

Made in India for the world

The D'Ascoli aesthetic is a unique amalgamation of New York-Paris-New Delhi and seeps into all their work, from fashion to home furnishings.



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Peter and Cecile D'Ascoli believe in an authentic approach to fashion and furnishings. Photo: Vikram Sharma

The story OF the D'Ascolis is one of globalisation, its opportunities and its threats. It is also a story of 'made in India' emerging as a brand the rest of the world can look to for excellence and consistency. Peter D'Ascoli is an American who grew up in Long Island, USA, coming to India at the height of a revival of the Indian aesthetic led by Pupul Jayakar. A student of the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan, he travelled to India in 1982-83 to work for the Ministry of Textiles-run Handicrafts and Handloom Exports Corporation, interning with bright sparks (and later legends) such as Rajeev Sethi and the late Martand Singh. "It was a time of deep immersion into India," says Peter -who spent two years travelling from Kashmir to Kerala, Chennai to Rajasthan working with weavers, embroiderers and craft clusters. He met the best of Indian designers then -from David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore to the late Rohit Khosla. He was like a clean slate on whom an ancient Indian tradition could write its magic.

Now seated in the Panchsheel Park home he shares with his French stylist wife Cecile, their daughters and two dogs-Bagatelle, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, and Haru, a Yorkshire/Jack Russel mix-he still seems under a spell.

Surrounded by memories of their life together, from a Turkish embroidery panel to a series of hand-drawn vignettes of how Peter met Cecilie, he talks about how his Talianna Studio evolved. His five years with the iconic Diane Von Furstenberg as director in her New York studio overlooking Central Park and next to the Rolling Stone magazine office were enormously influential. Artistes such as David Bowie and Andy Warhol would drop by the iconic designer's studio giving Peter an insight, not only into the big business of American fashion, but also of elite, sophisticated luxury, mixing old world charm with new age edginess. He then worked with a series of big American fashion companies, his journey mirroring the changes in an increasingly flat world where manufacturing was being relocated to less expensive parts of the world with the abolition of quotas. The big textile mills in America were closing down, jobs were being off-shored, and the invention of the Internet ensured that the supply chain moved to Turkey, China, Europe and Pakistan while the design creation stayed in the big cities like New York, Paris and Milan.

And that's when he had an epiphany and moved back to India in 2006, setting up a design studio in Delhi, moving the knowledge centre to where the supply was. That's also when the rough end of globalisation hit him. His business model was to be simple: the design studio would create content in India and work with large global corporations on a royalty arrangement. But then the 2008 market crash happened and the orders stopped. But Peter and Cecile -they met in Delhi in 2003 when the latter was here sourcing for her fashion line back in Paris-are back on their feet now, having never ceased to innovate in their Talianna studio, which has now shifted to Faridabad. They decided, wisely, to move to the very top of the value chain, making luxury clothing and furnishings of the finest quality with sophisticated aesthetics.

Their twin lines are making India proud. Ready-made fashion and home products are now available on matchesfashion.com, ModaOperandi, and other fine retailers under the D'Ascoli brand, and prides itself on the best of the East and the West. Each piece is handmade, utilising both ancient and modern techniques such as hand-embroidery and digital printing. Working with locally grown cotton and silks, the label creates its bohemian dresses and separates with an acute attention to detail and every collection is inspired by a wide range of global influences - from traditional Japanese garments to American photography. D'Ascoli Home has the same philosophy, employing sustainable, low carbon forms of production to create socially responsible products that enrich the lives of makers and users with an authentic provenance, and the integrity that results from small-batch production. The D'Ascolis know the world is looking for individual voices in the era of mass marketing and they believe they, and India, are uniquely positioned to offer the fashion world a new model mixing craft and technology. There is fast fashion and there is handmade, says Peter. "Given the growing disenchantment with industrial production we are part of a new, slow fashion approach wherein the products have an authentic provenance of sustainability and fair trade." Their time, truly, has come.

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