Making Rainbows

Posted on



Fine silks shimmer in soft colours, shades of pink, grey, blue and green merging in a tapestry of beauty. Bold hues speak volumes in artfully cut dresses, and vibrant animal prints are striking in their vivacity. Chrysanthie Fernandopulle-Saverimutto is not just a designer, but an artist who brings life to her palette of fabrics.

Words Ayesha Inoon Photographs Indika De Silva

With a mother and aunt who were skilled seamstresses, designing and sewing had always been in Chrysanthie’s (Or Chryss as she prefers to be called) blood. Even during her school days she had concocted various designs and conducted fashion shows. Although her initial ambition was to join the School of Fine Arts and learn

drawing and painting, she was sidetracked when she entered – and won – the Designer-of-the-Year Competition. This brought more opportunities in this field and her designing career was underway.

As she learned and worked under renowned masters such as Eric Suriyasena and Vipula Dharmasena, Chryss learned and experimented with various techniques, acquiring a Diploma in Scientific Dressmaking as well – for it is not enough to simply design she says, but one must also know how to cut and sew the clothes.

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Over the years Chryss designed a variety of items from bridals to wall hangings and cushion covers, finding her niche in the art of batik, where she could combine her eye for colour and talent for artistry in the creation of stunning designs. From 81’ – 89’ she produced the glamorous fashion show ‘Catwalk Rag’, before taking a break from centre-stage.

Her creations have also adorned the participants of various beauty pageants such as Miss Sri Lanka, and one of the highlights of her career was her recognition at the Zonta Club’s Woman of Achievement Award in 1989. In March this year, she made a brilliant comeback with the tenth edition of Catwalk Rag, presenting a stunning medley of batik designs, white party gowns and opulent evening dresses. Her return to the fore of the local fashion industry has been greeted with enthusiasm, and she looks forward to presenting more of her work in the future.

Each of her creations is a work of art, a culmination of creativity, painstaking labour and skill using the ‘tie and dye’ method or wax-resist dyeing method. A team of talented and experienced women, who have been with her since the inception of her work, assist in the making of these products.

Only pure silks are used – crepe, satin and habutai fabrics, in the saris and lengths that she produces. The fabric is first folded and tied with string before immersing in dye, in order to inhibit the flow of the dye into the folds of the fabric. The pattern of the folds and knots determines the final design.

Chryss often layers her colours to achieve the final melange of hues that define her vibrant saris and fabrics. Each time, the fabric is tied, immersed in a vat of dye, then left to air dry for the colours to appear. Portions of the fabric to be protected

from the dye are tied up in a polythene bag prior to dipping.

In order to achieve specific patterns, the technique of waxing is used. She first sketches the pattern on paper before transferring it onto the fabric. Then, wax is dropped onto parts of the pattern to prevent the dye catching. The fabric is then immersed, air dried and boiled to fix the colours and remove the wax. The entire process may then be repeated for additional colours. “I always want my work to be perfect,” says Chryss, “Even if it means boiling three times over.”

“The profit is nothing compared to the sheer joy I get from my work everyday,”

For someone who is determined never to repeat her designs, Chryss must constantly come up with new ideas and patterns. This, she says, is part of what brings her so much satisfaction in her work. She is also particular about not having any ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ side in the clothes she designs, therefore equal effort goes into both sides of each piece.

In this way, Chryss fashions fabrics of bold patterns, vibrant saris and dresses of animal prints which are so popular at present. Furthermore, the dresses she has devised from the animal print fabrics are cleverly reminiscent of the animals themselves, with the crocodile print dress trailing a subtle tail, the giraffe print suggesting grace and elongation and the leopard print a concoction of wild beauty.

Some of her fabrics feature intricate dotted patterns, a creation that involves hours of elaborate work. The dots are patterned on the fabric with wax from a delicate tool before the process of dye-immersion, drying and boiling.

With all the work that goes into her fabrics, laughs Chryss, she is sometimes loath to part with her creations. However, they are much in demand, even being sent as far away as Canada to those who have fallen in love with the vibrant hues and patterns.

“The profit is nothing compared to the sheer joy I get from my work everyday,” says Chryss, a joy that is translated into the elegant beauty of the fabrics and clothes that she designs.

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