



Kirthi adding the finishing touches

Designs that last a lifetime - it's an accomplishment that many designers aspire to. But only a handful cross the threshold into timelessness. Kirthi Sri Karunaratne, legendary in the Sri Lankan fashion industry, is among that select few. As the first fashion designer in Sri Lanka, his oeuvre speaks for itself: a life's work acclaimed for its simplicity, class and elegance.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara



Sri Lanka's design legend,
Kirthi Sri Karunaratne

Pointing to an old black and white photograph of one of his bridal designs from 1962, Kirthi declares, "To my mind, that is what a bride should look like". The brides of yesteryear that Kirthi spun his magic for embody the designer's mantra: "A bridal should be simple and suit the girl." It's a rule that holds true for many of his other designs too, their longstanding value evidenced by the fact that so much of it is still relevant today.

While designers are ten-a-penny in Sri Lanka these days, there was barely a fashion industry to speak of when Kirthi was first starting out. "There's so much happening today," he observes. And with the sheer volume of work being produced now, he stresses the importance of staying innovative to avoid slipping into mediocrity. As the design veteran turns 84 in November this year, he reflects on a vibrant and still active career.

For Kirthi, becoming a designer wasn't a conscious decision. He credits Sita Jayawardena, a renowned journalist for giving him the push that he needed. She convinced Kirthi that he possessed a rare gift, and published an article titled 'Schoolboy Designer' featuring his sketches. Soon afterwards Kirthi was singled out when the House of Dior came visiting in search of young talent. Had it not been for this course of events he might have become a surgeon, but Kirthi took his skilled fingers and eye for detail out of medical college and took up a job at Dior's European offices.

During his years in London Kirthi toyed with the idea of enrolling in dress designing school, but was unsure about committing to a five-year course.

"Even those at House of Dior told me, 'You are already a designer, the talent is already in you. We can only teach you the structural side of things'," he says.

And Kirthi soon realized, he recalls, that the Western fashion world was very different to that of Sri Lanka. "In Europe they develop two collections, one for Spring/Summer and one for Autumn/Winter - something that will never happen here." He felt the need to produce work that was relevant to his native land.

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After stints at Dior couture houses in London, Paris and New York, and working with designers John Cavanagh and Emilio Schuberth, Kirthi returned to Sri Lanka, a seasoned couturier. Soon after his return in 1956 he held his first show at the Women's International Club with a model from his London days, Rita Fernando. Colombo's high society came along expecting to have a good laugh and instead discovered a real Sri Lankan talent.

"Things changed after that," Kirthi says. "Maybe I was lucky." Whether it was luck or skill that helped him that day, it sparked a career so illustrious that the designer can claim to have dressed almost every notable woman in Sri Lankan society. He particularly prides himself on the wedding dress and going away outfit that he created for Mrs Ranjan Wijeratne, wife of the late cabinet minister. Other memorable commissions include wedding dresses worn by Sicille Kotelawala, Mrs Neville Coorey and Shushila Gunasekera.

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Looking back on a long career that includes producing beauty contests such as Miss Sri Lanka and Mrs Sri Lanka, one poignant moment stands out in his mind. "It was wonderful to go to New York to receive a lifetime achievement award and have a show there," he recalls of the event hosted by the Old Boy's Association of his alma mater, Ananda College, in 2003. On his return from the short trip, the first ever Colombo Fashion Week was held, where Kirthi was presented with another lifetime achievement award.

Although fashion has remained his forte, Kirthi has proved to be a multi-faceted artist. His love for acting saw him star in what are now popular film classics Kalu Diya Dahara (1975), and Kolamba Sanniya (1976). He also designed the costumes and coached Malini Fonseka and Gamini Fonseka's waltz sequence in Nidhanaya (1972). His creativity has gone as far as christening popular film stars with their professional names as well.

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Kirthi's list of talents also includes writing. His expertise and experience in the world of fashion, and lucid style of expressing his views have made him a valued critic, writing on events and shows in newspaper columns over the past 50 years.

Yet despite his many and varied professional achievements, the designer delights in simple pleasures in his spare time. He loves flower arranging, for example, brightening up his home with creative and beautiful displays. The secret of his artistic success? "I suppose you simply have a flair for it."

