



STITCHING A STORY



APPAREL/GOING GLOBAL

Born out of respect for traditional Indian textile techniques, Ahmedabad based Rajka Designs studio designs garments for export to high-end buyers across the world. BRINDA GILL narrates the tale!

“What makes us stand out is that our garments have a story to tell. Buyers from abroad are keen to know the story of a fabric or hand-worked technique of a garment,” says Samvit Sarabhai, Director, Rajka Designs, Ahmedabad. The studio was established in the early 1980s by his designer mother Rajshree and industrialist-environmentalist father Kartikeya Sarabhai to design classic and contemporary-style garments using traditional Indian textile techniques. And as few Indian studios were exporting garments stitched with traditional textiles or embellished with traditional textile techniques, Rajka found a niche that it has developed over the past 35 years.

DESIGN STUDIO

Having grown up in Ahmedabad, Rajshree and Kartikeya were aware of the beauty and uniqueness of handcrafted Indian textiles; Kartikeya is a descendant of the Sarabhai family that founded the Calico Mills and the Calico Museum of Textiles, both in Ahmedabad. Keen to showcase Indian textiles to the West, they established Rajka Designs with an aim to export handcrafted garments to premium

stores abroad. While deeply appreciative of the beauty of handcrafted textiles crafted by artisans in Gujarat and southern region of the adjoining state of Rajasthan, they realised that traditional Indian textile techniques needed to be showcased to the world with a subtler designer sensibility while being true to tradition.

SUBTLE SENSIBILITY

Right from the beginning, Rajshree and the team travelled to villages to meet the artisans, and explain the work required from them, though it draws from traditional techniques it bears a distinct sensibility. “Traditional Indian embroidery is very intense and colourful. We toned down the embroidery to a simplified expression of what one encounters in Gujarat and Rajasthan, and worked it selectively on garments such as only on the sleeves and yoke instead of all-over embroidery. The motifs and compositions are designed by Rajshree, and they are inspired by nature, traditional Indian architecture and elements. For executing the work we opted for white on white, tone on tone, or pastel colours for the handwork. And for the cuts we opted for

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classic shapes like long kurtas and tunics that could be worn with jeans or western trousers, as well as dresses”, Samvit elaborates.

THE PRODUCT RANGE

The product range of Rajka features jackets, shirts, sleeveless vests, and kurtas for men; jackets, dresses, kurtas and tunics for women; and attire for children such as dresses, skirts, tops for girls and shirts and kurtas for boys, all using handloom, khadi, ikat and also using fun embroidery work. Most garments are made from cotton, and some from silk and wool, and of late, khadi has been very popular too. The garments are stitched at Rajka’s garment workshop in Ahmedabad by highly skilled tailors and artisans.

Since the beginning, jackets have been popular. These are quilted sleeveless and with sleeves jackets. “Quilting has played a big role in the design of the jackets, to give an attractive look, body and warmth. Our quilted jackets are been made with cotton, silk and wool fabrics. Most of the jackets have a silk or tie-dye lining, and are reversible, that makes them versatile. They are embellished using different traditional techniques”, Samvit adds.

DEEP ENGAGEMENT

Rajka’s first significant export consignment was for The Conran Shop in the UK in the early 1980s and the studio presently exports to The Conran Shop, Designer’s Guild, dosa (Christina Kim), Jurgen Lehl and Found MUJI as well as to high-end clients in Europe, UK, USA, Japan and Australia. From the beginning, Rajka has approached collaborations with a personal involvement, contacting stores abroad.

“From the very start, we have been keen on personally meeting clients. Even in the 1980s and 1990s, designers from abroad would



come to Ahmedabad to see our studio and facility. They would understand our work, we would understand their requirements, and then create a sample range for them that would be sent to them, and then we would receive an order from their marketing team. This direct interaction, rather than through an agent, helps to give the stores exactly what they are looking for. Today, we see that more and more foreign brands want to know the story behind a certain fabric or technique. They want to travel to villages



and meet artisans. While designers from across the world share similar aesthetics, clients from Japan are particularly concerned about what is acceptable and what is not in terms of handwork. For instance, there are certain inherent irregularities in khadi. And the Japanese clients would prefer to put down in measurable figures regarding a slug of what size is acceptable in a khadi weave”, Samvit explains.

The Rajka team takes the effort to explain techniques to designers who visit, so they understand the effort, skill, heritage and nuances, which are, in turn, conveyed to the stores and final customers. They believe transparency in giving information as required, about provenance, time taken to create a garment and any other details. That there is greater openness rather than keeping such information as a guarded secret makes all the difference in building a relationship with buyers.

UP-CYCLING ENDEAVOURS

Committed to create environment-friendly products, Rajka works with organic dyes and fabrics to a great extent. The studio also retains snippets remaining after garments are stitched, and uses these worked with embroidery and applique to create quilts as well as creatively attaching them onto the garments.

Rajka has been collaborating with Christina Kim, founder of the LA-based brand dosa, to create beautiful garments from bespoke handcrafted fabrics and from cutting-room leftover fabrics. The Cooper Hewitt museum in New York held an exhibition titled ‘Scraps: Fashion, Textiles and Creative Reuse’ (September 2016–April 2017) that featured her recycling work created in collaboration with Rajka. “We used the end pieces and fall-outs from the garment production, and used the scraps to make jamdani panels. The scraps were hand-embroidered onto the

panels creating lovely borders. We also did appliqué work on the scraps creating lovely new dimensions and designs”, Samvit mentioned.

Working on different paths, Rajka thus aims to promote the rich textile traditions of India. “It is our endeavour to provide continuity of work for the artisans so that our textile traditions can survive the challenges of globalisation, at the same time, create designs that reflect the beauty and joy of our textiles to the world”. ■



SHIRT STORY

Rajka has been collaborating with Susan Benn, a former photographer and publisher living in London, who created the concept of SHIRT STORY in 2013 at the age of 75! Susan’s treasured Indian khadi shirt collection is inspired by one simple, fluid, easy to wear design that was made for her by Rajka decades ago during visits to friends in Ahmedabad. Her love for khadi cloth and ikat patterns and the ease of movement in old French work shirts led to a creative partnership between Rajka, Susan and her granddaughter Josephine Saunders and the curators and buyers at the V&A Museum shop, London.

"I realised I had developed a very special relationship with my Indian shirts, that was totally comfortable and effortless. Three different lengths of shirt –for day, evening and travel wear, all based on one simple shape, offers me flexibility for all seasons and all occasions. We are also doing a longer version on bespoke basis at the moment. Hand-spun and hand-woven khadi cloth. This was written about by Marco Polo in the sixth century and which I first discovered as a textile student at London’s Royal College of Art, is both warm in winter and cool in summer. As you wash it, it becomes softer and its construction gives many years of wear.



My khadi shirts have become my identity”, says Susan.

Encouraged by old family friends Rajshree, Ritu and Samvit Sarabhai at Rajka Designs in Ahmedabad, Susan designed her first collection for the western market beginning with a conversation with textile curator and ikat expert, Rosemary Crill at London’s V&A Museum. This led to a meeting with the V&A shop buyers to explore ways to encourage curators, buyers and producers to work together and promote a greater understanding of traditional craft processes of handmade textile products. SHIRT STORY’s first order of ikat mid-length shirts from V&A Enterprises in 2015 was completely sold out. They reordered two new ikat patterns in 2016 and the next design will be featured in May 2017. New designs for jackets and a children’s range are currently in development.

"My 24 year old granddaughter Josephine joined SHIRT STORY in 2016, so now we are three generations working across two continents. Our special relationship with knowledgeable and dedicated weavers, dyers, curators and production partners at Rajka are continually enriching and rewarding. Such respect for traditional craftsmanship by the men and women who make our shirts is rare in the globalised commercialised fashion world we live in now. Family, handmade textiles, beautiful simple designs and sustainable ethical ‘slow’ fashion are the enduring characteristics of all our shirt stories”, Susan mentions. ■

