

## FASHION

## For love of craft: in conversation with Artisans' Radhi Parekh



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### **With her gallery Artisans', Radhi Parekh has tried to eschew global homogeneity in lieu of handmade design**

In Kala Ghoda, three buildings stand out. The powder blue Keneseth Eliyadoo Synagogue, the erstwhile Rhythm House in blue and yellow and the building housing the gallery Artisans', which is covered in a mural of hands making things. The mural says as much about the neighbourhood as it does about Artisans', a gallery that promotes handmade Indian arts and craft. Most of the cafes and shops in the area wear their support for handmade goods and artisanal foods like a badge. As a result, Kala Ghoda has over the years

acquired the aura of an indie neighbourhood, with Radhi Parekh, the owner of Artisans', playing a significant role.

Parekh, 58, diminutive with a warm smile and a wardrobe that has probably never known synthetic fabric, started Artisans' in 2011. In the six years since then, the handful of streets that make up Kala Ghoda has emerged as a little hub of design. Aside from Artisans', there are the clothing labels Obataimu, The Bombay Shirt Company, Masaba, Manish Arora, Gaurav Gupta, Sabyasachi, Chumbak, FabIndia, Translate, the home décor and clothing store Nicobar, and design shop Filter. Each place has a different vision of design. At Artisans', the focus is on Indian handicraft presented in ways that are either traditional or contemporary. The exhibitions at the venue have ranged from mata ni pachedi (shrine cloths) from Gujarat and Kutchi embroidery to old textile mill labels and contemporary handwoven clothes made by little-known designers from around the country. In a way, Artisans' is where three recent trends converge. The evolution of the neighbourhood, the recent interest in design in the city and the revival of handloom.

## State of origins

The Artisans' building could've been lost to a generic chain store. Previously the building, which is owned by Parekh's family, housed H. S. Cox, a logistics company they'd bought in 1962. Parekh's father was keen to sell the building but she restrained him upon her return in 2009. She'd just wrapped up a career in graphic and user interface design in London and the US, spanning more than 20 years and contemplated "creating the building as a design and craft destination". A few years earlier, a termite attack had proved fortuitous as the bugs had eaten through a false ceiling to reveal the sloping roof one sees today. The attractive old ceiling gave her a sense of the potential of the place. At the time, the two "like-minded" shops in the area were Kala Ghoda Café and Muse, the erstwhile boutique. Parekh imagined the place undergoing a transformation similar to that of Covent Garden, the address of Usborne Publishing, where she'd designed and illustrated educational books from 1988 to 1997. The London district "had transitioned from a seedy neighbourhood to a hub of independent businesses" and she wanted to see Kala Ghoda go the same way.

The first tenant to occupy the ground floor of the building was Sabyasachi, in 2010. The spot is now occupied by the designer Gaurav Gupta as Sabyasachi moved to a larger store nearby. Parekh felt he fit into her idea of the neighbourhood as he patronised Indian crafts. And so she leased the spot to Sabyasachi even though a multi-designer clothing store chain had made her a better offer. Her parents thought she was nuts.

Living in San Francisco has something to do with Parekh's lack of enthusiasm for chains. In 1997, Parekh moved to the US to work for Scientific Learning, a company that made learning and language games for children and adults on CD-ROMs, a relatively new technology at the time. She moved on to Oracle and then Paypal as a user interface (UI) designer. Now a common area of design, UI was emerging then. "It was such an exciting

time,” Parekh said. “We were making things up as we went along.” She lived in a bohemian part of San Francisco that had “a moratorium against chains and was instrumental in one of the first neighbourhood farmers’ markets”. During periods of recession in 2005 and 2008, Parekh said that people around her took to crafts like beading, knitting and crochet and began making a living off them. She had started making jewellery in 2000 and she’d sell her pieces in street fairs in summers. “We were plugging into an interest in the handmade,” she said. “It was a reaction to technology.” Meanwhile in India, which she’d visit every year, she found in malls and advertising hoardings, a rapid embrace of homogenous global culture. “It was everything we were rejecting in San Francisco,” she said.

## Homeward bound

In 2008, Parekh decided to move back to Mumbai, which she did the following year. Her father was ill and she was experiencing a mid-life restlessness. “It was quite a wrench,” she said. “I felt part of the neighbourhood (in San Francisco).” Before starting Artisans’, she taught a postgraduate course at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, where she’d studied visual communication in the 1980s. The school was her first port of call when she set up Artisans’, getting her access to artists and designers. Rta Kapur Chishti, a textile scholar and founder of Taanbaan, a Delhi-based label selling handloom clothes and fabric, conducted the first event at Artisans’, a sari draping workshop. Erroll Pires from Ahmedabad, a former NID faculty member and an expert in ply-split braiding, a technique traditionally used to make decorations for camels, was next.

A large number of exhibitions and workshops at Artisans’ have to do with textile. It’s a natural inclination for Parekh as her family used to be in the textile business. They owned Victoria Mills in Mumbai and several mills in Ahmedabad, which were shut in the 1960s and ’70s. Her mother Mita Parekh has been making block-printed salwar kameezes since the mid 1970s. “I’ve grown up with cotton,” Parekh said. The clothes sales at Artisans’ have showcased all manner of traditional textile – Rabari embroidery, saris from Bengal – and modern clothes made with handloom. It’s the contemporary labels that are of interest to shoppers who like making sartorial discoveries. Parekh has shown designers and labels such as Soham Dave from Ahmedabad, Sunita Shanker from Delhi, Urbania from Jaipur and Anavila from Mumbai before she became famous.

## Contemporary undertakings

Last year, Parekh opened a store within the gallery stocked with clothes, accessories and other handmade items that have been part of exhibitions. “Now everyone is doing handloom and talking about sustainability and the environment,” Parekh said. In fact in the city, Artisans’ is a notable player in the recent revival of handloom, an industry that got a leg-up from Lakmé Fashion Week. The annual event began encouraging handmade fashion

three years ago and in the process, drawing attention to designers working with traditional textiles, especially those with online labels.

This trend has coincided with the growing interest in design in the public sphere. Last year, for instance, there were two major exhibitions on different aspects of design: *The State of Architecture*, an overarching exhibition on the history and state of Indian architecture at the National Gallery of Modern Art, and *Design: The India Story*, a show on Indian product design through the ages at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya and Galerie Max Mueller. Such conversations are encouraging for Parekh, especially since craft is valued so little in cities. This is the where the workshops held regularly at Artisans' come in. The gallery has hosted workshops on everything from watercolour painting and photography to weaving and tie and dye. "When people in cities can see how things are made, they will value it more," she said.

*Artisans', Kala Ghoda. 9820145397*

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