

Threading her own way

Designer Sushma Kilachand teams Indian embroidery, fabric with Western styles

By PRITHI YELAJA / The Toronto Star

SHE USED to live in a Maharajah's palace in Mumbai, but fashion designer Sushma Kilachand now calls a modest east-end Toronto house - which doubles as her studio - home.

What compelled her to give up her pampered existence and move half way around the world to start a new life? Love.

But first, the clothes.

Walking in from the steamy haze of Toronto's heat wave, her home, decorated with family heirlooms shipped from India, is an oasis of cool elegance.

"I love this weather. It reminds me of India," says Kilachand.

Upstairs in her small studio, Kilachand designs her collection, called Sushk, by teaming Indian embroidery and fabrics - silk, chiffon, linen and georgette in bright shades of pink, orange, purple and turquoise - with Western styling to produce a versatile line of tunics, ponchos and Indian suits that she describes as Indo-Western.

"Colour symbolizes what India is all about. You can wear these tops with jeans to a brunch or to afternoon tea or with pearls and heels for an evening out. They look so hot!" says Kilachand, 29, whose designs are featured in next month's Flare magazine.



ABOVE: Designer Sushma Kilachand poses in one of her wedding outfits with her husband Ashish Rajendra.



Sushk designs include pink sequin linen tunic.

"Most of my ideas come from watching what women are wearing in the clubs and bars and on streets of Mumbai. These are middle-class women who can't drop thousands of rupees on clothes, but they want to be trendy on a budget."

Mumbai - with its hip club scene, restaurants, shops and fashion houses including Versace and Armani - is the Paris of the East, says Kilachand, who is dressed casually in capris and a white T-shirt.

Since leaving Mumbai two years ago, she's kept in touch with what's happening on the fashion scene through her production team.

Kilachand sketches her designs, scans them into the computer and e-mails them to the 12-member team, who stitch and embroider each piece by hand.

Each outfit is unique and takes approximately 30 hours to complete; the price and quality is higher than similar mass-produced garments sold at chain stores. Tunics range from \$100 to \$130; ponchos from \$130 to \$160 and churidars, salwar kameez and kurtas with trousers from \$150 to \$220.

The Shopping Channel approached Kilachand to sell her line on-air, but she declined because the quantities they required would have forced her to switch to mass production. For now, she is content selling to customers through word-of-mouth referrals out of her home showroom.

She counts some high-powered women among her regular customers, including Dr. Tanya Chawla, a radiologist at Mount Sinai Hospital, who likes the simple, elegant lines of Kilachand's designs.

They are a refreshing take on traditional South Asian styling, which Chawla finds "too garish, too gaudy and makes you look like a Christmas tree."



Sushk designs include turquoise kurta with crushed scarf.



Sushk designs include beaded poncho.

"Sushma's designs cross over well. You can wear them pretty well for any occasion, from formal to casual," says Chawla, 35.

For her wedding two years ago, Kilachand designed all 10 of her outfits - she wore a different one for each event in the week-long round of parties leading up to the wedding ceremony - as well as the outfits of all 20 people in her wedding party.

The wedding and reception, with 800 guests, took place in her childhood home - a 55-room, 100-year-old palace that once belonged to Bhupinder Singh, Maharajah of Patiala. As ruler of the largest Sikh state during the British colonial era, he was famous for having a huge appetite for women, food, jewelry and sport. The palace has been designated a heritage property.

As the only daughter of a wealthy business family that owned sugar cane factories and alcohol distilleries, Kilachand lived like a princess with 20 live-in servants.

"I was surrounded by beauty; it was not hard to be inspired," says Kilachand, who began designing her own clothes at 14. After high school in 1998, she studied at the Institute of Fashion Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles.

She landed a dream job as an assistant buyer at Saks Fifth Avenue in Boston after graduation, but gave it up six months later because she was homesick.

She returned to India and worked with designer Krishna Mehta for two years before launching her own line in 2001.

When Ashish Rajendra, a 29-year-old project manager from Toronto, came to visit India in 2003,

Kilachand was already engaged to marry a wealthy industrialist - a love match, but also an alliance that furthered the interests of two business families.

Kilachand met Rajendra through her cousin. After three meetings, including a marathon six-hour dinner, they were smitten with each other.

"We just clicked. We knew we were destined to be together," she says.

She broke off her engagement.

Her mom initially "freaked out" at the news, but in the end was completely supportive.

Kilachand married Rajendra three weeks later.

Life in Toronto has been an adjustment. When she first arrived in 2003,

Kilachand asked her new husband who would be doing the cooking for them.

"He said, 'You.'

" was shocked because I hadn't entered the kitchen back home in 16 years. I had never even made a cup of chai."

Though the couple eats out frequently, Kilachand has mastered cooking. Surrounded by Mughal miniatures and Burmese teak furniture, antiques from her childhood, she feels thoroughly at home.

"Bringing a piece of my life in Mumbai here has made the transition a lot easier."

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