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TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

Indian Roots, International Expression

For over three decades Rajka Designs has made bespoke, handcrafted, contemporary Indian garments and home furnishings. Over the past 35 years, the studio has deepened its involvement in hand-crafted products, and spread its presence worldwide. Growing up in the 1960s in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, founder Rajshree Sarabhai was surrounded by hand-crafted textiles. Known for producing hand-embroidered, tie-dyed, appliqué and quilted fabrics, Gujarat was also home to Gandhi who advocated wearing khadi, a hand-woven fabric made from hand-spun yarns. Back then, Ahmedabad was known as the Manchester of India for its many textile mills.

In 1968, Rajshree's love for textiles was furthered when she married Kartikeya Sarabhai. A well-known industrialist-environmentalist, he is a descendant of the prominent Sarabhai family, renowned for establishing one of India's first textile mills (The Calico Mills, in 1880) and India's finest textile museum (The Calico Museum, in 1949). It was only natural that the self-taught designer-photographer and her husband would soon decide to establish a studio that would build on Indian textile crafts and tradition. Designing contemporary garments for men, women and children, they would also produce homeware including bed linen, quilts, curtains and drapes, exclusively with hand-crafted fabrics. Thus in 1982, Rajka Designs was born.

At the time, contemporary Indian design was little known worldwide, as Indian textiles typically featured motifs such as flowers,

elephants, peacocks, parrots and paisleys in bright colours. Rajshree realized that on one side, Gujarat and the adjoining state of Rajasthan were blessed with a heritage of wonderful textile techniques, mostly done by women working from home: and on the other were textile lovers, across the world, some who knew of and appreciated hand-crafted Indian textiles yet preferred a subtler design expression and many who were unaware of the beauty of handcrafted Indian textiles.

Because of this, Rajshree designed attire and furnishings embellished with contemporised traditional handwork, infused with an appreciation for heritage. Her eye for detail and ability to see beauty in things around her, honed from her passion for photography, helped her to envisage detailed textile motifs. Creating delicate patterns inspired by nature such as the veins of leaves and flowers, and by traditional Indian architecture such as the exquisite patterns on fretted screens, Rajka has developed a global, timeless appeal.

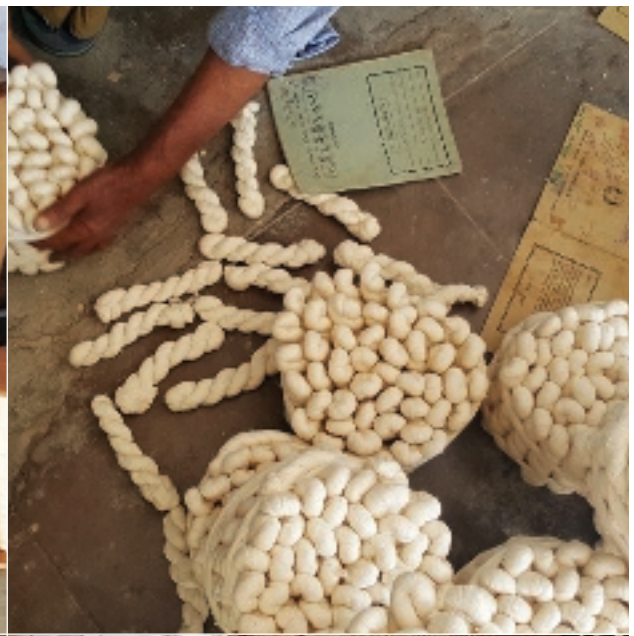
During Rajka's early years, at a time when even landlines were a rarity, setting up shop was a great challenge. With an informal system that still continues to the present day, Rajka's team travels to Indian villages with samples, explaining to the artisans the embroidery, quilting or tie-dyeing that ought to be done, only to return weeks or even months later to pick up the final work.

These meetings are just as useful to the artisans as they are to the design team, as it gives the team a chance to see and understand the

challenges faced by women artisans living in these villages today. The team can then offer viable work solutions to assist artisans to work from home. The team also meets with weavers and dyers to create customised fabrics, and once the completed work reaches Ahmedabad, it is then dispatched to a garment workshop to be stitched by highly skilled tailors.

Meeting with designers abroad and inviting them to the studio led to Rajka receiving export orders and proposals to collaborate on many garment and homeware collections. At all times, the Rajka team endeavours to explain its textile processes to visiting designers so that they appreciate the effort, skill and nuances of the work. With this transparent approach, Rajka has steadily built up a loyal clientele of famous international brands such as The Conran Shop, Designers Guild, Jurgen Lehl and Found Muji as well as high-end clients in Europe, UK, USA, Japan, and Australia.

In the past three decades, Rajka has broadened its scope to embrace other textile techniques such as block-printing and traditional weaves such as ikats. The studio is increasingly using natural dyes such as indigo to dye fabrics and it has also increased involvement with khadi, a fabric synonymous with India's freedom struggle. Rajka has also worked with London-based Susan Benn, a former photographer and publisher who founded Shirt Story in 2013 at the age of 75. Susan's Indian khadi shirt collection is based on one simple, fluid design that was made for her by Rajka decades ago. ▶





Her love for khadi cloth and ikat patterns, and the ease of movement in old French work shirts, has led to a creative partnership between Rajka, Susan and her grand-daughter Josephine Saunders; to develop French work shirts with ikat khadi fabrics, available at the V&A Museum shop. Susan values the fact that family-led, handmade textiles of simple design are enduring characteristics of their shirt stories.

Along with creating garments and products with specially commissioned fabrics, Rajka consciously collects left-over snippets and up-cycles them with additional handwork such as embroidery and appliqué, to create intricate products such as patchwork quilts. Rajka has been working with Christina Kim, founder of the LA-based brand dosa, for over ten years to create beautiful garments from customised, hand-crafted textiles as well as from cutting-room waste fabrics.

It's been a long journey for Rajka, one that has seen its scope and reach widen. Samvit, Rajshree and Kartikeya's son, now heads the business and has started building Keri, a brand with the same values as Rajka, tailored to the Indian market where many of the next generation of artisans who have worked with Rajka are happily taking up work with the studio. Giving artisans quality work and good terms has held the studio in good stead. In our technology-driven world, Rajka preserves traditional craft bringing a livelihood and pride of heritage to hundreds of artisans, showcasing the versatility and beauty of traditional Indian textile techniques. ... **Brinda Gill** www.rajka.com

