

D'Ascoli is a textile-focused Indian label that enjoys cult status abroad

Namrata Zakaria Updated On: 9 Sept 2022 4:04 PM



Peter D'Ascoli came to India first 40 years ago, his designs are firmly rooted in Indian traditions.

Highlights

- Peter's visual language has found many takers in the West.
- His home line has often found mention in the revered 'Cabana' magazine for decor fiends. Their e-commerce site also sells his exclusive collections.
- D'Ascoli has also teamed with Tamara Mellon, the founder of Jimmy Choo shoes, for a limited edition, fabric-oriented shoe line.

'The Aesthete' is a weekly column by journalist and editor Namrata Zakaria, illuminating the best in Indian style and design.

It's a dusty, sweaty Saturday but I am driving to Faridabad, Haryana, to the Talianna studio. It's famous in design circles around the world as the workspace of Peter D'Ascoli, the name behind the cult of the D'Ascoli home and fashion brand. D'Ascoli celebrates Indian block prints and chintz, either by hand or digitised, the world over. Its table linen is as beloved as its bohemian womenswear.

Peter, an Italian born and raised in the USA (he speaks less Italian than I do), has kindly kept the studio open for our visit simply because I had been telling him how eager I wanted to come and see things in production. It's a beguiling space, in an alley off the highway, and appears to be much smaller from the outside concealing rooms behind rooms. It's amazing this unassuming edifice is where one of India's most distinguished international brands is housed. Peter came to India exactly 40 years ago as a student of textile design. It was the summer before his senior year at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, and he was working freelance with menswear designer Hector Herrera. He was sent to New Delhi to source fabric, but ended up meeting people who worked in India's government offices, especially the Ministry of Textiles. "This was in 1982, and Mrs Indira Gandhi was the prime minister. The officials asked me to go back and finish my degree, but to return and work for the Handicrafts and Handloom Exports Council," the 60-year-old recalls. "The ministry was putting together the Festivals of India exhibition. Pupul Jayakar was still alive and her two proteges at the time were Rajeev Sethi and Martand 'Mapu' Singh. I was here when Martand put together the Viswakarma show, that's still being exhibited in several prestigious museums in India. This was the world I fell into, and it was just magical."

Peter recalls how small the private sector was then, even in the garments business. "This is before the Uruguay Agreement that abolished quotas and everyone had access to the rich US markets to sell products. The crafts sector in India was still simulated by the government," he explains. This made him return to the US to find work, and he ended up at the iconic womenswear designer Diane von Furstenberg's label as design director. In his five years there, Peter says he learned several things about how a mass market brand works. "Her brand and business had become rather diluted by then. I learned from dealing with giant retailers and big mills. I reported directly to her and spending time with her also taught me a lot about her sophisticated international style and aesthetics. So yes, the learnings were both technical and aesthetical," he says.

He returned to India in 2005 and opened his Talianna Studio a year later. "Liberalisation had been around for 15 years. But the challenges of being a foreigner and dealing with supply chains still existed," he avers.



D'Ascoli designs: Nostalgia (left) and Jardin d'Ete (right)

D'Ascoli has long been a front-running name in India-made and internationally-available home textiles. His western wear also enjoys a notable global footprint, it's available at MatchesFashion.com. "The last few years have seen the business grow between 50-100 percent," he admits. "We've reached a nice place where we are able to incorporate craft with scale. We use handspun, handwoven cotton and people internationally have a great appetite for handmade products."

The Indian market has not been D'Ascoli's focus right now, Peter finds the infrastructure that the USA and Europe provide much easier to offer scale to his work. "There are chains of retail stores and a much more vibrant marketplace. In India, the market for western dresses is quite small. Most Indian designer businesses revolve around festive or bridal wear, which we don't do. But yes, we have just started making saris," he smiles.



D'Ascoli X Cabana 2021 (left); Carpathia table linens (right)

The ground floor of the studio is where the printing and embroidery (their famously fine French knots) gets done. He has a large room for hand-block printing, as well as a couple of other rooms where the digital printing machines are housed. "DVF taught me not to look down on any technique or any product. Of course, a burger will taste different if you eat it at McDonald's or at a friend's house, but there's room for both. Mass production has its trade-offs, and you cannot compare it with a luxury product. But the creation of both still requires the same technical skills from us, we come up with the designs, the artwork and the layouts. It's like at the beginning of my career, we drew and painted with our hands, now we do the same on a computer."

The design and embroidery work is done upstairs. Large terraces hang reams of hand-dyed or printed fabric of a linen line, dancing in the August sun.

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