Heritage Hands: Preserving the Artisanal Weave of Dumbara in Contemporary Fashion

Posted on



Thanks to Sarita Rajandran’s Heritage Hands collection, Sri Lanka’s iconic Dumbara weave—renowned for its vibrant geometric patterns—will no longer fade into obscurity but be celebrated and preserved for future generations.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. **Photography** Arantha Photography.

In early 2023, personal stylist Sarita Rajandran embarked on a journey to explore Sri Lanka’s rich fashion heritage. While researching, she stumbled upon a hidden gem — a rare and intricate weave from the remote upcountry village of Udu Dumbara. Fascinated by its uniqueness and historical significance, dating back to the sixth century, Sarita felt a deep calling to revive and protect this ancient craft, now declared a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Driven by passion and purpose, she has since dedicated herself to preserving this timeless art of weaving for future generations.

The urgency of preserving the iconic Dumbara weave is stark—today, only one family continues the centuries-old tradition, a handful of four to seven artisans, putting this unique art at risk of fading into oblivion. Sarita Rajandran recognized the threat to this indigenous craft, especially as there is no guarantee the next generation will carry on the legacy. The Dumbara weave, a labor- intensive process using both hands and feet, has long been associated with intricate geometric designs. Historically, it was used for cushion covers, table mats, and wall hangings, prized for its durability and quality, so much so that Dumbara mats adorned the palaces of the island’s monarchs.

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In September 2023, Sarita partnered with local weavers to breathe new life into the traditional Dumbara weave, launching an innovative fashion show under the Heritage Hands label. This collaboration, in association with the Industrial Development Board of Sri Lanka, showcased a bold fusion of cultures, as the iconic Dumbara patterns were reimagined into contemporary Western- style attire. The event was a celebration of both artistry and craftsmanship, blending heritage with modern design in a groundbreaking way. Saman Yapage, a master weaver from the illustrious seventh generation of Dumbara artisans, was instrumental in bringing Sarita’s vision to life. Having first learned the delicate art of weaving at the tender age of ten, Saman has honed his craft over more than two decades. Today, his work continues to thrive with the support of his wife and a dedicated team of six assistants, all working in harmony to preserve and innovate within this ancient

tradition. The fashion show was designed to celebrate this ancient craft and create new revenue streams for the weavers, motivating them to continue their traditional livelihoods and encouraging them to pass the craft on to others outside their families. Sarita envisions making the show an annual event, which she hosted on her own with a limited audience in November 2024, marking its continued success Heritage Hands was launched in 2023 to promote and showcase the island’s indigenous textile heritage through the lens of modern fashion, reimagining the Dumbara weave in contemporary designs and silhouettes— transforming an ancient tradition into a vibrant part of modern fashion.



Sarita Rajandran, owner of Heritage Hands with Saman Yapage, Dumbara Weaver; and Shanelle Almeida Hallock, Brand Ambassador.



Classic contrast – where bold patterns meet elegance.



Effortlessly chic – the perfect blend of black, white, and woven textures.



The designs in the bolero and skirt resemble an artist’s canvass of vibrant colors.



Creativity meets craftsmanship.

As the founder of a fashion label, Sarita Rajandran understands the importance of nurturing artisans' creativity. She gives the Dumbara weavers the freedom to express themselves, providing only color guidelines and specific requirements. This empowering approach was met with great success at the debut fashion show of indigenous textiles, where her bold use of a vibrant, innovative color palette captivated the audience. Building on that momentum, Sarita collaborated with the

weavers to create the traditional bright hues of the Dumbara weave while introducing a strikingly novel black-and- white collection. Sarita credits Barbara Sansoni, the revered pioneer in Sri Lanka's Indigenous textile revival, with recognizing the Dumbara weave's potential and providing a platform for its creators. She aims to take this further—transforming the Dumbara weave from its traditional uses into textiles that can be crafted into modern clothing, catering primarily to Western-style palates and bridging heritage with contemporary fashion.

Each year, Sarita sources a carefully curated quantity of textiles from the Dumbara weavers, which takes them nearly ten months to complete. These intricate fabrics are showcased at fashion shows and form the cornerstone of Sarita's mission to take the Dumbara weave to a global stage. Her first international effort occurred in July 2024, when she collaborated with a Sri Lankan partner for a trunk show and sale at Marina Bay Sands in Singapore. This milestone marked the realization of Sarita's vision to elevate the Dumbara weave as wearable art, transforming these textiles into exclusive, collectible fashion pieces.

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The Dumbara artisans rely on threads to weave, which come at a steep cost, making their textiles not only exclusive but also able to command a premium price. However, the high cost of these threads has created a barrier to expanding the craft, preventing traditional artisans from training individuals outside their families. Undeterred, Sarita is committed to securing the future of the Dumbara weave, supporting the purchase of threads to fund training and ensure its future. Her vision is to establish a training center in the artisans' village within the next five years, a goal that, once achieved, will empower more Sri Lankans to master this sacred craft. Sarita's dream is to ensure that the Dumbara weave survives and thrives, becoming a vibrant and cherished tradition passed down with passion and dedication for future generations. Sarita, the founder of the resort and swimwear label Rachel RAJ, is now championing the Dumbara weave as a non-profit CSR initiative. The exclusive Heritage Hands collection is now available at the Rachel RAJ

flagship retail space, located on Elvitigala Mawatha in Colombo. With a mission to make this ancient craft more accessible, she is selling garments made from the weave at cost price, driven by the noble goal of bringing the Dumbara weave into the mainstream and ensuring its lasting legacy.

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A geometric twist on classic black and white.



Embrace the rainbow – vibrant colors that sparkle with every step.



Innovative designs that redefine style.



Sarita boldly innovated a novel black and white collection.