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In this picture taken on January 7, 2023, embroiderers of Shanagar, a luxury Mumbai-based hand-embroidery atelier, work on a design for French couturier Julien Fournie, at a production facility in Mumbai. — AFP photos



An embroiderer of Shanagar works on a design.

THE MUMBAI ATELIER THAT'S THE SECRET WORKSHOP OF TOP FRENCH FASHION

Sitting in a lotus position, four men weave glittering beads through gold thread on an organza sheet, carefully constructing a wedding dress that will soon wow crowds at Paris Fashion Week. For once, the French couturier behind the design, Julien Fournie, is determined to put these craftsmen in the spotlight: his new collection, showing in Paris on Tuesday, is entirely made with fabrics from Mumbai.

He says a sort of "design imperialism" means that French fashion houses often play down the fact that their fabrics are made outside France. "The houses which don't admit it are perhaps afraid of losing their clientele," Fournie told AFP. But that is absurd, he continued.



Chetan Desai, director of Shanagar, a luxury Mumbai-based hand-embroidery atelier, shows their work during an interview with AFP in Mumbai.

"India is number one in the world in embroidery. It's ancestral. They've been dressing maharajas in gold-embroidered outfits since the 16th century." Fournie works with a company called Creations By Shanagar (meaning "to adorn" in Sanskrit),

housed in a non-descript beige building near Mumbai's international airport.

Dozens of men in grey polo shirts sit cross-legged on cushions, heads bent over large sheaths of fabric. There is silence but for the clicking of needles and beads, the whirl of ceiling fans, and the occasional plane overhead.

'A lot of fantasy'

For decades, they have played an essential but unsung role in the fashion industries of Europe, Japan and the United States. "I like working with Julien because he is another master craftsperson who knows his subject very well," said director Chetan Desai, 55.

"He has a lot of fantasy. He comes up with his own concepts and I have to translate those ideas into embroidery. It has been a very challenging experience and at the same time, it has been very fruitful," he added. Back in France, Fournie sends the compliments back. "What they know how to do better than anyone is to embroider

with degraded gold thread, passing it through transparent beads to create colour gradients. It's unprecedented," he said.

It gives silk an aged, elegant look for wedding dresses that "shine, but not too much". "Haute couture customers don't want to look like a Christmas tree," he added. "I've worked with great French embroiderers and each time it's complicated. Everyone wants to put in their own ideas and you never get exactly what you want."

Star clients

Desai's father set up Creations By Shanagar in the 1960s as a workshop for handloomed and embroidered saris. In the 1990s, Desai looked further afield to France, partnering with Franco-Tunisian designer Azzedine Alaïa on dresses that ultimately graced the likes of Naomi Campbell. He does not divulge the current clients on his books but his past roster gives a sense of the high demand. They include Jean Paul Gaultier, Yohji Yamamoto and Donna Karan.

Even Hollywood came knocking, with Shanagar helping design Nicole Kidman's costumes for the 2001 hit "Moulin Rouge!". The atelier attracts workers from across India, such as Biswajit Patra, 31, who has been working here since he was 16.

"I learned the trade in my village near Kolkata because my father was doing the same job and my brother and sister are also doing this job," he said. Among their unique ideas is a way of rolling up pieces of tulle to make embroidered flowers.

"They have a range of techniques that we don't have here," said Jean-Paul Cauvin, director of Fournie's house in France. One of the most delicate jobs is preparing the fabric once it arrives from India and heads for the workshop where it will be assembled into the dresses.

It is Fournie himself who irons out the fabric. "Sixty percent of haute couture is ironing," he said with a smile. — AFP



Julien Fournie works on an embroidered dress at his studio, ahead of the Spring-Summer 2023 Haute Couture Fashion Week, in Paris.



French fashion designer Julien Fournie (L) works on an embroidered dress at his studio.



An embroiderer of Shanagar works on a design for French couturier Julien Fournie, at a production facility in Mumbai.

Indian designer evokes mysteries of the 'Cosmos' in Paris

For a man with seemingly infinite creative ambitions, it is fitting that Indian designer Rahul Mishra's latest Paris haute couture collection attempts to encapsulate the entire universe. Monday's Fashion Week debut of "Cosmos" became the latest showcase for one of Asia's leading stylists, whose works have been modelled by Michelle

Yeoh, Viola Davis and other top film stars.

Mishra invited AFP to tour his frenetic workshop on the urban fringes of New Delhi several times over the collection's production, from its initial sketchbook concepts to his last-minute agonies over sudden revisions.

His long and laborious journey reflects a desire to evoke the boundless mysteries of life, told through his trademark embroidered flourishes of animal contours and luminous details. "This is actually the true cosmos in its ultimate manifestation," Mishra, 43, told AFP this month while proudly unveiling one of the more than two dozen gowns he was about to send to Paris.

"It justifies the name of the collection." The gown's flowing pleated silhouette is alive with intricately embroidered depic-

tions of the animal kingdom, where schools of fish rub shoulders with the night sky's constellations. Mishra has spent months engrossed in every microscopic detail of the piece, but even in the frenzied final week before its Paris debut, he was compelled to make a major conceptual change.

"It looks dramatic, it takes too much attention," he says as he agonises over a bold decision to pin two giant golden fish ornaments to the gown's bust, wondering if it upsets the delicate harmony he has cultivated. Mishra often defers to the expertise of his team and solicits their opinion but they share his taste for the flamboyant and give a resounding vote of approval to the new look.

'It has to be spectacular'

"The more we try to know about cosmos, the less we know; the more we try

to know about ourselves, the more remains to discover-this is the true meaning of cosmos," Mishra said of his artistic vision. The theme is well-suited to a designer whose creations fuse together as many materials, textures and patterns as the laws of physics allow.

"We work like an art studio that tries to mix mediums, to assemble ideas, to create a new expression that is not necessarily just fashion," he said. "Our dresses are full of life-they are growing, expanding, they are reaching for something in an ever-expanding universe."

The collection's more extravagant pieces reflect Mishra's preoccupation with the natural world and include a sequined gown with translucent veils, modelled on the pulsing movements of a jellyfish. Other eye-catching works feature elegant embroidery of pink-tinged leaves, golden ladybird brooches, or frilly bustiers with

blue sequins and marine life motifs to elicit the ocean's depths.

Mishra's intention to portray a fantasy journey to "something that doesn't exist" have this time led him out of his tradition-



Indian fashion designer Rahul Mishra stands beside his new collection at his workshop in Noida. For a man with seemingly infinite creative ambitions, it is fitting that Indian designer Rahul Mishra's latest Paris haute couture collection attempts to encapsulate the entire universe.



Rahul Mishra (C) sits with the men working on his designs at a workshop in Noida.



A collection of dresses designed by Indian fashion designer Rahul Mishra is pictured at his workshop. — AFP photos

al obsessions and into the urban environment. On an ankle-length coat, uncharacteristically monochrome against the designer's usual colour bursts, skyscrapers float upside down on a ruffled hem against speckled silver stars to channel the magic of cities at night.

Flamboyant even by the standards of the Parisian runway, Mishra abhors any suggestion of aesthetic restraint. "It has to be spectacular, otherwise why would you create something?" he said. "There are already so many beautiful clothes in the world." — AFP