

FASHION FILE by Pia Southam

anthropology with attitude

Bali-based New York designer channels Gandhi and Hendrix in his spirited clothing empire

I gave him the shirt off my back and two days later he returned it to me, transformed into wearable art. That's the genius of Paul Ropp, Southeast Asia's answer to Roberto Cavalli.

I met the charismatic designer at his studio-cum-factory in Kuta, Bali. He's a big man who quietly dominates any room he enters, not least because of his trademark attire: brilliant lime and orange embroidered silk pyjamas and flip flops. His shy blue eyes are disarming. During our interview he took a shine to the simple beige cap-sleeved silk shirt I was wearing, liking the way it fits and its classic, working girl lines. We struck a deal: he would borrow the shirt, make a pattern and return it to me along with an original version in a couple of days. I left his studio in my bra and blazer, dreaming of the original Paul Ropp shirt that would soon be mine.

It wasn't long after arriving in Bali that I spotted Paul Ropp fashions at his signature store in Jimbaran Bay. In a land full of colorful clothing options for the tourist with spare change in their pocket, this was a different thing altogether. My male companion and I dived in (actually, I was a little jealous of his purchases because, if anything, the Paul

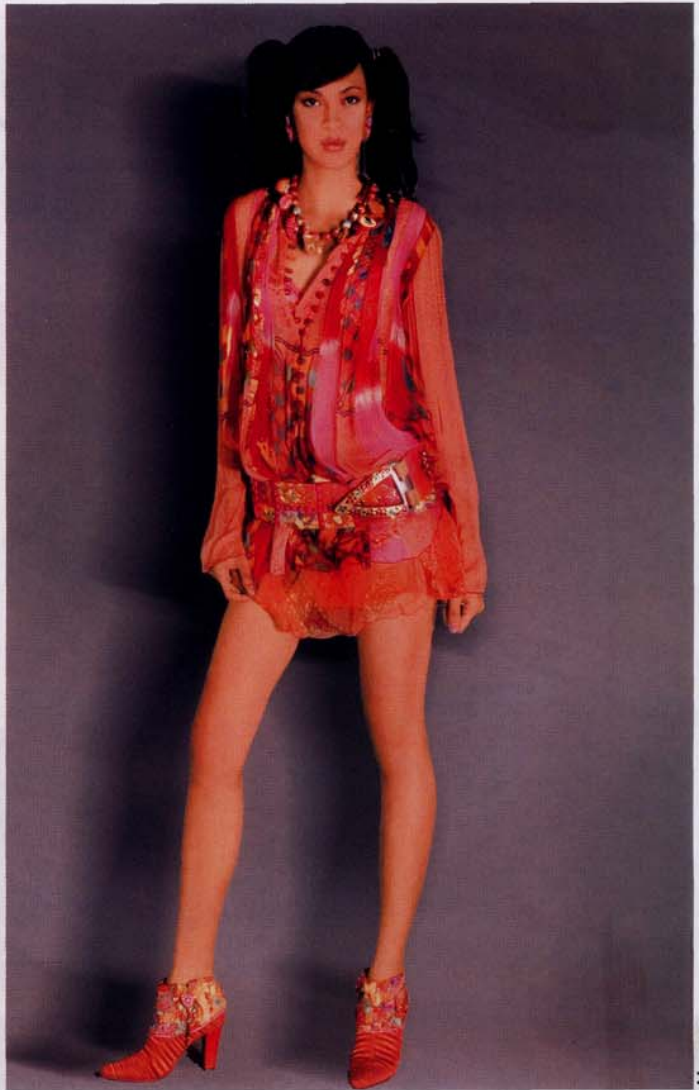
Ropp menswear line is even more seductive than his women's clothes).

As Ropp puts it, "My clothes are sensual, not sexual. I make clothes for people who would rather be naked."

The 63-year-old designer is a kind of pirate figure from the psychedelic 60s. He grew up in New York, the product of a fractured Jewish family, abandoned to the juvenile detention system where he "got an excellent education in creativity; everyone left me alone to do art all the time." He decided to learn to read in his early twenties, beginning with *The Little Prince* and moving on to Gujarati literature.

Ropp was a roadie for the great Paul Butterfield Blues Band at Woodstock. He also did hair and made clothes for stars like Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, and through one bit of mischief or another, ended up creating cigarette papers printed with the American flag. At one point, the counterculture revolutionary controlled 30 per cent of the American cigarette paper market, but he was attracting the wrong kind of attention in the Nixon era and so took off for India in 1971, one step ahead of The Man.

On the subcontinent, he pursued his passion for the values of Mahatma Gandhi and eventually employed entire villages to keep



Paul Ropp

alive the ancient textile arts of hand-weaving, embroidery and hand-painting on silks, cottons and wools. The combination of Ropp's designs and the villagers' hand-crafting (some pieces took up to three months to create) meant the exuberant fabrics were a big success both culturally and commercially.

The next step was Bali, 1978, where his best friends were expecting their first child. In the home birth spirit of the times, Ropp became a midwife. He describes his role as being there to "catch, cut and wrap" the baby girl, and he did it all on a magnificent length of Paul Ropp fabric. This became the birth of a new cycle in Ropp's life as well. He began his fashion line using fabrics from India, then cutting, stitching and further embellishing each piece in Bali.

His factory in Legian is stacked to the ceilings with neatly folded color-coded fabrics, and dozens of pretty Balinese ladies with agile fingers work on sewing machines or focus intently on handiwork. "Look at this," Ropp says, pointing out two women creating trimmings. "We are so lucky to have these Balinese workers. Their hands are capable of such delicate

work because all their lives they have been weaving offerings to the gods." Currently there are 300 people working for Ropp in Bali, and a further 3,000 making the fabrics in India.

Ropp has strong ideas about the business side of things too. For example, he hates waste, so everything gets used. The scraps end up frayed, ruched or appliquéd onto garments and amazing accessories. His bags are fabulous, ranging from little patchwork clutches in tropical shades of fringed and torn fabric to the Important Large Handbag, which he does like no other designer: extravagant, with leather patches, beads and feathers all hanging off a hobo pouch. Belts, beads, boots, sandals, hats, everything is made with that creative bohemian flair, and yet so modern and luxurious. Now he's putting out bras and little boy shorts too, handmade with sexy silks and crochet work. His two-year-old menswear line is a fantastic success, accounting for more than 50 per cent of his business revenue.

Ropp is now in 18 countries, including Sury and Kay at The Village on Dongping

Lu. Owners Kartini and Mae Tanoto say, "We were exposed to Paul Ropp in Indonesia and we had to bring his unique vision to Shanghai." They're betting fashion-forward Shanghai hipsters are going to take to Ropp with great enthusiasm.

Expanding his casual signature internationally has given rise to a new line of Paul Ropp that can be worn in the northern winters. It's called SUN COLD, and translates the same piled-on casual elegance into wools and flannels, hats, coats and boots in colors that are slightly muted for overcast skies.

But back to 'The Shirt'. I was leaving Bali and en route to the airport swung by to pick up my little beige silk shirt. There it was – same shirt, but now it looked like a brilliant Uluwatu sunset, with carved bone buttons and vivid hues flaming from vermilion to coral. Paul Ropp's last words to me, as I effusively received this magnificent little work of art, were characteristically modest, and offered with a shy grin. "I thought it would look good on you." ■

Find Paul Ropp designs in Shanghai at Sury and Kay, 215, The Village, 6 Dongping Lu (6466 5581)