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The future of India's traditions and crafts in the 21st century lies in the hands of eight women who are reinventing handmade for contemporary times. Bound by their unending passion for our rich collective heritage and an astute eye for individual style, their unique vision for the craft sector is matched by a younger generation—nominated by them and presented here for the first time—that resonates with their pioneering ideas.

THE PIONEER:
LAILA TYABJI, DELHI

In the elegant hand-woven saris that Laila Tyabji is known to wear, there is always a mischievous detail—subversive motifs, fun tassels or an unusual mix of colours. It is not difficult to imagine her then, in her younger days riding a motorbike on the streets of Delhi. It is this irreverence that makes her an adored and revered figure in the world of craft and design, inherently understanding that for traditional crafts to remain relevant, they must respond to changes in popular culture.

Having studied fine arts at the Baroda College of Art, Tyabji began her career as a designer in the 1970s, when the industry in India was slowly taking form, involving herself with an array of creative opportunities, including designing for Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It was after she was brought in to conceive a lifestyle store at the Taj Hotels' new property on Delhi's Mansingh Road that she began to realise the gap between craft products manufactured at grassroot levels and their demand by increasingly cash-rich urban consumers. She formed Dastkar in 1981 with a group of like-minded friends and experts.

But it was at a Chanel couture show in Paris that she had an epiphany. "I was wearing an Indian kurta and found myself being twirled around to demonstrate how Indian cuts could balance structure and drape at the same time. Immediately, I knew there was something here that needed more attention."

Revisiting handmade, she says, has become the cornerstone of her work. In 2012, she received the Padma Shri, and her latest project for Dastkar >

INSPIRE

SPINNING CHANGE

It's the order of the day in fashion, but keeping India's crafts and traditions alive has never been more important. Leading the way are two generations of extraordinary women who are creating a rich tapestry, one stitch at a time.

By MAYANK MANSINGH KAUL

Photographed by CHARUDUTT CHITRAK

Styled by ARADHANA BARUAH

TYABJI ON MEETA

"Meeta has an unconventional way of looking at crafts. Her bold designs with block printing have taken on another level of creative expression, most visible in stores like Delhi's People Tree. With their quirky messages, her prints have defined a whole generation of Indi street style for grungy teenagers."

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CHANDNI SINGH; PRODUCTION: GLITZ PRODUCTIONS



JAITLY ON VERMA

"Her skills provide the backbone of our ambitious projects. She accommodates varied opinions because of her ability to strike immediate relationships—whether with visiting dignitaries or craftspeople, which is essential in the work we do."



includes an experimental space on the Delhi-Gurgaon highway. “It’s about taking craftsmanship to the heart of a high-tech city!”

THE PROTÉGÉ: MEETA, DELHI

Recognised for her work in natural dyeing and printing in Rajasthan’s Kaladera village, Meeta began working with crafts at Dastkar in 1989. Now on its board of directors, her projects include designing, sourcing and executing projects across the country. Her biggest thrill, she admits, is working with the children of craftspeople, who tend to be more open to new technology and ideas. “This ensures that the ideas are constantly growing and there’s dynamism from the root level.”

THE PIONEER: JAYA JAITLEY, DELHI

In the recent budget, India’s newly appointed government has allocated a whopping ₹40 crore for a new Hast Kala Academy, devoted to the documentation and development of crafts, giving it a platform similar to fine arts.

This is no small feat, and credit should be accorded to Jaya Jaitly’s tireless efforts. This accomplishment is a natural progression to her landmark contributions in the crafts sector, which includes founding Dilli Haat—the famous urban bazaar for crafts in Delhi.

As the founder of Dastkari Haat Samiti, an organisation that directly represents 1,200 craftspeople from across the country and works with thousands more through around 70 NGOs, Jaitly’s keen eye is grounded in a sound understanding of the needs of these talented individuals in a socio-political context. “They need to be accorded the dignity they deserve. They are often considered illiterate, but in fact they are more literate than we are. They have their own language and vocabulary of skills.”

The scale of Jaitly’s projects is astonishing, given her compact staff of just eight. It’s her Gandhian nature and political beliefs of democratic socialism, she says, that make her look at



DUDEJA ON VARMA

“Malika’s passion and zest to take kantha to the younger sections of society arises from her desire to reach out to larger markets, so that more women can be empowered through kantha... She will take kantha to the future.”

craft on rational terms. “The decentralised mode of craft production makes the Indian crafts sector an unparalleled resource and also a playground for design experiments.”

How does that work, I ask? “Think about it; the way denim is paired with shirts in Indian textiles would not have been so popular among the youth today had the designs not been well thought-out in terms of everyday use.”

THE PROTÉGÉ: CHARU VERMA, DELHI

Verma, who heads project management, has been involved with the Dastkari Haat Samiti for the last 11 years. Growing up in Old Delhi, she

was constantly surrounded by local crafts through the vibrant lanes of Chandni Chowk and Kinari Bazaar. Following a career in corporate marketing, she returned to the world of the handcrafted.

THE PIONEER: SHAMLU DUDEJA, KOLKATA

On her last visit to Kolkata in 2012, Hillary Clinton gifted a kantha embroidered scarf to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. As she waved to the crowds during their joint press conference, Shamlu Dudeja—from whose organisation SHE Clinton had picked up the scarf—saw in >

HOLKAR ON PATIL

"An experienced designer, excellent photographer and a print expert, Geeta is also comfortable in rural India communicating with craftspeople. She and her colleagues are the future of craft. And may there be many more like her..."

the flash of a few seconds the journey this quilted embroidery technique, so synonymous with Bengali craft, had taken.

Until the mid 1980s this was the average man's textile, made by layering cotton scraps and discarded pieces of cloth. Its transformation into a fashionable fabric can be explained significantly through Dudeja's work. "I was once in the South of France and arrived at the opera to find eight women wearing scarves by SHE!" she quips.

The maintenance of quality and regular supply is partly achieved through a commitment to the women embroiderers, going beyond fair wages to extend to medical and educational support and a systemic improvement in living conditions.

Dudeja's daughter, Malika, has been involved right from the beginning in predicting new design directions, in-

cluding a use of sequins, to add a bling factor to the otherwise understated technique, and in developing marketing strategies. But it is a fourth dimension, as Dudeja puts it, for which customers come back repeatedly. The very energy these women imbue in the act of creating a kantha product renders it sacred and gives it a non-material quality that can't be explained. "In Bengal, the feminine power of the goddess is celebrated."

THE PROTÉGÉ: MALIKA VARMA, KOLKATA

Varma has been involved as co-founder and director with SHE since its inception, guiding design and marketing. Her close association with the fashion fraternity, beginning with the late designer Rohit Khosla, has ensured that products respond to changing trends.

THE PIONEER: SALLY HOLKAR, MAHESHWAR

The difficulty with which one manages to get Sally Holkar on the phone or email is indicative of the infrastructural problems facing vast sections of India's villages. Yet small clusters of weavers in Maheshwar and beyond are able to supply exquisitely crafted textiles to international designers.

Holkar's journey started in Palo Alto, California, where she met her former husband, the erstwhile Maharaja of Indore, while studying at Stanford University, resulting in a move to Maheshwar and the birth of Rehwa, which is dedicated to reviving textiles of the region. There hasn't been a dull moment since. When Asha Sarabhai brought Issey Miyake and his team for Holi, she recalls, the Japanese models with them wore just black lingerie to prevent the colour from ruining their clothes, causing quite the scandal in the conservative community.

"The Indore royal family had always been a patron of Maheshwar saris, so it seemed natural. Our 'aha!' moment was when John Bissell, Fabindia's founder, came to visit and told us to have a little cupboard made, carve 'Rehwa' on the front and put it in their only store. Our very first sales were made from that cupboard. That was 1978..." Holkar reminisces.

WomenWeave was started in 2003 as a culmination of Holkar's decades of experience. By making women the focal point, it ensures that previous gaps like access to micro-credit can be addressed. "Design input is critical to the survival of handlooms," she continues. WomenWeave is a fashion business supplying to luxury stores internationally and designers like International Woolmark Prize winner Rahul Mishra.

THE PROTÉGÉ: GEETA PATIL, MUMBAI

A post-graduate in textile design from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, Patil, as head designer, has been instrumental in driving the vision of WomenWeave. She is most drawn to field work and hopes to return to her home state of Karnataka to revive languishing crafts. ■