

Fashionwear with a Flair

Posted on

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Fashion designing and the world of haute couture are not altogether alien to Sri Lanka. On the contrary the fashion scene here is a hive of activity with more and more fashion designers joining the fray each year, with the steady, encouragement they receive from various organizations within the industry.

Fashion shows are held regularly, at least once a month in Colombo's five-star venues, with some shows going out to major towns in the island. Most of Sri Lanka's top names in fashion design hold their annual shows at which a breathtaking range of fascinating, gorgeous, or simply outrageous designs, as the current world trends dictate, are presented to the discerning fashion-conscious audiences. These designers of 'up market', high fashion-wear could be bought at a price from their exclusive boutiques or on order.

Most Sri Lankan designers are women. The 'Catwalk Rag', by top designer Chryss (Chryshanthi Fernandopulle), or by Pret a Porter, another top name in fashion design, and Nayantara Fonseka are highly rated and widely patronized in our fashion scene. Cheryl Gyi, Mangala Innocence (who happens to be a man), Lilian Perera (a Norwegian designer) the list is long, the talent in abundance and the competition fierce for these designers who have all established themselves in the fashion scene here. Most designers travel abroad frequently, attending fashion shows in the West, visiting top fashion houses, exclusive boutiques and meeting with designers from other countries to keep abreast of the current world trends. Entering the world of fashion design here is by no means easy. Most of the big names in fashion design have taken years to establish themselves. The Fashion Designer of the Year contest, begun a few years ago and held annually, provides a springboard for aspiring designers to enter the fiercely competitive, rather close

circle of fashion designing in Sri Lanka.

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Fashion is synonymous with beauty. At the numerous beauty pageants held in the country like the Miss Sri Lanka Contest for Miss World, Miss Universe, Miss Asia/Pacific, Mrs. Woman of the World, Miss Working Girl, and Miss Tourism-to name a few – a fashion show by one or more of our well-known designers is a regular feature.

Modelling is part and parcel of the fashion scene in any country and Sri Lanka is no exception. The fashion scene here pays considerable attention to modelling and a couple of years back the Model of the Year contest was introduced to unearth and train women to be professional models. The winner of each year's contest is sent to Paris, the fashion capital of the world, to train in a top modelling school there.

As Susan James from London suggested a year ago, developing a Sri Lankan-style with a characteristic Eastern flavour to compete in the fast-moving, demanding, high-fashion markets of the West is not beyond a handful of our most innovative, dashing, daring designers who possess that innate 'touch of class'.

So far Sri Lanka's comparatively new garment industry has been targeting their exports _ to the middle and lower range market. The garment exporters' guardian, the Export Development Board (EDB), has been trying to open up new vistas for the industry in high-quality, exclusive exports-not without success. What is needed now, the EDB feels, is a slow and steady growth of the industry to weather the competition from other Asian countries, particularly Thailand. The industry has to concentrate on upgrading the quality of their product, from raw materials to skilled labour, to sophisticated machinery and factories, to design, if they are to penetrate the top end of the international apparel market.

The Clothing Industry Training Institute opened by the Ministry of Textiles in 1984 plays a major role in this process. By 1987 the industry was offering 20 courses ranging from machine operating and maintenance to computer application in garment manufacture.

The path the Sri Lankan garment industry should travel on is clear. As we grow in quantity and quality and set our sights and goals to emerge as the apparel exports centre in South East Asia, Sri Lanka would have to develop a Lankan identity to its garments which would be recognized and sought after in international markets.

As September approaches the local garment industry starts buzzing with activity in preparation for the Sri Lanka Apparel Fair which is quietly establishing itself as the leading trade fair in the industry. Scheduled to take place from September 26th to 28th the exhibition is fashioned to be a buyer/seller meet, where overseas buyers could assess our production capabilities, view our product range and the quality and design of our apparel. Buyers also have the opportunity of studying the infrastructure available to our manufacturers which would help build up their confidence in our products and induce them to place big orders with our manufacturers.

The venue is a five-star hotel, a member of the prestigious Hilton chain, the Hilton International Colombo, situated in the heart of the city. The Apparel Fair is already being extensively advertised in the international apparel market through the Hilton's worldwide network, and by the other organizers of the Fair, the Clothing and Footwear Institute (CFF) and the Sri Lanka Export Development Board, in an attempt to attract international apparel importers, wholesalers, and international chain and department stores to the Fair.

During the past decade the garment industry in Sri Lanka has made steady progress to reach the top slot in our foreign exchange earnings – and has so become a priority in the export trade. In 1977 the value of exports of apparel was Rs. 140 million. Last year (1980) their value had increased to Rs. 13,000 million. Since 1986 the industry has edged out tea, the traditional leader in the export trade to second place. Sri Lanka's garment exports at present concentrate on the U. S., West German, Netherlands, U.K. and more recently Japanese and Australian markets. The U. S. A. is our major market to which approximately 65 per cent of the total value of our garment exports are directed.

Our range of products – from shirts, blouses, skirts, dresses, trousers, jackets, underwear, nightwear, and children's wear-do not yet have their own brand name. Sri Lanka, however, produces for international brand names like St. Michael's, Harrods, C and A, British Home Stores (BHS), and Anne Klein. The garment industry's colossal expansion in the export trade and employment sphere has elevated it to being one of the most important industries in the country to be protected and upgraded. The Apparel Fair held for the second year in succession is an industry. At last year's Apparel Fair, attended by more than 50 importers from all over the world, Susan James from the London College of Fashion was quoted in a national newspaper as saying, 'The quality of the clothing is good. But the manufacturers are turning out en masse what the people want. What you need are a few good designers who will know what the world market in fashion is all about and-respond to that market."

