude to market themselves. Their contractual employers paid them a niggardly amount, but sold their creations for much more to match its worth. Objectively, the weavers' children preferred to stay detached from an art that didn't help their economic condition. And the involvement of middle-men in this supply chain only added to the chaotic struggle. This is a common disease that eats into such weakening communities.

The trend continues mainly because the geographic identification of crafts is missing. Accreditation is misplaced. Designers who promise to dedicate their time to their repositioning find themselves caught in a demanding time-frame. But when those long days of elbow-greasing begin to realise remunerations, the village, and even its younger generation see themselves being gainfully employed within the community they once wrote off as despondent waste. So of course giving them true recognition goads them into dreamer bigger for their talents.

WEAVING NEW LIFE

Sally Holkar: *Maheshwari* sari and dupatta borders.
Wendell Rodricks: *Kumbi* – a Goan sari.
Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla: *Chikankari* ensembles.

SETTING STAGE ON A LIMB

Whatever happened to directors from the 50s, 60s and even 70s who didn't deter actresses from concerting traditional whirls on the big screen? Remember Vyjayanthimala, Waheeda Rehman and Hema Malini? They were lauded for their knowledge of Bharatanatyam. People gushed after their dances, imputing their grace to their knowledge in classical dance. But today influential Bollywood cinema has nurtured its own genre of a leg-shake. Salsa, jazz and disco have found their way into most choreographers' handbooks as well, snatching the spotlight from Bharatanatyam even. It seems we have allowed the big screen to dictate everything that falls under the category of grandiose.

What's more is that our sensibilities to enjoy a good raga have been lost – a whispering requisite to appreciate archaic dance forms. Singing to those commercial beats is about as easy as aping their accompanying thrusts in comparison to classical verses and steps. Gayathri Keshavan, Director of the Academy of Bharatanatyam in Bengaluru asserts, "There is so much competition now. Children are anxious to learn fast, perform quickly and win immediately. They lack the patience and respect that

people twenty years ago had for the sake of the art?"

No wonder people are more excited about a three-month salsa course than a yearlong Bharatanatyam programme. "People don't understand that if you know Bharatanatyam, you can easily get the right form of salsa just by looking at it." It is this lack of popularity that has forced many teachers today to hold classes only twice a week as opposed to when they were obligated to teach six days a week. And if in a rare case the passion remains, academic pressures arm-twist class 10 and 12 students out of poise and into books. You can't blame them though, because there isn't much of a monetary lure at the end of it all. Consequently, the age-old concept of a gurukul exists only in cases when a financially fertile and culturally sensitive person submits years of his or her life to a dance teacher. (This is when the student lives with the teacher and follows a routine that helps in learning a disciplined way of life.)

Well aware of these factors, government bodies are doing their bit to expand supporting platforms for India's ethnic streams. In fact, Keshavan is on one such committee as well. Charity shows, scholarships for promising students and cultural programmes are some of the tools that promote this. A number of teachers have also found scope in countries like the USA where Indians are keen to get in touch with their traditional roots. This is still a slow



Priya Venkataraman: dancer and choreographer

acquaintance. Perhaps with enough zeal to propagate the beauty of such lissom art, the popularity graph may turn upwards, preserving India's refined charm.

BOLLYWOOD CLASSICS

Madhuri Dixit: Kathak.
Hema Malini: Mohiniyattam.
Rani Mukerjee: Odissi.

GATHERING YESTERDAY, TODAY

There was once a graphic designer who decided to get in touch with the basics of typography. So he looked high and low for those skilled painters adept at hand-painting actors' expressions on canvases, signboards in fanciful strokes and arty car number plates. But this search left Hanif Kureshi disappointed. These talented people that were just about everywhere till about 15 years ago are not found as easily today.

He also figured that even though they belonged to the labour class – with aesthetic interests – they never did have a union to support their interests. And that is when HandpaintedType.com came into being. The few painters he met had transformed into middlemen between the client and a whiz of computer designing. This is their fight for survival against the machine, against redundancy. Kureshi explains their uniqueness, "Each region has a personality. Just like how after you travel 200 kms in this country, you will notice a change in dialect. The same way, letter fonts change. For instance, long strokes are very Mumbai."

He urges the artists to create any type they fancy and then designer Sarang Kulkarni emulates them on the ever-present machine that took their jobs in the first place. Anyone who appreciates them can download them for a fee. To spread the web, students from NID Ahmedabad; Shirshiti College of Art, Bengaluru; Lasalle College of Art, Singapore; and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London are roped in as well to source painters from all corners of India. They happily contribute with the finished, digitalised product after tapping into the depleting Indian market of typography. This is perhaps the only effort to preserve such artistic skills. And once they're digitalised, they just may be known for generations to come.

Imagine if this is the fate of something as simple as hand-created typography, how tragic would it be to see other forms of art vanishing. The country has given way to a pool of artists whose works are contemporaneous with the progressive century. Even if they do find a muse within those traditional frames, there will always be a contemporary variation of it. ▼

FADING SIGHTS

Thanjavur's Tanjore paintings.
Mumbai and Gujarat border's Warli paintings.
Himachal Pradesh's Kangra paintings.

India.

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ON BLACK