

# Indian Aesthetic Themes Have Shaped International Design Vocabularies: Peter D'Ascoli

**Arunima Gupta** October 29, 2021



For Peter D'Ascoli, the New-York born designer, art and design have always involved an aspect of adventure and learning. "From my very first job I was sent abroad, and I have been traveling the world ever since. I grew up in a relatively modest home in which I was not exposed to a wide range of aesthetics. As a result, I have always been curious to learn, and it is this cultivation of a knowledge of history, geography, and the diverse cultures of the world that has developed into a design philosophy of sorts. I want my work to be a celebration of these global cultural influences."

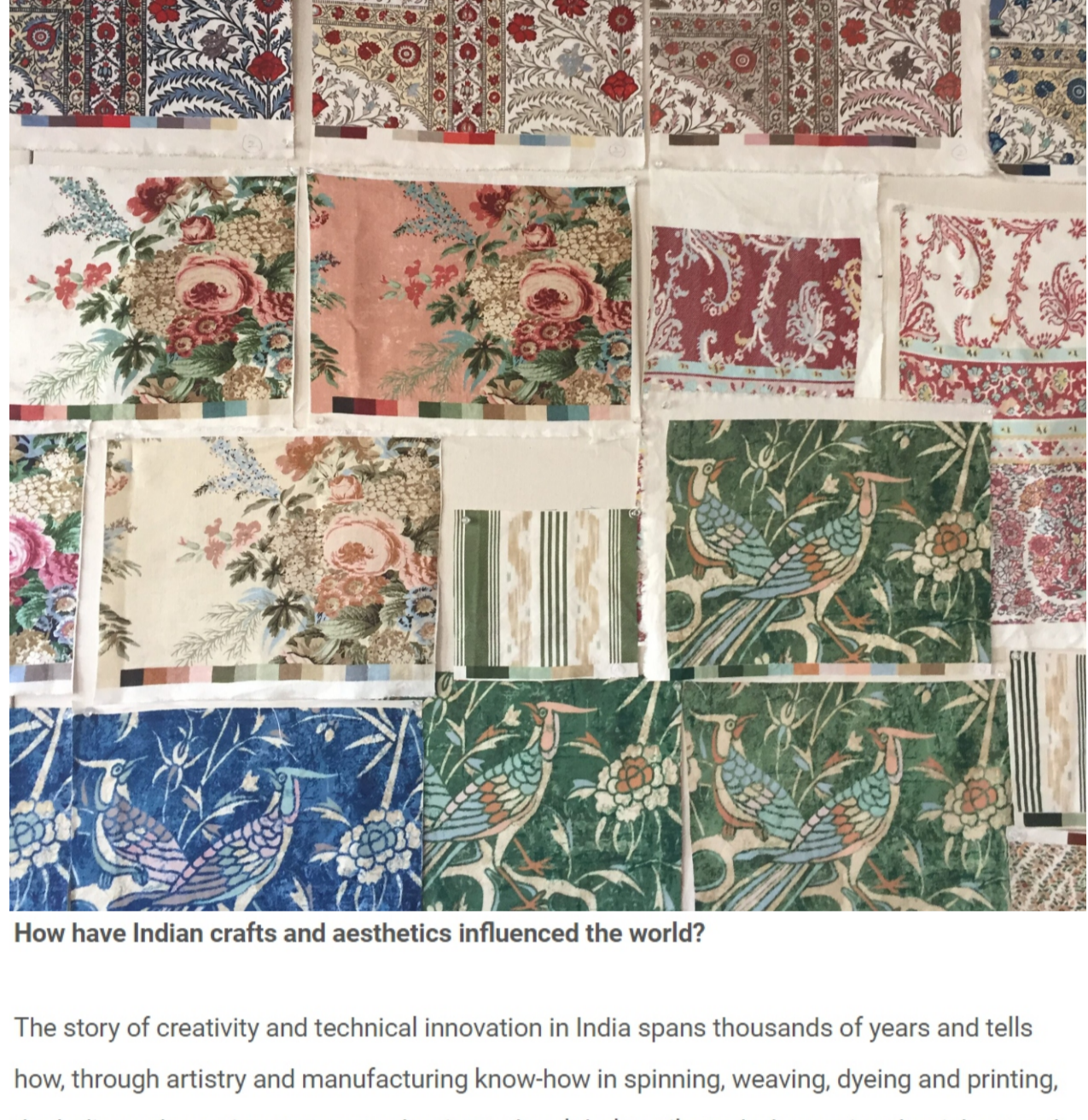
In 2006, after twenty years of designing and directing fashion housed in NYC, Peter founded the Talianna Studio in India. The studio is a production house and design centre where ancient Indian aesthetics meet modern techniques of design, production and creative innovation.

Today, D'ASCOLI, a label that bears Peter's family name, crafts India-inspired luxury products in fashion and home décor. D'ASCOLI creations have adorned the wardrobes of Princess Madeleine of Sweden, television personalities including Taylor Black and Lisa Wilkinson and his homeware decorate the Shiv Niwas Palace, the Royal Guest House of Udaipur.

In this conversation, Peter tells us about working with Indian crafts, making them an aspirational luxury and taking it to the world.

**What kindled your artistic inspiration and why did you choose to work with Indian decorative art?**

Ever since I can remember I have been attracted to art. When I was a child, I always had an art desk in my bedroom where I did my drawing and painting. From an early age, I saw this as my vocation. I remember when I was ten years old finding a book in my school library about military insignia. I remember devouring page after page of symbols and graphics. I was conscious from an early age that I had a love for art and also for history. In high school, I had an art teacher who was an interior designer and he encouraged me to pursue textile design. So, I went on to pursue Textile Design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. I first came to India when I was 21 years old on a government project for the Ministry of Textiles as a catalyst to facilitate better export of Indian crafts. Over two years I travelled the length and breadth of the country working in handicraft centres from Kashmir and Ladakh in the North, to Chennai and Kochi in the South. I always say that India is like Europe in the sense that the culture from region to region is as different as Sweden is from Greece or Spain, except that India's cultural landscape is much better preserved and retains diversity and richness no longer found in more industrialized parts of the world.



**How have Indian crafts and aesthetics influenced the world?**

The story of creativity and technical innovation in India spans thousands of years and tells how, through artistry and manufacturing know-how in spinning, weaving, dyeing and printing, the Indian sub-continent came to dominate the global textile trade, becoming the richest and most influential region on earth.

The impact on global culture is still felt today throughout the world of design and fashion. This history should evoke pride in every Indian, and admiration from the rest of the world, for it tells how aesthetic themes created in India have endured, shaping the national design vocabularies of countries across the earth.

I do feel that India, more than any other country on earth, can offer the world something very special because of her craft heritage and because of the number of artisans still producing, what I consider luxurious products, by hand. The idea that we have a sustainable source of woven cotton fabric should be celebrated. And at the upper-middle and high end of the product spectrum, India's hand printers and embroiderers are a treasure.



**Where do you see the future of Indian crafts and textiles heading towards – both in terms of production and consumption?**

I believe that the future of Indian fashion and textiles will take two routes. One where crafted items become more expensive, serving a luxury clientele – one that is not shopping for the lowest price but, rather, is interested in high quality, sometimes unusual materials and techniques that are not widely distributed and that offer sophisticated aesthetics.

This means that there will be fewer and fewer artisans making higher quality, sophisticated products. Handmade items will become a luxury in India as it has throughout the industrialized world. This means that, in the future, if a company or artisan wants to sell their goods, the aesthetics of those products must appeal to the luxury customer.

Another route would be increased industrial production that will serve the vast majority of the market. Even within India, with a population of 1.3 billion, people need and want industrially produced goods. Industrial production is the only way to deliver the wide range of goods her people are beginning to demand. It is the best way to deliver high quality products at a low cost, and it makes no sense to try and compete against industrial production if the item cannot be differentiated through aesthetics and rare materials.

In earlier days a modest Rajasthani woman was purchasing a bandhani sari from a local maker. Now that same village woman can and does purchase a much less expensive roller printed, imitation bandhani sari from Surat or some other industrial hub. This is normal as we cannot expect the modest family to save and spend on the real, handmade sari when the roller printed sari is comparable in their eyes. If competing against mass produced industrial goods on price is the strategy, this will almost always result in a diminishing of the craft and, with low income and low status, the artisan will want to change vocations and will certainly not want the next generation to follow them.

**Would you then say that the future of Indian handmade looks bleak?**

Industrial production does not mean that all artisans and crafts will disappear. This is why I believe that the most important job of any craft advocate is to help usher Indian craft up the value chain into higher quality. Not all artisans will survive into the future, but the best should and will if they maintain or improve both technical and aesthetic quality. The loss of handicrafts in 2021 should not surprise us. What is a surprise is that it lasted so long into the Industrial Revolution.

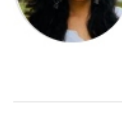
Craft and traditional design aesthetics have survived in India for complex reasons involving politics and economics. It is a fact that India's economy is mostly agrarian and, although there is rapid change, India exists mostly in her villages. Combined with a relative lack of industrialization, this has meant that India's traditional ways of life have remained largely unchanged for hundreds of years. Sadly, this is now changing quickly and we see much loss of cultural diversity as India experiences both positive and negative results of globalization.

Ultimately, if Indian designers and companies create sophisticated, high quality, handmade products and market them properly then global awareness of India's craft riches will grow.



**Can you tell us about your efforts in taking Indian artisanal heritage to the world?**

At the Talianna Studio, we are using traditional craft in several ways for both our D'ASCOLI branded readymade fashion and home products, as well as our custom interior fabrics marketed under the PETER D'ASCOLI name. To date, all of our cotton dresses and blouses are made from 100% cotton that is hand spun and hand-woven cotton in West Bengal. We transform this cloth in-house with hand embroidery and digital prints. We also use in-house block printing and hand embroidery for our PETER D'ASCOLI custom interior fabrics. In this way, we are using both ancient and modern techniques to create truly new modern and luxury products. Today, D'ASCOLI labels have a presence across high-end retail as well as e-commerce platforms across the US and Europe.



**Arunima Gupta**

Arunima Gupta is Principal at Network of Indian Cultural Enterprises (NICE). She tweets @ArunimaGupta03