

Madhu Jain: Craft Revivalist and Textile Conservationist

The handlooms sector, which represents the rich diversity of India's 2,000-year-old textiles tradition, has a hands-on advocate in Craft Revivalist and Textile Conservationist Madhu Jain, designer extraordinaire, whose name is synonymous with *swadeshi*. Madhu is a doyen in the Indian crafts sector, evident from her many partnerships over the years with Government of India's Ministry of Textiles.

Crafts call for sustained effort. From the time she launched her label in 1987, Madhu has worked only with natural fibres that are quintessentially Indian in ethos and execution. This gravitation towards traditional, organic textiles is a reflection of her personal sensibility, and she has carved a niche for herself as the country's most respected craft and textile revivalist, whose fine creations and revival of rare and extinct motifs and textiles are embedded in strong Indian roots.

Updating Indian Textiles

Madhu has experimented extensively with textiles and continues to innovate to craft unique blends that are characteristically true to her "made-in-India" natural fibres label. After travelling extensively through rural India to meet master craftsmen and weavers, Madhu's research led her to develop textiles in distinctive combinations of two different weaving traditions from two states to create new textiles, high on quality and design. This seamless blending is Madhu's speciality, making her a forerunner in the indigenous traditional weaves industry.

Madhu has experimented with Odisha's Ikkat weave, Andhra Pradesh's Kalamkari craft, Assamese Mekhla Chaddar, and Andhra Uppada. In keeping with her passion for eco-friendly textiles, she was instrumental in introducing bamboo fibre as an alternative textile in India. Additionally, she has collaborated with several NGOs in India and Bangladesh that work with rural artisans and local weavers. Her innovations have resulted in a resurgence of interest in Indian's traditional textiles.

Providing Livelihoods to Artisans

Increasingly, factory-produced textiles are inundating the market and fast overtaking the natural fibres sector, forcing artisan communities into outmigration in search of other work options. Pained to see the denudation of India's traditional crafts markets, Madhu felt an urgent need to ensure these traditions would not languish and slowly die out.

Madhu realised that for the traditional natural textiles industry to survive and retain its supremacy in urban markets, the key was to contemporise textiles while at the same time, being true to tradition. This meant relying on the dextrous skills of India's master weavers and craftsmen whose craft has been handed down to them generationally. In doing so, she sources artisans who were once famous for their crafts and who still practice them. Madhu's work has given a much-needed boost to this industry, providing employment to over 500 master weavers and craftsmen across India.

After Madhu used bamboo textile as a base for the Kalamkari "Tree of Knowledge" for the 2010 Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony, the Kalamkari sector has witnessed a 500% growth. Her exceptional contribution to the crafts of Andhra Pradesh is "figurative" Kalamkari, accomplished by incorporating innovative features to the traditional craft by using influences such as Raja Ravi Verma's paintings. Madhu's twist in design sensibility has given a new lease of life to this craft form.

Popularising Craft by using Fashion as a Platform

To preserve India's endangered crafts heritage, the obvious solution is to ensure markets. Madhu has succeeded in increasing awareness around handcrafted textiles and craft-based clothes. To reach out to a larger, national and international audience, she uses the platform of fashion to showcase India's heritage, and to assure urban markets for rural weavers.

Next Steps

Having worked with various government and NGOs in development, design, and marketing of indigenous textiles and crafts, Madhu aims to set up a chain of support to ensure steady volumes of work to India's artisans, independent of season or the vagaries of fashion.

Highly regarded as a handlooms specialist whose life quest is revitalising and reinvigorating dying crafts, Madhu has impacted the sector by giving it a fresh lease of life.

Patrons

Government of India; J&K Government; Ministry of Textiles; Sonal Mansingh; Nita Ambani; Rani Mukerji; Vandana Luthra; Maneka Gandhi; Waheeda Rehman; Raveena Tandon; Juhi Chawla; Milind Soman; Neelam Pratap Rudy; Princess Maha Al Sauduri of Saudi Arabia; Mariam Fayesalle, First Lady of Senegal.

Major Contributions to the Handlooms Sector, Including Awards and Memberships

§ **1987:** Launched Madhu Jain label to revive the handlooms sector.

§ **1987:** Created a collection blending Baluchari of West Bengal with Kalakshetra motifs of Tamil Nadu.

§ **1996:** Revived folk art Nakshi Kantha in collaboration with BRAC (Bangladesh), one of the largest NGOs in the world.

§ **1996:** Reintroduced the legendary Dhaka Muslin, which had disappeared from India after partition.

§ **1997:** At Miss World Pageant showcased Nakshi Kantha and Dhaka Muslin craft, winning international acclaim.

§ **2000:** Associate Designer Member, Fashion Design Council of India.

§ **2003:** Launched “Projekt M” with Milind Soman to catapult Indian textiles onto the world map.

§ **2003:** In tandem with Indian Textiles Ministry, Madhu introduced bamboo as an alternative, eco-friendly textile.

§ **2003:** Showcased a Kalamkari collection at Singapore Fashion Week.

§ **Feb 2004:** At 7th World Bamboo Congress New Delhi, formally introduced bamboo-based textiles into India.

§ **2005:** Embarked on “Kashmir Project” with J&K government to restore employment lifelines to local artisans by sourcing, developing, marketing and popularising Kashmiri handicrafts in India and abroad through museums. Dr Karan Singh’s personal collection in Amar Mahal museum provided critical reference points. For the “Kashmir Project” Madhu mixed traditional and contemporary design in Kashmiri handicrafts, presenting this to leading museums in New York—Metropolitan Museum, Museum of Arts and Design, American Museum of Natural History, Rubin Museum of Art.

§ **2005:** Published “The Living Art and Craft Tradition of Jammu and Kashmir”, a book that charts the history of Kashmiri crafts and details its myriad crafts.

§ **2007** Member, Culture Committee, South Asia Foundation, which promotes better understanding between SAARC nations through crafts and culture.

§ **2008:** Entrepreneuried a special showing of Great Living Traditions of Indian Weaves and Exquisite Craftsmanship with especial focus on the sari.

§ **May 2008:** Invited by J&K government to present a paper on “A Journey into the Living Arts and Crafts of J&K”, at South Asia Foundation Summit, Srinagar.

§ **Jan 2009:** Official Style and Design partner, Miss India Worldwide 2009, to promote the traditional sari.

§ **2009:** Nominated for “Marie Claire Fashion Award” for contribution to Indian crafts

§ **April 2009:** Awarded “25 Women of Excellence” FICCI FLO award in recognition of excellence in field of creative arts.

§ **2010:** Designed a carpet for *People for Animals* fundraiser.

§ **Oct 2010:** In recognition of her excellence in revitalising the crafts sector, for the Opening Ceremony of the Commonwealth Games 2010, was given the rare honour of crafting an installation in the “Fabric of India” segment. Using the skills of 300 weavers, 500 craftsmen and 200 hand embroidery artisans, Madhu designed and executed a giant 115-foot eco-friendly craft installation using bamboo fibre and Kalamkari craft technique.

§ **2011:** Restored a rare khadi sari woven in prison in 1941 by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

§ **October 2012:** In collaboration with Jehangir Art Gallery (Mumbai) and Ensemble boutique, Madhu curated a retrospective of 25 years of her contribution to reviving crafts.

§ **2013:** Curated a retrospective of museum-quality textiles and craft at Ogaan, New Delhi.

§ **2015:** Curated an exhibition, *Rare Textiles of Gujarat*, in New Delhi, which was inaugurated by Smt. Menaka Gandhi, Union Cabinet Minister for Women & Child Development.

§ **October 2016:** Chosen from among India's top designers by the Namaste France-supported historical French European Indian Fashion Week held at the Eiffel Tower, Madhu showcased her signature textiles and served an ambassadorial role in sharing India's cultural traditions with those of other regions.