

artisans and artist colonies

the fabrics and frocks of Easton Pearson

For over a decade, **Easton Pearson**, one of Australia's most admired fashion houses, has negotiated close working relationships with textile artisans from various regions in India. **Rhana Devenport** spoke recently with **Pamela Easton** and **Lydia Pearson** about this fertile and forever evolving aspect of their practice and the scope of their creative influences.

'Mammachi held a gleaming violin under her chin. Her opaque fifties sunglasses were black and slanty-eyed, with rhinestones on the corners of the frames. Her sari was starched and perfumed. Off-white and gold. Her diamond earrings shone in her ears like tiny chandeliers. Her ruby rings were loose. Her pale, fine skin was creased like cream on cooling milk and dusted with tiny red moles. She was beautiful. Old, unusual, regal.'

Rhana Devenport: Since Easton Pearson's establishment in 1989 in Brisbane, your interactions with Indian artisans have become an integral dimension within your working ethos. In and among devising, producing and marketing four ranges a year, you also visit India around five times annually, deepening your already close associations with groups and cooperatives of craftspeople. Can you tell me more about how these relationships developed?

Easton Pearson: Our negotiations with Indian textile artisans began around 12 years ago, but it wasn't until we visited India seven years ago that the possibilities truly became apparent. We were unquestionably overwhelmed by the incredibly rich history of practice and by the extraordinary potential this way of working offered. We established an early relationship with a Bombay workshop run by a master craftsman and just a few artisans—this workshop now employs 90 artisans who work exclusively for Easton Pearson. Another key relationship we formed a decade ago, that continues strongly today, is with different groups of women through the Shrujan cooperative. This cooperative was established some 25 years ago by Indian women for the women of the geographic region of the Great Rann of Kutch.²



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Easton Pearson

While being familiar with a number of traditional techniques, you constantly vary and adapt these techniques in your work. Can you describe your process of experimentation?

We may source cloth woven by the men from Kutch, then organise the women from Kutch to work the embroidery, and then more sequining is completed by groups of men and women in and around Bombay. Whenever possible, we travel to different regions in India to research alternate textile techniques such as Ikat weaving from outside Hyderabad, mirror work from Rajasthan, Lucknow chikan embroidery, or the complex layered appliqué technique from Ahmedabad. The National Institute of Fashion Technology in Hyderabad and the Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad are wonderful storehouses of brilliant examples of technique and practice. Of course we have also been extremely fortunate in our personal friendships with particular people who love Indian textiles, who have nurtured and assisted us enormously.

By working with craftspeople at the initial commissioning level, we can develop new textiles with specific garments in mind, while also being aware of the particular qualities and limitations of specific techniques. We rarely acquire ready-made fabrics. Rather, we create our own fabrics through a long process of selection, design and adaptation. This often takes up to 18 months, with the two of us spending hours hunched over the photocopy machine as we create artworks and assemble colour combinations.

I understand that while the fabrics are formed in India, all your manufacturing is undertaken here in Australia.

Yes, our garments are all handcut and machine sewn in Australia—naturally, we are keen to support Australian industry as well.

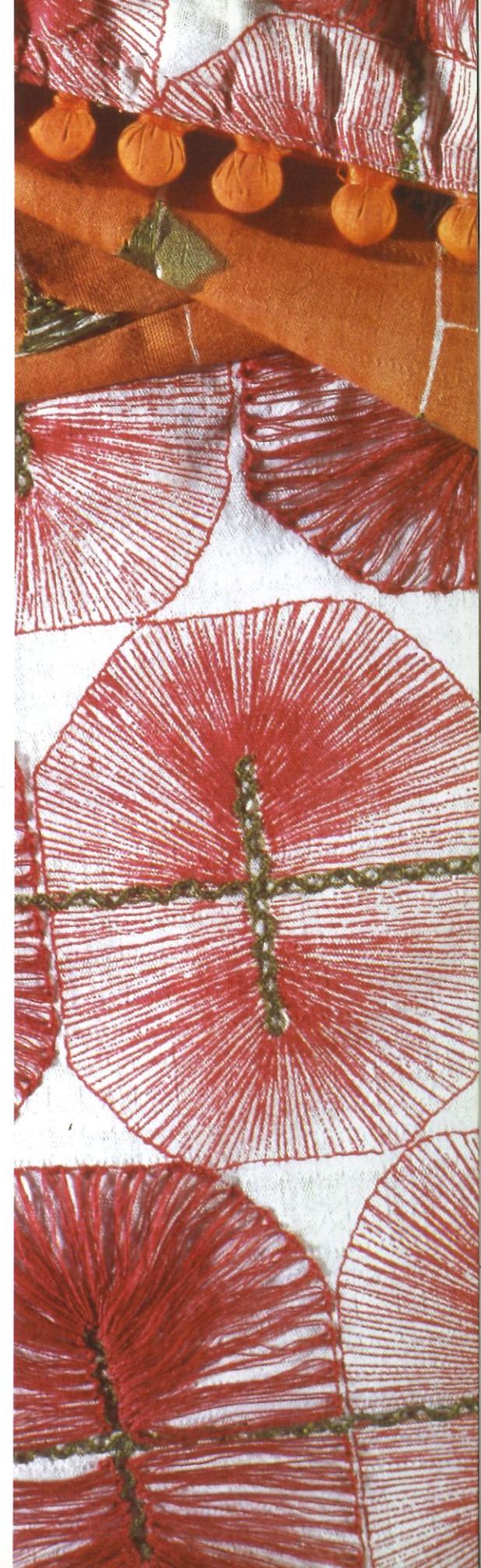
Your timing with the 'hippie ethnic chic thing' over recent years was perfect, and many people now associate Easton Pearson entirely with this aesthetic. However, your eclectic sweep of influence has always included Euro-American sources as well, hasn't it?

Opposite page, left: Easton Pearson, *Pippar Top*, 2002. Photo Alex Zotos.

Opposite page, middle: Easton Pearson, *Aosta Skirt* (detail), Poppyfield cotton, 2003.

Opposite page, right: Easton Pearson, *Grover Dress*, 2003. Photo Alex Zotos.

Right: Easton Pearson, *Bibi Skirt*, *Silk Cotton Mashru*, 2002.





Absolutely. Our recent range moves deliberately away from the look of 'bohemia', or an aesthetic drawn from cultural practices in Asia or Africa, to a more abstracted quality—it's more about a *spirit of life* than a particular era or place. We are currently fascinated by the astonishing work of Vionnet—the French couturière who worked at the beginning of the twentieth century—and particularly by her use of the circle as a visual motif. We had her approach in mind as we thought about the integration and placement of our fabric motifs, which are integral within the shape and design of each garment.³

One of the most dazzling aspects of your Summer 2003 Collection is the luxuriously bold, swirling motifs: the 'Pearl and Wave print' and the 'Crescent Circle' prints on silk. Can you explain the genesis of these motifs?

For this collection we borrowed marvellous patterns from the Ottoman Empire of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The designs were found on the cut velvet of men's robes, and one motif in particular seems to have been borrowed from an original Buddhist design. Other influences are graphics from the 1920s, the 1960s and the 1970s. We are especially interested in how visual ideas appear and reappear, again and again.

We have talked in the past about your interest in experimental artists' enclaves as one source of reference within your wide influential sphere. What are other sources of inspiration as well?

Our references are drawn from varied terrains—from Indian, African and European sources, from historical predecessors, from vintage clothes, from museums, archives and films, from books and our personal travels with our families. We find we are drawn to the work of Indigenous communities in humid and hot lands drenched in light. For example, the

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extraordinary painted houses of Basotho in South Africa inspired certain garments in our 2002 Second Summer Collection, such as the 'Star', 'Diamond' and 'Bintang' sarongs.

For the 2002 Collection we looked at the avid appropriation of tribal dress by colonial makers and the cross appropriation by Indigenous makers of Western clothes. The champagne-cork fringes referred to the inventive use of found objects and the ecclesiastical tops referenced aspects of the missionary presence in Africa. The mixture of Victorian blouses and batik skirts echoed our constant double take and re-adaption that occurred within the processes of re-editing and re-working the textural and decorative elements.

Artists' colonies that interest us include those in the South of France, the American Desert, Mexico and Polynesia, and artists such as Georgia O'Keefe, Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta. We are interested in the same decorative traditions within Indigenous communities that attracted a wave of artist communities to these locations. We are particularly fascinated by the fusion of Indigenous work and artists' interpretations of this work—in the influences, dilutions and cross-fertilisations that erupt.

Your frocks sometimes seem a little out of step with current trajectories of fashion, and somewhat idiosyncratic, as if journeying on their own explorative path. Can you speak about Easton Pearson's relationship to popular fashion aesthetics?

We have always been a little outside of what's happening. We tend to move forward, but not in straight lines or parallel to everyone else. Of course, we are mindful of trends, but we like to interpret these directions in different ways.

We begin with a love of the cloth we create. Simultaneously, we are interested in designing for women who have a clear idea of how they see themselves and how they want to present themselves to the world. We design for women who are interested in the silhouette and more ... elements such as detailing and the texture of fabric against skin. We pay a great deal of attention to the way the internal seams are finished and re-create these aspects for every garment. We care about how the garments feel when worn. We like to think people can take our garments and make them their own. When we design, we are thinking about specific women we admire.

So you have multiple muses?

Yes. Our work is more about a sensibility than fashion.

Rhana Devenport is Manager, Australian Centre of Asia-Pacific Art with the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

Endnotes

1. Aundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 1997, Flamingo, London, p. 166.
2. The Great Rann of Kutch is to the north of Kutch in India's westernmost region of Gujarat, and separates the rest of Kutch from Pakistan. Its landscape is remarkable: the entire area is almost an island, particularly during the monsoon period from May onwards when it becomes flooded by sea and then river water. In the dry period it becomes almost completely barren, given the intense soil salinisation. In 2001, an earthquake that left many villages destroyed further devastated this fragile ecosystem. The people of the Kutch region have long been renowned for their distinctive and exquisite handicraft, especially detailed mirrored embroidery. These crafts, and the traditional Kachchhi culture that they embody, are being sustained by a number of cooperatives aimed at ensuring that craftspeople receive their fair share of profits. These include Mahila Vikas Sangathan, the Kala Raksha Trust, Kutchcraft and Shrujan. The Shrujan cooperative works with artisans from around 70 villages.
3. Madeleine Vionnet is most usually remembered for transfiguring women's fashion with the invention of the glamorous bias cut gown in 1927 that became the centrepiece of 1930s day and evening wear (and a knock-out on Ginger Rogers).

Opposite page, left: Easton Pearson, *Martucci sarong* and *Zante Tunic* Printed silk twill, 2003.

Opposite page, middle: Easton Pearson, *Tonga T* with *Raffia Hip Belt* and *Maria Skirt*, 2002. Photo: Alex Zotos.

Opposite page, right: Easton Pearson, *Kivu Singlet*, 2002. Photo: Alex Zotos.

Above, left: Easton Pearson, *Anoku skirt* and *Arlette top*, 2002.

Above middle: Easton Pearson, *Kani T* with *Louis Pant*, 2003. Photo: Alex Zotos.

Above, right: Easton Pearson, *Laya Smock* with *Souvenir Skirt*, 2003. Photo: Alex Zotos.