

Style Nudges Tradition

Indian jewellery's move towards the fashion industry

Indian jewellery has only recently begun changing as both consumers and manufacturers have moved away from the millennia-old traditions that have kept it locked in an unchanging grip. **Shanoo Bijlani** reports on the successful merging of fashion design and jewellery manufacture by some of the country's leading retailers.



Long isolated in a box of its own, the Indian jewellery industry is now moving decisively in the direction taken long ago by its counterparts elsewhere in the world. An increasing amount of product is being designed by branded fashion industry creative talent rather than by specialist jewellery designers, as has been the case hitherto.

These initiatives have meant that retailers get to present unique brand designs, while fashion designers get to stretch their imagination and reach out to pockets of clients that they have never tapped before. The results have been impressive both in creative as well as commercial terms.

The three major jewellery brands and retailers who have tied up with top-line Indian fashion designers in recent times are Tanishq, India's leading jewellery brand from the huge Tata industrial group which is headquartered in Bangalore, Gaja, a high-end jewellery brand of Shree Ganesh Jewellery in Kolkata and the house of Kirtilals from Bangalore, the jewellery retail operation of De Beers sightholder Dimexon.



Rohit Bal - Kirtilals

Tanishq, which retails its upscale, luxury collections through a separate chain of boutique stores called Zoya, recently launched its new Miasma collection created by designer Raghavendra Rathore who runs his own company that, besides designing clothes, also does work in interiors and other product design. Rathore has designed 150 jewellery pieces for the collection, which will be unveiled in four parts corresponding to four different seasons. The collection, a “blend of regal charm and modern aesthetics and mysticism of the east intertwined with the clean lines of the west”, ranges from Rs. 25,000 (\$528) to Rs. 300,000 (\$6,345) with average price points between Rs. 70,000 (\$1,481) and Rs. 80,000 (\$1,692).

Gaja tapped fashion designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee to launch a collection which was unveiled at the Spring-Summer '09 Season of the Mercedes Benz New York Fashion Week last September. The collection, priced at Rs. 500,000 (\$10,580) and above, artfully used an eclectic mix of different Indian traditional methods like minakari (enamelling), jadau and

the Chettinad style of stone setting prevalent in the south. The Sabyasachi-Gaja collection is retailed exclusively through Gaja's standalone outlets.

Last year, Kirtilals partnered with Rohit Bal, a fashion designer from New Delhi, to produce a line called the Jewelled Garden –the Lotus Collection based on Bal's iconic logo, which was priced at Rs. 70,000 (\$1,481) upwards.

Manufacturers Speak

So why have Indian manufacturers suddenly woken up to the fact that names popular in the fashion industry, and are brands by themselves, could do wonders for jewellery? Sandeep Kulhalli, vice president of retail and marketing for Zoya, remarked at the launch of Miasma, “We wanted someone like Rathore who was from a non-jewellery background, and who had the ability to interpret traditional designs with a modern twist. There is a need for associating with personality designers outside of the jewellery industry, as we need some freshness of thought and thus, newer design concepts. Keeping in mind the image of Zoya, we looked to tap a personality



Balaji Viswanathan



who had a similar appeal, and we zeroed in on an exclusive designer like Rathore. Finding the right partner is the key.”

Nilesh Parekh, managing director of Gaja, voices similar thoughts when talking of his firm’s association with Sabyasachi. He told Solitaire, “As a part of our forward integration plans, we wanted to launch a collection targeted at high end consumers and so we tied up with Sabyasachi Mukherjee. Sabyasachi is renowned and already caters to a high-end clientele. That in itself helps in understanding the clients that we are looking at.”

Since the collections have been received well, the manufacturers will take forward their association with the respective designers to bring out more collections in future. Balaji Viswanathan, marketing head (India), of Kirtilals, asserts that their tie up with Rohit Bal was not a one-off attempt. He says, “We do plan to bring out many more collections out of the creative combination. Our whole idea of introducing this collection was to give our customers new kinds of pieces linked to grandeur. We got a very positive response from our customers

who appreciated the concept, designs and its craftsmanship.” For Parekh, too, this was not just making a splash at the NY event. “Gaja,” he says, “will come out with more lines designed by Sabyasachi.”

A lot of thought, creativity, time and money have been invested into making these co-branded collections a success. Rathore revealed that it took him and the Zoya team an entire year to create 150 designs. It involved endless hours of brainstorming sessions, sketching and doodling, the designer notes.

“Making the Miasma collection was a great learning experience for me, and it was nice of the firm to have reposed faith in me. As a fashion designer I have observed that unlike the fashion industry, the jewellery industry in India does not generally have trends based on seasons. So, we introduced the seasonal concept in jewellery. Later perhaps, we will aim to synchronize with fashion weeks in India.”

Designing jewellery, Rathore observes, was different from designing apparel, home spaces, and architecture. The key for him was to understand what kinds of materials were available. “I could have easily worked with large diamonds and created a top end line,” he says. “But one has to adapt one’s designs to resources and come up with creations that are suitable for the designated price points. You have to ‘edit’ your jewellery accordingly.” In keeping with this idea, the collection liberally uses black onyx, citrine, white- and black diamonds, and white gold. Citrine or the colour yellow was selected because it is a dominant colour on the runway, observes Rathore.

“When other people are investing their money, you have to strike a creative balance and not go overboard,”

“But one has to adapt one’s designs to resources and come up with creations that are suitable for the designated price points. You have to ‘edit’ your jewellery accordingly.”

Rathore says. “You have to be on the same bandwidth as the firm that hires you to design jewellery.”

The Rohit Bal-Kirtilals collection took six months, of which three months were spent in designing the exclusive pieces while the remainder went into producing them, says Viswanathan.

The Jewelled Garden collection, akin to ‘wearable art’, used the finest quality of diamonds, including rare coloured ones, coloured gemstones, Italian corals and conch pearls, and was crafted by artists trained in Italian jewellery-making techniques under the supervision of an Italian master jeweller. At the launch, Rohit Bal was quoted as saying, “I am proud of this creation that will highlight the beauty of the ever-discerning woman.”

Fashion designers are pushing the envelope to stretch the aesthetic sensibilities of Indian consumers, who are now willing to look beyond the intrinsic value of the jewellery they buy. They are open to paying for design and exclusivity – a factor which until recently didn’t motivate them much.

Sabyasachi, who designed for Gaja, noted during the launch of the jewellery line that, “Fashion literacy in India is on the rise. People are conscious about what they wear and are increasingly seeking quality, comfort and style in their wardrobes. What’s unique is that fashion here is coupled with our rich and varied culture and tradition, and rather than looking towards the west we should look at setting our own benchmarks in jewellery making or designing garments.”

However, Rathore warns that “despite deriving inspiration from traditional sources, one should keep in mind that the jewellery we produce should have no stamp of geographical

boundaries and it should have a global template. It is imperative that jewellery should be versatile in nature.” At the same time he says that “Trends come from the market itself. You cannot be radical. We need to dole out fashion in small doses and cannot lose the commercial perspective.”

Even though these are still pretty much niche initiatives, it is clear that Indian jewellery is going through some major changes in the way it is conceived and developed – for a consumer base that is going through major changes itself in terms of style preferences and what it is willing to pay for. Branded jewellery is still a very small part of the huge Indian retail market. Importantly, however, it is becoming a key component of what drives demand.



Nilesch Parekh



Miasma

RAGHAVENDRA RATHORE

A Woman's Whole Ensemble Could Be Designed Round Her Jewellery



Fashion and interior designer Raghavendra Rathore shared his experiences and views on the move to designing jewellery in an exclusive interview with Solitaire

What prompted your move into jewellery design?

It has been my company's vision to be able to focus on lifestyle design products rather than just fashion. I've had many commissions that have called on me to integrate my design sensibilities and sense of aesthetics into a variety of fields. Jewellery designing is just another new and exciting venture that I landed recently.

Do you see jewellery mainly as a fashion accessory or do you think it makes a style statement of its own?

Jewellery is more than just a style statement and it takes years for a designer to build goodwill with a client who chooses to buy his or her brand. Miasma for Zoya has been created keeping in mind a specific group of clients and their lifestyle. It has been designed with a very personalized perspective. I have tried

to make the line 'timeless' and able to hold its own without the crutch of 'fashion' to give it a complete look.

Does intrinsic value matter to you or do you feel that the design quotient is the main value in jewellery?

They go hand in hand and one cannot do without the other as today's customer is extremely evolved and is looking for intelligent, unconventional and unique designs with a justified value.

How important do you think intrinsic value is to today's woman – especially the younger generation?

It's extremely important as every client has a specific requirement and a budget to go with her character. The value has to be authentic in keeping with the type of jewellery irrespective of a higher or lower value.

What are the main impellers for fashion design today? What do you think is most important to women?

I think the modern-day woman is looking for total '360-degree' design solutions. Jewellery should



Miasma





Miasma

be timeless and unique, appealing and personalised in design. The outpouring of luxury products has made the client more aware and thus more appreciative of designer products like jewellery.

Do you see the jewellery you design as individual, self-purchase style statements only or are you creating product for the gifting market as well?

The idea is, not to typecast it into a slot but to build a design vision to create something unique with a USP that excites global aesthetics and give the client a piece of timelessness old-world Indian luxury.

If you were to design a complete ensemble for a woman that would make a personal statement for her, could you begin with designing a specific piece of jewellery for her – with a specific set of materials or a particular stone – and then move on to the rest of the ensemble? How different would this approach be from what you normally do?

Yes definitely, the approach is not very different from that of customised clothing. It is imperative

to understand a client's requirement along with his or her personality, for any design to be a success. The eventual design generated should compliment and enhance the individual's personality yet have a stamp of the Rathore brand imagery. Brand India with a twist in style!

Any ideas about where do you think jewellery and jewellery design is headed in the medium- to long-term future in India?

The Indian jewellery market has great potential as it has a huge audience and all it needs is to be tapped by the right design concepts. I did a study of the market and found there is a gap in the luxury segment which, I believe we, as designers, need to fill.



Miasma

