
VOGUE
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SAMANTHA
RUTH
PRABHU
"THANKFULLY,
I WAS
VULNERABLE
ENOUGH TO
ACCEPT THAT
KIND OF
LOVE AND
FRIENDSHIP"

VOGUE INDIA

PHOTO: SIGNE VILSTRUP/*VOGUE* INDIA

**BEFORE IT'S IN FASHION,
IT'S IN VOGUE!**

March April

'FLOW STATE', PAGE 156

BIKRAMJIT BOSE.

COVER LOOK
Side-slit suede dress, TOD'S. *High-top earrings, Hardware ear climbers,* GOLDEN GAZELLE. *Gold band ring,* PIAGET.

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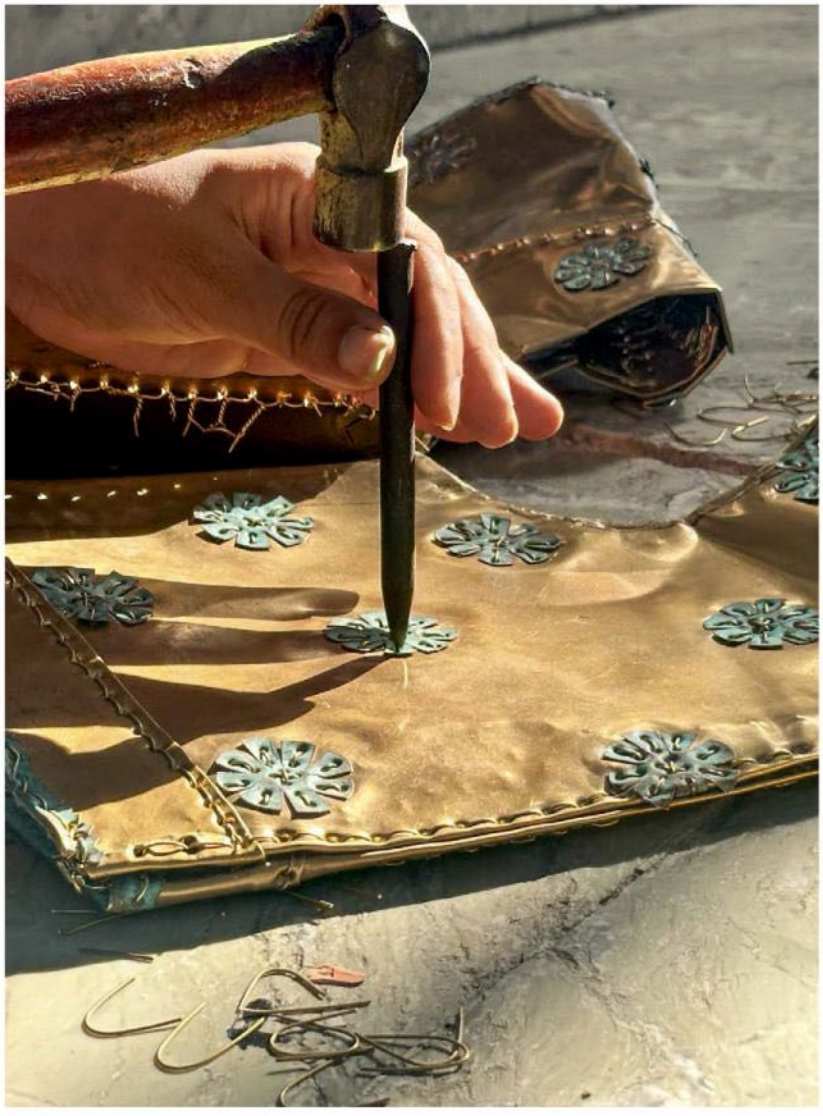

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THOSE FASHION TYPES

SOUJIT DAS.

Many years ago at a fashion magazine party in Delhi, I spotted a journalist turned author whose work I admired. His debut novel had affected me at such a fundamental level, I remember becoming an angrier person the week I was reading it. Mustering up the courage to admit this to him, I walked over and introduced myself. He accepted the accolades and indulged me in small talk about preferred literary genres. Then, he said, "I'm surprised you read about politics, I didn't think this would interest you fashion types."

That interaction taught me two important lessons. One, heroes are human—and the truth of them is often more disappointing than the fiction you've written in your head. And two, even the smartest people misunderstand fashion. And by extension, the community that's tied to it.

To me, fashion is a language, one that allows you to learn so much about a person before they even breathe a word. Our culture, our insecurities and aspirations, the difference between the way we are and the way we would like

A COMMON LANGUAGE
From the subways of New York to the backwaters of Kerala, the grammar of fashion can unite those who come from separate worlds.

to be perceived. When a film's costume designer needs to convey to the audience that a character is defeated by his circumstances, all she needs to do is put him in a mud-brown shirt that's two sizes too large so that his shoulders droop and the extra fabric makes him look like a deflated balloon. Enough said.

Conversely, to some folks, like the adults with developmental disabilities that Avani Thakkar writes about in 'More than words', "Fashion or getting dressed is not just about looking presentable, it also epitomises the joy of exercising preferences, something many of us take for granted." I enjoyed reading about her Tinu maasi's love for rani-pink cotton midi-dresses and how it signalled autonomy in a reality that had otherwise stripped her of it. As Thakkar adds, "selfhood surfaces through these narrow openings that fashion affords".

For the muga silk weavers of Assam and the ajrakh block-printers of Kutch, fashion is continuity, even as climate change threatens their way of life. That they persevere and "adapt constantly because they've always worked with nature, not against it" is a wake-up call to those who look the other way while the planet burns.

And to that author turned critic, I say, fashion has always been deeply political. Artist Richa Arya points to young girls donning school uniforms to demand a chance at an equitable future. Bhavitha Mandava opening Chanel's Métiers d'art 2026 show, an indication of increased global interest in the Indian growth story. Cover star Samantha Ruth Prabhu in a deltoid-celebrating dress, when in the past, she's been asked "to cover my arms because they think muscles on a woman aren't attractive". Fun fact: I carried my dumbbells to the shoot so she could pump iron between takes and make those muscles *really* pop.

So the next time someone dismisses you as one of 'those fashion types', just know that you contain multitudes. And, you're in great company.

NISHAN DAS (ROCHELLE). AVANI RAI (BLUE DRESS, GAURAV GUPTA; RING, SWAROVSKI).

CONTRIBUTORS

Amitava Saha
Photographer, 'Mind the cap', page 194

What's your unpopular opinion regarding fashion?
Chasing every micro-trend feels exciting, but it dates you quickly. A clean shirt, well-cut trousers and a solid shoe don't shout for attention, they just stay relevant, year after year.

A Mumbai-based photographer, Amitava Saha has honed his craft while exploring style, identity and visual storytelling.

Avani Rai
Photographer, 'Emerald city', page 174

What is a fashion hill you are willing to die on?
What feels radical to me is repetition. Wearing the same clothes again and again. Letting them crease where my body actually lives. Letting them hold memory—travel, work, exhaustion, joy.

An artist, photographer and filmmaker, Avani Rai's interest lies in capturing human expression, life and nature.

Diya Colaço
Illustrator

What is a fashion hill you are willing to die on?
In a world that values constant consumption and is forgoing artistic traditions in favour of machines, craft is the only real luxury. Nothing can replace the human touch; it's what makes art meaningful.

Diya Colaço is a visual designer and illustrator whose practice explores the culmination of craft, culture and contemporary visuals.

Smitha Menon
Writer, 'A higher power', page 82

What's your unpopular opinion regarding fashion?
If a 'sustainable' clothing label makes garments that can only be dry-cleaned, it's not sustainable.

Smitha Menon is a food and travel journalist and the creator and host of the Big Food Energy *podcast. She is India's only TasteHunter for the 50 Best network. Previously, she served as culinary editor at* Condé Nast Traveller *India.*

PHOTO: BIKRAMJIT BOSE/*VOGUE* INDIA

CRAFT SORCERESS
"Oh, this old thing? I discovered it in the back of an antique store in a Parisian flea market when I was 18. The owner said I had great taste..."

Bodysuit, skirt, AARTIVIJAY GUPTA. *Cactus (left hand), Clown (right hand),* CHORUS WORLD. *Bling 100 mules,* JIMMY CHOO. *Merge sari (above),* SWATI & SUNAINA.

Choose your player

In a world where personal style is becoming performative, these characters step into fashion as role-play. Photographed by SOUJIT DAS. Styled by MANGLIEN GANGTE.

PAGE TURNER
Dresses for long afternoons, pencilling notes and the romance of being unreachable.

Blouse with tie-effect neckline, mid-length flared skirt, MiniCD R8F glasses, large book tote, DIOR.

QUIET ROMANTIC
"Choose carefully, edit often."

The Cocoon jersey dress, TARUN TAHILIANI. *Cap,* AK-OK ANAMIKA KHANNA. *Anise 75 mules,* JIMMY CHOO.

ARCADE ATHLETE
Always plugged in, even when pretending not to be.

Blue rib top, wool silk panelled asymmetric top, MIUNIKU. *Mask-shaped sunglasses,* GUCCI. *Cassia Annmac 100mm pumps (red),* CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN.

WEEKEND WICKET
Plays for joy and the excuse to disappear for a few hours. Winning is optional.

Regiment vest, argyle applique shirt (off-white), MARGN. *The Essence shorts,* ROSANI. *Mostro OG Prime sneakers,* PUMA. *Bat, kneepads,* SHANTNU NIKHIL CRICKET CLUB.

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ESPRESSO OVER MATCHA
"I'm getting notes of citrus, red berries and the fear that someone will see the coffee stain on my skirt."

Printed silk twill shirt, GG cotton canvas fabric skirt, GG Marmont belt, Vittoria pumps, GG Marmont earrings, GUCCI.

Climate couture

Traditional textile crafts in India face extinction due to changing social and climatic conditions. How much longer until all we're left with is nylon and polyester? By THEA MULCHANDANI.

Assam's muga silk comes from the cocoons of a silkworm species that cannot exist outside the specific climatic conditions of the Brahmaputra Valley. Unlike most silks, muga is not dyed—the luminous gold is inherent to the fibre itself. It even becomes glossier with wear. Traditionally, almost every household maintained small silk farms in their backyard, but that system is growing increasingly fragile.

"One early morning last April, I received a call from one of our farmers," recalls Jagrity Phukan, a designer and the founder of Way of Living Studio, whose Assam-based textile practice works primarily with muga, eri and mulberry silks, as well as cane, bamboo and various indigenous fibres. "She was crying. There had been an unseasonal hailstorm overnight, and the entire muga crop for that season was gone. Her roof was damaged too, but she kept saying, 'Leave everything else—this crop was supposed to be ready in three days.'"

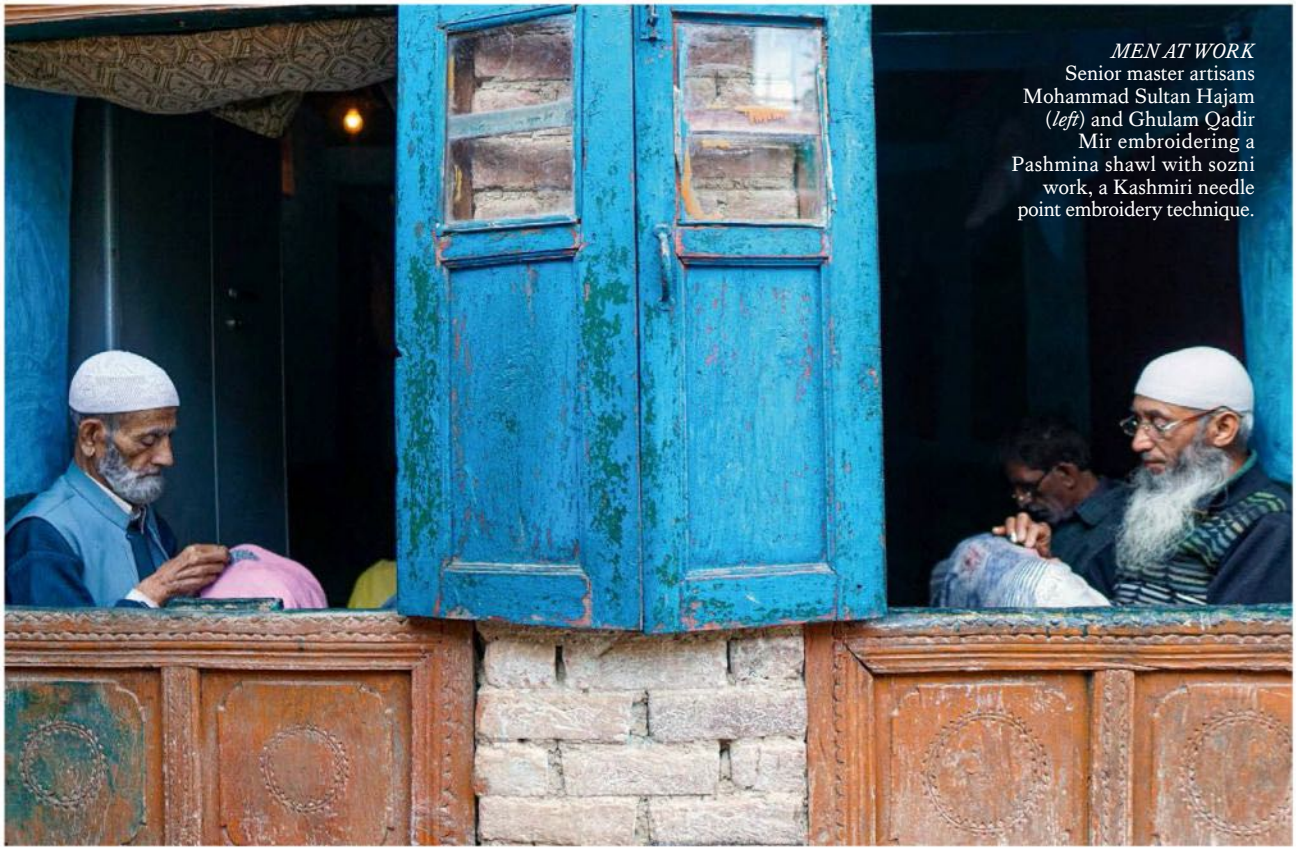
Across India, this pattern repeats. When ecosystems collapse, so do livelihoods. When we talk about fashion and climate change, the conversation is usually unidirectional. Fast fashion creates waste, factories pollute rivers and supply chains are opaque. This is all true, but there's another side of the story that rarely gets the same, if any, attention. What happens to indigenous textiles and crafts when the climate they depend on starts to collapse?

Our country's natural ecological diversity has gifted us a corresponding textile heritage. In the north, pashmina—so fine it can pass through a ring, yet warm enough to survive Himalayan winters—is under pressure. It comes from Changthangi goats, reared by nomadic Changpa herders at altitudes between 14,000 and 17,000 feet. These goats grow their exceptional wool as a biological response to extreme cold.

As winters get warmer, the wool fibres are affected. Tariq Dar, founder of Pashmkaar, a brand dedicated to preserving traditional Kashmiri weaving and embroidery practices, explains that while the warmth of the shawls has remained consistent so far, "the quantity and the quality are slowly getting affected. Not in a way most consumers can yet feel, but enough for experts

HANDLOOM HOMES
The post-flood revival of the Gandhi Smaraka Grama Seva Kendram centre in North Paravur, Kerala, by Save The Loom.

DINESH MADHAVAN.



MEN AT WORK
Senior master artisans Mohammad Sultan Hajam (*left*) and Ghulam Qadir Mir embroidering a Pashmina shawl with sozni work, a Kashmiri needle point embroidery technique.

to notice." Where fibres once measured just 13 to 14 microns, today the geographical indication standard permits a thickness of 16 to 17 microns. It's a dilution of one of the world's finest natural fibres, and of a livelihood that has sustained communities in Kashmir and Ladakh for centuries.

Climate, however, is only part of the story. Abhilasha Bahuguna, founder of Looms of Ladakh—an ethical, herder- and artisan-led luxury brand—points out that ecology and geopolitics are inseparable. "For centuries, Changpa herders moved seasonally between Tibet and Ladakh in a transhumance cycle that allowed pastures time to regenerate. In the 1960s, when the Indo-China border closed, grazing patterns changed permanently." Grass no longer had time to recover, and because these goats are entirely pasture-fed, fibre quality began to decline.

In response, some Changpa herders are turning to yak wool, which, while quite warm, has much coarser fibres than pashmina. Yaks nibble grass from the top rather than pulling it out by the roots, making them gentler grazers. They also live at lower altitudes, closer to where younger Changpa herders want to be. With little infrastructure or support at 17,000 feet, many are migrating to villages nearer to Leh and Kargil.

"What is actually required to protect pashmina is collaborative visioning [between the herders, artisans and governmental interventions]," adds Bahuguna. Unlike Kashmir, Ladakh does not have a long-established textile production ecosystem with different communities handling different processes, so change is not as tough. "Changpa herders want skills, institutional support, bargaining power and ownership within the industry."

> "Craft is rooted in the geography of the land from where it originates" —LAILA TYABJI

Down south, Chendamangalam in Kerala is often framed as a revival story—a community of handloom weavers that recovered after the devastating floods of 2018. Ramesh Menon, founder of Save the Loom—a nonprofit community that helped weavers after the floods—describes the floods not simply as a natural disaster, but as a systemic failure intensified by dam mismanagement, unchecked construction, altered river flows, illegal sand mining and mangrove loss.

Handloom weaving here is largely home-based. It depends on stability: dry floors, controlled humidity, sunlight and time. In spite of large-scale destruction of property and handlooms, many weavers were back at work within 110 days—not because conditions had improved, but because every day without a loom was a day without income. The revival narrative glosses over how vulnerable the cluster already was. Today, looms are raised off the ground, and equipment can be dismantled early when floods threaten.

"Some brands [like 11.11/eleven eleven] are now also working on a seed-to-store model," adds Menon, "intervening at every stage to preserve the integrity of hand-making." The model stands for a transparent supply chain, tracing the journey of the textile from cotton seed to the customer's hands, which faces instability from the very beginning. According to a 2010 study published in *The Indian Journal of Agricultural Sciences*,

AAMIR WANI.

rising heat has led to shorter fibre length, droughts and flooding damage to crops, while warmer winters have increased pest pressure, reducing both yield and quality.

As Laila Tyabji, author, craft activist and cofounder of Dastkar, an NGO that works to revive traditional crafts in India, points out, "Craft is rooted in the geography of the land from where it originates."

Ajrakh, for instance, is the resist-dyed block-printed textile traditionally practised by Khatri communities in Kutch. It's known for its deep indigos, rich reds and near-mathematical symmetry. It requires repeated washing and open-air drying at multiple stages, and the mineral balance of the water directly affects how natural dyes show up. "Ajrakh is an entire system of knowledge," says designer Monica Shah of Jade by MK, whose brand consistently champions the craft clusters and artisans they work with. "You can't rush it. It depends on water, weather and the artisan's judgement more than any machine."

Historically, Kutch's fresh groundwater made this possible. Today, the region faces rising salinity due to industrial overextraction and seawater intrusion, exacerbated by repeated drought cycles. "Even with utmost skill and care, there are black splotches and muddy tones due to the saline content. Is it a wonder that many traditional ajrakh printers are turning to chemical dyes?" shares Tyabji.

Next door in Rajasthan, dabu printing tells a similar story. It relies on a resist paste made from local clay, lime, gum and sometimes wheat chaff. The paste is applied by hand with wooden blocks, left to dry in the sun and then dyed. Wherever the clay resists the dye, patterns emerge. According to a 2023 study presented at the International Conference on Innovation in Visual Arts, Rajasthan has seen a sharp rise in extreme heat days, and higher temperatures cause the paste to dry too quickly, leading to cracks where the dye seeps in and blurs the design. Erratic rainfall washes the paste away before it sets. High humidity stalls drying entirely.

Construction and mining have altered the soil composition around many ajrakh and dabu craft clusters, forcing printers to travel further for materials or substitute them with inferior ones. "Some clusters have tried collective systems such as shared resources, better washing set-ups, filtration support and training the next generation, but it's not enough," adds Shah.

In Assam's silk farms, even when the crop survives, yields have declined significantly and cocoon thickness has reduced. "Earlier, my uncles who reared silkworms wouldn't even shave during the rearing period. They washed their hands with ash water instead of soap because they believed even a trace of a chemical or oil could harm the worms," shares Phukan. A far cry from soap, tar fumes from road development have destabilised these ecosystems today. Faced with unpredictable weather and shrinking returns, many families are switching to farming tea—already expanding into silk-growing regions, bringing pesticides and chemical residues with it.

"Artisans adapt constantly because they've always worked with nature, not against it," shares Shah. "They shift working hours, change drying methods, modify sequences and adjust dye behaviour depending on the climate." But you can only adjust so much when faced with failing water systems and extreme heat. As Menon says, "we are perpetually reacting to disaster, not preventing it."

There's a certain pride in wearing traditional textiles. Ajrakh printing dates back to the Indus Valley civilisation. With its saturated colours and geometric patterns, it carries centuries of knowledge in its folds. Muga silk, which flourished under the Ahom dynasty in the 13th century, has a sheen as inimitable as its softness. The next time you wear a muga silk sari, feel the fabric as you drape it around your body, as you tuck the pleats into your waistband and set the pallu on your shoulder. These are crafts that have quite literally survived the rise and fall of empires. And yet, with every passing day, we inch closer to taking them from wardrobe staples to museum artefacts.

AJRAKH REMIXED
An ajrakh-printed piece by Zaid Khatri of Ajrakh Gharana, an Ajrakhpur-based clothing company.

A higher power

Ladakh, with its quiet pride in all things local, offers simple, homegrown lessons in wellbeing and mindfulness. By SMITHA MENON.

Sunshine streams through soft, white almond blossoms that dot the orchard I'm standing in. An orchestra of birds chirrup and in the distance, a glacial brook gurgles. Above, hawks ride the wind thermals, looping through the air. Almost reading my thoughts, Rigzin Lachic says, "You know those soundtracks they play in fancy spas when they tell you to close your eyes and relax? That's what a regular day in Ladakh sounds like." The owner of Dolkhar, a boutique hotel in Leh, tells me that after corporate stints in Japan and New Delhi, this picturesque landscape is what called her back to launch a small hotel and restaurant that has since been featured on *Time*'s 2023 list of the World's Greatest Places.

When Ladakh opened for tourists in 1978, all of 527 arrived. While it has been popular for trekking and adventure sports for years, locals and travellers alike are now waking up to its potential as a wellness destination that reconnects you to yourself and those around you. Despite facing more than its fair share of difficult times lately with political upheaval and the relentless side effects of climate change, the region's rhythms endure. Ladakh meets you the way it always has: holding you in its vastness and asking you to slow down and listen.

Dolkhar's offerings span meditation sessions at the local monastery and spa treatments by a masseuse versed in Tibetan medicine, using traditional ingredients like apricot oil and barley dough. A food programme that spotlights local ingredients and cooking techniques at Tsas, its award-winning restaurant, rounds off its philosophy.

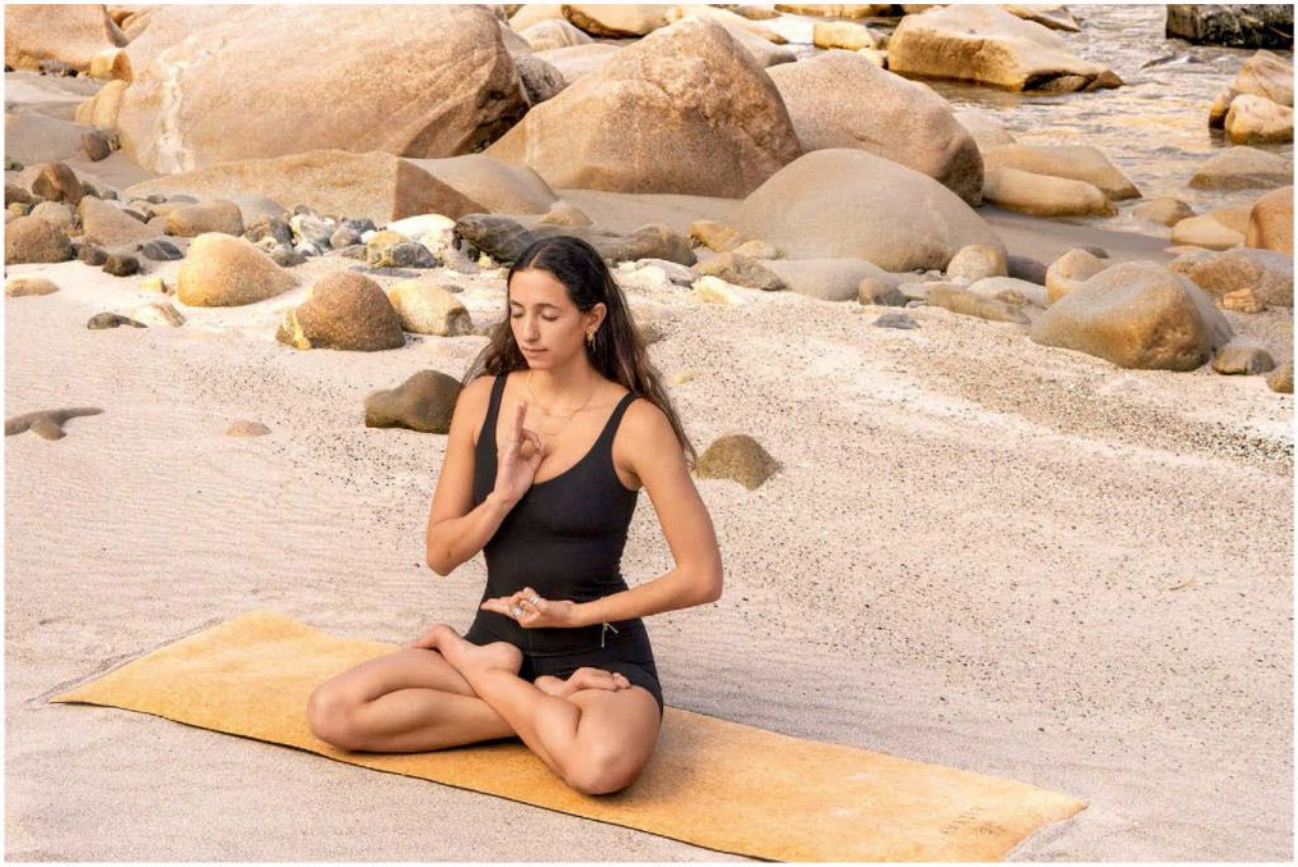
Unlike retreats in the West that usually have an individualist approach to wellness, focused on restrictions and detoxification, wellness in Ladakh has been embedded into local culture for centuries. "The harsh environment makes us extremely respectful of our natural resources and the community around us. Everything we do is touched by this premise of impermanence and gratitude," explains Lachic. Here, wellness isn't restricted to a sensibility; it's also reflected in Sowa-Rigpa, a system of traditional medicine native to the region. Also known as the Amchi system of medicine, Sowa-Rigpa is perceived to be similar to the Ayurvedic philosophy and uses sophisticated diagnostic techniques, diet and lifestyle modifications, herbal medicine and spiritual healing to increase longevity and cultivate happiness.

Over at The Grand Dragon in Leh, owner Danish Din is blending the best of the East and West into his hotel's wellness treatments to appeal to travellers seeking familiarity in a new location. At the Hammam Wellness & Spa by L'Occitane, the intricately carved, hand-painted frescoes overhead help guests situate themselves in Ladakh while indulging in massage treatments infused with Himalayan traditions—think herbal-oil heat pouches and sea-buckthorn tea. But ask Din for his personal wellness mantra, and he'll explain why treatments aren't common with the locals. "I travel a lot for work. But after three days outside of Ladakh, I just want to run back. Where else can I sit and gaze at constellations on a moonless night or listen to a river with a cup of tea and a friend? That's priceless."

"It was only once I left Ladakh that I realised that wellness is a way of life here. We don't

TAKE THE PLUNGE
The largest cold-plunge bio pool in North India, Virsa Baltistan's in-house water body is fed by glacial meltwater that is always about 3 degrees Celsius. Guests can pair the dip with a traditional sauna experience at the hotel.

RADA SADYGOVA. COURTESY OF VIRSA BALTISTAN (OPPOSITE PAGE).



ONE WITH NATURE
Yoga sessions at the mountain beach in Turtuk, on long, quiet stretches of Himalayan clay sand, are designed to connect body and breath to the surrounding landscape.

COURTESY OF VIRSA BALTISTAN.

have the vocabulary for it, but the scale of the mountains, the fragile ecosystem and strong sense of community humble you," says Stanzin Tsephel. After much professional and academic success in New Delhi and then Oxford, the founder of Stone Hedge Hotel, in the Nubra valley, returned just before the pandemic owing to a "deep sense of dissatisfaction" that could not be cured. "I realised my cycle of unhappiness was being perpetuated because I was chasing external validation. I returned to heal, to seek internal validation," he explains. Having set up the hotel in 2018 and immersing himself in Tibetan teachings, Tsephel is now building a wellness programme at the hotel that focuses on external therapies such as medicinal baths, Tibetan massages and compression treatments as well as internal reprogramming that ranges from guided meditation to sound healing. "We don't want to just do a feel-good massage. We're offering a peep into an ancient philosophy," he explains.

Also in the Nubra valley is Kyagar, which was founded in 2022. Set on 25 acres of land dotted with sea buckthorns and aromatic wildflowers, its 16 spacious rooms are spread across eight cottages, where you can open the curtains at dawn to witness golden light hit the frosted peaks or soak in the silence of the Himalayas. While the property offers a few in-room spa treatments, owners Rinchen Kalon and husband Stanzin Gurmet encourage visitors to walk through the village to get a sense of the community. "Unlike in parts of the world where one barely talks to their neighbours, in Ladakh, you cannot survive without their help," explains Kalon. When I visited a few years ago, she packed me off to interact with everyone from local village head Rigzin Wangdus—who invited me for a home-style meal—to a matriarch in charge of a 250-year-old Ladakhi home.

About 150 kilometres away, in Turtuk, is the new boutique hotel Virsa Baltistan. It is run by Rashidullah Khan, who hails from the Balti community, originally from Baltistan, an erstwhile kingdom that is now divided across two countries. In the past year, he has built a bio pool that's fed by glacial water, a sauna and a bevy of treatments in line with manpa, the traditional Balti medicinal system. But perhaps the most profound form of wellness at Virsa is the invitation to live slowly. Guests are encouraged to rise with the sun, read under the apricot trees, to play ukulele by the pool or do nothing at all.

"All this," Khan explains—pointing to the chirping birds and babbling brooks—"is not going to last forever." He knows a thing or two about impermanence, having watched his homeland be cleaved into two, with relatives on the other side of the border whom he and his family can no longer meet. "Spa treatments will come and go. The real luxury is to be at peace—with your inner and outer world."

First impressions

What if fashion's most original references are not imported at all? MANGLIEN GANGTE reflects on how style grows in overlooked places, far from the industry and its institutions.

It was a regular weeknight—the groaning of construction cranes and Mumbai's refusal to pause playing in the background as the doorbell announced the arrival of my manchow soup. I had cued up an episode of *Fashion Neurosis with Bella Freud*, which was convenient because she runs the podcast like a therapy session. I had a deadline breathing down my neck, a shoot in Tamil Nadu going nowhere, and no solution in sight. So I had my therapy via osmosis. Jonathan Anderson, the creative director of Dior, was tonight's guest.

"Looking back, it was the idea of dressing up to feel like you weren't in something, or not part of something. It was almost a fantasy act," he said, speaking about his wardrobe choices as a teenager in Belfast. "I think it was the idea of something foreign, something that made me feel like I needed to express myself outside of a conformist environment. I grew up in Northern Ireland, born in '84. Between the mid '80s and the '90s, it was a complex place to live."

I reacted to that sentiment like a Pavlovian dog, spiralling right back to my childhood. That early itch for a different world, that vague, stubborn hope that being a little odd is the point.

I grew up in Lamka, a small hill town in Manipur, far from anything deemed "fashion". Tin-roofed houses climbed uneven slopes, mornings smelled of damp earth and market stalls opened under stark electric-blue tarpaulins, pinned in place with stones tied to their ends. People dressed for sudden rain and colder evenings, layering out of necessity—mostly second-hand, often oversized for tactical comfort—pulled from bins under these tents.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER
An archival portrait of Gangte's mother and her friends from the mid '60s, an image he's returned to time and again on moodboards for his shoots.

Long before I saw a runway show on FashionTV, which many of the townsfolk tabooed because of the "half-naked women", I watched my mother thrift clothes, always a size larger so they'd last me longer. One such piece was a ruby-red pair of jeans that I often paired with a black jacket boasting the deepest pockets. Now, those pockets could actually be better used for lugging around emotional baggage. At school, seniors made an entire uniform look rebellious simply by rolling up their sleeves or loosening their ties just a notch, in an effort to exhibit individuality.

Janice, my cousin, was the first person I knew who appeared to exist in two different worlds. At least 15 years older than me, she was already living in Delhi at this point, and would come home during vacations with jewellery gathered from the city. Oxidised earrings that must have been bought in Sarojini Nagar, scarves that smelt faintly of city air. My favourite was a three-tiered beaded necklace from her Naga friend, which she hung on the wall of her bedroom. Everything she spoke about was laced with such a sense of flourish that one couldn't help but admire her.

On a bus ride to Imphal, she spoke of when she worked part-time at a perfume shop. I remember her talking about an apple-shaped perfume by Nina Ricci, as if it were the Holy Grail. This was also my gateway into recognising brands. Going through magazines with her felt like a syllabus of what was worth knowing. With her, I began to see for the first time that there are other ways of living and that I wanted to learn one of them.

It's a sentiment I shared with designer Alan Alexander, who grew up in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala. Far from any formal fashion ecosystem, he recounted to me how getting his first computer at 12 had expanded his world view overnight.

"I used to obsessively read articles and blogs from across the world—about fashion, costumes, art, books, culture, music, socio-political struggles, food recipes, everything under the sun," he said. "I would download international music in languages I didn't even speak, just to experience things unknown. All of this was information I absorbed simply for the sake of it."

"In fact," he added, "fashion wasn't even my first choice of career. I studied applied electronics and instrumentation before switching."

I remember a conversation I had with photographer Tenzing Dakpa, with whom I have collaborated a couple of times in the past. A second-generation Tibetan, he was raised in Gangtok, Sikkim, in a hotel that his parents run even today.

"Fashion as a personification came from adopting musical influences and style as a way to identify yourself with a certain temperament." At another point, almost apologetically, he added, "It's photography and description that I'm interested in. Fashion almost becomes a by-product of that process."

Fashion, for many of us, doesn't begin with proximity to its industry or access to its institutions, but with a desire to imagine another life, or to make sense of the one you're already in.

By the time the episode ended, the city was still grumbling outside. But so was my mind. Who actually gets to shape fashion's language? It struck me how often we look outward for inspiration, building moodboards with borrowed references from Pinterest when the original vocabulary was already formed around us. Long before we even knew what to call it.

ROYAL T HANGZO.

On the nose

The liquid rhinoplasty has been growing in popularity, offering more natural and subtle effects. Would it work for me? asks ALICE GREGORY.

Last fall, after decades of vision so poor I couldn't recognise my closest friends across a small room without glasses, I paid $10,000 for ICL surgery, a newish Lasik alternative in which permanent contact lenses are installed in one's eyeballs. Besides the somewhat daunting, monthlong course of prescription eye drops that followed, recovery was swift. I've had no major medical complications, only subtle psychological ones: Improving my vision, I realised, impaired the way I saw myself.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I looked in the mirror and saw only my face staring back at me. No brow-hiding frames, no eye-distorting lenses. And most crucially, perhaps, was my nose: bare, no longer horizontally bifurcated by a ridge of black acetate.

In a good mood, on a good day, my nose is "striking" or "distinguished". It has "character", to quote my mother. In a bad mood, on a bad day, it is simply crooked. "I'm so glad she never fixed it," a famous artist recently told a mutual friend, upon meeting me. Meant as a compliment, I, of course, interpreted it as insult.

Should I have fixed it? A basketball to the face in middle school left a hairline fracture and with it a slight asymmetry I was always aware of without really caring about. But now the asymmetry shone (sometimes, especially in photographs, literally: reflecting a spot of glare back at the camera). My friends and family all called me crazy whenever I mentioned it, but their reassurances were of little value. It wasn't that I didn't believe them—I didn't care what they looked like either—but I wanted a professional opinion.

One drizzly spring morning, I entered the sprawling, multistorey Park Avenue office of plastic surgeon Lara Devgan, MD, whose Instagram follower count approaches 1 million and whose proprietary skin-care fans include Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Aniston. Known for what she calls "facial optimisation", Devgan tends towards an approach made up of "tweaks", as she refers to them—the facial equivalent of having an old dress tailored rather than getting a fabulous new one custom-made.

"So you have a 'deep radix'," she said, petting the depression at the top of my nose with her index finger. There was also, she went on, a "widening of the dorsal nasal aesthetic lines"—the bridge, in lay terms. There was "some crookedness", which she said was "likely the site of prior trauma". Lastly, I suffered from what she described as "a little bit of a bulbous and slightly droopy nasal tip".

Finally, some honesty, I thought to myself.

A good, old-fashioned rhinoplasty could, of course, make my nose smaller and less crooked. It would also cost close to $20,000, require general anaesthesia, take up to a full year to see the final results and turn me into a person who got a purely elective nose job at an age (37) that was, in my opinion, decades past the point of utility.

But there were other methods. "One of the hallmarks of modern plastic surgery is customisability," Devgan said. Some well-placed injections of hyaluronic acid—which functions almost like a cartilage graft—at the top of the nose (to lessen the prominence of the bump) might "optimise" my appearance, as she put it. "We don't have to have you look textbook to be happy."

Devgan was describing, essentially, a nonsurgical nose job—or a 'liquid rhinoplasty'—a procedure that has been growing in popularity without being, in itself, new. (The practice of injecting the nose with various liquids dates back to the turn of the 20th century, when precarious substances including oils and waxes were used.) The first filler made of hyaluronic acid—which is also used topically for its moisturising properties—was approved for cosmetic use in the US by the FDA in 2003, and in the years since its effects can be seen everywhere from the enviably sculpted cheekbones of influencers to the trout-y mouths of the ladies populating Bravo and so many of the women who love to hate them.

Like anyone living in a major city in 2025, I had grown wary of the surreal effects of facial fillers. Sometimes, I'd take the subway or go to a Pilates class, look around me and be surrounded by slightly swollen-looking faces of indeterminate age that seemed a little too taut and almost tender to the touch. But I had yet to see—or at least had yet to notice—any noses whose shapes I'd attribute to filler.

For much of the 20th century, rhinoplasties were used—and seen—as a method of assimilation, often within immigrant communities. The procedures often involved a dramatic removal of cartilage, the results being small, angular and upturned. But Raj Kanodia, MD, a Beverly Hills–based plastic surgeon, told me that he has seen "a noticeable shift in what patients are asking for" in recent years. "People are looking to refine—not change—their features," he said. Kanodia, who approaches filler with "extreme caution" and prefers rhinoplasties of the kind he has performed on celebrities like Khloé Kardashian and Ashlee Simpson (internal stitches only), said that he tries to honour and embellish patients' cultural identities, rather than erasing them. His surgical motto is: "Fool the mother's eye." Kanodia, surprisingly, attributes this shift to social media, which provides a vastly larger sample size of aspirational beauty.

STRAIGHT STORY
"When you're thinking about noses," says plastic surgeon Melissa Doft, "you want to look at the beautiful noses over the ages." Detail from Agnolo Bronzino's *Laura Battiferri*, circa 1560.

GIUSEPPE SCHIAVINOTTO/MONDADORI PORTFOLIO/ART RESOURCE, NY.

"People are embracing uniqueness and seeking procedures that help them look like the best version of themselves—not someone else," he said.

This was what I wanted, and as I sat in Devgan's office, she assured me that I would "not be burning any bridges" were I to go the more subtle route. It would feel like getting Botox, Devgan promised—some numbing cream, a few pricks, perhaps a tiny bit of redness—but the results would be instant and last for up to a year. She compared the procedure to "magical, three-dimensional makeup", a real-life Facetuning. Magic was indeed what I was looking for—to look both better and exactly the same—or maybe it was more that I was engaged in magical thinking. Isn't that always what we want? To somehow change our life, without changing anything about our lifestyle?

A few days later, I paid a visit to the office of Michael Bassiri-Tehrani, MD, another plastic surgeon, whose 'tip stitch' had recently gone viral on TikTok. The procedure—a few sutures inside the nose to pull the tip upwards a few millimetres—is a standard part of a traditional rhinoplasty, but Bassiri-Tehrani was now routinely performing it à la carte, often for men who otherwise might be too embarrassed to get a nose job, but also for women in advance of special events where they knew they'd be photographed smiling (which draws the nose downwards). Would lifting the tip of my nose up somehow disguise what I was now privately calling "my basketball bump"?

It might, Bassiri-Tehrani told me, but he wouldn't recommend it. If the choice were only his to make, he'd prefer to perform a true, "well-balanced" rhinoplasty that, he said, would have the "ironic" effect of looking "more natural" than a "bunch of minor half-steps".

He proceeded to take a series of photographs of my face, and then we relocated to his office where he began to tinker on Photoshop. He would bring the radix up, reduce the bump and add a bit of volume. The results, when he flipped around his screen, were surprising. From straight on, I looked almost exactly like myself; from a three-quarter angle my nose was still large but now perfectly straight—something no amount of filler could have achieved.

I started to squirm and began to speak in a voice that was not unlike whining. I was almost 40, I told him. I was married. I had a baby. I had lots of friends. How could I possibly justify a major facial surgery? The hesitancy wasn't really rational, I knew: I exercised; I highlighted my hair; I dressed myself in expensive, flattering clothing. "Everyone draws the line somewhere," he said.

High up on a kitchen shelf, wedged between many linear feet of neglected media (DVDs—we have no DVD player; expensively produced coffee-table books—we have a toddler), sits a plaster reproduction of a bust of Hermes, originally carved in 340 BC. It has peered at me while I made dinner for years now, and only recently did it occur to me to actually take it down. My grease-stained god's nose looked remarkably like mine, though—whether by the forces of his mythic power or the anonymous hand of the sculptor who rendered him—perfectly straight. It had never occurred to me to seek aesthetic inspiration in the face of a deity before, but here it was, all along, in my own kitchen.

The office of Melissa Doft, MD, is located behind the kind of discreet Park Avenue door seemingly only ever entered by women in sunglasses. Doft, a friend had said, was gentle in manner, exquisite in her taste and—most importantly perhaps—had a face that appeared untouched. "It's kind of like going to the makeup floor at Bergdorf, right?" Doft herself said. "If you don't have a brand that you want to patronise, you wander around looking for the lady behind a counter whose makeup looks like how you'd want yours done."

Looking at my face, she agreed with Bassiri-Tehrani that the most suitable version was a proper rhinoplasty. There was "enough mass to work with", as she tactfully put it. Once again, I started in about my age, but she cut me off.

"The age range for rhinoplasties is now actually much larger than one might think." She said she frequently performed rhinoplasties on 20-somethings only to have their middle-aged mothers come in later wanting one too. To this end, she said she tried to avoid results that were, as she put it, "too cute". The nose, she went on, should look good not just on a 17-year-old girl but on an older woman as well.

"When you're thinking about noses," Doft elaborated, "you want to look at the beautiful noses over the ages. What has been idealised across time, what have we gravitated towards not just today but in the past too? It's symmetry, it's straightness, it's a bit of a flare at the bottom, like the open wings of a bird."

"People [seek] procedures that help them look like the best version of themselves—not someone else"
—RAJ KANODIA, MD

It sounded lovely. And not too far from what my own nose looked like. "But it's sort of like going into a pool," Doft said. "Some people dive right in, others go down the ladder and some people never want to go in at all."

I felt myself cowering at the shallow end, one toe hovering above the surface. And then she offered me an inner tube.

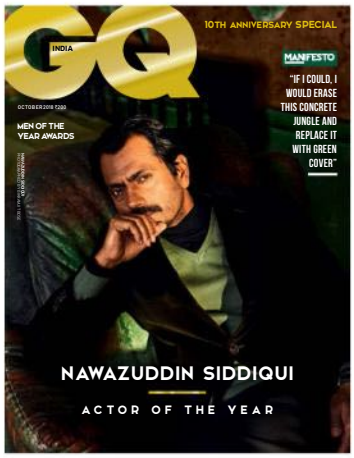
"We could try a bit of filler," she said. "Like, right now." The immediacy hadn't occurred to me—Doft could apparently see my hesitation. "It's dissolvable, if you don't like it."

Doft left the exam room to retrieve a syringe of what she called "one of the newer fillers". Introduced to the US market in 2020, RHA (or resilient hyaluronic acid) is, in Doft's experience, more natural-looking in its effects than some of the older varieties. The doctor propped my chin in her slender hand, pricked the top of my nose twice, massaged the area for a few moments and then added an additional drop to the side of my nose to help disguise the asymmetry. She rubbed again, blotted and handed me a mirror. My nose looked no smaller, but there was a smoothness that there wasn't before, more like a child's drawing of a mountain than a topographical map of one. "Nobody is going to know but you," she said.

"So did you get a nose job?" my husband asked later that evening, when I walked in the door. "No," I told him. "I didn't do anything."

My quest was over, and with it the desire to look in the mirror—not because I was afraid of what I would see, but because I was tired of thinking about my face. The doctors I spoke to all described the perfect nose as one that recedes into the background of the face, but the perfect nose, I discovered, is also one that recedes into the background of one's mind.

IT'S WHAT'S NEW NOW



PHOTOS: BIKRAMJIT BOSE (OCTOBER 2018); TARUN KHIWAL (SEPTEMBER 2018); R BURMAN (FEBRUARY 2019); PRASAD NAIK (AUGUST 2019); ERRIKOS ANDREOU (OCTOBER 2019); TARUN VISHWA (MARCH 2019); ALL COURTESY OF *GQ* INDIA

Down to Earth

As Sunita Williams hangs up her space boots, KANIKA SHARMA meets the legendary NASA astronaut by Kozhikode's riverside to speak with her about what lies beyond the stars.

LIKE A CHARACTER in an Arundhati Roy novel, I wait by the silver-green backwaters of Kozhikode. The leafy riverbank is hushed, save for a lone boatman dipping his oars into the water, sending ripples fanning out like rays of the sun. Soon, voices drift closer. I turn and spot her, emerging from behind slanting coconut fronds, her hand extended.

"Hi, I'm Suni."

The first thing I notice about Sunita Williams is her smile: sunny and wide enough to reassure people around the world when her eight-day mission stretched unexpectedly into 286 days. We sit on a metal bench. I have such a clear mental picture of her gravity-defying curls that were splashed all over the internet in 2024 that seeing them now tamely graze her shoulders feels jarring. Her violet kurti looks worn in; her space-printed Converse sneakers look custom-made for comfort. There's not a stitch of makeup on her face—the same face beaming down from hoardings announcing her as the guest of honour at the ninth edition of Kerala Literature Festival. Only days have passed since NASA formally marked her as a "former" astronaut, and Williams already appears to be settling into a new rhythm: meeting unfamiliar people, gorging on dishes she never imagined (she will soon confess a fondness for falooda) and soaking in the sights.

Maybe space is closer than we think. Her small silver ear studs—one shaped like a planet, the other a rocket—can attest to it. And yet, how does someone who has loved space so ardently announce retirement at just 60? Astronauts like John Glenn ventured back into orbit as late as 77. Why stop now? "A spacewalk has every human emotion," Williams tells me. "You're super-excited because you've accomplished a goal. And then you're happy because, 'Oh, my God, look at the view.' But you miss home, right?" One of the simplest pleasures she longed for was to feel the rain on her face and to be with her family and dogs. "That made me a little lonesome."

As someone who spent her childhood hiking, camping, windsurfing, skiing and swimming (her father insisted his children learn to swim after a near-drowning of his own), and who would go on to become one of the humans to spend the longest time in space (though she jokes her admission into NASA was a clerical error), Williams likes her feet on the ground as much as she likes her head in the clouds. "This morning, I got up and went for a little walk," she says, sipping coconut water. "It hurt a little because of the time zone changes. My sister and I always work out when we wake up; she swims in the ocean during winter. But as I'm getting older, it's getting tougher." She pauses. "I thought, why not make these next 20 years about climbing mountains, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing while my husband and I are still in pretty good shape?"

FLIGHT MODE
STS-116 mission specialist Sunita Williams pictured aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery in 2006.

Shading her eyes from the afternoon sun, Williams looks up at a coconut tree and asks how people manage to climb it and pluck the fruit using only their hands and feet. I clock it then—that itch to test her limits. The same restless resolve shaped her career, making her one of the most remarkable women in spaceflight history at a time when women made up about 11 per cent of astronauts. "There were men in my career who were like, 'Why are you here?' And I get that. They thought my performance would be substandard. So, what did I do? I made sure my performance was even better than theirs and then they had nothing to say."

For all its rigours, space has also been her happy place. She has spoken of Thanksgivings in orbit, crew members floating through meals, football games playing in the background, a rugby ball tossed across modules, guitars emerging, songs improvised. "It doesn't get much better than that," she wrote on her blog. In 2007, she became the first astronaut to complete a marathon in space when she ran the Boston Marathon tethered to a treadmill via a harness at the same time that it was taking place 250 miles below on Earth.

One would assume that, having experienced everything she has, not much could scare Williams. "No, I'm afraid of a lot of things," she clarifies. "I've always been a little afraid of the dark," she adds. Ironic, for someone who spent nine months staring out at the vast blackness of space. "I'm also afraid of taking a test because I don't like memorisation or having to show off my knowledge on a piece of paper. I'm not scared of scaling a mountain or being suspended in space because there's mechanical control at play. But I won't drive fast on an icy road."

As much as Williams is filled with stories, she's also filled with curiosity. She wags her finger, slipping easily into her father's voice. "He used to tell me, 'Suni, everybody has a story. You just have to listen.'" And she will be listening, even to stories that go on without her. "I'm sad I'm retiring because it's such an exciting time in spaceflight—we're getting ready to go back to the moon. It's going to be all hands on deck. As a mentor, I feel like I've set the young kids up for success and now I get to watch them carry on the work."

GETTY IMAGES.

AT EASE
Williams enjoys a quiet moment by the Chaliyar river in Kozhikode.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY NABINA NAZAR. BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATMA. ASSISTED BY: JASLEEN NARANG. LOCATION: THE RAVIZ KADAVU.

Medium rare

Are single-edition saris the ultimate flex for textile connoisseurs? VINITA MAKHIJA investigates.

"It all started with a wild goose chase in Banaras (Varanasi)," recalls Swati Agarwal. One half of the label Swati & Sunaina Gold, the designer traces the brand's origin story back a decade ago when, inspired by her Marwari family's trove of heirloom saris, she set out to find a rangkaat (a complex weaving technique that interlocks silk with zari threads) drape for her brother's wedding.

The search was obsessive—calls to President's Award–winning artisans, hours spent poring over Weaver Service Centre booklets, even a cold hunt through Varanasi's bylanes. She never found the rangkaat she had dreamed of, but discovered a new calling instead.

In a landscape crowded with Banarasi brocade brands, Agarwal and her sister-in-law Sunaina Jalan have conjured up an anomaly. Their focus is the single-edition sari, which means no two patrons will ever own the same piece. Exclusivity is taken so seriously that they do not even maintain a physical archive of their actual creations (they do chronicle through sketches and samples). Each collection is a capsule of just six design directions, with 12 to 18 pieces in singular colourways. With pieces starting at ₹3 lakh, these are not impulse buys.

Since the beginning, the founders have worked exclusively with Banarasi textiles, drawing on dampach, kadua, jamdani, rangkaat and gyaser (their interpretation of the Indo-Tibetan textile). But each comes with interventions. Where others would settle for neat colour panels in rangkaat, they tied the blocks with woven bows. Their intervention in gyaser required looms that normally yielded only 23 inches to be adapted to accommodate an entire sari—a feat never attempted before.

Their Vanya collection of 24 saris brought wild silks from the Northeast—eri, tussar, muga and mulberry—into the Banaras gharana. The kora or white nature of these silks was paired with motifs inspired by Indian white flowers (rajnigandha, juhi, bela, champa, aparajita and brahmakamal) as well as miniature Kangra paintings of Krishna in the night garden.

What makes Swati & Sunaina Gold stand out in a competitive market is "their research vis-à-vis history, design and the technique applied in their collections," explains textile curator Lavina Baldota. It's little wonder that these saris, sans shiny embellishment or accoutrement, "demand a certain price", she adds.

ALIZA FATMA.

WARP AND WEFT
In Swati & Sunaina Gold's saris, centuries-old Banarasi textiles and techniques come with radical, unique interventions.

This dedication to detail is evident in their collections. The pair took four trips to France and wrote a thesis on the India-France textile connection before releasing the newest Varanasi to Versailles line, which showcases a fine mix of brocade and French lace.

As India experiences a revivalist moment, and formal contemporary textile museums remain rare, the role of individual designers and collectors becomes even more crucial. Agarwal shares that a young bride from Hyderabad commissioned a sari for her wedding. "She'd met her fiancé only a couple of months prior, but the connection felt cosmic, and she wanted her bridal look to reflect that."

The team created a piece that drew from the couple's astrological signs, lucky numbers and intertwined names in a Telugu script. The bride archived the entire process, proving that collectors who buy refined textiles value the journey as deeply as the finished weave itself.

To the sisters-in-law, as with other skill-led designers—Chinar Farooqui of Injiri and her quiet devotion to jamdani; Sanjay Garg of Raw Mango, who has expanded the handloom lexicon; Pankaj S with his luminous Murshidabad mul; and Aadyam Handwoven with its explorations in ikat—speaking about process and their long-term relationships with makers isn't marketing. It's a responsibility.

Which is why conversations must shift beyond focusing on how many hours a weaver spent at the loom or which mythological character inspired a motif. The sharper question is whether stakeholders—not just the weaver but the yarn dyer, the spinner, the jacquard punch maker, even the loom maker—are compensated well enough to continue this work. Exhibitions that showcase skill, patronage that inspires continuity and above-market pay structures are what separate romanticism from real commitment. Agarwal and Jalan understand that difference.

"I don't think weaving is a dying art form, but it is certainly an ageing one," Agarwal says, contemplatively. The renewed fascination with handlooms has helped both small ateliers and big brands, but she points to a new threat. "Many young weavers may not have the patience or focus like their forefathers did." She notes many young practitioners' attention spans have been hijacked by their phone while a power loom grunts on the side.

For years, the fear was that the new hands would just not have the same agility. Now, it's focus that is slipping away. And in that quiet fading of concentration lies the real fragility of the craft Agarwal and Jalan are trying so hard to protect.

Fit check

No more ladder-climbers, Gen Z creatives are constantly adapting to whatever the world throws their way. And naturally, doing it in style. By THEA MULCHANDANI and MANGLIEN GANGTE.

COURTESY OF GURDEV SINGH.

PHOTO: ATHUL PRASAD/*CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER* INDIA

MANCIE RATHOD
Leo
Model, documentary photographer

How has your style evolved?
A lot of my style comes from the women around me—watching how they move through the world, how they adorn themselves.
Do you think there's a 'Gen Z aesthetic'?
Not specifically—what I see instead is a collective nostalgia, a longing for times that felt freer and more expressive. You can see that fashion, at the moment, is informed by previous silhouettes, styles and designs. I think fast-fashion brands today are trying to flatten us into something colourless and uniform.
If you had a uniform, what would it be?
Light-wash blue jeans, a graphic tank, wooden wedges, my keffiyeh and a quilted flap handbag.
What would you wear to a 9-to-5?
Either a fitted grey cardigan with a plaid midi skirt and black knee-length slouchy boots or a Missoni zebra turtleneck tank with gold neck buttons, black crepe flared pants and a pair of pointy El Dantes heels.
What are your 'ins' and 'outs' for 2026?
In: I want to learn how to sew—reinvent some of the pieces that I have, upcycle thrifted pieces where the print, pattern and material are cute but just not my style.
Out: Buying from brands that do not care about people—as humans or as consumers.
Where do you shop the most?
More than 95 per cent of my wardrobe is preloved. I pretty much only wear second-hand clothing, accessories and shoes. Most things that are new were very graciously gifted to me by brands or purchased to support brands that are progressive, support human rights and committed to making the world a little less grey.
What gets your time when everything feels important?
I try to find the best ways to balance the mundane and the more exciting parts of my life. I look to how I can fill my days with something whimsical for myself, something with the people I love and something that serves my mind and heart.
What's the most stressful part of juggling multiple paths?
Focus—I like to do things well, and when I'm spread thin, the work doesn't always meet my standards. It affects my mental clarity and how I feel in my body. This year, I'm committing to balance and focus.

NAMITA SUNIL
Virgo
Model, UI/UX and visual designer

How has your personal style evolved?
Moving away from my hometown and studying fashion design was my chance to experiment. I've been through it all—emo, athleisure, coquette, you name it. Currently, I'm in love with [American rapper and singer] Doechii's style. She's rewriting femininity in fashion.
Do you think there's a 'Gen Z aesthetic'?
Gen Z experiments with a ferocity that

is inspiring and terrifying. The number of trends that are born and die nearly instantly is a testament to their creativity, but I do feel there is a need for patience, to let a trend evolve and settle down into a long-lasting subculture.

What's on your wishlist?
A custom Thom Browne suit.

What's your 'getting ready' process like?
I start with how I want my face and hair to look, and build my outfit around that. So, with adjectives: today, I want to look polished; tomorrow, maybe a little grittier.

If you had a uniform, what would it be?
A hoodie, baggy jeans, cowboy boots and sunglasses.

What's one styling tip that's changed how you dress?
If it isn't one hundred per cent yes, it's a no.

What are your 'ins' and 'outs' for 2026?
In: Shopping intentionally, learning to repair your own clothes and more media literacy. Out: Buying more clothes than needed, judging people for their style.

What gets your time when everything feels important?
Health comes first. Making sure I'm well-fed and physically active is number one—can't follow your dreams if you're unwell. I work on tasks with a hard deadline first, then admin chores and my personal art. I try to remain kind to myself throughout.

"If it isn't one hundred per cent yes, it's a no" —NAMITA SUNIL

OJAS TYAGI
Capricorn
Creative executive assistant, model

How has your personal style evolved?
Growing up, my family dressed me in skirts, so maybe that's where it all began. Post lockdown, I started experimenting more with chains, rings and layering. My girlfriend also has had a huge influence on how I dress—just having someone who supports me without judgement makes me more confident.

Do you think there's a 'Gen Z aesthetic'?
Right now, it feels less like an aesthetic and more like the unavoidable influence of social media.

What's one styling tip that's changed how you dress?
Understanding my body proportions helped a lot. You're able to tell what will look good and what won't.

What makes a fashion criminal?
You could be wearing the perfect outfit, but if you don't own it, it'll look pretentious. Confidence makes fashion work.

How would you style a white shirt?
A white shirt will look good any way that you style it. I'd opt for an oversized one, maybe with mismatched buttons and big pants.

What are five products that are always in rotation for you?
Cowboy boots, silver accessories, baggy jeans, an oversized coat and a little coral blush.

What's the most stressful part of juggling multiple paths?
Missing out—sometimes I have to drop modelling gigs because of prior commitments and that always stresses me out.

What gets your time when everything feels important?
I'm good at multitasking, which helps when everything feels important. When it gets overwhelming, the people around me help me stay grounded and focused.

COURTESY OF THE SUBJECTS.

"When you're feeling uninspired, wear things inside out, back to front or upside down" —SHACHI ANKOLEKAR

SHACHI ANKOLEKAR

Aquarius

Multidisciplinary creative, model

What is on your fashion moodboard?
I love drawing from history and culture to create a modern, punk way of dressing. I like pieces that carry a narrative—silhouettes, colours or structures that feel rooted in something older but that are styled in a way that feels current and irreverent.

Are there any trends you love right now?
I really love Indian jewellery. Chunky maximalism is coming back in a big way and India should be at the forefront.

What is your unpopular fashion opinion?
Minimalism is often just unfinished styling. If you're going to keep it 'clean', the intention needs to be razor-sharp. Otherwise, it's just safe dressing pretending to be tasteful.

What's your 'getting ready' process like?
World-building—every look feels like setting a scene. The clothes, the accessories, the mood, the pace, it's never really just about getting dressed because no theatre piece is complete without thoughtful costume design, always.

What do you wear when you're running late?
Baggy pants, a baggy shirt and lots and lots of rings. Big sunglasses always.

What's one styling tip that's changed how you dress?
When you're feeling uninspired, wear things inside out, back to front or upside down.

What makes a fashion criminal?
Do you know what a nothingburger is? It's when you expect a lot from an outfit and the person delivers... nothing. Think great base outfit, huge potential, but lazy accessorising bringing down the whole look. Don't be shy, baby, serve us something.

What gets your time when everything feels important?
I haven't mastered escaping deadlines yet. Everything gets my time all at once. This either makes me highly efficient or completely burnt out—usually the former. I always prioritise ballet when I feel overwhelmed. It calms me down. It's important to have one thing you can escape into when everything feels overbearing.

What's a skill from one job that helps you in another?
Discipline from ballet—it teaches you how to show up even when motivation disappears and that carries into everything I do, creatively and professionally.

COURTESY OF THE SUBJECT.

GURDEV SINGH
Aquarius
Performance and visual artist, model

How has your personal style evolved?
My personal style is based on anything vintage or tailored. My family also has a lot of archives from the 1960s and '70s, with young, dapper sardars in high-waist pants and puff-sleeve shirts and uncles who wore printed turbans, which has inspired me. Sikhs were very flamboyant back in the day.

What is on your fashion moodboard?
I'm obsessed with regimental and Napoleon jackets. I collect them from Janpath or Sarojini (in New Delhi) and then source buttons, batches and brooches for them. I'm also very moved by the way Indian royalty used to dress, like the Patiala kings, who wore custom Cartier necklaces.

COURTESY OF THE SUBJECT. *LAL KAPTAAN*, 2025, GURDEV SINGH.

If you had a uniform, what would it be?
Retired military uncle who's gardening in his Lutyens colony home.

How are you styling a white shirt?
With Punjabi juttis, a pastel-toned turban and high-rise pants.

What's one styling tip that's changed how you dress?
Invest in tailoring and cut down on fast fashion.

What are five products that are always in rotation for you?
Signet rings, high-rise pants, greys and browns in terms of colour, turbans with a cool palette, antique watches.

What makes a fashion criminal?
When someone can't have fun with creating their own persona and instead succumbs to micro-trends.

How does what you do for work show up in how you dress?
I deal with a lot of old magazines and photographs of all sorts, which helps me to create my paintings and collages, so a lot of my fashion also comes from the same place.

What's the most stressful part of juggling multiple paths?
I really want every aspect of my work to be true to what I stand for, so when I feel like I'm not able to give something my all, it does get to me.

"I'm very moved by the way Indian royalty used to dress, like the Patiala kings, who wore custom Cartier necklaces"
—GURDEV SINGH

Down the line

Fashion illustration—once a mainstay of lookbooks and magazines—is on our moodboards again. By DIVYA BALAKRISHNAN

Stepping out of my London hotel, I found myself frozen in my tracks, facing the wide glass frontage of the department store Harvey Nichols. I had expected the familiar grammar of luxury retail: mannequins frozen mid-gesture, campaign faces enlarged to abstraction. Instead, drawings darted across the glass—Jacky Blue's sketches animated on screen, stretched beyond scale, rendered in thick, confident strokes that simultaneously had a doodle-like charm.

I was not new to the vocabulary of illustration. Fashion did not enter my life through proximity. It arrived obliquely, through cinema. Audrey Hepburn led me to Givenchy and Dior, and from there to Edith Head. What stayed were not only the finished garments, but the drawings that preceded them. I sketched obsessively through my years of science education, mostly in the margins of textbooks, copying silhouettes I could not access in any other way. When fashion felt unreachable, I drew it closer.

Fashion illustration has long functioned as a form of access for buyers and enthusiasts alike. From early costume books at 19th-century couture ateliers to campaigns in *Vogue*, this language was how designers and their patrons communicated. When the industry accelerated and photography made the process of creating images instant, illustration seemed to slip from the centre. Yet, a single held-back line can sometimes contain more feeling than an entire campaign.

The legendary Italian fashion illustrator René Gruau understood this instinctively. His work for Dior, beginning with Miss Dior in 1947, did not merely advertise the clothing but conjured up an immersive world for the brand. A ballerina in a tutu; an ingenue's hand resting lightly on a leopard's paw; a woman, as seen from behind, hugging a huge bouquet of flowers—you could almost smell it. Gruau's 20th-century drawings for Dior, Balenciaga, Schiaparelli and Givenchy shaped how modern luxury learned to look at itself.

That sensibility carries forward most clearly today in the work of the English fashion illustrator David Downton. He built his reputation on drawings made fresh from Paris couture fittings each season, as well as on his live portrayals of illustrious figures—from Cate Blanchett to Linda Evangelista—rendered in his signature, watercolour lines that convey an air of impenetrable glamour. His art has circulated so widely that it sits pinned to moodboards and framed in private homes, absorbed into the collective visual memory of fashion.

GIRLBOSS
Julie Houts skewers the world of fashion with satirical, relatable illustrations.

Downton arrived in Paris in 1996, just as John Galliano and Alexander McQueen were taking up their posts at Dior and Givenchy. "There was electricity in the air. I felt like I had entered Narnia and I knew I had found my métier," says Downton. His work remains committed to being present, standing up, pacing, making decisions that cannot be undone. Downton muses, "It is an intimate experience. A mini love affair. Today, it takes an army to produce a portrait or a fashion photograph. But with a drawing, it is just you and the subject: time arrested."

Milan-based Jenny Walton, trained in real-time observation, translates that energy into her own work, sketching runway shows not to record but to respond, creating images that are as much

JULIE HOUTS, JENNY WALTON (OPPOSITE PAGE).

"Because fashion illustration is so limitless, it easily lends itself to pushing ideas to their most absurd, exaggerated conclusion" —JULIE HOUTS

personal impression as reportage. Which is what the major brands, from Bergdorf Goodman to Prada, come to her for. Trained at the Parsons School of Design, where illustration was once central to fashion education, she learned to draw for hours, standing, capturing a gesture before it vanishes. Vintage references run naturally through Walton's visual world, both in her personal style and in her illustrations. "Styles and items from the past immediately bring a warm sense of nostalgia to something new, making it feel so much more familiar and inviting," says Walton.

Elsewhere in the world of fashion illustration, the tone shifts. New York–based Julie Houts approaches drawing not as reverence but as satire. Her images are populated by rats and fashion girls collapsed in fetal positions. Emotions spill and absurdity reigns. She sketched the industry's contradictions, exposing its anxieties and excesses through witty text scrawled onto these illustrations. "Because fashion illustration is so limitless, it easily lends itself to pushing ideas to their most absurd, exaggerated conclusion."

At the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, designer David Abraham was taught to emphasise drawing for its own sake—learning proportion, perspective, ratios and how to render material. How granite behaves differently from wood, chiffon from silk. These principles, he explains, are what make a drawing work. One half of the duo behind the label Abraham & Thakore, he insists that thinking begins when the hand moves across paper. Drawing is meditative. Once he picks up a pencil, ideas start to form. In that sense, illustration becomes part of the visualisation process itself.

At their label, sketches are iterative and ongoing. A doodle might lead to the development of a weave in Telangana, which then returns altered through material and technique. When the fabric comes back from the loom, Abraham sketches again to understand movement, drape and proportion. Where should a motif sit on the body? Is it too large or too small? These decisions, he says, only become clear when he sketches. When everyone understands the drawing, the garment works. If they don't, it doesn't.

Illustration was my portal into the fashion industry, but you rarely see it anywhere anymore. In India, it feels almost extinct. Walton speaks candidly about the challenges facing fashion illustration today. "As commissions have diminished, fewer young artists can study or sustain the practice professionally. Illustration takes time," she notes, and without paid work, "it becomes difficult to justify".

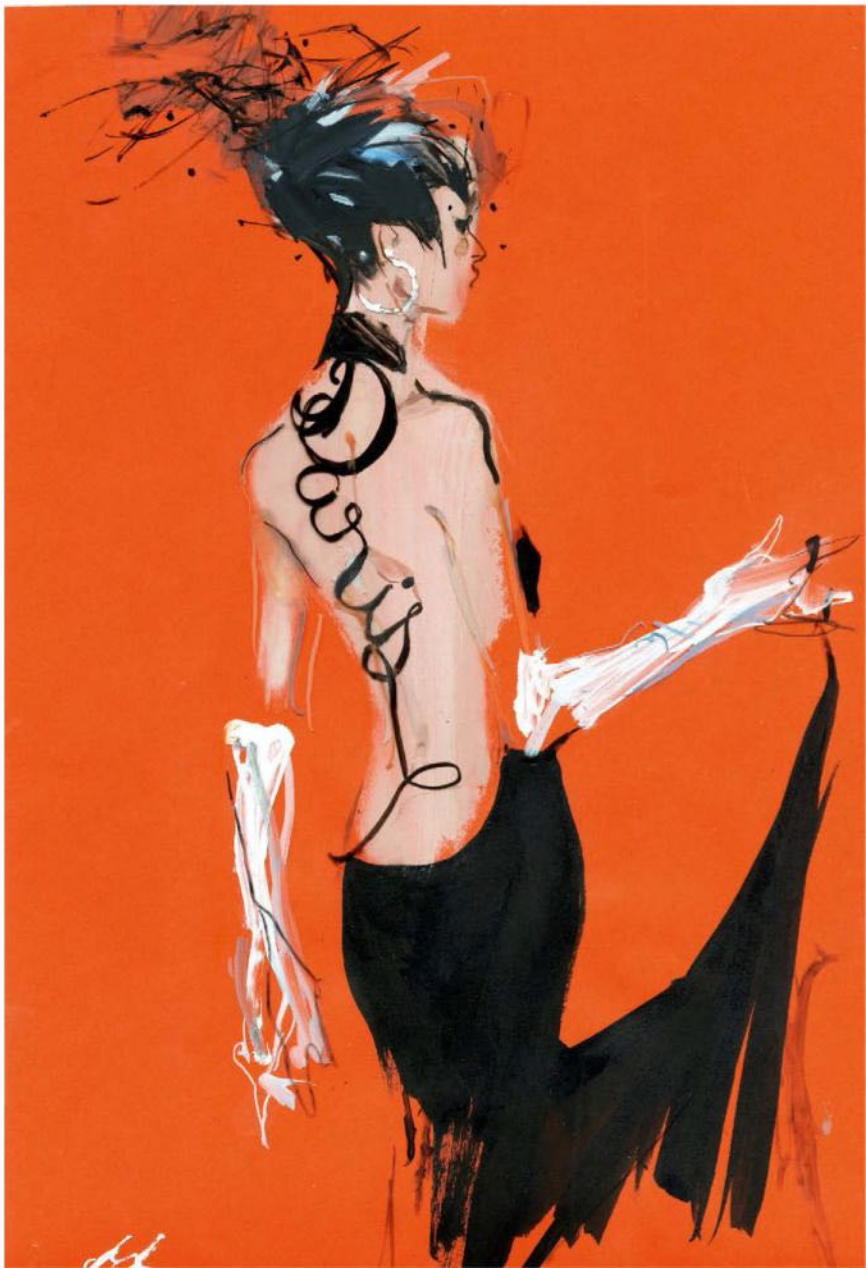
But, it appears, the countertrend is already underway. As artificial intelligence accelerates what can be produced cheaply, there is a call to return to the nuance and imperfection of what humans create.

Major houses are paying attention: Daniel Roseberry's illustrations for Schiaparelli have demonstrated that the drawn line sits central to his work at the couture house. In January, Hermès introduced its theme for 2026 with hand-drawn, animated illustrations by French artist Linda Merad. The immediacy that Downton demonstrated has begun to flourish again in the front rows of fashion shows today, from illustrators like Katja Foos, Miyuki Ohashi and Steve Clarus Quiles, who sketch live at shows—from Balenciaga and Valentino to Mathieu Blazy's first show at Chanel. Brands like Acne Studios, Gauri & Nainika and Lanvin have, in recent years, returned to commissioning illustrators to rethink how their brands speak. Beyond ateliers, illustration thrives in unexpected spaces: Instagram illustrators such as Rameen Rizvi and Simona Alvarez render their daily fit checks as mini versions of themselves, Lizzie McGuire–style, blending photography and drawing.

Recently, I came across a post by a young Germany-based illustrator and motion designer, Haojing Simota: "When I was a kid, I dreamed of designing clothes and watching models strut down a runway in my creations. Then life happened, bills happened and that dream quietly packed itself away in a drawer. [But] recently I realised: dreams don't disappear—they change shape. With drawing and animation, why not build the runway I once imagined, brush by brush, frame by frame?"

It is heartening to see the return of wonder to fashion. "Because we have all become so accustomed to digital images, there is an indescribable energy in seeing an illustrator's hand in an image," says Houts, insisting that "ideas can feel more distilled or potent" when communicated this way. Drawing is intimate—a conversation between hand, eye and mind. In a fast-moving world, the hand still knows how to make an idea feel alive.

"Today, it takes an army to produce a portrait or a fashion photograph. But with a drawing, it is just you and the subject: time arrested" —DAVID DOWNTON



SEXYBACK
Sketching live, season after season in Paris, David Downton has chronicled the world's most illustrious personalities, brands and fashion shows.

DAVID DOWNTON. DAVID ABRAHAM OF ABRAHAM & THAKORE (OPPOSITE PAGE).

BUILDING WORLDS
Delhi Vintage Co founder Manish Chhabra used objects from his private collection to create a fantastical world for visitors to explore at the store.

DELHI VINTAGE CO.

Dream merchants

India's leading fashion designers are creating whimsical imaginariums where there's much more to thrill than the swipe of a credit card.

By NURIYAH JOHAR.

At the Sabyasachi store in Mumbai, an interesting statistic comes up in conversation with a sales associate. She mentions that on any given day, between 10 and 15 people walk in with no explicit intention of making a purchase. Many are international tourists, keen to see what's been recommended to them as one of the most exquisite retail spaces in all of India.

And for good reason. The store (and its many addresses across the country and in New York) offers an encounter with Indian maximalism where time feels suspended. Its curation of collectibles—heirloom furniture, treasured curios, antique rugs and the like—exists in a profusion that has to be seen first-hand to be truly understood. Naturally, then, visitors are sometimes confused to learn the artefacts aren't for sale.

A few lanes away, Gaurav Gupta's three-storey flagship is an immediate visual foil: an all-white world of minimalist futurism. Architect Vishal K Dar created a space for the brand that is undulating and otherworldly—like a white-cube gallery in which the garments are presented as wearable art. Further south, Sanjay Garg's Raw Mango store, designed by interior architect Ashiesh Shah and designer Isla Maria 'Loulou' Van Damme, is meditative, measured and almost anti-spectacle in its approach to Indian craft traditions. The layout, material palette and aesthetic elements draw from the tropical modernist philosophies of architects like Geoffrey Bawa and Charles Correa, culminating in a space of true repose: an 800-square-foot courtyard.

In addition to the one-kilometre radius they inhabit, the retail spaces of Sabyasachi, Gaurav Gupta and Raw Mango share a strong common denominator: they each function as compelling, tangible extensions of their brands' sartorial identities. Within South Mumbai's Indo-Saracenic and neogothic streetscape, these stores exist as micro-universes of craft. They're evolving into a new version of the third space, where communities are formed, cross-collaboration is encouraged and creative programming feels entirely natural. Raw Mango's famous baithaks come to mind, the most recent edition of which was hosted at the label's Banjara Hills store last November.

For designers who see themselves as being creators before entrepreneurs, the store is where their vision can be realised in full. At Delhi Vintage Co, the worldbuilding takes on an almost mythological nature. Their new 10,000-square-foot store in the capital, designed by Smita Singh of NoDoor, draws from the phases of a lunar eclipse interpreted as a series of archways. Founder Manish Chhabra's soulful private collection of Indian

NEW AVENUES
Additional in-store programming—like Raw Mango's series of baithaks—establishes these places as third spaces.

art is displayed throughout the store, though one of his most significant pieces was a bespoke commission: a sculpture of a devi, seemingly suspended in motion at the very edge of a table and secured in position by threads, produced by Neil Ghose Balser and Doyel Joshi of How Are You Feeling Studio. "We worked very closely on every element—from artefacts to textures to spatial flow," says Chhabra. "Even the fragrance in the store is custom-curated, because I wanted the experience to go beyond the visual."

Another rendition of this ideology lies in the glittering new Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla store at Jio World Plaza in Mumbai. Quilted curtains finished with aabla embroidery, gold-leafed walls with AJSK patola motifs and mirrored ceilings are only a prelude to the brand's take on opulence.

The rapid growth of e-commerce feels almost directly proportional to a more resolute conviction that physical retail spaces are irreplicable. This is especially true in a luxury marketplace. The physical store is where a customer can best understand the difference between one house and the next beyond price points—where a brand is fully felt and where loyalty is earned, in a way a website never can.

Brands are working hard to protect this distinction, ensuring the act of making an in-person purchase doesn't exist in a vacuum. Showrooms now come with branded cafés and restaurants, and in some cases these hospitality outposts become their own attraction: in 2024, Mumbai got its first Armani/Caffè, with a menu comprising a selection of Giorgio Armani's favourite dishes. Indian labels such as Nappa Dori routinely partner with coffee brands for their in-store cafés. When Moonray rebranded to Chorus last year, with a three-storey flagship in Kala Ghoda, it included a chic café and home-decor section, as well as a compelling selection of handcrafted soaps, body oils and candles.

Among legacy brands, there is an increased focus on consumer literacy around craft processes and provenance. A few years ago, Hermès presented its 'In Motion' travelling exhibition in Mumbai, offering a rare and detailed insight into over a century of the house's archive. In Jaipur, the House of Sunita Shekhawat, a family-run fine jewellery brand, established a permanent museum to celebrate the art of meenakari around two years ago. "People don't walk in only to see objects; they walk in to understand where meenakari comes from and why it matters," says Sunita Shekhawat. "Clients now arrive with a stronger emotional connect and a deeper respect for the craft. We've seen a clear shift towards mindful collecting rather than quick purchases."

Among brands that offer a more interactive understanding of craft processes, Basement, the concept store for clothing and lifestyle label 11.11/Eleven Eleven in Delhi, stands as a noteworthy example. A large brass vat filled with indigo dye is the pièce de résistance in the store. Customers are encouraged to dip raw fabric into the liquid and witness it take on the colour, in an experience they're not likely to forget anytime soon.

While it is a globally accepted fact that brick-and-mortar stores are far more than sites for transactions, it feels most relevant in India, where so much of fashion's foundation is intricate handwork, technique and generational—as well as regional—expertise. The store is where this foundation becomes truly intelligible; the delicacy of chikankari or the raised relief of zari can rarely be understood through an image alone. Gupta says, "A physical store allows for something that digital can never fully replicate—that is, presence. It allows clients to slow down, to feel the weight of a fabric, to understand proportion, to engage with craftsmanship."

Chhabra echoes this sentiment. "Luxury is deeply tied to human interaction," he says. "The physical store allows for a slower, more immersive engagement, where stories are shared, textures are explored and relationships are built. In that sense, reinvention is essential."

RAW MANGO.

AD

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HOMES IN THE WORLD

PHOTO: JIGNESH JHAVERI/*AD* INDIA

More than words

Style choices may be limited for those with disabilities, but fashion still carries the same codes—of self-expression and individuality. By AVANI THAKKAR.

Safely tucked away in my nani's cupboard is a rani-pink cotton midi-dress with a billowy fit and pleats that have softened in the absence of its wearer. It was dear to her first-born—my maasi—who passed away in 2019, just shy of her 45th birthday. Despite being unable to speak and carry out basic cognitive tasks due to a developmental disability, Tinu maasi relished the act of dressing up and was meticulous about her clothes. Having spent the majority of my summer vacations with her and my maternal grandparents in Gujarat, I was privy to her wardrobe, stacked exclusively with round-neck midi-dresses in every sprightly colour combination imaginable. These were custom-made by the local tailor, who accounted for her unique body proportions because ready-made garments failed her.

If maasi wasn't in the mood to wear her no-frills 'home' dress on a Monday morning and wanted to lounge in one of the fancy, velvet ones that my nani—her primary caretaker—had reserved for special occasions, she would tug at it until she got her way.

The entire house, and even unsuspecting guests, would know when maasi was sporting a new dress. There was no need for words; she'd just clutch her pleats and make intense eye contact, as if to ask "How do I look?" Compliments were met with a hearty laugh and playful hand gestures—her way of saying thank you.

Sunglasses and hats were not safe in her vicinity. She was infamous for sneaking up on you, swiping them and plonking them on herself. During winter, sweaters and beanies entered Tinu maasi's list of prized possessions—more things to choose from. When my great-grandfather brought her a shawl embroidered with pink roses from Rishikesh, she refused to part with it even when the season changed.

She may not have been able to read, count or take a shower by herself, but she had a remarkable ability to discern new versus old and independently choose her clothes every morning. She loved colours—pink and yellow were her favourites. All of this was a quiet assertion of autonomy, says rehabilitation psychologist Maya Chandrashekaran, where making the choice of what to wear brought with it a sense of ownership that helped her feel emotionally grounded.

Curious to understand how selfhood surfaces through these narrow openings that fashion affords, I spoke with the caregivers of other adults with developmental disabilities.

Muneer Rafi, a 33-year-old based in Kolkata, lacks verbal skills and has limited cognition, but is expressive in his own way when it comes to clothing, his ammi, Bushra Noorin, tells me. He immediately recognises if she is wearing her 'going-out' clothes, jumping at any opportunity to change into his favourite elastic-banded jeans and tag along. A core part of his routine is attending a school for those with special needs, for which he carefully lays out his uniform—a red checked half-sleeve shirt and khaki pants—every night in quiet anticipation.

"Without words, clothing helps the body to understand context and make sense of time. Especially for these individuals, it is an important visual cue for what activity is coming next," says fashion psychologist Prarthana Sabharwal.

Sometimes it also speaks to their need for control and reassurance, like in the case of Jaya Chandurkar's son Yash, who lives with Williams Syndrome. Yash doesn't have strong preferences, but "there can't be a broken stitch, mark or even a tiny tear" on his clothing, says his mother. According to Chandrashekaran, this boils down to sensory sensitivity where even small changes in fabric like its weight or pressure can affect the wearer's mood and comfort.

Due to Yash's motor difficulties, anything with buttons or laces is impractical, making him a Crocs devotee. "For the longest time, I didn't buy him a watch because he doesn't see time, but he was very adamant about getting one and now wears it everywhere." If you think about it, his desire for a watch for its look over functionality isn't that different to the rest of us splurging on minuscule bags that hold nothing, or a coat that looks good even if it isn't warm.

In Sydney, Swarnaa Rajalingam, has spent years attuning to the non-verbal cues of her thambi (younger brother in Tamil) Athavan, whose cerebral palsy diagnosis requires extra attention paid to clothing. "He has some vision impairment, but experts have told us that the colour red stands out to him and we've also noticed he is more engaged when wearing vibrant hues."

> 'Fashion' or getting dressed is not just about looking presentable, it also epitomises the joy of exercising preferences, something many of us take for granted

Psychologically, there is a reason why both Athavan and my maasi leant towards reds and pinks compared to neutral tones. As Sabharwal explains, "Bright colours are emotionally clear—easier to see and feel. When cognition is limited, the brain responds more strongly to bold signals and vivid colours evoke clarity."

But, too many visual inputs can be chaotic. "Athavan doesn't like too many patterns because it's noisy and a lot to process, which hinders his self-regulation. If he's not happy in his clothes, he will look at the ground or do repeated hand motions in the air," Rajalingam explains. "For others, clothing can be about aesthetics but for people with disabilities, it's about creating a soothing environment. Thambi loves being in his pyjamas because it means he's home and done being outside; he's in his comfort zone."

What pyjamas are to Athavan is what Crocs are to Yash, elastic jeans are to Muneer and a new dress was to my maasi—each item anchoring them to an identity that the world dismisses as 'dependent' or incapable of existing as separate from their caregiver.

To them, 'fashion' or getting dressed is not just about looking presentable, it also epitomises the joy of exercising preferences, something many of us take for granted.

Sometimes, when I'm preparing for a trip, a fond memory resurfaces: of how Tinu maasi would toss a bunch of her favourite dresses on top of our suitcase as my mother and I prepared to fly back home at the end of summer break—her not-so-subtle way of insisting she come along. It's why I still make sure to pack the brightest clothes I own, no matter the destination. Pink dresses get bonus points, of course.

SAHIL BEHAL.

Metal of honour

Trying to embroider iron might sound like a Sisyphean endeavour, but Richa Arya keeps at it to remind herself of the injustices the women in her hometown endure. By AVANTIKA SHANKAR.

Eight years ago, when Richa Arya tried to make her first metal sculpture—a school uniform constructed from tin—she cut herself quite badly. Still, it was nothing compared to how deep the sting of helplessness pierced when her family elders kept trying to marry her off instead of acknowledging her aptitude for art. Her strongest pillar of support was her mother, who tried to support her daughter to the best of her ability but was overruled. In a happy plot twist, however, a GST officer whom her family coerced her into meeting as a potential husband ended up offering her advice on how to attain financial independence so she could fend off the pressure to get married once and for all.

"Since then, I haven't taken a single rupee from my family," Arya shared from her studio in Kaladham, an art colony in Greater Noida, where she had just finished creating a blouse made out of bronze for India Art Fair. Like she did with previous editions of the blouse, including 2023's iron, brass and paper *The Last Season* and 2024's brass and bronze *Handmade*, the 29-year-old artist embroidered the hard metal with wire so assiduously that it looked like real thread. Today, she no longer sustains the kind of injuries she used to when she was just starting out, but back then, her bloodstained hands were a testament to the despair she felt. "I would keep bandaging my fingers and continue, because at the time, my main focus was to make a school uniform. I knew so many girls around me who had been denied an education. For them, a school uniform was only a dream. I wanted to express that."

It's a dream that the sculptor is all too familiar with. Born into a conservative joint family in Samalkha, a small town in Haryana, Arya grew up in a community where early marriage was the norm and the only acceptable career path for women was teaching. She wasn't academically gifted ("I was always either drawing, painting or making animals out of papier-mâché and clay"), nor was she particularly social, so in sixth grade, her family sent her to an Arya Samaj gurukul in the Jind district, hoping that the rigid structure would coax her out of her shell. It backfired, and by the time she'd matriculated, she was so

MEMORY KEEPER Threads of Survival (2025) is Arya's homage to the women artisans of her hometown, whom the fast-fashion industry exploits but refuses to acknowledge.

used to the simple brahmachari way of life that she planned to stay there for good. "There was no TV or any other kind of entertainment, so I kept making art." Her parents brought her back home to complete grades 11 and 12, then immediately began pressuring her to get married.

As luck would have it, Arya's grade 12 art teacher informed her parents that she could—and indeed, should—apply for a bachelor's in fine art. While the elders of her family remained wary, her cousin brought home an application form and helped her secretly apply. By the time she was invited to give the entrance exam, her mother had warmed up to the idea enough to accompany her, and when she got into Kurukshetra University's Sculpture programme in 2018, her father managed to convince his brothers to let her enrol. "Even that was a struggle—they wanted me to pursue painting or applied art, something that would allow me to work indoors. They were worried that being a sculptor meant working on the street."

> "[As a child,] I was always either drawing, painting or making animals out of papier-mâché and clay"

As the pressure from her family mounted, so, too, did her systems of support. Arya connected with fellow artist Deepak Kumar—now her partner—and moved with him to Kaladham, where she could pay subsidised rent and focus on securing her master's degree. When the pandemic upended any hope of a final-year showcase at the College of Art, Delhi, she took it upon herself to apply for every open call she could find, eventually securing a solo show alongside a ₹30,000 grant by the Raza Foundation. More shows and residencies followed, including a spot in Somaiya Vidyavihar University's Immerse fellowship in Mumbai and the Khoj Peers and Serendipity Arts residencies, both in Delhi.

She may have wriggled free of the ties that once bound her to tradition, but Arya has never forgotten her roots or taken for granted that her story is not as common as it should be. Through her practice, she remains committed to championing the women artisans who've inspired her and bringing their stories to fast fashion–consuming urbanites who need to hear them: the neighbouring city of Panipat has become infamous as the cast-off capital of the world, with over 20,000 recycling units processing over a million tonnes of textile waste annually and releasing uncountable air and water toxins in the process. The artist often calls in favours from friends of friends to document the stories of the women working in these factories, many of whom are forced to not only breathe toxic levels of fabric particles every day and constantly cut themselves on the rudimentary tools given to them, but also bring their children to work and expose them to the pollution due to

"[My family] wanted me to pursue painting or applied art, something that would allow me to work indoors. They were worried that being a sculptor meant working on the street"

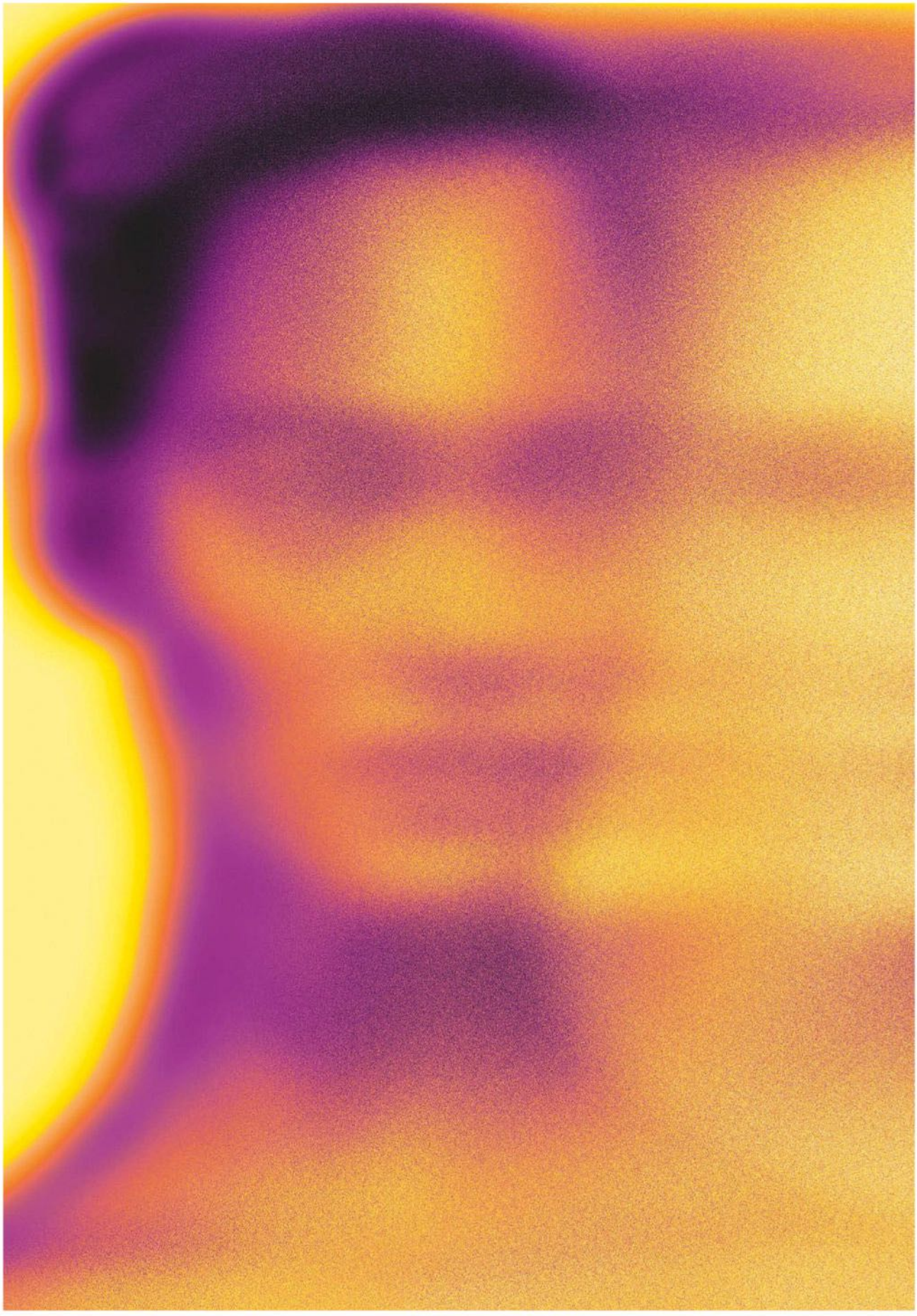
a lack of childcare facilities in the area. "They tell me, 'Yeh kaam bali maangta hai' (This work demands blood)," said Arya, showing me her studio walls in Kaladham that are now lined with photographs she has taken during her site visits.

She's careful, however, not to present these women as victims; instead, she credits them as sources of inspiration for her practice. Many of her sculptures, like 2023's *Threaded Lives* or 2024's *Boundary Crossing*, feature them at work, brows furrowed, eyes defiant, the patterns on their clothes fading. Her blouse series, in fact, was inspired by a woman in Samalkha who used to sew for a living and had hung a 'sample blouse' outside her house. "It had grown dirty and faded over the years, but to me, it said so much about her life." As Panipat grapples with the bleak reality of textile recycling, the artist's work draws attention to the resilience of the women whom the fast-fashion industry refuses to acknowledge. In many ways, it also reflects her own journey as she continues her ascent in the art world, which is slowly but surely extending meaningful support to the women artists who deserve to be on an equal footing with their male counterparts. "Yes, there's still pressure to get married," Arya reminded me. "But other than that, life is good."

MADE OF METTLE
For *Skin Cover* (2020), Arya renders an item of clothing as a metal artwork to demonstrate the hardships faced by the women of Samalkha, her hometown in Haryana. She made a similar sculpture for her latest showcase at India Art Fair, where she was represented by Exhibit320.

MADHAV MATHUR (RICHA ARYA).


Condé Nast
Traveller
THE LAST WORD IN TRAVEL
PHOTO: ERRIKOS ANDREOU/CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER INDIA



RADHIKA TRIVEDI.

Blank space

When her eyes are open, it's spotless vision. When they're closed, it's abject darkness. SADAF SHAIKH thought this was everyone's story—until she realised she was missing a crucial device in her creative toolkit.

My art teacher in school despised me. Not only was I a rabble-rousing backbencher, but I was also exceptionally awful at sketching. The fruits in my still life always looked like they had been sprayed with too much pesticide. My landscapes were a hodophile's nightmare. "Close your eyes and visualise an apple," Mrs Vesvikar would bellow at me. I would make a show of shutting my eyes…

…And see the same thing I view in my mind's eye 21 years later. Darkness. Not the headed-towards-apocalypse, doomed-to-die-alone darkness. I mean absolute visual absence. Like a light switch going off in your head. Do I know what an apple looks like? Of course. Can I describe it? Yes, from my memories of having seen different varieties throughout my life. Does a shiny red fruit appear in my mind when somebody says the word 'apple'? No. I thought everyone visualised things the same way until five months ago, when my colleagues took the 'red apple test' and reported actually seeing one in some form or the other when they shut their eyes.

I took my broken brain to Google for answers and was diagnosed with aphantasia—a condition that restricts the mind's ability to form mental images, affecting 3.9 per cent of the global population. When they take the 'red apple test', 96.1 per cent of people can conjure up some version of an apple on a scale of one to four, one being the most vivid (also: hyperphantasia) and four being a hazy outline. Fives, like me, are the have-nots; those who go looking for cues in the crevices of their brains only to come up against barricades prohibiting further access.

Many things have started to make sense since my aphantasia diagnosis. Like why I keep getting lost in streets I've walked through dozens of times (my brain won't register geographical landmarks); why I can't conjure up my husband's face unless I'm looking at it (he continues to be gobsmacked and mildly offended by this); why I hated reading *The Lord of the Rings* even though I can quote the movies in my sleep (all of JRR Tolkien's painstaking worldbuilding is lost on me).

More than anything, this 'imageless thinking' has made me suspicious of my own mind. Where my brain once felt like a collaborator—earning me good grades, helping me pivot to my dream career, equipping me with the skills required to level up—it now feels like a crook determined to cheat me out of precious memories. I love how my father's nose twitches when I catch him in a lie but having aphantasia prevents my brain from stashing this visual away for a rainy day. How do I hold on to the faces of friends who only stuck around for a few seasons but left indelible footprints on my heart? What is the point of trekking 13 kilometres to log a beautiful sunrise into a mental cache that my mind will clear almost immediately?

I used to be one of those people whose phones remained in their pocket for the entire duration of a meal or concert, too busy living in the moment to capture it on camera for posterity. Post-aphantasia discovery, my phone is ready to spring into action without occasion, eager to document every cat I come across on the road, every leaf that sprouts out of a crack in a wall, every nap my niece takes, every mind-boggling slogan plastered below a motorcycle's tail-light. I've resumed logging the books I start on my Goodreads profile. One of the entries on my Notes app has over 500 new words I've picked up, with their descriptions mentioned alongside. I'm not sure how often I will return to these mnemonic totems, but it helps to know that they are there, ready to step in with visual assistance when my memory fails me. Perhaps that is why 'your iCloud storage is full' notifications make me want to aggressively purchase more space on my smartphone. After all, how much of myself would I be able to salvage if my second brain also abandoned me?

Where my brain once felt like a collaborator—earning me good grades and helping me pivot to my dream career—it now feels like a crook determined to cheat me out of precious memories

For years now, I've been toying with the idea of writing fiction but if I can't imagine what Middle-earth looks like, maybe I have no business creating my own universe. "It can be challenging for aphantasics to fully imagine something or empathise with someone because images and emotion go together," says Tanya Vasunia, a researcher and psychologist. "The beautiful part though," she adds, "is that the mind naturally develops tools to bypass that limitation." Syed Kazmi, a 3D artist and fellow aphantasic, is proof. "I've developed a conceptual imagination instead of a visual imagination," he explains. "I simply start working on something using briefs, references and basic concepts till something starts emerging in front of my eyes. It's the 'getting started' that is usually the hardest part." Meanwhile, I've already started showing myself more grace. I am learning to feel less embarrassed about sticking out my fingers to count instead of struggling with mental math. Maybe my faulty sense of direction will lead me to a hole-in-the-wall diner which makes the best triple schezwan fried rice. If Disney animator Glen Keane could conceive characters like Ariel, Tarzan and Alladin despite his aphantasia, maybe there's hope for me too. In which case, Mrs Vesvikar, could I request a do-over?

Return of the fashion nerd

For an audience hungry for IYKYK nuggets, Matthieu Blazy serves up an endless buffet. By ROCHELLE PINTO.

FRESH START
This page: Bhavitha Mandava, the first Indian model to open a Chanel show. *Opposite page:* Created for the show, *La Gazette* detailed the work of the various métiers the maison works with.

The first time I realised my partner was 'The One' was a moment so deceptively ordinary, you might actually roll your eyes upon reading this. We were exiting my apartment building in the afternoon, when he doubled back and handed me his sunglasses. "It's very bright, you'll get a headache," he said. A man's act of remembering a throwaway detail shared casually months ago. A woman's surprise at being seen and cared for in that wholly quotidian, impossibly real way. When I told my partner it was the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for me, he did actually roll his eyes. When I recounted the incident to my best friend, she understood immediately.

Women are so used to shrinking themselves—in public, at the workplace, in marriages, at the gym—that when we are seen and remembered, strange quirks, weird medical conditions and all, well… we fall in love.

Matthieu Blazy understands this simple truth that evades so many others of his sex. For Chanel's celebrated Métiers d'art 2026 show last December, the house's new creative director did not fly his audience to a tropical island or plop a Swedish iceberg (RIP Karl Lagerfeld) in the centre of the runway. Blazy made them schlep down to an unused subway station in New York. Hardly the epitome of glamour. Then, as a train rolled in and a cast of characters poured out in every direction, he forced us to look at, and fall for, the details like only a true fashion nerd can.

The show made it clear that Blazy hadn't just rabbit-holed into the archives. He'd also invested time in getting to know Coco Chanel, the woman. Everywhere you looked, there were cheeky references to her life, waiting to be identified. A red scarf slung low across the hips of a black co-ord set, styled like Mademoiselle herself. A tweed suit woven to look like leopard print, an ethical homage to her love for fur. A leather jacket hand-painted with 'Tonight or Never', recalling the 1931 film that marked Chanel's debut as a Hollywood costume stylist. Then, the vocabulary expanded. The fashion nerd flexed. Intermingled with allusions to his chosen ancestor were everyday women Chanel might have met on her pit stop in New York. The off-duty showgirl waltzing home from Broadway, feathered fan in hand. The Upper East Side cat lady. The mob boss, dressed to kill.

The end result felt cinematic to Margaret Zhang, filmmaker and the former head of editorial content at *Vogue* China. Though we watched the same show, she was seated further down the subway platform than me, giving her a completely different vantage point of the chaotic choreography. Zhang found Blazy's approach to be more like a film director's, "unafraid of people moving in cycles as opposed to bodies moving through a sterile space". She points to the mutual creative respect Blazy has for his

CHANEL.

Blazy's democratic approach, one where the magic of the métiers is laid out on the table to be deduced and dissected, is shaking up the old guard but magnetising the next generation

Intermingled with allusions to his chosen ancestor were everyday women Coco Chanel might have met on her pit stop in New York

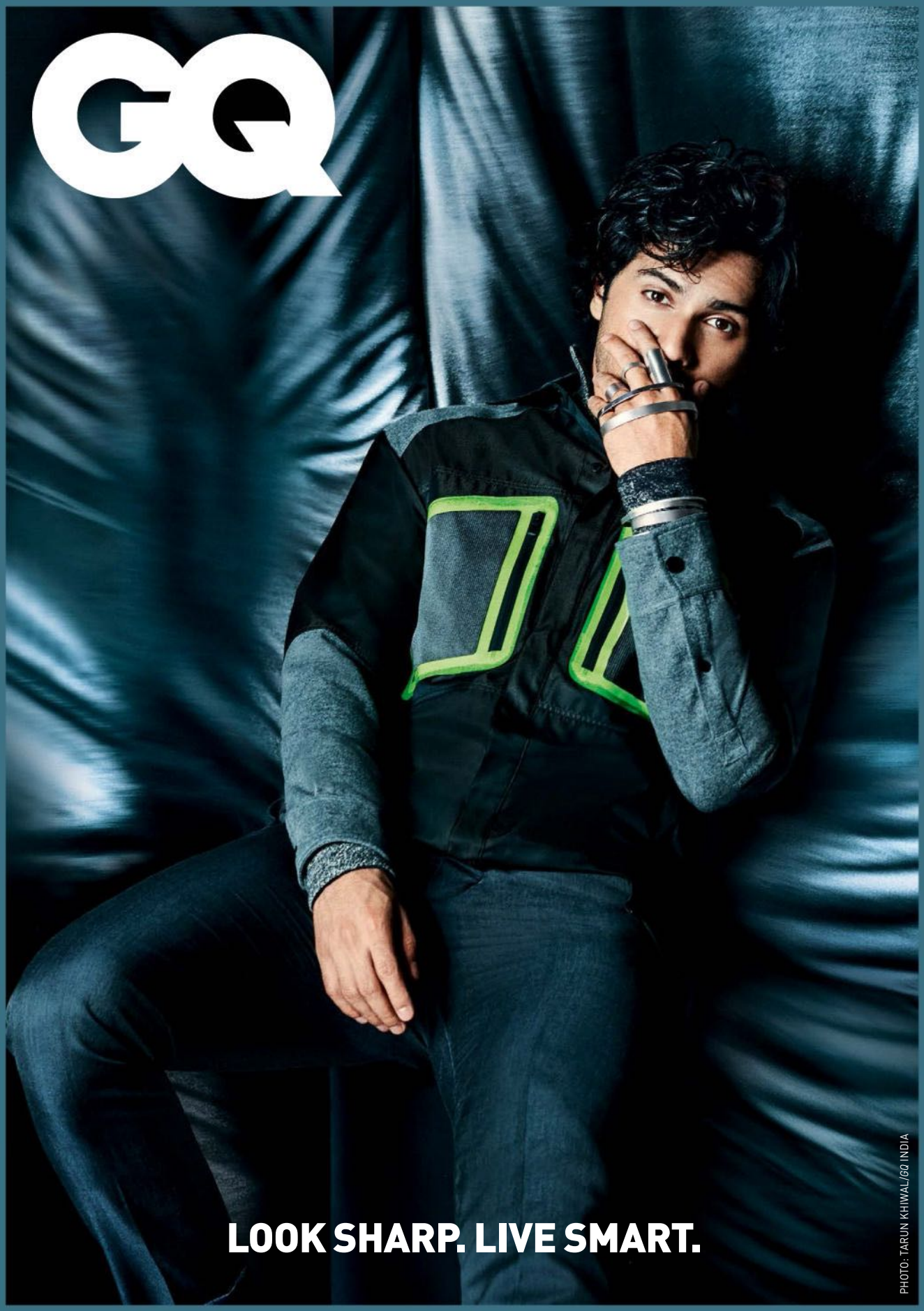
audience: "He is doing the work but he's also asking us to do the work rather than just telling us exactly what he's thinking. It takes confidence to invite people in, to allow for scrutiny like that and it's such a luxury to be trusted as an audience."

Scrutiny of the microscopic kind is part of the package at a house like Chanel. It's the double-edged sword that Sabyasachi Mukherjee knows intimately—his own maison boasts an equally loyal and opinionated following. Also a fashion nerd, the Indian couturier made the effort to attend Blazy's sophomore effort in New York to see the vision for himself. Mukherjee notes that the industry is tentatively moving out of a phase of "corporate designers" to embrace the "young and idealistic" again, powered by a new-found confidence that the post-digital world has given the consumer. "That's why personal style has come back, why research and nerdism is coming back," he explains. Brands can no longer prey on people's insecurities to sell a prohibitively expensive handbag, the craft has to speak for itself. Blazy's democratic approach, one where the magic of the métiers is laid out on the table to be deduced and dissected, is shaking up the old guard but magnetising the next generation. A necessary reinvention to survive when our very understanding of luxury is being questioned.

"For too long, men in suits were running fashion," says Mukherjee. "But you can't capture human desire or imagination on an excel sheet."

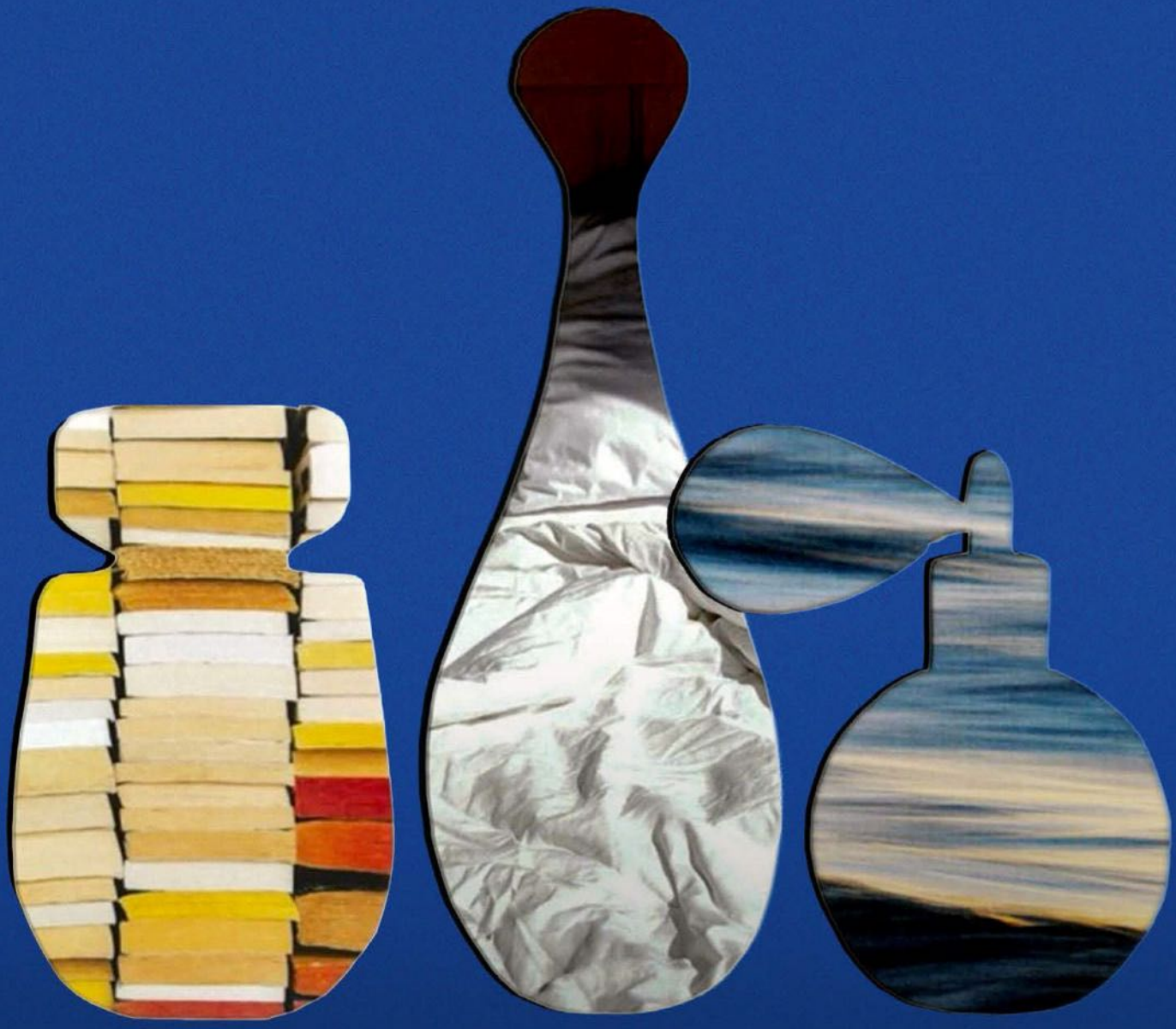
PAST PERFECT
The show was peppered with references, like Coco Chanel styling her blouse with earrings.

CHANEL. BORIS LIPNITZKI (COCO CHANEL).


GQ
LOOK SHARP. LIVE SMART.
PHOTO: TARUN KHIWAL/GQ INDIA

Bottled-up feelings

Today's most evocative fragrances smell like life's most ordinary, unremarkable moments. By SIYA BHAMBWANI.



SHEEL KOTHARI.

By the time Krishna Malani, a Mumbai-based architect, reaches her third site visit of the day, her favourite fragrance, Chai de Robert Piguet, has morphed into comfort. What lingers, she says, smells "the way my mother's kitchen felt at five in the evening". Tea leaves. Cardamom in the air. Something to cut through all the site noise. "It keeps me sane when everything else is concrete and dust."

For a growing number of people, fragrances are shifting from a declaration of who you are to holding onto how something once felt—or how you want to feel again. In Barcelona, financial analyst Tina Bathija reaches for Massimo Dutti's Solar Linen, a dry, sun-warmed fragrance, on days filled with review calls. "It smells like sheets drying on my grandmother's terrace back home," she says. "I might be buried in spreadsheets but my brain gets a tiny reminder that there's life outside the laptop."

What we are seeing is not nostalgia for its own sake, but a search for relief. It's worth asking: are we chasing the past or are we simply trying to pause the churn of adult life without opting out of it entirely?

Naturally, perfumers have begun to build around this instinct, around memories so precise they feel almost current. Maison Margiela's Replica line, launched in the 2010s, was one of the first to embrace the fact that our best memories are almost never red-carpet moments. Lazy Sunday Morning does not promise seduction. It smells like clean cotton sheets, warm skin and the blissful weightlessness of doing nothing in a freshly made bed. By the Fireplace is just as specific: it opens with clove and pink pepper, then moves into roasted chestnut over a base of vanilla and balsamic wood, so you get the feeling of thawing out by a cabin fire after the party is over rather than standing in the middle of it.

What we are seeing is not nostalgia for its own sake, but a search for relief. It's worth asking: are we chasing the past or are we simply trying to pause the churn of adult life without opting out of it entirely?

In Commodity's Book, airy eucalyptus and bergamot give way to cypress and cedar, anchored by sandalwood, amber and musk. Together, they create the impression of dry pages, pencil shavings and polished shelves. Master perfumer Ketrin Leka describes it as a return to her childhood libraries, "turning the pages and breathing in the smell of dry paper mingling with open air". It resonates because it's not about reading as an activity, but about the emotional safety those spaces once provided.

Some fragrances push even further into emotional specificity. Demeter Fragrance Library's Funeral Home, built on lilies, carnations, polished wood and a faint waxy note, sounds unsettling on paper. It should not work. Yet if you have ever sat in a flower-heavy parlour, a prayer hall or a quiet living room where the air was thick, it lands with eerie accuracy, pulling up a memory you did not know you had stored—the strange stillness of grief and the hum of community around it, where comfort can exist even in the worst possible moment.

Serge Lutens's Jeux de Peau goes straight for breakfast: warm bread, jam on toast, the aroma that wafts out when you open the door to your favourite bakery. Meanwhile, Ormaie's 28° encompasses the sensation of standing in a square of sunlight at exactly that temperature and creates the impression of crisp linen, sun lotion and the balmy warmth of air that has just tipped into summer. "[It] is the smell of holidays," says Baptiste Bouygues, cofounder of Ormaie. "It's a walk in the south of France, where a woman passes by you with a whiff of monoi (a flowery Tahitian oil) in her hair."

Indian perfumery, though, has always been fluent in the poetry of ordinary life. Long before 'mundane fragrances' became a category, attarwalas were distilling daily life into oil—conjuring temple courtyards at dusk decorated with jasmine garlands, using rose and kewra to make rooms feel built for lingering. Even today, this sensibility survives in attar oils like Ajmal's Colaba Mukhallat and Kandeel, distilled with rose, saffron, sandalwood and resinous woods to evoke the feeling of being somewhere known. "The average person is no longer seeking fragrance solely as spectacle or status, but as grounding. These scents can reset our emotional state completely," says Amandine Nikuze, vice president of perfumery at Ajmal Perfumes.

Our appetite for small relief has clearly grown. "The idea of everyday 'glimmers'—tiny moments where joy can seep in—has become more valuable," says Manan Gandhi, founder of Bombay Perfumery and Zerozero essential oils, which is why these scents can offer peace and emotional intelligence in an increasingly hectic life. In other words, our signature scent has turned into something we reach for to steady the day, not simply to style it.

The desire to participate rather than simply consume has also grown. In January, author Twinkle Khanna revealed she had spent her birthday at a perfume museum in Morocco, sniffing through glass bottles of vetiver, caramel, oud and amber before blending her own scent called Birthday Note. Scents carry memories, she said, and this one will follow her into airports, on old sweaters and on days when she will want to remember that birthday in Marrakesh.

A decade ago, this sort of perfumery might have felt too niche to last. It did not fit the language of aspiration that you'd associate with luxury perfumery. But now it sits comfortably in a culture that is equal parts material, mechanical and sentimental. We document our emotions in apps, save videos that remind us of childhood and screenshot posts because they recall that summer in 2014 when Tumblr felt like a world of its own. The gap between the life we live and the life we imagine has widened. And fragrance has become one of the few ways to bridge it.

ME BEFORE YOU
New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani and his illustrator-animator-ceramicist wife Rama Duwaji at City Hall on their wedding day.

Aloof wife autumn

Once occupying the highest rung in the social pecking order, the WAG is now dead, laid to rest by the aloof wife. SAACHI GUPTA questions whether they are detached or simply independent.

Nineties' kids had the Rachel: Jennifer Aniston's choppy, shoulder-length haircut from *Friends*. Today, we have the Rama: somewhere between a bob and a pixie, belonging to illustrator, animator and ceramicist Rama Duwaji, wife of New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani. The internet is besotted with Duwaji. Her edgy black outfits are representation for 'weird art girls'; her bombastic side-eye at Mamdani's inauguration ceremony is the cherry on top of a great start to the year. She skips her husband's campaign event to teach a ceramics class, barely mentions him on her Instagram *and* cuts her own bangs? Conservatives clutch their pearls in horror, American newspapers derisively refer to her as an 'aloof wife'. To social media users, this means infinite aura points. #AloofWifeAutumn starts trending across platforms, hundreds of comments under Duwaji's posts left by users *outside* NYC proclaim, 'MY first lady'. In a viral reel, author Caro Claire Burke points out how Duwaji is "more independent and has retained more of her own self, her own identity than virtually any political wife that we have had in American history".

In an age where it is embarrassing to even have a boyfriend, being married is positively mortifying. More so, if you morph and mould your life to fit your partner's

In an age where it is embarrassing to even have a boyfriend, being married is positively mortifying. More so, if you morph and mould your life to fit your partner's. If—like Kareena Kapoor Khan in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*—you go from a sassy, confident Poo in (gasp) backless tops to a blushing, eyelash-batting Pooja suddenly draped in saris and salwar kurtas. Or God forbid, you become known as a WAG, the early 2000s acronym coined in the UK to describe 'wives and girlfriends' of high-profile sportsmen. In their oversized sunglasses and teeny-tiny shorts, It girls Victoria Beckham (the OG WAG), Coleen Rooney and Cheryl Cole were everywhere. Hounded by the paps, featured in Marc Jacobs campaigns, cheering on in the bleachers. Women adjacent to sportsmen have always been shiny accessories who must dazzle prettily, yes, but never take the spotlight off their partners with any real accomplishments. Perhaps it's why even Taylor Swift felt compelled to dismiss her own career in a singsong voice when asked why she doesn't perform at the Super Bowl. "Can you imagine if he [Travis Kelce] is out there every single week putting his life on the line doing this very dangerous, very high-pressure, very high-intensity sport," she giggled to Jimmy Fallon when she appeared on *The Tonight Show* in October last year, "and I'm like, 'I wonder what my choreo should be.'"

But *of course*, Kelce is putting his life on the line by… playing American football and Swift's expansive catalogue of albums, which has shaped female discourse around the world, is trivial in comparison. *Of course*, Anushka Sharma and Sharmila Tagore were to be blamed for their husbands' poor performances on the field, relentlessly attacked on the internet, even by Tagore's own father, for being 'distracting'. But WAGs like Beckham, who were used to being dismissed as frivolous gold-diggers by the media, took it on the chin, capitalising on the attention to build personal brands long before the age of the influencer. So much so that a 2009 survey found that 60 per cent of UK women aged 21 to 25 aspired to become WAGs. Presumably, it wasn't embarrassing to have a boyfriend then.

We are now living in a post-Greta-Gerwig-*Barbie* world where insecure men are considered icky. In their stead have risen men like Mamdani, alongside actors Riz Ahmed and George Clooney, who never miss out on the opportunity to fangirl over their wives in public. "Amal is a human rights lawyer who worked on the Enron case, an advisor to Kofi Annan on Syria and was appointed to a three-person commission investigating rules of war violations in the Gaza Strip," Tina Fey stated while hosting the 2015 Golden Globes. "So tonight, her *husband* is getting a lifetime achievement award." Clooney laughed the loudest in the audience. Ahmed pauses on the Oscar red carpet to fix his bestselling author wife Fatima Farheen Mirza's hair. Kohli races

KARA McCURDY.

TILTED SCALES
An international human rights lawyer, Amal Clooney's work has impacted global policy and held regimes accountable for their actions.

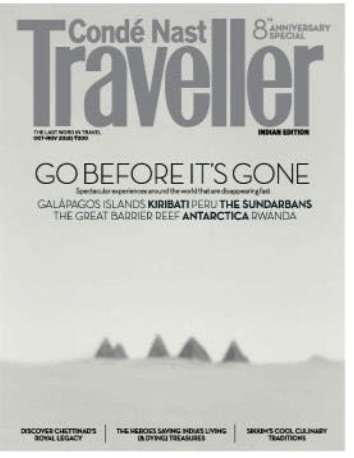
to embrace a teary Sharma after winning his matches, calls her his 'lucky charm' and repeatedly condemns trolls for attacking her. Mamdani goes pink as he gushes over Duwaji in interviews, revealing that he's planning on getting allergy shots so he and his wife can adopt cats together. "Always trust a man with a cool wife," reads a comment under one of Duwaji's posts.

Much of the real world, however, has been slow on the uptick, continuing to undermine the wives of famous men as vacuous, pretty little things. This idea is threatened when these women also turn out to be intelligent. Society still struggles to figure out what to do with a thinking WAG. "If she isn't conventionally beautiful, then she can think for herself because she is not desired," explains poet and writer Dr Meena Kandasamy. "So, she can be this strange creature, an outcast. But if she is pretty and also intelligent, they cannot dismiss her as easily. It upsets the system designed to insist that women can only have one of the two."

Yet, as the label of WAG expands to partners of men in politics, entertainment, tech and beyond, women refuse to remain ornamental, to succumb to the pretty-but-dumb stereotype, to play the role of supporting characters spurring their famous husbands on from the sidelines. Instead, they carve out their own identities in both private and public spheres. Kiran Rao, who directed the critically acclaimed *Dhobi Ghat* and *Laapataa Ladies*, spoke about how marrying someone famous like Aamir Khan inevitably led to a certain loss of identity that she's since had to rebuild. "He has a hand in my life," she told Kareena Kapoor Khan on an episode of *What Women Want* in October 2024, "but for others to attribute my accomplishments solely to him is a… [*She trails off, then continues.*] I think a lot of women are accustomed to that happening to them."

Decentring her husband is ultimately what made Victoria Beckham cool again. The pictures from her 2008 Marc Jacobs campaign, tumbling in and out of giant shopping bags, now horrify her. "It was very much poking fun at me. No one took me seriously," she confesses in her 2025 Netflix documentary. Thus followed her decision to "kill the WAG": rebrand herself from a footballer's wife to a fashion designer with credibility. This is something that comes intuitively to today's It girls, who are not merely wives-and-girlfriends but artists, bestselling novelists and human rights lawyers. Their Instagram presence has little trace of their partners. They have full lives outside of their relationships. And most importantly? They remain aloof, always.

GETTY IMAGES.



Condé Nast Traveller

THE LAST WORD IN TRAVEL

Peak condition

Twenty-five years since releasing their first album and taking their virtual band all over the world, Gorillaz co-creators Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett have finally dropped anchor in India. Now, their souls are permanently moored. By SADAF SHAIKH.

Anything could happen to 2-D, Murdoc, Noodle and Russel in the Gorillaz universe. They could be driving through a desert and suddenly find themselves in a high-speed car chase with Bruce Willis hunting them on behalf of a gang of pirates. Jack Black could be jamming on a guitar in Venice Beach, California, with 2-D skating in the background before being rudely tripped by Russel. Green-faced Murdoc could go to jail for smuggling drugs and, for a while, be replaced in the band with Ace, the Gangreen Gang hoodlum from *The Powerpuff Girls*.

When you love Gorillaz, you become invested in the character lore too. It's almost like a movie franchise comes to life with each album release. Everything is connected. So when the animated members of the virtual band fled to Mumbai with fake passports after escaping the Forever Cult and subsequent arrest, fans immediately began speculating whether their next chapter would unfold in India.

Indeed, it did. Early sketches for *The Mountain* show the quartet inside local trains in Jaipur, on the backs of motorcycles in Haryana, in front of ashrams in Varanasi, rocking mundus and wearing bindis. There's something mystical about them now. The music, too, seems divinely charged, featuring contributions from Asha Bhosle, Asha Puthli, Ajay Prasanna and others. The Gorillaz co-creators, musician Damon Albarn and artist Jamie Hewlett, themselves seem transformed when they speak about the album, India and death, with 2-D, Murdoc, Noodle, Russel and one very special collaborator chiming in.

***Vogue* India:** *The Mountain* is the title of the album as well as the first song on it. Were you inspired by an actual mountain or a metaphorical one?

Damon Albarn: On our first trip to India, we went to Fort Amer in Jaipur and it was a magical moment for us. The music emanated from there, so we named the album *The Mountain*. But it's also a mountain we visited in Western China years ago, which was so high that you couldn't even light a match at the top.

Jamie Hewlett: There was a temple on top with Buddhist monks. You could stand at the edge and look down at the clouds. I was trying to light a cigarette but it just wouldn't spark.

DA: And then, during the descent, I got lost.

JH: Damon got lost in 500, no, 5,000 square miles of forest. And it was getting dark.

CROWD CONTROL
From left: Murdoc, Russel, 2-D and Noodle hang out with Jea Band in Jaipur while recording *The Mountain*.

COURTESY OF GORILLAZ.

"The mathematics of driving around India is fascinating. A friend was driving me around Jaipur and I was so impressed that no one was crashing into each other" —JAMIE HEWLETT

DA: I ended up on a road and got picked up by a guy on a scooter. He then took me up another mountain, stopped with me on the back and got into a domestic row on the phone for half an hour. At which point, I thought I may never actually return to civilisation. I was convinced it was the end. Yeah, we've had some lovely experiences on mountains so it was easy for us to rally around that image.

***Vogue* India:** What did India *feel* like for you? I ask this because many come here in search of the 'meaning of life' and don't always find it. Did you feel like you found it?

JH: I didn't go looking for it and certainly didn't find it in the ways it was presented to us or the average tourist visiting India. We didn't fall for any 'gurus', although we would've loved to meet a real sadhu. I know the ones outside our hotel in Varanasi weren't real because they'd… [*Hewlett points to the sky, then extends an open palm as if asking for money.*] Instead, I found meaning in some of the people we travelled with who put up with us for weeks on end and were so generous with their time.

DA: One of our most profound experiences was eating dal and chapati (in a langar) with thousands of people at the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Russel: India reminds you that power isn't just strength; it's thought, patience and madness all at once.

***Vogue* India:** As ever, a man of few words, Russel. Say, 2-D, didn't you go to a silent retreat in the Himalayas 10 years ago to prepare for a reconciliation with Murdoc? Were you successful?

2-D: I'm good at forgiving and especially forgetting because of all my concussions over the years. What was the question again? Oh yeah, Murdoc. We've become a lot closer on this trip to Jaipur. He forgot his sleeping bag so we had to share mine.

***Vogue* India:** I'm happy for you both. Damon, Jamie, are there any specific sights from your time in India that are seared into your brain?

JH: The mathematics of driving around India is fascinating. A friend was driving me around Jaipur and I was so impressed that no one was crashing into each other. He said, "I can drive in Jaipur without even thinking, but if I go to Mumbai, I can't do it." There's a different rhythm to the driving in each city, right? You kind of understand where you're all going to turn and nobody crashes?

***Vogue* India:** We do crash; we just get right back up and continue on our way.

JH: That's one of the wonderful mysteries I'd like to keep a mystery. So don't tell me you crash. Tell me you never crash.

***Vogue* India:** We never crash, Jamie. Damon, I heard the faint strain of a roadside band playing in the background at the end of 'The Plastic Guru'. Did you find India sonically intense?

DA: Yes. I loved the early morning song in some of the Hindu temples when the curtain comes up for the first time. The Sufi

WANDERLUST
Above: 2-D looks out of a train window.
Below: Noodle spotted on the back of a motorcycle in Haryana with a yellow SGT University bus in the background.

ALL ABOARD
After narrowly escaping capture by the Forever Cult and the Los Angeles Police Department at the end of Cracker Island, 2-D, Murdoc, Noodle and Russel escaped to India.

devotional singing on Fridays in Old Delhi was also extraordinary. I've become a devotee of the conch. I bought one and now use it in my own practice.

JH: Visually, too, there's something interesting going on in every square metre of India. That's why we took our photographer with us—drawing a single backdrop would probably take me a year. I wanted to photograph everything and then put the characters into those scenes. It would have been impossible to replicate what was happening on the streets of Jaipur or Delhi through a sketch because it's thousands of years of cultural evidence. I love it. I'm not finished with India. I need more.

***Vogue* India:** You've collaborated with some of India's best musical talent on *The Mountain*. In the song 'The Shadowy Light', Asha Bhosle sings about 'the river of life'. What do you think she means?

Asha Bhosle: I'll take that one, thank you. In one part of 'The Shadowy Light', I sing, "Chal mere raahi, gehra hain paani, mujhe jaana hain uss paar." I'm telling the boatman to ferry me across the river, which is my life's journey: my birth, my relationships, my dedication to music, my achievements, my duties as a mother, daughter, sister, wife and Indian. The boatman is a metaphor for my music, which has guided me across this river of life. When I get to the other side, my journey will be complete and I will attain moksha. If you listen carefully, you will be able to discern thousands of sounds floating around us. I shall become one of them. This freedom to become one with nature is what awaits me on the other side of the river.

Murdoc: I'd love to add my two cents here but due to an ongoing legal battle with Him Downstairs, I'm not at liberty to discuss my soul with any third party. Letting go is part of life though, isn't it? Chuck it in the stream and watch it drift away. Very healing.

***Vogue* India:** A special appearance by Murdoc—what a treat. Damon, Jamie, now that you've finally wrapped up the album, how are you kicking back?

DA: I find ways to fill my time while I wait for him to finish doing his part. I'm really quick and he's really slow.

JH: No, it's just that what I do takes time. But the idea of 'kicking back' from what we do seems pointless because what we do is so much fun. It's not like, "I can't wait for the weekend, I hate my job." No, I love my job. The holiday would be going to India and coming back with ideas to turn into work.

COURTESY OF GORILLAZ.

COLLISION COURSE Co-creators Jamie Hewlett (*left*) and Damon Albarn pose with Gorillaz's virtual members.

COURTESY OF GORILLAZ AND REUBEN BASTIENNE-LEWIS.

> "If we don't play in India, what's the point of this album?" —DAMON ALBARN

***Vogue* India:** But what happens when your work—the kind of unexpected collaborations and art that only humans could once think of—is generated by AI? Where do we go from here?
JH: Challenge it.
DA: If AI is a self-generating facsimile of our current reality, then we have to prove that we still reign supreme when it comes to imagination. If we can't keep up, it deserves to inherit what we've built. We've just got to relearn the joy of ritual and hard work.
JH: Technology is going to make us lazier and lazier. It's going to get to a point where we become like the humans in *Wall-E* who are too fat to get out of their floaty chairs and just press buttons with the one finger that still works. That's the future.
***Vogue* India:** That's a bleak visual. It's been 25 years since you released your debut single 'Clint Eastwood'. Congratulations on your silver jubilee of working together. How different is it now?
DA: Far fewer hangovers. Apart from that, pretty similar.
JH: I love Damon's music. He gives me music to put visuals to. How lucky can I be?
***Vogue* India:** Damon, do you want to give Jamie a compliment?
DA: [*Dryly*] Knowing Jamie has been one of the great joys of my life.
***Vogue* India:** Okay, level with me. Is an India tour on the cards?
DA: If we don't play in India, what's the point of this album?
***Vogue* India:** Has your idea of what happens after death changed since making *The Mountain*?
DA: It's becoming clearer to me that life after death has something to do with quantum physics.
JH: Yeah, like AI is a modern form of magic, quantum physics is a modern form of religion. And you can also find ideas of what happens after death in India—that knowledge has existed for over 2,000 years. If you care enough to have a look.
DA: The past is so much smarter than the future.
JH: The way we're going, that might be true. To answer your question, I don't know what happens after death, but I'm less bothered by it now.
DA: We're definitely closer to it.
Noodle: We each have our own hell. Mine was pretty dark; you don't want to go there. I've learned that hell is never the final stop—just a detour.
***Vogue* India:** Thanks for that, Noodle.
JH: I'm still ruminating on that one. But I'm not afraid of death anymore.
DA: I think Jamie's more afraid of losing his Vaseline lip balm than dying. [*Brandishes Jamie's tub of Vaseline, which has been sitting slightly off-screen the whole time.*]
JH: [*Trying to pry it out of Damon's hand*] Nothing worse than dry lips in the afterlife. Damon, will you make sure I'm cremated with my lip balm?

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HOMES IN THE WORLD

Shared ground

Farzana Hossain and Akash Kakumani brought together 85 guests for a wedding celebration shaped by different faiths, shared humour and a few joyful surprises. By SARA HUSSAIN.

YAZMINE MAY PHOTOGRAPHY.

Farzana Hossain and Akash Kakumani met in San Francisco, though their introduction came through a small algorithmic detour. Kakumani's childhood friend posted an Instagram story that happened to feature Hossain in it. He asked about her. A date followed. Then many more.

At the time, both were living in San Francisco. Hossain had just begun her first job after college, working as a healthcare consultant, while Kakumani, a Bay Area native, was working as a software engineer. San Francisco became the setting for the early years of their relationship. They sailed around the bay, planned picnics and worked their way through the city's sushi counters.

They were together for five years before Kakumani proposed. Hossain thought they were heading to a photoshoot by a lake in Palo Alto, followed by dinner. Instead, she was led by friends to a TV and decorations set up by the lake. "I walked over, pressed play as instructed and a video about us began," she says. As tears streamed down her face, Kakumani walked over and proposed.

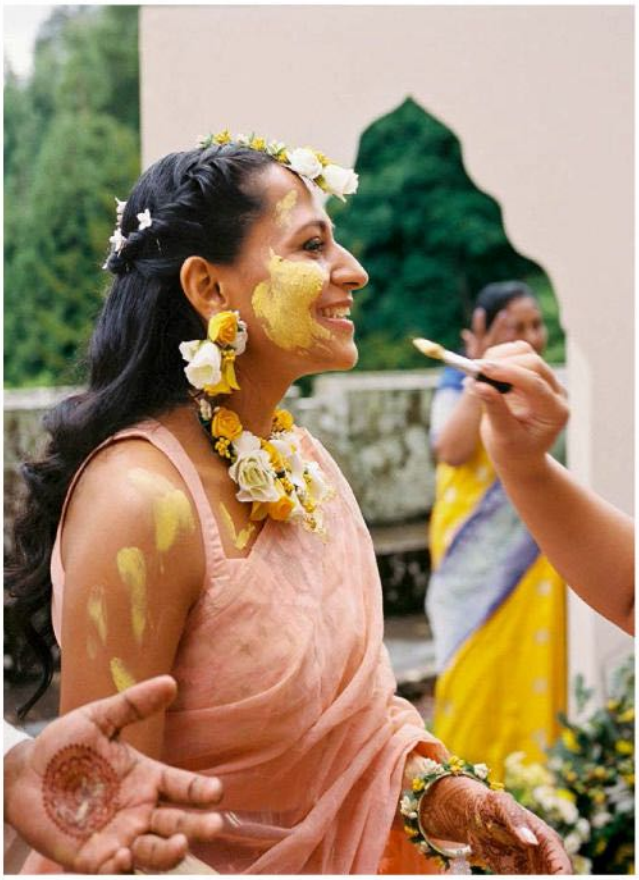
Two months before the main celebrations in June, they held a small civil ceremony at San Francisco City Hall with their two dogs, close family and friends. They wanted to mark the beginning of their marriage in the city where it started.

When it came to the wedding itself, they knew they wanted to gather everyone somewhere away from home. Travel had always shaped their relationship, and they were drawn to the idea of creating an immersive, shared experience for their guests. Kakumani had long been fascinated by medieval history and architecture, and when the idea of a castle surfaced, it stuck. After considering venues across England and Scotland, they chose Eastnor Castle in Herefordshire.

They worked with wedding planner Rohita Pabla, given the short timeline and the fact that Eastnor Castle was hosting its first multiday Indian wedding. While the planner handled logistics, Hossain remained closely involved in the creative process, from moodboards to signage, designing much of the visual material herself.

Honouring both cultures meant resisting short cuts. Kakumani and his family observed Telugu Hindu rituals

TAKING THE TIME
The celebrations were shaped by a commitment to honouring two belief systems, forgoing easy blends in favour of care and mutual respect.



CEREMONY, WITH FLAIR
From a Bangladeshi-inspired baraat to a nikah officiated by family, the second day folded humour and heritage into ceremonies shaped by personal choices.

with care, and Hossain focused on bringing Bangladeshi Islamic traditions into the weekend, from clothing to the ceremony structure. Rather than compressing everything into one event, they chose to let each ritual stand on its own.

The first day began with a joint gaye holud and haldi ceremony. Hossain wore a jamdani sari her mother had bought in Bangladesh, draped in the region's style. Kakumani wore a white panjabi, a traditional Bangladeshi tunic, from Aarong. Water guns were handed out, haldi flowed freely and Kakumani's late father's favourite dessert, sweet chapati, was included in the menu.

Hossain wore a gold Kanchipuram sari and Kakumani donned a dhoti for the pellikuthuru and pheras a few hours later. Her mother walked her down the aisle and a seat was left empty in memory of Kakumani's father. The priest's daughter explained each ritual to guests as it happened, and the pheras were adapted to remove gendered language, reframing the vows around equality and partnership.

The sangeet that evening leaned into humour. Hossain wore a lehenga by Payal Singhal, while Kakumani wore a custom outfit tailored by The Wilson's in Hyderabad. An autorickshaw stood at the entrance, later used for the couple's arrival. Drinks were named after members of the bridal party. Hossain's bridesmaids performed a Bangla dance they had been rehearsing for months, while Kakumani's friends staged a skit narrated by him. The night moved easily between speeches, music and dancing.

The second day began with the baraat. Kakumani arrived in a lungi, travelling by autorickshaw with his groomsmen, an idea borrowed from Bangladeshi tradition and enthusiastically embraced. Dhol players led the procession, while Hossain's niece blocked the entry until Kakumani negotiated his way inside.

The nikah ceremony, officiated by Hossain's brother-in-law, took place against the backdrop of Eastnor Lake. Hossain wore a white lehenga by Varun Chakkilam, Kakumani a green sherwani, custom-made by The Wilson's. The couple exchanged vows, and a violinist played throughout, including the *Harry Potter* title track as an owl carried their rings down the aisle.

Cocktail hour came with drinks named after the couple's dogs. At dinner, handwritten letters awaited each guest, written by Hossain and Kakumani during their travels through London in the days leading up to the wedding. A champagne tower replaced the traditional tiered cake and the night ended with fireworks over the castle.

Over two days, Eastnor Castle became something more intimate than its scale suggests. It housed prayer, music, traditions and play, while allowing each element to exist fully. And most importantly, for this couple, the persistent memory of having gathered, with care, everyone and everything that mattered most at the start of their marriage.

YAZMINE MAY PHOTOGRAPHY.

INTIMATE AFFAIR
Herit Vachhani and Kinjal Patel's wedding by Lake Como was a family-only celebration, with just seven guests.

INNER CIRCLE

In a culture built on big, fat weddings, some couples are choosing to go very, very small and discovering that the real luxury isn't scale, but time. By THEA MULCHANDANI.

A typical Indian wedding conjures up images of a beautifully decorated stage, the bride and groom at its centre, vowing to spend the rest of their lives together. Beyond them, a sea of people watching. Including the bride's uncle's new astrologer and the best man's breakdancing troupe from college.

But for some couples, the tides are shifting, stars are realigning and the guest list is dwindling. An intimate desi wedding sounds faintly contradictory, and yet, it has snuck up on us. Lists that used to run well into the hundreds are now tapering off in the fifties and, gasp… even twenties. Why are couples going down this lean route? Or rather, how are they getting away with it? According to Krish Sheth and Shefali Sharma, whose 55-person wedding took place in Rishikesh, the trick is simple: make sure your sibling gets married first. "Both our families had their fill; they'd already called everyone they wanted to," shares Sheth.

But the couple didn't begin with a number in mind. After months of searching, they found a property that felt right, Anand Kashi by the Ganges. It had the warm energy they were looking for and, more importantly, a limited capacity. So, the venue wrote the guest list. Years of attending large weddings had already planted the seed. "It's like an attendance register," Sheth says. "You show up, say hello, pose for a photo and move on." Anyone they didn't have at least three core memories with, didn't make their list.

> The big Indian wedding isn't going anywhere. But alongside it, there is room for another version

For those working behind-the-scenes, this shift has been a pleasant change of pace. The pandemic was certainly a catalyst—proof that ceremonies could still feel complete without being excessive. Wedding planner Priya Maganti of RVR Eventz & Design, who recently hosted around 180 guests—intimate by her standards—knew every guest there by name. "By the end, people didn't know if I was the planner or part of the family," she laughs. That closeness changes everything. With fewer guests, you actually get to host, to make sure people have eaten well and to be present.

But Indian families are tightly woven webs. Invite one aunt and another becomes inevitable. Before long, you're receiving a hug, kiss and blessing from someone you're meeting for the first time. So, who really gets to choose to have an intimate wedding? Often, it is a privilege of those with supportive parents, the emotional bandwidth to deal with the consequences or simply the confidence to hold one's ground.

Shlok Punjabi and Katyayni Gupta, who hosted a 20-person wedding, recall long conversations with their highly social parents who struggled with the absence of old friends and extended family. What helped was that family involvement started long before the wedding. "The proposal wasn't something we did alone," shares Punjabi. "Her brother, her mom, my parents, my sister—everyone was involved. When wedding conversations began, it didn't feel like we were suddenly taking control or shutting anyone out. There was already trust."

And those conversations were well worth it. For three days in Tulum, Mexico, the small group talked endlessly, danced together and simply existed in the same space. "You just can't manufacture that feeling of togetherness with a larger group," adds Gupta. It translates on-camera too, documented for years to come. "You can hear more—small chatter, half sentences, private jokes," shares photographer Siddharth Sharma of House on the Clouds, "It changes the way moments unfold behind the lens." With fewer moving parts, you notice details that usually get lost.

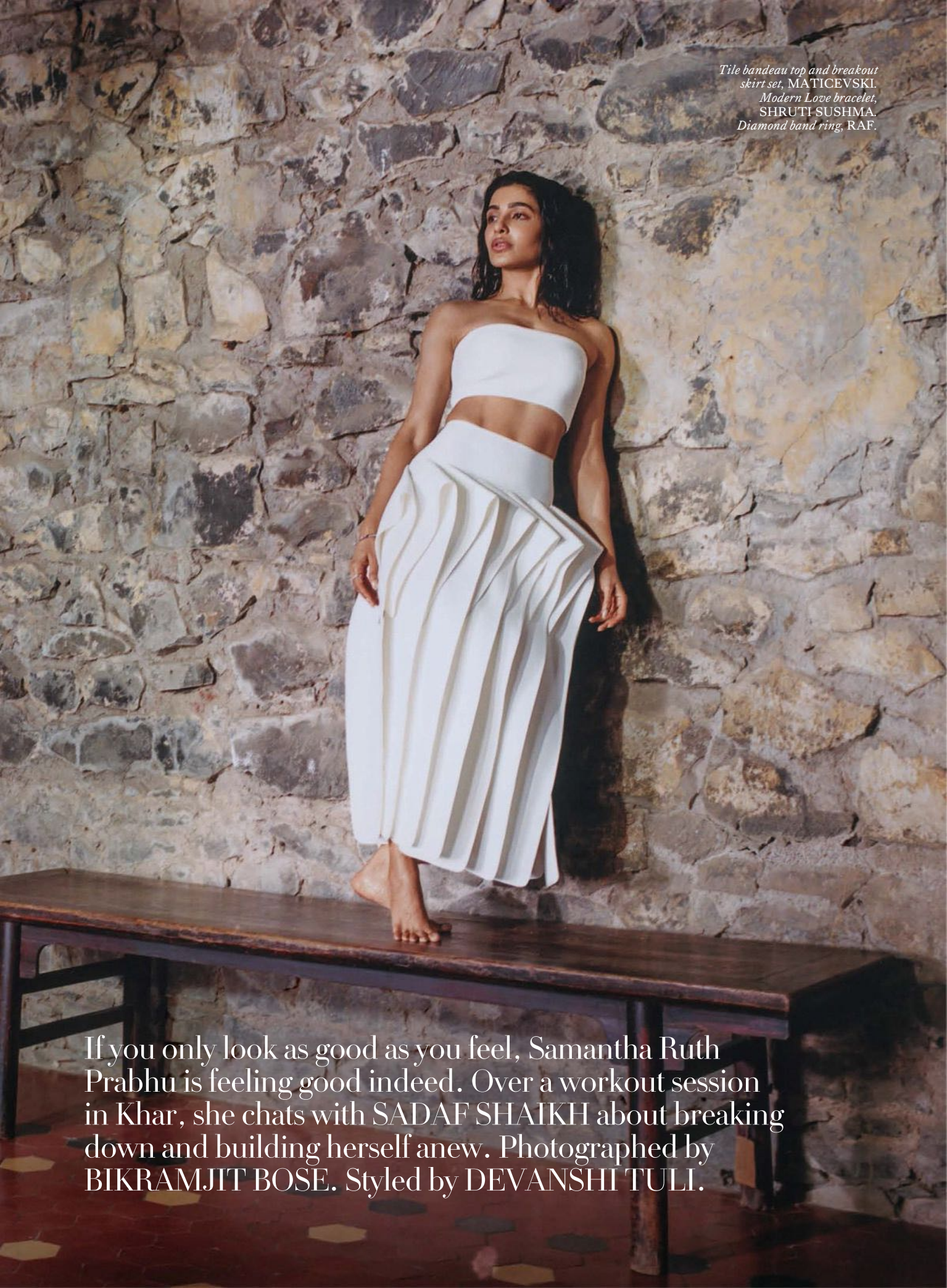
For Herit Vachhani and Kinjal Patel, the decision to go small came from fatigue. Midway through planning a large-scale wedding, Patel realised the process itself had drained the joy out of the idea. "It wasn't fun for us. For an entire year, this was all we talked about." Her 300-person engagement party had already given her a preview. "You can't really enjoy the day because you're thinking: what if someone spills wine on the floor or what if someone breaks a vase." Their eventual wedding by Lake Como had just nine guests.

While intimate weddings are often framed as emotional decisions rather than financial ones, they are considerably easier on the bank account. Fewer guests mean less logistics and more freedom to spend intentionally. "There's space to be more mindful," shares experience designer Eeshaan Kashyap, of Eeshaan Kashyap & Co and Tablescape by Eeshaan, "We had a bride who wanted to drape her old saris across the tables; we've done rangoli with flowers left over after a ceremony at a farm; we've curated entire menus based on shared memories with guests."

The big Indian wedding isn't going anywhere. There is no substitute for the collective joy it brings. But alongside it, there is room for another version. What you lose in fireworks, you gain in time—the rarest luxury. Time to sit with your parents without being pulled away. Time to eat with your friends instead of waving at them across a room. Time to finish conversations, to linger after they're over and to celebrate the beginning of a new life.

HOUSE ON THE CLOUDS.

FLOW STATE



Tile bandeau top and breakout skirt set, MATICEVSKI. *Modern Love bracelet,* SHRUTI SUSHMA. *Diamond band ring,* RAF.

If you only look as good as you feel, Samantha Ruth Prabhu is feeling good indeed. Over a workout session in Khar, she chats with SADAF SHAIKH about breaking down and building herself anew. Photographed by BIKRAMJIT BOSE. Styled by DEVANSHI TULI.

So many things can go wrong during your first month of training at the gym. You could easily lift seven-kilogram dumbbells off the rack and almost meet God while lowering them during a chest press. You could get into a one-sided running contest with a guy before realising he's probably had years of practice and you're mortifyingly close to the edge of the treadmill. Or, in a moment of misplaced self-confidence, you could sign up for a workout class with Samantha Ruth Prabhu.

When I arrive for our session at Breathe Studio in Khar, I expect I will have some time to get my bearings—by which I mean eliminating any chance of death-by-equipment and coaxing the trainer into going easy on me. But Samantha is already on the mat with head coach Paridhi Doshi, waving me over to join them. I wave back, double-knot my shoelaces and drop a pin to my husband on WhatsApp with the accompanying text saying: "If you don't hear from me in two hours, look for me in the nearest hospital."

We start with squats—five-kilogram dumbbells for me, a barbell stacked with plates I'm too afraid to even look at for Samantha. The studio has been asked to turn the music off so I can speak with the actor without having to scream, but between fighting for breath between reps and the clicking sound my knees make every time I move, there's enough audio disturbance. It's only when we're doing wall sits later that I recover enough to really look at Samantha: taut calves, firm stomach, enviable shoulder blades, a face that looks like it is drenched in dew rather than soaked in sweat like mine. "How has the new year started for you?" I blurt out when she catches me staring. "The horoscope writer at *Vogue*," I explain, "told me that Taureans will have one of the most transformative years of their lives. Has that been the case for you?"

The 38-year-old star's answer seems to emerge from post-squat clarity. "The past few years have been incredibly transformative for me. When you're in the public eye, there's always a fear of embarrassing yourself, of being cancelled, of being trolled. You're constantly trying to guard your status because you're so scared of losing it. Because when you fall, everyone watches, right? It's public."

And it has been a very public *everything*. A very public first wedding to Telugu superstar Naga Chaitanya, followed by a very public divorce and a very public health diagnosis. "When I went through a separation, I closed up completely. I didn't think it would ever be possible to rely on someone else." A smile begins to spread across her face, like she's so glad to have been proven wrong. "Thankfully, I was vulnerable enough to accept that kind of love and friendship. And I'm a much better person because of the relationship I'm in. Because of the person Raj (Nidimoru) is." It's a transformation those close to her can attest to. "I met an old friend a few days ago and she sent me a voice note afterwards saying, 'This is the first time in a long time that I feel like you're not struggling to breathe.' I'm not performing anymore."

Paridhi is shooting daggers at us because we've overshot our rest limit and are supposed to be two reps into our next set. Samantha and I, both dyed-in-the-wool millennials, tell her she is too Gen Z to talk or hear about love without feeling embarrassed. She has one word for us both. "Lunges," she growls. "Leave the 5, pick up the 7.5," she adds, looking at me stoically and I detect the slightest note of vengeance in her sweet voice. I look to Samantha for help but she, ever the dutiful student, has already started without me.

And so it is that we become like two ships passing in the night—me, an inflatable raft in a hurricane, losing my balance with every step I take; Samantha, a sturdy ocean liner already

Lace and resin slip dress, MAISON MARGIELA.

Sheer bubble smocked dress, SUSAN FANG.
Pearl drop earrings, HANUT SINGH.
Gladiator anklet flats, DISOBEDIENCE.

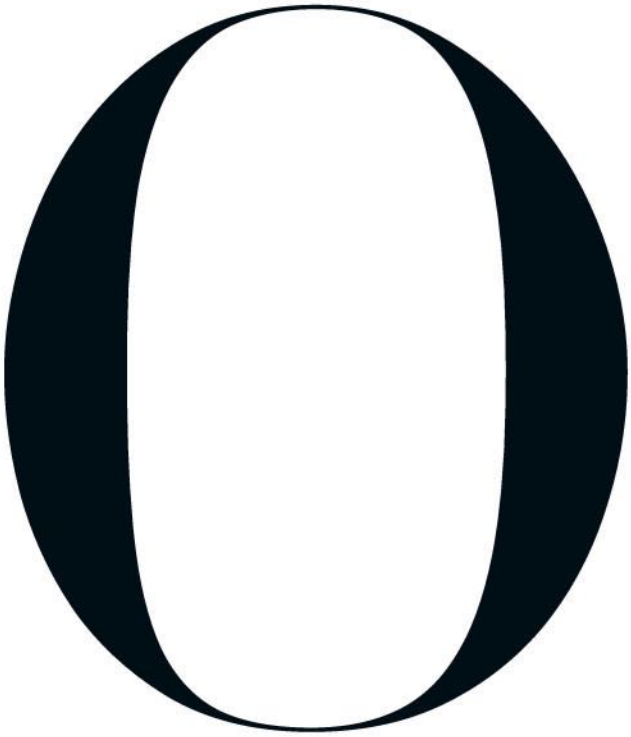
"THANKFULLY, I WAS VULNERABLE ENOUGH TO ACCEPT THAT KIND OF LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP. I'M A MUCH BETTER PERSON BECAUSE OF THE RELATIONSHIP I'M IN"

on her way back to the starting point, ready for her next rep. When our paths cross, she sends words of encouragement my way. "You have great flexibility. I struggled with that."

When I collapse on the mat two minutes later, she sits next to me quietly, a silence that neither of us feels compelled to break. Instead, her triceps seem to be doing the talking for her, catching the golden hour at different angles as she breathes in and out. She catches me looking—again—and explains, "I do my own stunts in all my films so I have to be strong. It needs to look believable." I realise, belatedly, that she has mistaken my appreciation for aversion. Her apprehensions aren't unfounded. When cricketer Smriti Mandhana wore a halter-neck gown to an event in Bengaluru in December last year, her deltoids were deemed 'too manly' by men who incidentally looked like they wouldn't last five seconds in an arm-wrestling match with a kitten. "When I shoot with brands and often in films, too, they try to cover my arms because they think muscles on a woman aren't attractive," Samantha confesses. "Which is why," she continues, beaming now, "it was so cool that *Vogue* gave me weights during the shoot and asked me to pump before each shot so my triceps would look well-defined. That's usually only done for men."

Her upcoming Telugu film *Maa Inti Bangaaram* makes full use of all the hours she's been putting in at the gym. In the trailer, Samantha plays the docile daughter-in-law with a secret: she can beat up any man who asks for it. She kicks one off a moving bus, stabs another in the eye with furniture and drags another through a home courtyard—all while wearing a sari. "I haven't fought in a sari before, so that was definitely challenging," the actor laughs. "Also, because I've produced this film myself under Tralala Moving Pictures, the budget had to be kept super tight. We finished shooting the bus fight scene in five hours, where it usually takes around two days. It was quite stressful." Producing and acting in *Maa Inti Bangaaram* aren't the only things on her plate either: less than two months after launching her fashion label Truly Sma, she launched her activewear brand Mile Collective; her clean-perfume brand Secret Alchemist raised $3 million in a seed-funding round by Unilever Ventures; and, as the co-owner of Chennai Super Champs, she is racquet-deep in prep ahead of season two of the World Pickleball League. Still, it's clear where her heart's compass points. "I've not had a film release in over two and a half years because of the break I took for my health. Yes, I've invested in many businesses and enjoy the entrepreneurial side of things, but acting is my first love so it feels great to be in front of the camera again." And does a certain Raj Nidimoru's presence on set as the creator of *Maa Inti Bangaaram* have anything to do with it? "Raj and I really are that irritating couple that does everything together," Samantha laughs. "We work together, we play together, we work out together with Paridhi. And we love it. If I have to travel for even a day, I'm like… [*pretends to swoon in distress.*] I don't think it's a honeymoon phase. Too much time has passed for it to be that."

It helps that the newlyweds' professional relationship precedes their love story: In 2021, Nidimoru directed Samantha in season two of *The Family Man*, a debut OTT outing that earned her critical acclaim in the hard-to-crack digital landscape. They reunited for *Citadel: Honey Bunny* in 2024, but could not recreate the magic they had previously conjured on screen. If the early chatter around *Maa Inti Bangaaram* is anything to go by, third time's the charm, but I'm sure it doesn't come without the challenges of working with someone you share a home with. "In fact, it's the opposite for me," Samantha shrugs, blushing. "As an actor, you want to get into the skin of the character on your own terms without worrying about whether the director will think you're stupid or incapable. With Raj, it's too late now. Even if I embarrass myself, he can't leave me." So much so that she feels that her husband's presence on set has helped her unlock a new level of acting. "Leonardo DiCaprio keeps on working with Martin Scorsese and his performances just keep getting more layered. I think I'm becoming a better actor because Raj is around."



"Okay, last exercise and then I'll let you two continue yapping," Paridhi promises, leading Samantha away to do box jumps. "Give me 15," she tells her and turns to me slowly, as if wondering whether she should test me or spare me. "Fifteen step-ups," she decides, showing me to an aerobic-style bench that looks so much safer than the black box of death Samantha is steadily jumping on and off. Unlike me, the actor doesn't complain. You can tell she's grateful to be rebuilding her body—both physically and mentally—four years into living with myositis, an autoimmune disease that causes muscle inflammation and makes movement painful. She has an elaborate morning routine ("I wake up, pray, get some sunlight and meditate so it's a good one and a half hour to myself before I meet Raj"). She isn't tempted by cheat meals ("I ate the same vegetables and basic chicken dishes every single day for a year because anything could trigger my condition, so there's no temptation anymore"). And above all, she is in a committed relationship with her gratitude journal. We're now sitting in the café attached to Breathe Studio, and the actor shows me a few entries she's logged into the diary app on her phone. "When I fell sick, a doctor advised me to start writing out my feelings. For the first six months, every day, I would wake up and write, 'I'm in pain. I'm tired.' It was all negative thoughts. You can tell I'm struggling to write." I look at a couple of stilted affirmations from December 2023: 'All is good.' 'All is well.' 'This is my time.' But then, she tells me, without any grand epiphany, something changed. "I decided that no matter what happened, I would only write positive things going forward. Even on days I felt miserable, I would write, 'Today is going to be amazing.'" After a few months, she realised she wasn't pretending anymore. "I wasn't magically healed or physically better, but I was starting to feel a lot more positive about my condition improving. That's when I understood that what you project, manifest and speak out will come to pass."

Today, 16 years since her debut, little fazes Samantha, especially on the outside. She's aware that the winds of support blowing her way on the internet could change course the next day. "I don't take the compliments or criticism seriously. Not the times they tell me I'm an angel, nor the times they tell me I'm the worst person on the planet. Sixteen years is a long time; you develop a thick skin." Except it has been more than 16 years, hasn't it? *Ye Maaya Chesave* may have been her first movie to hit theatres in 2010 but the first film she shot for in 2007 was *Moscowin Kavery* opposite actor-director Rahul Ravindran, who is one of her closest friends today. "Oh my god, yes, we were such babies. We would go to the set, iron our own clothes to wear for the scene and give our shot. He was the best thing to come out of that film."

Throughout our conversation, Samantha's phone has buzzed with calls and messages, every one of which she has courteously ignored. I imagine it's a busy period for her as a multihyphenate who has several active entrepreneurial hustles and a film on the cusp of release. But then her screen flashes with a call from her husband and she won't let it go to voicemail. "Babu, I'll be home in 15-20 minutes," she coos, and I realise our time is up. "It's only January and so much has happened already. It's going to be a very important year," the actor effuses. "Hopefully, I'll come out of it happy, not with everything around me burnt to the ground. Let's reconnect at the end of the year to take stock."

HAIR: DAKSH NIDHI/THE ARTISTS PROJECT. MAKEUP: AVNI RAMBHIA. BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATMA. ENTERTAINMENT DIRECTOR: MEGHA MEHTA. SENIOR ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR (CONSULTANT): REBECCA GONSALVES. PRODUCTION: IMRAN KHATRI PRODUCTIONS. ASSISTED BY: TUSHAR TARA (PHOTO); SHRIYA SAXENA (HAIR); BIDIPTO DAS, HARSHITA SAMDARIYA (STYLING); JASLEEN NARANG (BOOKINGS); RADHIKA CHEMBURKAR (PRODUCTION). LOCATION COURTESY: THE GREAT EASTERN HOME.

Sheer black lace body-con dress,
ALESSANDRA RICH.
Vessel ear climbers,
STUDIO RENN.

Radical chic

As Jonathan Anderson settles in at Dior, the world seems to be watching: Can his earlier triumphs of creativity and craft translate to one of Paris's most monumental and historic houses? One thing is for certain: He likes a challenge. By NATHAN HELLER.

The light outside is pale and fading when, late one Friday afternoon, on a quiet street in Paris, Jonathan Anderson settles at a large table in his office to sift the pieces of the future. "What have we got to go through?" he asks. With an air of surgical focus, his design director, Alberto Dalla Colletta, runs through the day's couture decision points, then turns to urgencies in women's ready-to-wear. "This is that skirt we repaired," he says, riffling through a sheaf of papers. "It's becoming more of a thing, which I thought was fun."

"The back is nice," Anderson says briskly, and then nods for the next item. Tall and relentless, with a flare of auburn hair and a tumbling Irish baritone of a voice, Anderson, at 41, is the new holder of one of the most powerful jobs in fashion: the creative directorship of Dior. When his appointment was announced last year, it was greeted, across the industry, with a shimmer of excitement. He was finishing 11 years at Loewe, during which he energised the field with a style of creative eclecticism that reached across fashion history and his own scattered interests to bring a crisp new allure to the market. And he did it, remarkably, while leading his own London-based brand, JW Anderson, which is now 18 years old.

"He can just go in any kind of direction—I don't think of his designs as looking like one thing," says Jennifer Lawrence, among the first to wear Anderson's Dior dresses on the red carpet. "His range constantly amazes me."

WORKING THE ROOM
"You are mining for ideas most of the day," says Anderson, photographed in the Dior atelier. "But it's also an obsession—an artist or a person or a piece of vintage could inspire a whole collection." Grooming for Anderson, Jillian Halouska.

GROOMING: JILLIAN HALOUSKA. PORTRAITS: PRODUCED BY: AL STUDIO.
SET DESIGN: MARY HOWARD.

Portrait by Annie Leibovitz.
Sittings Editor: Jack Borkett.

TURN IT UP
The pieces in Anderson's debut women's show paid tribute to the house's history while toying with it and subverting it. Model Ajus Samuel in Dior.

Fashion Photographs by Stef Mitchell.
Fashion Editor: Alex Harrington.

CRACKING THE CODES
"How do you find newness within something which is already old?" Anderson asks. "By having it dialogue with what's happening today." Model Betsy Gaghan in a dress from Anderson's spring 2026 show.

STAND AND DELIVER
"I have never been under so much pressure," says Anderson of his first runway show. Model Charlie Jones in Dior.

The excitement of Anderson's appointment came, in part, from its high-wire stakes: He is the first designer at the house since Christian Dior himself to lead all fashion lines—women's, men's and couture, including bags and shoes: 10 heavily freighted collections a year at what is now among the largest couture houses in Paris.

Anderson yanks a hand through his hair. His working manner is generally that of a man outside the surgery of a village hospital, waiting for a doctor to appear with news. At his left elbow is, as usual, an outlay of personal effects, as if he has emptied a bag onto the table: an iPhone, a coffee cup, a bottle of Evian, a case with earbuds, a box of Tic Tacs, a box of cigarettes and a small tape measure.

"Nice," he says at last, then peers more closely. "Though here the colours are not so nice."

Dalla Colletta shows him two more pages, and then Anderson, heading to another meeting, races from the room.

Anderson's first women's show for Dior, held in the Tuileries, was for months the most anticipated in Paris. During the hour before it began, a throng spilled out from the park into the Place de la Concorde. Some bystanders wore costumes. Others lifted signs and screamed for every celebrity—Jennifer Lawrence, Sabrina Carpenter, Anya Taylor-Joy, Jisoo, Jimin, Robert Pattinson, Johnny Depp and many others—who passed along a route marked by security guards through a parting in the crowd.

There were plissé twisted fabrics, curtailed skirt suits in tweed, and lace woven in eerie jagged patterns. There were variations on Dior's famous bar jacket and playful subversions of its dress profiles. With its bib fronts; turndown collars; bow cravats; and rich, astringent plaids, the collection alluded to decorous midcentury ideas of fashion. But its strange volumes, vertically tightened proportions, and sudden, startling abridgments—as if whole forms had been made and then, like herbs, clipped to their living roots—gave the traditionalism an extreme and vaguely perverse edge.

Most noticeably, the looks echoed the vocabulary that Anderson introduced in his first men's collection, in June, which included womenswear-inspired elements such as a high-volume, almost bustle-like pair of cargo shorts. The potential to design men's and women's collections not just side by side but in tandem was the core of his pitch for such unusually comprehensive control, Delphine Arnault, the company's chair and CEO, tells me.

"It's a modern vision: You can see the look on men and women with an interchangeability," she says. It is also a vision that Anderson has pursued from his earliest days as a designer at his own brand, when, in 2013, he caused a stir by bringing into his men's collection a pair of ruffle-bottom shorts with a miniskirt silhouette.

One of Jonathan Anderson's favourite words—the first he reaches for to convey praise—is radical. "Radical doesn't have to be loud; radical can sometimes just be about the process of trying to work out what is new," he tells me one day. "And what is new for Dior is different from what would be new for Loewe."

Although Loewe is the oldest brand in the LVMH fashion portfolio, it had spent most of its history as a Spanish leather-goods company, making a name for its craft expertise with bags and moving into clothing tentatively. Anderson brought not merely energy, but, in a basic way, a public understanding of what Loewe style was. "Loewe needed a fashion language," he says. "Dior does not need a fashion language! But it needs bag construction. It needs a world." Anderson's radical act comes in negotiating fresh juxtapositions, a new kind of relationship between this and that.

To evolve this way while holding on to what came before requires a certain relationship to the past. Anderson, after all, is negotiating the terrifying weight of taking on the helm of a historic Paris couture house, whose previous creative directors have extended from Christian Dior himself, who created the post-war New Look, to Yves Saint Laurent, John Galliano and countless others: a menacing pantheon.

"I have never been under so much pressure," he explains. "And it was not coming from myself, or from the brand. It was coming from the way everyone feels at the moment that fashion needs to be saved. I find that a strange utopia."

For Anderson, most work is infused with struggle and drive. His father, Willie, was captain of the Irish national rugby team. His brother, Thomas, is a rugby player too. "Watching my brother and my father's relationship—the competitiveness—I always was like, Thank God I wasn't into rugby!" he exclaims. And yet, growing up in Magherafelt, a small town in Northern Ireland, getting rejected from his first-choice fashion school, he assumed a similar psychic mantle.

"I've always operated in my life as an underdog, and if I'm not in the feeling of an underdog, I will construct an environment around myself so that I feel like I have to prove something," says Anderson, who is known for having chased his opportunities even more than he has been chased for them. At 20, while working for Prada, he got himself photographed for *i-D* magazine as a maker of brooches from found objects. He tells a story about how Delphine Arnault called him up out of the blue at around seven one morning, expressing interest in his work, but Arnault remembers their first meeting a year earlier, at an exhibition in London. In 2013, the year LVMH invested in JW Anderson, he was asked whether he had suggestions for anyone to lead Loewe, which needed a creative director in a hurry. As the head of LVMH fashion at the time has recalled, Anderson suggested himself. By the early years of this decade, he was angling for a new assignment. "He started talking with me about what the future was, and what new projects we could give him in the group," Arnault recalls. When Maria Grazia Chiuri, the previous creative director, stepped away from Dior (she's now at Fendi), Anderson proposed that he lead menswear, womenswear and couture all together.

By then, Anderson's Loewe work had become a phenomenon. For his first seven years at the brand, he had focused on craft—a modern, elegant and volume-based interpretation of a distinguished label's savoir-faire. Then, during the pandemic, he underwent a moulting, shifting to a wilder, more playful, more openly eclectic conceptualism. This was the era of shimmering breastplates and digitally pixelated fabrics, of coats sprouting living grass, of Minnie Mouse pumps and balloon heels, of enormous strawberries inspired by a painting by William Sartorius. (For Uniqlo, with which he has an ongoing collaboration, he designed a collection inspired by Beatrix Potter.)

"What he did with Loewe was ground-breaking. It was not just a brand shake-up; culturally it was a shake-up," Lawrence recalls. "He was a really powerful artist who was taking in culture in a very specific, nuanced way."

Anderson studies and collects a range of art, from the Flemish Masters to Anthea Hamilton; in London, he sits on the board of the Victoria and Albert Museum. For a while, he was interested in architecture, and he holds a lifelong passion

WOLFGANG TILLMANS, *SPINE/RUCKGRAT*, 1996.

for ceramics. The style that he began to cultivate in his collections after the pandemic—brighter and in a particular way more pared-down—seemed to afford him a new way to reference these interests head on.

"That kind of incorporation of art and fashion is fundamental to Jonathan," says Josh O'Connor, who began working with Loewe as a brand ambassador in 2017. "And I think that creating these incredible shows and then seeing people celebrate him gave him more and more confidence."

Many of Anderson's friendships and relationships today have art at their centre. Lately, he has been dating the Catalan artist Pol Anglada, with whom he collaborated at JW Anderson. Otherwise, these days his interests often follow the arc of professional urgency. "At the moment, there's a look book every week. There's a campaign every week. You are mining for ideas most of the day," he says. Then, as if thinking that this description failed to capture the thrill of it, he adds, "But it's also an obsession—an artist or a person or a piece of vintage could inspire an entire collection."

One December morning, I arrange to meet Anderson at the Musée d'Orsay, where he is visiting a major exhibition on the work of the British painter Bridget Riley, whose 1988 canvas *Daphne* he owns. Anderson arrives late: He never looks at his daily schedule in advance, he says, or plans ahead for his next run of meetings, for fear he will second-guess whether they are worthwhile; unsurprisingly, he's perpetually running behind.

Anderson tells me he admires Riley paring down to the essence in her work. "Like, you have the confidence to go to the end," he says. "In great Indian painting, you can find that. Even in a Rembrandt—they know when to stop. It invites your mind to think more about why you're in front of it."

The exhibition's curator, Nicolas Gausserand, who has been following us, points out the colour of the wall: white. Riley, now in her mid-90s, insisted, against museum doctrine, that Seurat would be enhanced by white-wall display.

"It makes the whites whiter," Anderson says. "It's so radical." He makes a last tour of the galleries, then charges for the door. "You need to go through briskly to start your brain," he explains as we leave the museum. "If I go too long, I don't see connections. It's always been this idea of, How do you find newness within something which is already old? By having it dialogue with what's happening today."

We dip into a booth at the old wood-panelled riverside restaurant Le Voltaire for lunch. Waiters bring plates of radishes, salamis, breads and butter. Anderson orders a filet de boeuf, medium, and as we settle into our meal, tells me that he takes his cultural project at the moment to be "trying to work out purpose" for a luxury brand in a digital age.

"The reason I was drawn to fashion was designing something for the future: you design it, you show it and it goes into store in six months," he says. "It means you give the consumer time to digest it. Now we are in this period where we are designing clothing to get stimulus for right now—when it goes in the store, it has lost its gas—it's a sugar rush." The trouble, he says, is that it's almost impossible to propagate a standard of quality in that environment.

Couture—a new realm for Anderson—fascinates him as a way to rebuild a culture of daring and appreciation. He has

HOUSE ON FIRE
"I've always operated in my life as an underdog," says Anderson, photographed at Dior headquarters in Paris.

a dream of making Dior's couture more accessible, so that people who cannot afford a couture dress can still learn to appreciate the work up close. "It's about getting people to love fashion," he says. "Couture may not be the thing that everyone buys, but it's the trunk of the tree that supports the whole thing—the legacy, the hand, the knowledge."

His debut couture collection was inspired by John Galliano, the first outsider to whom he showed his women's collection—"because when I was younger, he was like God", Anderson says. "John came with a bag of food from Tesco and these two immaculate posies of wild cyclamen—I love cyclamen." The flowers, from Galliano's garden, touched Anderson deeply; in a tribute to Galliano—an unusually gallant nod to a living precursor—cyclamen became a motif of the collection, from embroidery to decor, as Anderson worked from 18th-century textiles and antique portrait miniatures. He decided that the couture show would open with a version of the lantern-shaped white plissé dress that launched his women's show.

Since Anderson took the Dior job, much of his life has been spent in transit. In November and December, apart from his normal commuting around Europe, he travelled to New York, Doha and Beijing on errands for the brand, while working actively on six separate collections. One bright, crisp morning in Los Angeles, he tumbles down to the lobby of the Chateau Marmont to start a run of meetings that will culminate in the celebration of a new boutique in Beverly Hills. "I've always loved coming to LA—I would never live here, but I love being here," he says, and begins devouring a large dish of yogurt and granola, gripping the spoon like a water dipper. Two young women across the room surreptitiously photograph him—a reminder, in the capital of celebrity, that with the ascent of Dior's global profile, Anderson has become a celebrity himself.

TAKE TWO
Justin Vivian Bond describes Anderson as "one of the first designers to really bridge the gap between female and male collections" (Galerie Jantzen antique canes; Free People socks).

That evening, Anderson arrives at the top-floor terrace and lounge of the boutique at twenty-five past seven. The guest list is, for a fashion dinner, eccentric and interesting. "It was the kind of gathering of individuals that really speaks to Jonathan and his mind," Greta Lee, who attended in a simple, elegant grey Dior blouse and jeans, tells me. "It's unexpected, often, these ideas and choices that he has, and the breadth and scope of what he cares about is genuinely interesting." Lawrence comes with her husband, and Charlize Theron, a longtime Dior ambassador, arrives last. But there is also Gia Coppola; Maude Apatow; and Ejae, the *KPop Demon Hunters* voice star. Lauren Sánchez Bezos takes selfies and gives hugs. Mike White, the creator of *The White Lotus*, is there, apparently to his own surprise, dressed by Dior in a sweater and wandering around in fascinated alertness, as if taking mental notes.

After shaking hands and greeting Delphine Arnault, who has also flown out for the occasion, Anderson rushes over to Lee and throws his arms around her. ("For me, she's not a muse, she's a friend," he says. "It's not just about wearing clothing; it's, Can you have a drink and a three-course meal with that person?") He is wearing a pale blue shirt, jeans and brown moccasins. Waiters carry nori rolls filled with caviar, and tiny onion tarts resemble white folded cranes. By a quarter past nine, Anderson is leading a troupe of celebrities to the terrace for a smoke. Half an hour later, he has shots of tequila sent around to everyone.

In Paris, as the holidays near, tourists teem before the twinkling lights of the Dior flagship, taking photographs. Christian Dior presented his first collection in 1947 and died 10 years later, by which time his house was employing hundreds of people and doing business on five continents. Yves Saint Laurent succeeded him at the age of 21. "Now if a 21-year-old was sitting over a house of that scale, people would be horrified," Anderson says. "You know what I mean? If we haven't looked at the past, we forget the radicalness of it."

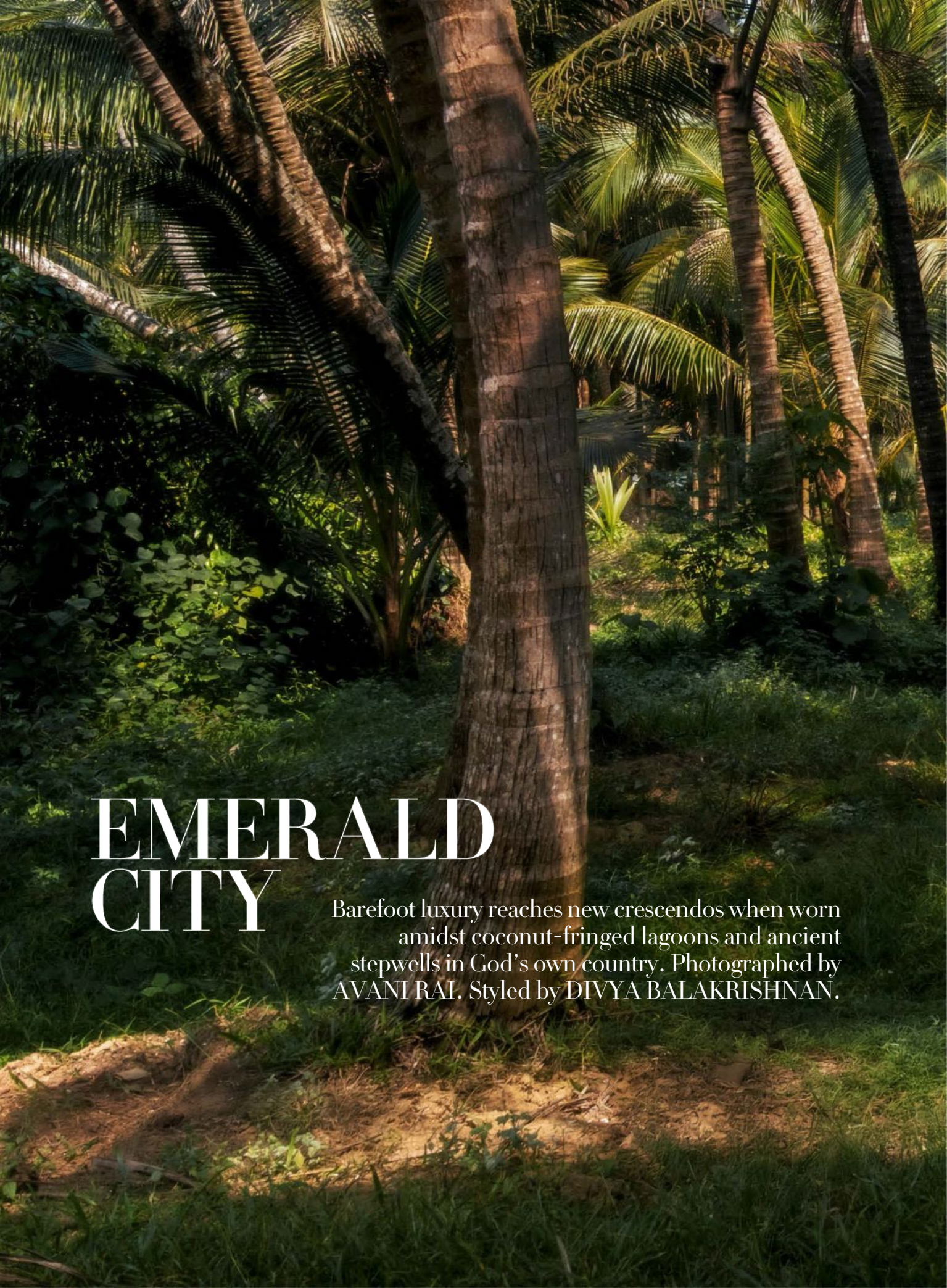
In the studio the next day, Anderson sits staring at his boards, showing the upcoming advertising campaign.

"I'm really happy," he says with uncharacteristic openness, gazing at the boards. He points to a series of photographs of models Laura Kaiser, Saar Mansvelt Beck and Sunday Rose crunched together on a love seat. "I just love this," he says. "There's a kind of happiness in it. When you go to a party, there's always the one who's genuinely having fun, the one who's trying to have fun and the one that's seducing—a good depiction of what this can all be." He turns to a board centred on Kylian Mbappé, the soccer player, dressed in jeans, a grey sweater, and a tie in an Eldredge knot. "Then you have this idea of leadership—you're taking the footballer outside, transporting him. And then you have someone like Greta"—he turns to Lee's board—"and you have these two pillars of how the girl can be and still have the same energy."

He crosses his arms. "I will sit with this, and 20 other people will have an opinion about it, but I think it makes sense," he pronounces, and allows himself a smile of relief. "I was so consumed by this idea of the anticipation and whether people are going to like it. But when I see all this, I feel very proud of the teams. I think it was the right direction. Is it the birth of a brand-new language? Not yet. But is it a step further from where I was in my previous job?" He looks at me with quiet delight. "It's starting to go," he says.

HAIR: RYAN MITCHELL. MAKEUP: AURORE GIBRIEN. PRODUCED BY NILM. SET DESIGN: GIOVANNA MARTIAL. PHOTO ARTWORK BY MARTIN DEPALLE. MANICURIST: MAGDA S. TAILOR: LAURYN TROJAN.

THE NEW NEW LOOK
"Moments like this, for any artist, are particularly interesting," says Greta Lee, "because they're moments of transition."



EMERALD CITY

Barefoot luxury reaches new crescendos when worn amidst coconut-fringed lagoons and ancient stepwells in God's own country. Photographed by AVANI RAI. Styled by DIVYA BALAKRISHNAN.

Lucinda macrame gown, ANITA DONGRE. *Lalnu hat,* HANNAH KHIANGTE. *Square clear bangles,* RADHIKA AGRAWAL JEWELS.

Crimzon chiffon drape dress, ANAMIKA KHANNA. *Poothaali gold necklace,* KALYAN JEWELLERS.

Puglia dress (Dark Meadow), SUMMER AWAY. *Floral earrings with micro-set stones*, KALYAN JEWELLERS. *Mercato tote bag (medium)*, GUCCI.

Sari drape obi belt in printed dupion silk, pleated bib dress in three-tone metallic silk, KALEEKAL. *Cross button studs,* RADHIKA AGRAWAL JEWELS.

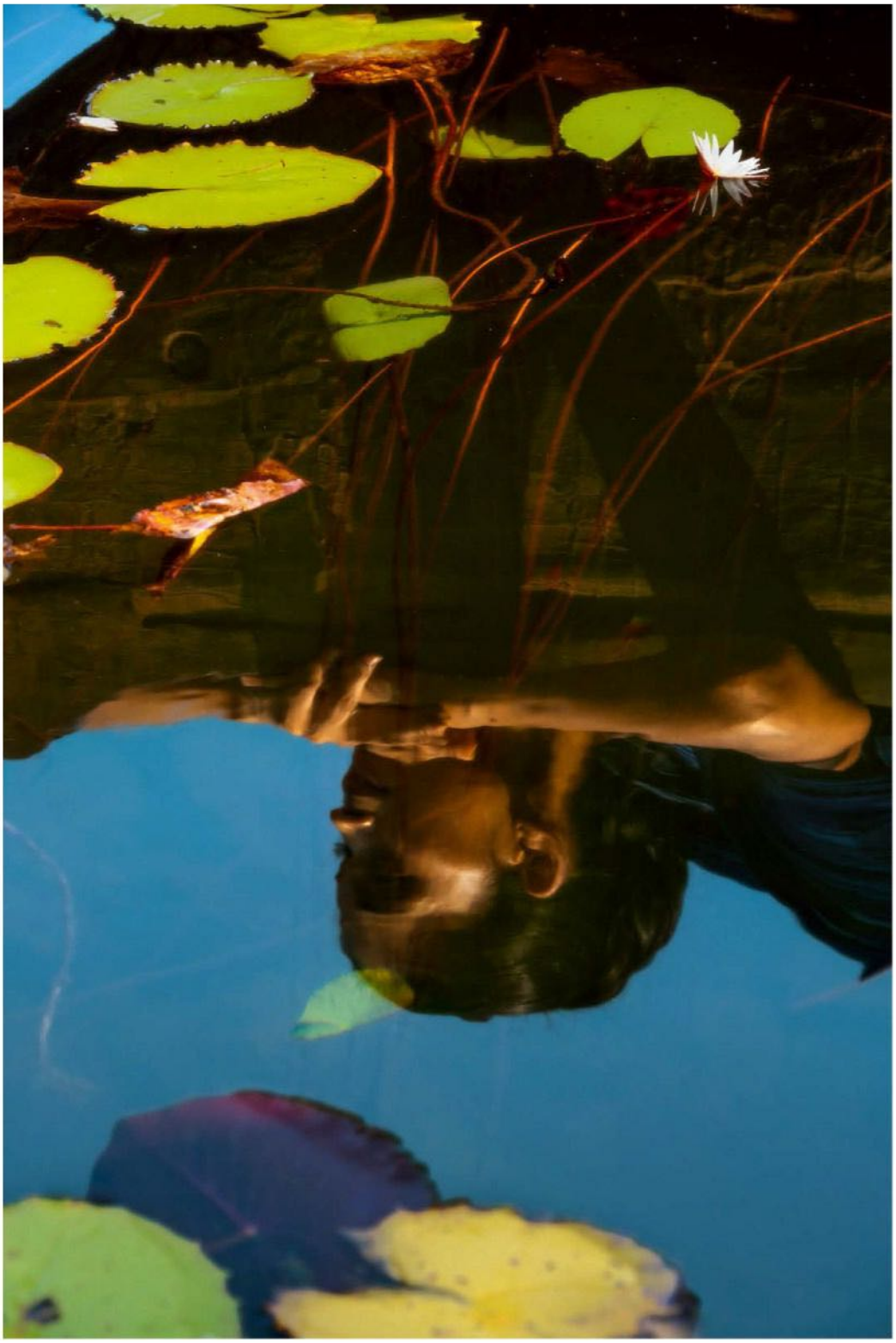
Verdalure green dress, VAISHALI S.

Pleated stripe shirt, white cotton lungi, handwoven checked tie, belt, ABRAHAM & THAKORE. *Cassiasticina shoes,* CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN.

Sunglasses, DIOR.

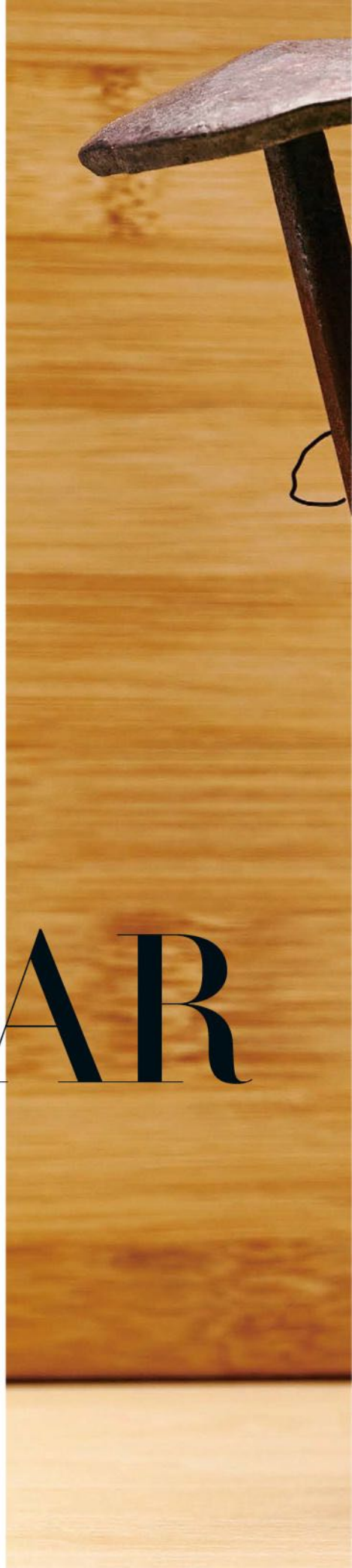
Handkerchief dress, bag, PAYAL KHANDWALA. *Mullamottu mala (worn on wrist),* KALYAN JEWELLERS.

Baroque velvet blazer and tailored trousers, BURBERRY. *The Pac-Man hoops,* RADHIKA AGRAWAL JEWELS.



Blue dress, GAURAV GUPTA.

HAIR AND MAKEUP: UMANG THAPA. BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATMA. MODEL: ARYA BENDKHALE/ANIMA CREATIVES. ASSISTED BY: HARMAN ACHINT (PHOTO); NYASA THAKKAR (STYLING); JASLEEN NARANG (BOOKINGS).



ALL-STAR CAST

With trends firing faster and attention spans getting shorter, we turn to pieces that will endure. Consider this a case for baubles that balance utility and statement. Photographed by WANG XU. Styled by YANG YI.

Love Unlimited rings, CARTIER.

Twenty~4 automatic watch (7340/1R-001), PATEK PHILIPPE.

Coco Crush necklaces and ring, CHANEL.

Serpenti Viper New Year special edition bracelet, Cabochon rings, BVLGARI.

Oyster Perpetual Day-Date 36 watch, ROLEX.

Panthère de Cartier bracelet and rings, CARTIER.

PRODUCTION: SUMMER GUO. SET DESIGN: OLIVER.

Seamaster Aqua Terra 30mm watch, OMEGA.

Contrast-trim ribbed tank top, COS. *Logan trench, Cass pants,* 431-88.

Everyone thinks they've got Himesh Reshammiya figured out—a polarising singer with lofty movie-star aspirations that will ultimately be his undoing. But underneath the bravado and the black trench coat, SADAF SHAIKH finds a lover boy simply chasing whimsy. Photographed by AMITAVA SAHA. Styled by MANGLIEN GANGTE.

MIND THE CAP

For every step we take into the future, our feet phantom-walk us two steps into the past. We're all doing Y2K fashion, we're all done with clean girl makeup, we're all going analogue, we're all meeting IRL. There are different ways to describe this yearning for the 'good ol' days'. You can play it by the book and say '2026 is the new 2016.' Or you can swerve off script and lament that 'the nights just aren't tandoori anymore'.

But what are tandoori nights? And why aren't the nights tandoori anymore? And more importantly, how do we make the nights tandoori again? Only Himesh Reshammiya knows. And he's showing us how: through his sold-out Cap Mania Tour, which kicked off in May last year. It's hard to explain exactly what goes down at a Himesh Reshammiya concert. There's a giant red cap protruding from the stage. Reshammiya comes on. He asks, "Naak se gaaun ya regular gaaun?" A unanimous chorus of "Naak se!" ripples through the audience. He launches into the nasally charged "Ooooooo" alap of 'Aashiq Banaya Aapne'. His hands start doing this swish-and-flick action, like he's trying to cast a levitating spell. The crowd—mostly made up of Gen Z'ers who are embarrassed by everything and impressed by nothing—goes berserk. Everyone ('Vivaan', to Reshammiya's fans) is wearing bedazzled caps with the initials HR emblazoned on them. Reshammiya's wife, Sonia Kapoor, walks towards him on stage, narrating a shayari. He gazes at her. The camera zooms in on the tears in his eyes. Suddenly, he looks to the audience and screams, "I love you all", then turns back to his wife and kisses her forehead. It's all very tandoori indeed.

Except things feel a little less tandoori when I meet Reshammiya on set for his *Vogue* India shoot. The composer-singer-actor offers a barely audible "Hi", then scuttles away into hair and makeup. When he emerges for his first shot, his eyes dart around nervously, his neck cranes each time the door swings open. We're confused—is he waiting for his coffee order to arrive? What—or who—eventually makes an entry turns out to be a better caffeine hit for Reshammiya than we could've hoped for. "Sonuuuu," he sighs, beckoning his wife over to show her his new look. He holds his breath as she scans him appraisingly, then smiles beatifically when she nods her approval.

Does that make Reshammiya a… yearner? He certainly ticks all the boxes. In fact, not only is he a yearner—he's the final boss of yearners. To yearn, by definition, is to intensely long for that which is unattainable. Reshammiya married Kapoor eight years ago; they live together; they spend most of their time together. And yet, he yearns for her as though they are separated by time and oceans. "That is the theme of my music too," the pop star agrees. "In all my videos and during my concerts, I'm holding the mic upward, not looking at the audience. Everyone around this man is dancing but he's only trying to speak to his lover through his songs. It's like Devdas in a club." Then, an Easter egg. "Sonia is the suroor of my life. Over 40 of my songs feature variations of her name: soni, soniye, sayyoni. It's all for her."

"In all my videos and during my concerts, I'm holding the mic upward, not looking at the audience. Everyone around this man is dancing but he's only trying to speak to his lover through his songs. It's like Devdas in a club"

Reshammiya knows how to love, but perhaps, more remarkably, he knows how to inspire love. He knows that the best way to make someone fall in love is to make them laugh. And there's little he won't do to amuse you, whether that's parodying himself lifting weights while performing on stage or gliding across the floor in a bodysuit that matches the tiles to steal a diamond in *Badass Ravi Kumar* (2025). You might think you're laughing *at* Reshammiya, but make no mistake; you're laughing *with* him. "*Badass Ravi Kumar* has the kind of quirkiness that lands well today. It's got that larger-than-life feel; however, it's very self-aware," he explains. "You can't fool Gen Z. They know these dialogues and music can't exist in the present. But if you specify that the film is set in a retro era, then you aren't challenging their intelligence. They appreciate that."

Reshammiya is unexpectedly eloquent. When I ask him a question, he does not rush to answer. I can see him mulling it over, the gears in his head turning until a thought has formed to his satisfaction. The more I talk to him, the more I realise he has the mind of a businessman, that his hyperbolic public persona is part of the act. He sees we love brainrot, so he gives us brainrot. He understands that to be cringe is to be free. 'Lord Himesh' he may be, but he is not above owning up to his mistakes. "When I started my singing career, people just decided that my voice was nasal, even though I tried to explain it was high-pitched. In 2006," he recalls, "Ashaji (Bhosle) said she wanted to slap me when I said that even RD Burman sang through his nose. I apologised because her anger was justified. What I actually wanted to point out is that when you touch those high notes, you tend to go nasal. It's very natural. In any case, once I accepted that my voice is nasal, nobody had a problem. If the public wants to brand me a certain way, I'll accept it. I'll make it my identity. Public sab jaanti hain."

Reshammiya has worn many caps over the course of his life, both literally—he has over 2,000 of them in his closet—and metaphorically. He was only 11 when he lost his brother and joined his music composer-producer father Vipin Reshammiya at work to help him cope with the grief of his son's death. "He just lost all interest in life and I felt like it was my responsibility to bring him back on track." By 16, he was producing mega-budget television serials that starred industry veterans Shekhar Suman, Farida Jalal, Prem Chopra, Neena Gupta and Om Puri. Still, his ultimate dream was to work with Salman Khan. "My father signed him, and though that film never got made, Mr Salman Khan promised my dad that he would give me a break." Khan kept his word and in 1998, Reshammiya made his debut as a composer in *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya*. "After I got into music, which was my real passion, I stopped making serials. Luckily, the songs I composed for *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya*, *Hello Brother* and *Tere Naam* were superhits right out of the gate. If they hadn't done well, I would've gone back to making serials."

When Reshammiya kicked off his singing career with *Aashiq Banaya Aapne* in 2005, it felt like the beginning of a collective psychosis. Suddenly, his voice was everywhere: blaring

Ribbed wool crewneck sweater, COS.

Local Objects poplin shirt and pants, DHRUV KAPOOR. *Coltrane sunglasses,* JOHN JACOBS. *Exaggerated-scale gloves,* LABEL ANURAG GUPTA. *Opposite page, on Himesh: Embroidered safari shirt, turn-up wool pants,* COUNTRYMADE. *Handcrafted cropped jacket,* DHRUV KAPOOR. *On Sonia: Silver Dusk blazer,* SIDDHANT AGRAWAL.

HAIR AND MAKEUP: ELENI CHATZINIKOLIDOU/ANIMA CREATIVES. BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATIMA. ART: SHAGUN JANGID. ASSISTED BY: NYASA THAKKAR, SARAH KIMHOFI SIMTE (STYLING); RUTU PATHAK (HAIR AND MAKEUP); JASLEEN NARANG (BOOKINGS).

CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE
Himesh Reshammiya's face breaks into a shy smile when his wife, Sonia Kapoor, pulls his leg on set.

out of lorry speakers, playing on a loop on car stereos, making roadside paan shops thump to the beat. The residents of Bhalej, a village in Gujarat, claimed that a man had become possessed after singing 'Jhalak Dikhla Ja' when the spirit misinterpreted the lyrics as an invitation to inhabit his body. India TV ran a segment claiming that aliens were so enamoured by the singer's pipes that they wanted to abduct him. Deepika Padukone made her acting debut, not opposite Shah Rukh Khan in *Om Shanti Om* (2007), as many assume, but being heartbroken over Reshammiya in the music video for 'Naam Hai Tera' in 2006. It was all going splendidly—songs like 'Mujhko Yaad Sataye Teri' from *Phir Hera Pheri*, 'Aashiqui Mein Teri' from *36 China Town* and 'Viraaniya' from *Namastey London* became instant earworms—until he lost 20 kilograms and decided to cosplay as Jay Gatsby in *The Xpose* (2014).

That puzzled his fans. Why would Himesh Reshammiya, the successful singer, sink his star by trying to be Himesh Reshammiya, the struggling actor? He once again takes a deep pause before responding, but Sonia beats him to it. "Let me answer that by painting a picture of what a day in our life looks like," she grins. "We begin our morning at 10 by talking about films; 11.30, we're still talking about films; 1pm, we're eating lunch and talking about films; 3pm, we are talking about different genres of films; 5pm, we're talking about actors; 7pm, we're talking about scripts. Himesh," she smiles teasingly, "is obsessed with the movies. His mother told me he started reading *Trade Guide* when he was four. Once," she continues, looking at him with twinkling eyes like he's four again, "he travelled to Hong Kong with his parents as a child, and his mother told him to get dressed to go out. Himesh said, 'I can't come anywhere because *Amar Akbar Anthony* is going to air on television so I must dress up like Rishi Kapoor in 'Tayyab Ali Pyar Ka Dushman' and watch the film.' Even today, when we go on holiday, he says, 'Sonu, let's sit in the hotel room and watch movies.'" "Or talk about movies," Reshammiya corrects her, adding, "but I always take her shopping." "And there also we talk about movies," Sonia delivers the final blow, rolling her eyes at her husband playfully. He puts his hands up in resignation. "I don't know what else to talk about. I have this soul connection with movies. But I need to change because I also want to do what she likes."

And isn't that what love is? To meet halfway. To have the freedom to go on the occasional side quest. Reshammiya gives us so much as a composer and singer. "I compose one song a day as a rule," he tells me. "I play it to a core group of 100 people. If they like it, I take it into my stock of tunes. Otherwise, I forget about it. But I have a bank of 10,000 songs." He wants to go international and has worked on about 17 English songs that he hopes will get him there. He's preparing to take the Cap Mania Tour "to every city in the world". Last year, he became the first Indian to feature on Bloomberg's global pop power list alongside the likes of Coldplay, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé and Katseye. His 2006 album *Aap Kaa Surroor* is the second-highest-selling album worldwide after Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. So if he wants to sing 'Dil Ke Taj Mahal Meinn' on the dunes of Muscat while locked in a dance-off with Prabhu Deva, I'd say he's earned it.

Hand-painted iron tray, ₹15,705,
LES-OTTOMANS.

HORO SCOPE WATER

CANCER

Blessings are arriving your way, Cancer. All that work, patience and persistence that you have poured into your life so diligently are now beginning to bear fruit. You are stepping into the real reason of your arrival on this planet and you are alchemising into gold. There may have once been a time when you needed some angel dust in your life, but look at you today—you have transformed, very humbly, into this angel dust yourself. Strike that balance, be judicious with your energy and remember that you must continue to love yourself before you love others.

SCORPIO

You've done the groundwork and you're ageing like fine wine. This is a time when spring sets in motion not only around you but also within you. If you feel like something has run its course, move on with a grateful heart while acknowledging all it did for you. Remember that nothing ever goes to waste. You must be willing to let yourself be seen for exactly who you are. That is the real deal. That is what your journey has been about all along.

PISCES

There is a fine line between illusion and imagination, and Pisces, you are being nudged to pay attention to it. Endings may be imminent but so are beginnings. The best way to wade through these waters is by bringing your focus to what is at hand instead of scampering about to make everything happen all at once. Yes, sometimes deadlines and checklists can feel overwhelming, but would you have it any other way? You are not changing who you are. You are simply graduating through the different stages in life.

Text by SNEHAA KHANNA SAHGAL.

HORO SCOPE AIR

GEMINI

The cosmos is asking you if you've still got it. What will your answer be, Gemini? Whichever kind of liberation you choose to seek out, you have some real love and abundant energy flowing through your life. This is something you've done before, and if you really set your mind to it, you could be in a very different space by the time Gemini season arrives. Are you ready for it?

LIBRA

Take it all in, but a little bit at a time. Just because you can do something doesn't mean you have to do it. Even the lion rests when it does not need to hunt, yet it remains the undefeated king of the jungle. Your life may have felt off balance for a bit but this could be the perfect time to focus a little bit of your attention on yourself. Honour your emotions as much as you comply with your logic. Stability is not found, it is built—and all components are equally important in doing so.

AQUARIUS

You're coming full circle, Aquarius. You have likely been through the wringer lately, but look at you now, emerging more self-aware, actualised and even more explicit about your needs and wants. Your memories and innate skills are nudging you to go in directions you may finally feel ready for. Your experiences have taught you enough and you needn't wait for another degree to let yourself explore your desires and dreams. Spend time talking to yourself and unravelling your next best steps.

'Totem Lumineux', ₹27,00,000,
LOUIS VUITTON.

'Edgar' oval tray, ₹31,139, L'OBJET.

HORO SCOPE EARTH

TAURUS

Get back to the ABCs, Taurus. To a time when you loved to get lost in the sunshine and chase the butterflies—a more innocent and heartfelt period when everything felt deep, alive and possible. Build up your team, gather support and resources and perhaps try reaching a consensus to make this situation move forward. Is it impossible? Not at all. But is this something that requires that you think and act differently? Most definitely. So figure your way out of this 'triwizard tournament' of a life situation and grab your 'portkey' to the winning post.

CAPRICORN

The happier your thoughts, the better your vibe. This doesn't mean that you have to be happy and smiling all the time; however, it's a cue for you to look for the silver lining as much as you can. In a realm of infinite possibilities, you got here by being exactly who you are. Give yourself some credit; cut yourself a little slack. And keep a bank of the moments that made you think: This is it. When you feel a downswing approaching, relive these memories to pick yourself back up again.

VIRGO

If overcome with fear, expect only the best to conspire—and when you cannot expect the best, summon your guides for a quick boost. When something daunting surrounds you, stare it in the face with the softest expression you can conjure up—not because it doesn't scare you but because there is nothing a little faith and tons of resilience cannot overcome. Fears and insecurities are often like children; when they throw tantrums, a firm, grounded, loving presence calms them a lot faster than tough love. Give yourself some of this and simplify your life as much as you possibly can.

HORO SCOPE FIRE

ARIES

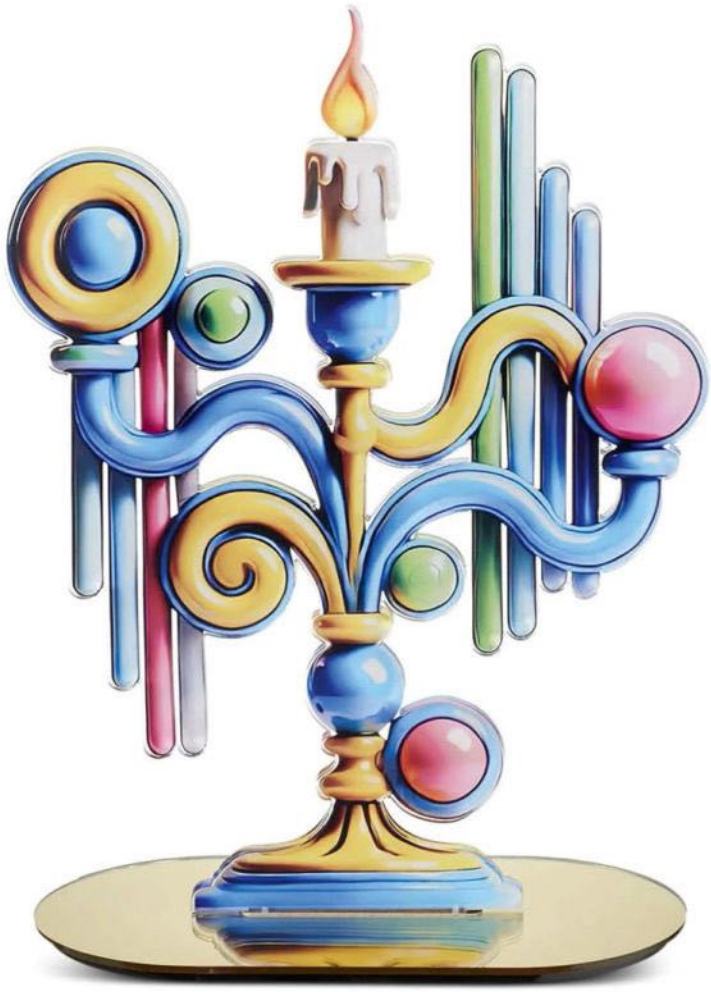
Family, friends and relationships—you thrive in them, Aries. You realise that the more laughter you share, the more value you add to your years. Bringing the focus back onto you, make self- and body-care your primary foundations. Be it exercising, eating right, spending a few peaceful moments by yourself or anything else, you have got to create space and time for these as they are the building blocks for the time ahead of you. The lighter your baggage in life, the quicker your footsteps will be.

LEO

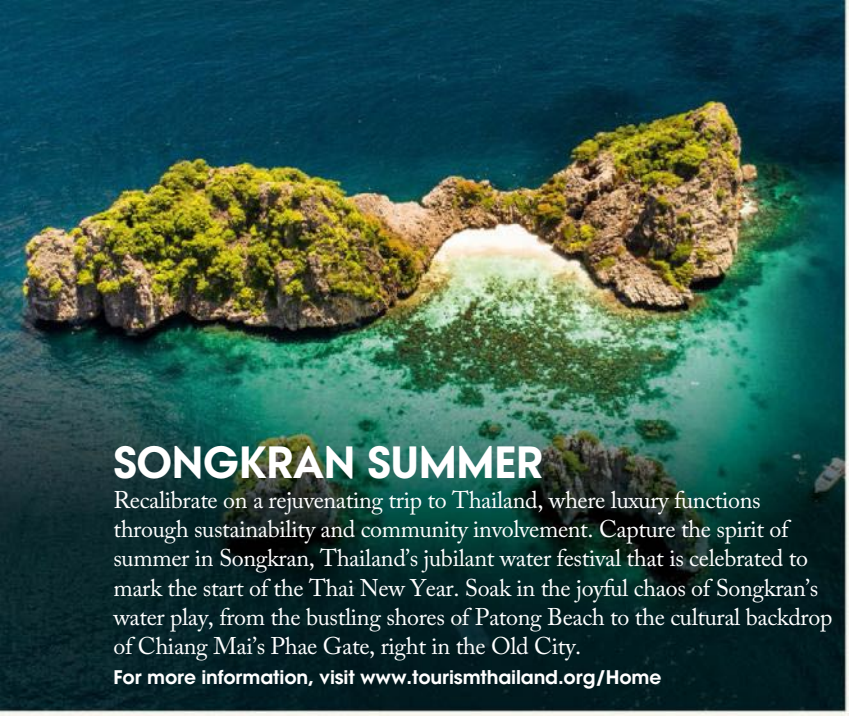
You don't need answers right away, Leo—take your time. Just because you can fix things doesn't mean you need to be the only one to fix them or that you must continue to fix them the way you always have. You are also likely to find answers in nature—so adopt that plant, spend time with your pet, go for that walk in the forest and do anything that helps you connect with nature. The more you silence your mind, the more you will be able to hear the whispers of the cosmos. Reclaim your scattered energy and rejuvenate yourself.

SAGITTARIUS

There's a burning question in your heart and the cosmic answer to it is: yes. You only need to cross the shallow stream to get to the other side and you will realise how easy it was all along. When we feel stuck, often it is because we are focused on the things that set us apart from others. However, when you choose to focus on what brings you together with someone—shared interests, tiny quirks or simply the way you perceive certain things—you not only build bridges but also overcome hurdles swiftly and easily. Try focusing on this for a bit for your insight to arrive.



'Candelabro Candy Pop Uno', ₹7,725,
LINEE RECANATI.



SONGKRAN SUMMER

Recalibrate on a rejuvenating trip to Thailand, where luxury functions through sustainability and community involvement. Capture the spirit of summer in Songkran, Thailand's jubilant water festival that is celebrated to mark the start of the Thai New Year. Soak in the joyful chaos of Songkran's water play, from the bustling shores of Patong Beach to the cultural backdrop of Chiang Mai's Phae Gate, right in the Old City.

For more information, visit www.tourismthailand.org/Home

QUIET LUXURY

Founded in 1931, Mehta & Sons observes the motto 'Tested By Time', reflecting a legacy of trusted craftsmanship. The Kala Ghoda atelier carries this heritage forward in a contemporary setting shaped around intimate experiences. From brides to those who see jewellery as art, every visit is curated around the individual. The space brings together jewellery, art, and conversation in a way that feels personal and unhurried.

Experience the Kala Ghoda atelier. Private viewings by appointment only

TIMELESS ALLURE

Emporio Armani's AR11704 rectangular dress watch reflects classic sophistication through a contemporary lens. The sunray grey dial, framed by a crystal-embellished dual tone case and Roman numeral markers, and finished with a stainless steel bracelet makes it the ideal piece for moments of subtle glamour and lasting allure.

For more information, visit www.watchstationindia.com

Vogue DIARY

We bring you the best in luxury and fashion

DESIRE MEETS CRAFT

Ratiaranya by Abhishek Sharma is a poetic couture collection inspired by desire, nature, and quiet awakening. Fluid drapes, sculpted surfaces, and contoured silhouettes come to life through skilled handwork. Conceived as modern heirlooms, each piece flows naturally with the body, celebrating individuality through the seamless blend of craftsmanship, elegance, and personal expression.

For more information, visit www.abhisheksharmastudio.com

ART INHABITED

The Blue Knot's work takes shape through A Living Canvas, a collaborative campaign that treats art as something to inhabit, not just observe. Set within Kalakaar's art salon in New Delhi, the brand's rugs and cushions settle naturally into the space, grounding it with warmth, presence, and ease.

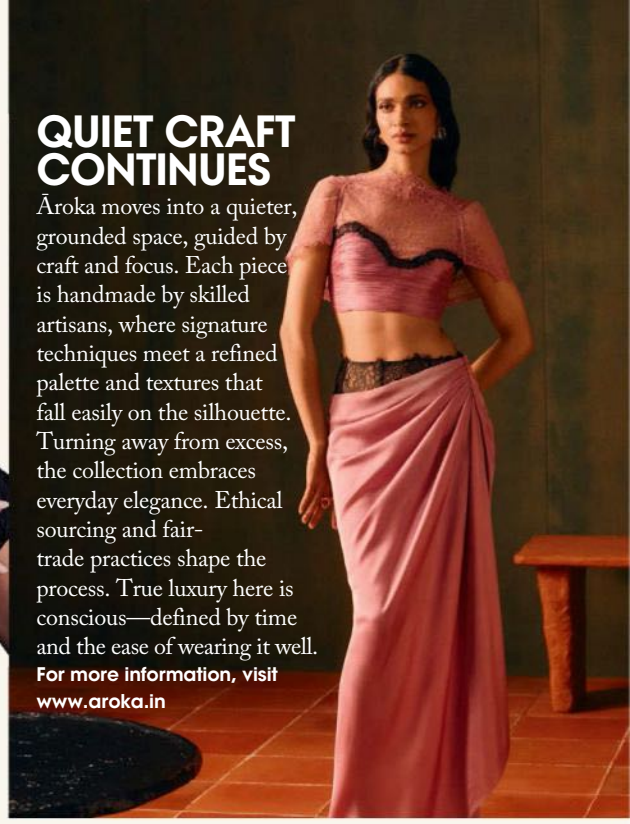
For more information, visit www.blueknot.com

PERPETUAL RADIANCE

Crafted in Europe and designed for everyday elegance, the Zen Pirlanta collection redefines the modern solitaire through refined craftsmanship and timeless design. Seen on global icon and brand ambassador Jennifer Lopez, Zen Diamonds reflect contemporary luxury vision, shaped by a heritage expressed across 450+ stores worldwide.

For more information, visit www.india.zendiamond.com

QUIET CRAFT CONTINUES



Āroka moves into a quieter, grounded space, guided by craft and focus. Each piece is handmade by skilled artisans, where signature techniques meet a refined palette and textures that fall easily on the silhouette. Turning away from excess, the collection embraces everyday elegance. Ethical sourcing and fair-trade practices shape the process. True luxury here is conscious—defined by time and the ease of wearing it well.

For more information, visit www.aroka.in

AS THE ROMANS DO

At Grand Hyatt's Cena Pranzo in Gurgaon, guests find themselves feasting on the finest that Italian cuisine has to offer. The restaurant practices the Italian philosophy of celebrating seasonal flavours and sourcing authentic ingredients. Indulging in Italy's timeless culinary traditions, chef Mauro Ferrari's menu showcases the essence of Italian gastronomy in a lively, communal atmosphere.

For more information,visit www.grandhyattgurgaon.com or call +91 124 503 1234

A QUIET KIND OF POWER

Farah Khan Fine Jewellery believes each piece is more than an accessory—it is a personal treasure. Crafted in-house with emphasis on quality, precision, and detailing, every design reflects the brand's commitment to enduring craftsmanship. Made to be worn and cherished for years, the brand opens its new boutique in Fort, Mumbai, this March 2026, marking a new chapter.

For more information, visit www.farahkhanworld.com or call +91 7685000045

A NEW CHAPTER IN DINING

Nestled in the Aravalli hills, The Leela Palace Jaipur reimagines dining with a strong sense of place and artistry. Five distinctive restaurants bring the palace alive–from starlit evenings at The Amber Terrace to intimate, candlelit dinners at Jamavar. Expect regional Indian flavours, modern Asian plates, Mediterranean accents, and finely crafted cocktails, woven together through thoughtful design, live music, and warm service. The experience honours tradition while embracing the rhythm of modern luxury travel.

For more information, visit www.leela.com

WOVEN LEGACY

Shravan Kummar marks 25 years of Indian craftsmanship with a special collection for Margazhi '26, his seasonal line for the 2026 winter/festive season. Featuring handwoven Kanchi and Banarasi sarees paired with diamond jewellery, each piece is an heirloom. Designed to be worn, cherished, and passed down through generations, the collection balances ceremonial grandeur with a modern sensibility—celebrating tradition, artistry, and timeless elegance.

Discover the collection at Shravan Kummar flagship store at Hyderabad or follow @shravankummar on Instagram

JEWEL OF JAIPUR

In November 2025, Anantara Jewel Bagh Jaipur Hotel celebrated its first anniversary as one of Rajasthan's most compelling sustainability-driven luxury escapes. From signature dining experiences and holistic wellness journeys at the Anantara Spa to upcoming initiatives celebrating Rajasthan's cultural heritage, the hotel continues to craft immersive luxury experiences rooted in tradition.

For more information, visit www.anantara.com/en/jewel-bagh-jaipur or call +91 14131 29129

HAIR COLOUR INNOVATION

iNOA, L'Oréal Professionnel's no ammonia permanent hair colour is powered by a high-performance formula with ODS² (Oil Delivery System) technology. Acting as a powerful color engine, it provides optimal scalp comfort and grey coverage, with high-shine results. The range offers a wide palette of 44 shades, delivering desired hair colour and respecting hair health.

Ask your L'Oréal Professionnel hairdresser and get your iNOA hair color transformation in-salon today

Vogue DIARY

REFINED EASE FOR EVERYDAY URBAN LIVING

UNIQLO : C Spring/Summer 2026 collection prioritises your comfort and ease—wherever the day leads. Designed by Clare Waight Keller, the collection moves with you–accompanied by soft tailoring, relaxed fabrics, and effortless layering. Calm, coordinated colours shift gently in tone, while clean silhouettes make it easy to dress from early mornings to late evenings in the city.

For more information, visit www.uniqlo.com

AN INTERFAITH WEDDING CELEBRATION

Luxury wedding planners Kkings Events curated Elizabeth and Nikhil Vazirani's Indian-English wedding at The Oberoi Udaivilas, Udaipur, translating the couple's global journey into an elevated celebration. With bespoke design, culturally inclusive storytelling, and refined craftsmanship, every detail reflected the couple's spirit—delivered through Kkings' signature luxury statement.

For more information, follow @kkingsevents on Instagram

FABRIC OF SOCIETY

Located in the heart of Jaipur, Nila House preserves and celebrates India's rich and diverse craft traditions, with a special focus on handmade textiles and natural dyes. From cultivating indigo to nurturing communities of artisans, Nila House brings together farmers, spinners, and weavers to create collections that showcase the best the land has to offer.

For more information, visit www.nilajaipur.com

THREADS OF TIME

Pashmkaar honours Kashmiri heritage through Shahbanoo, a collection shaped by the rare, time-intensive art of Sozni hand embroidery. Crafted over the last few years, each piece carries more than three million precise stitches, guided by skilled artisans. Singular and unrepeatable, these creations move beyond trends, becoming modern heirlooms—made to be worn with reverence and passed down through generations as symbols of patience, skill, and cultural continuity.

For more information, follow @pashmkaar on Instagram

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Signature of Publisher

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Omega Connaught Place,
New Delhi, 011-41513255
(www.omegawatches.com)
Patek Philippe (www.patek.com)
Piaget Bandra West,
Mumbai, 09773233333
(www.piaget.com)
Rolex Jio World Plaza,
Mumbai, 08928686155 (www.rolex.com)
Swarovski Phoenix Palladium,
Mumbai, 08655840081
(www.swarovski.com)

CULTURE & LIVING
L'Objet (www.l-objet.com)
Les-Ottomans (www.les-ottomans.com)
Linee Recanati (www.lineerecanati.com)
Louis Vuitton DLF Emporio,
New Delhi, 18001039988
(www.louisvuitton.com)

The merchandise featured editorially has been ordered at the above stores. Some shops may carry a selection only. Prices and availability were checked at the time of going to press. But we cannot guarantee that prices will not change or that specific items will be in stock when the magazine is published. We suggest that before visiting a shop you call to make sure they have your size.

Turtleneck cape, denims, DIOR. *Time Capsule earrings,* GOLDEN GAZELLE. *Double emerald ring,* HANUT SINGH.

BIKRAMJIT BOSE.

Swept away

A summer passed in garden picnics: think scarves drawn low over sun-dazed eyes, lying in the grass with friends while the breeze carries the afternoon along.

Green clover scarf, Book Cover 70 square scarf, both price on request, DIOR.

ALIZA FATMA.

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