

Museum-quality cloth conserves cultures

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Trisha Sertori, Contributor, Kerobokan, Bali

More than six decades ago India's Mahatma Gandhi called for villages across his nation to maintain ancestral professions such as weaving and embroidery. His goal was to crush dependence on England's spinning mills and ensure economic sustainability in villages throughout India.



"We started spinning and weaving as a means of solving unemployment as well as a resolution of self-reliance," Mahatma Gandhi is quoted when asked how "making one's own cloth and inheriting one's ancestral profession solve modern problems".

About the same time as Mahatma Gandhi was revolutionizing India, on the other side of the world in New York's Brooklyn, Paul Ropp was born. And now at 63 years of age the lad, who was born on the wrong side of the tracks and remained illiterate until he was 22 years old, is helping maintain Gandhi's vision in India and in Bali.

In Bali, Paul Ropp is best known as a fabric and clothing designer; a designer who says "Fashion is dead. We don't make fashion, we make ooh aah (clothing)".

The ooh aah factor in Ropp's designs is based in those Indian villages where his silks, wools and cottons are hand-dyed and loomed before being hand-embroidered then stitched in Bali.

This is what makes the pieces museum-quality garments. "The fact is that within 30 years these clothes will be in museums because the young people (in villages) don't want to do this work (hand-weaving and hand-embroidery) anymore. For me it's about trying to show them they can stay at home in their villages and make a good living.

"What Mahatma Gandhi wanted was for people to stay in their villages and not go to the cities to look for work. He wanted the villages to be strong (economically); to be independent of the British and that is in essence these fabrics," said Ropp, who employs more than 500 people across Bali and 5,000 people across India. In the mix are Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and more, said Ropp, of what he feels is the proof that economic health allows people from all backgrounds to work together creatively.

"India is the largest Hindu country in the world and Indonesia the largest Muslim country. The fabrics are woven by Indian Hindus, embroidered by Indian Muslims and exported to Muslim Indonesia, where they are stitched by Hindus, Muslims, Christians

and others all working together in real harmony, and exported around the world," Ropp said.

Engineering handwoven and embroidered fabrics demands an extraordinary attention to detail, planning where different motifs and colors fall on every meter of fabric is, Ropp said, a role he delights in. So specific is the fabric design that every garment is cut singly, literally one garment at a time. Ropp's garments are incredibly labor-intensive; utterly hands on.

This invisible element of human creativity in his designs breathes life into the clothing, you can almost hear the loom's shuttle and comb that gives birth to Ropp's designs as you handle the fabrics rich in color, weight and movement.

"This is a real collaboration; weaving will take a family about two weeks, then another week for embroidery then here in Bali for cutting and stitching. People are using their expertise to create something that is then exported globally. This is global marketing from indigenous labor -- that is the key -- multi culture bridges the gap," said Ropp of his designs that create a world market for remote villages that would not otherwise have global access.

"This is about sustainable development, the economic sustainability of villages; productivity based on community effort. And every time someone puts on a garment it supports that reality," said Ropp adding that his fabrics are "not made by mills but by people".

Ropp arrived in Bali back in 1978 after several years in India. A born entrepreneur, he had earlier gained a 32 percent share of the cigarette paper market in the U.S. before his move to India.

Ropp was making his American flag, draft cards and 100 dollar bill printed cigarette papers at the height of the Vietnam war and found a ready market of smokers keen to light up a little revolution with each puff; not bad business nous for a boy who gained his education in a reform school.

He is one of those people born to win against all odds. Perhaps if had he been born with a silver spoon the Ropp ebullience and creativity would have been stilted, drowned in middle-class mediocrity

It is his ability to think faster and wilder than most that has taken him to the top. Ropp is one of those multi-tasking people who get more done in a day than many of us achieve in a week. He checks skirt samples, suggests additional motifs on boots, stressing "we are not making boots we are making art -- over the top is good," and chats nonstop about fabric, embroidery, religion, art and the death of fashion at breakneck speed.

His eyes, as blue as his summer sky silks, encompass all under the Paul Ropp roof in Bali and further off into Hindustani and Muslim villages, and further still to the 14 countries that have absorbed his colors and designs like sun on a golden pond.