

ALPANA BAWA

"Fashion is too fickle," says Alpana Bawa. "I want to create something that lasts longer than one season." Trends come and go, but Bawa, a 15-year veteran of the women's wear business, has proven that longevity and fashion can coexist if you bang to the beat of your own drum.

It's her independent spirit that's kept her relevant for so long. And, indeed, it's what drove her to open a boutique in New York with no backing or support to speak of. Today her East Village store is still going strong, and her ever-expanding business now spans women's wear, men's wear and home décor. Her burgeoning creative endeavors are a testament to a daring design aesthetic that is unmistakably, not to mention, uncompromisingly her own.

Call it Bawa color—what sets her pieces apart, be it an embroidered wrap dress or appliquéd pillow, is a blazing, 100-watt palette that boasts every color of the rainbow. She swings effortlessly from constructivism to whimsy, casual to evening, and apparel to soft furnishings. But there's always one constant: her reliance on intense, super-saturated color in all aspects of her work.

The source of the New York transplant's passion for vibrant hues? Nineteen-seventies India, where a patchwork of crimson, saffron and indigo formed the backdrop to her childhood. As she remembers it, this was a place where women draped from head to toe in silk dyed, embroidered and embellished in a kaleidoscope of iridescent shades were as ubiquitous as sun-kissed mangoes fresh from the tree.

Bawa's mastery of color theory is, of course, grounded in such memories of home. But her flair for dressmaking was born, more out of necessity as in those days in India one went to the local tailor and designed one's own wardrobe. Being the youngest of three girls these trips were very frequent. "I would also take the left over fabric and make dresses from scratch for my two dolls, Sundari and Putali'

The biggest influence on the designer-in-the-making, however, was her mother, whom she accompanied on trips across the vast and culturally diverse India. It was while traveling as a girl that Bawa saw the myriad tribal dresses of her homeland. Whether she was aware of it at the time, the idea of clothing as a boundless expression of identity was forever embedded in her mind's eye.

Bawa completed school in New Delhi and briefly designed for a local clothing brand. But her aspirations outgrew the confines of India's rag trade of 1983. , so she made the journey to the mecca of the fashion capital of the world. Twenty-three years later, her sights are now set, ironically, on opening a retail location back in India. "I've been [in New York] for two decades," says the 40+-year-old from her Manhattan loft. "The next logical step for me is to open a store in Delhi. Then I'll feel like I've come full circle."

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