

A fine line

Indian pop (popular) art and street fashion share a complex relationship in which kitschy shapes, cherubic gods and retro Bollywood posters jump off pages and canvases and onto clothes and accessories.

TEXT P S BHAVANA DATTA



It is the year 2006. You walk into a flea market to pick up an orange T-shirt with a silk-screened image of Lord Shiva on it, a red bag with an 'Om' print and a white shirt bearing the likeness of an '80s movie star. Popular art, which spans the genres of mythology, religion, and Bollywood among others, dominates street fashion. Cut to 2010. You walk into a couture house and pick up a shirt printed with a hand-painted red truck from sadda (our very own) Punjab, a neon-yellow bag with a digitally-altered poster print and an ivory-white T-shirt bearing a screen-printed caricature of you. Indian pop art in fashion has had a face-lift.

ART AND COMMERCE

The commercial beginnings of pop art can be traced to the '50s and the '60s when works of Scottish sculptor and artist Sir Eduardo Luigi Paolozzi and Andy Warhol bombarded the global scene.



Everyday images of bicycles, buses, cans, boxes, animals, caricatures and even junk doused in colour were depicted as art. Eye-popping works by Billy Apple (a.k.a Barrie Bates), Mary Inman and Roy Lichtenstein created ripples, while across the ocean, David Hockney gave the British pop art movement a push. However, with all these histrionics what remained constant was the love for this lowbrow art in the fashion bubble.

Couture shared a deep connection with high and low art. In the '60s, Yves Saint Laurent's Mondrian-inspired dress made fashion-lovers hold their breath. One can mark graphic periods in the lives of couturiers like Christian Lacroix and Jean Paul Gaultier. More recently, Max Mara and Versace (via pop art prints with underwater themes) explored it on clothes. Gaultier's Spring-Summer 2009 couture

Dummy tree is nature's basic bridge and can be used for small crossings.



played with singer Klaus Nomi’s visual style (we cannot ignore music as a popular form of art, can we?) and Dolce & Gabbana and Moschino did not lag behind.

QUINTESSENTIALLY INDIAN

India had always thrived on popular ancient ideologies, art and fashion but modernity borrowed very little of it. Pop art remained one of India’s best kept secrets till high-end names tapped it. By the nineties, kitsch king Manish Arora’s exclusives were modelled on this theme. Brands like Swatch adopted his colourful designs for watches, while the Reebok’s Fish Fry collection by Manish Arora exploded with colours. Cosmetic brand Nivea also followed suit while Satya Paul’s contemporary and retro art-inspired saris, ensembles and ties made their mark. Other couturiers slipped in to the already-set framework with ease.

With couture and high fashion came a new segment called ‘glocalised fashion’, which was medium-priced yet exclusive. A new set of designers catered to consumers who lived differently but on the edge. An example of this is Attic. Started by four young designers, Attic is an urban art and fashion store in Mumbai. The designers believe that new-age customers who are exposed to world culture are drawn towards designs that reflect their personality and identity. Indian popular art helps define



this upper-middle class living. It draws effortless parallels between the real and the unreal; the tangible and the intangible; the internal and the external. In these urban, illusionary worlds of art and fashion the mundane becomes artistic. The jet-setting masses are looking for select yet everyday utility products inspired by something close to their homes. And what could be a better theme than their very Indian neighbourhood?

A NEW WAVE

This pop fashion-cum-art theory is further structured by digital and other technology. No wonder visual arts blogs like Masala Chai, which focus on finding and showcasing lesser known South Asian talent, have caught on. Pavitra Mohan, who authors MC says, “Neither fashion, nor pop art need to make sense. If you like it and think you can pull it off, wear it. Regular is not very interesting.” Pop art and new media dissolve boundaries, create imagery, rub shoulders with a Warholesque style and simultaneously go back to their roots.

“Dummy woman, the river has her wiles, rising, falling and ever-changing.”

Dummy: You can’t go wrong camping by the Chandra Tal where the Chandra River forms a lake. It is the epitome of riverside backpacking.

Dummy: Carry comfortable shoes; they help in hopping over rocks and also keep your feet from getting tired after a long day of trekking.

“Dummy woman, the river has her wiles, rising, falling and ever-changing.”

Today, imaginative interpretations have broken rules and reached the masses. Think of the cheeky Amul Butter advertisements, digital prints on eco-bags, or one-liners on T-shirt brands like Tantra? Delhi-based Playclan’s spokesperson Himanshu Thakkar talks of how they look at playfulness as a feature to remind them of regular things. While designing for projects like illustrative graffiti on walls of a hotel in Chennai, the colour, chaos and energy of India grabs their attention. In Himanshu’s words work is play for the team.



HITTING THE FUNNY BONE

Nouveau pop art strongly believes that laughter is the best medicine. Humour acts as a medium to instantly connect with the customer. It could be via a Bollywood movie dialogue, local slang or even political humour. The auto-rickshaw is a very popular (and fun-filled) pop art icon. Not only does the Indian customer identify with it, but also the foreign traveller for whom it works as a souvenir. Playclan stresses on the need to catch the energy and the pulse by a positive-in-spirit approach. Rabia Gupta shows a patriotic and confident angle when she says: “We have grown as a nation and have a new found confidence that allows us to laugh at ourselves, and to be okay with just who we are. This has led to the use of humour and irony across all forms of design and art.”

Convenience apart, fashion also roams the area of unadulterated art. Clients do not want to spend vast amounts on heavily embroidered garments which typically have a shorter shelf-life. A few ask for unique pieces with caricatures and interesting designs. It looks like the day is not far for pop art couture to take the lead. The humdrum masquerading as art has reached iconic status and the outrageous is ironically commendable. It is the era where the more boisterous and radical it gets, the better it sells.



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Dummy: The epitome of riverside backpacking.