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CRITICAL SHOPPER | SOIGNE K

Cue the Sitar, Cast the Petals

By CINTRA WILSON

RECENTLY, when interviewing potential Web-site fixers who responded to an ad I had place on Craigslist, I met Gargi Shinde, a scholarly concert sitarist so ridiculously overqualified, I hired her on the spot.

I asked Gargi, who hails from Mumbai, to accompany me to Soigne K, a new boutique opened by the jewelry designer Soigné Kothari and devoted to designers from India and updated takes on the sari, because I hoped she would fill in a few of the more obvious holes in my head. I had tried to give her a silk sari I'd kept for years, but she politely demurred; pale yellow is apparently something only elderly Indian women wear, and my taste in saris is tragically unhip.



With Gargi thus anointed the expert, and me her primitive native guide, we ventured deep into the tangled necklaces and gilded lilies of darkest Madison Avenue.

I read too much into the window display. On one side: clumpy matte-gray sequined leggings. On the other side: a geometrical minidress that I thought had been ingeniously wrought out of tri-colored lentils as a kind of post-colonial dialogue of equilibrium, perhaps describing a parity of esteem between lentils and sequins. (The ladies in the shop laughed their asafetidas off about that one. No, they're just beads, they giggled, as I skulked oh-so-blondly over to a rack to try to find a funeral pyre to throw myself onto.)

I felt like a culturally myopic New York hickweed for not being aware of these Indian designers sooner. The pieces are superbly novel without being so alien as to cause distress or confusion. I tried on a whole lot of them, in a rare blast of sartorial enthusiasm.

I went especially ape for Prashant Verma, a young designer given to revamped nostalgic lines in photo-printed silk-satin. I tried a backless halter dress in bright ocher with chrome hot-rod pistons arranged down the front like the robot from "Metropolis" (\$420). Mr. Verma, who trained

with Philip Treacy and Alexander McQueen, was also responsible for the best of show: a flared opera tailcoat in black silk-satin with a jagged industrial pattern in iodine red (\$1,065).

Gargi recognized an off-white caftan by Tarun Tahiliani.

“Ah,” she said. “This is the kind of stuff older Frenchwomen wear.”



She pointed out an example of chikan embroidery: a paisley made of tiny teardrop-shaped holes, created by pulling nearly imperceptible strands of silk and separating them. This kind of miniaturized detail always looks like torture to me. I wondered if the seamstresses needed eyeball replacements at the age of 25, like ballerinas need new hip joints.

We jogged upstairs to look at the more expensive stuff: spangled bridal and evening wear straight out of the “Arabian Nights.”

While the downstairs designs looked comfortable in Western and Asian settings, the top floor was all-out Indian bling: traditional saris that had run away to Vegas and married gold lamé to wild animal prints, blinding brocade and iridescent bugle beads. A feathery selection by Falguni & Shane Peacock might have been Bob Mackie for Cher, but the rest: strictly for the warrior princess of Liberacestan.

“It all seems very Padma,” I said, reminded of Padma Lakshmi, Salman Rushdie’s comely ex-wife.

“It’s very nouveau riche,” Gargi agreed. “Very Bollywood.”

“It’s like they didn’t know when to quit ... and where did they get this?” she lamented, singling out an embroidered frog fastener for being obviously machine made. (I wouldn’t have guessed.)

I found it all pretty dreamy. I wanted to be at that royal wedding party, surrounded by twinkling saris, with sitar music and an indoor pool with candles and orange rose petals and Padma floating on top.

Gargi explained that her personal style is fairly uptight; the traditional Indian analog to a super-conservative Kennedy family, Brooks Brothers look. She liked a subdued three-quarter-length A-line Tahiliani vest-dress with traditional soof (translation: “neat and clean”) embroidery: single-stitch designs over a classic block print.

“Aww, come on,” I whined. “That’s so dowdy. It makes you look like you’re teaching Cultivation of Mung Beans for the Single Mother at U.C. Berkeley.”



I chided her into trying on an accordion-pleated turquoise silk halter-dress covered with printed gems and a rhinestone collar from the Pria Kataria Puri collection (\$425). It was a raving compliment to her shape and coloring; she seemed suddenly lighted by a team of magic-hour cinematographers. I thought she should buy it, but it was too many miles from her comfort zone.

She did, however, keep gravitating back to the Prashant satin tailcoat, admiring its beautiful cut in the mirror and sighing.

IF the talent and ingenuity of these “new” designers are any indication, it’s really only a matter of months until American college graduates are answering telephones in South Asia and learning to stitch chikan. For the moment, I may find astonishing employees on Craigslist, and a cat may look at a queen.

But not for long, I bet.

To paraphrase a writer from another collapsing empire. You’re a better gal than I am, Gargi Shinde.

Soigne K

717 Madison Avenue (near 63rd Street);
(212) 486-2890.



SWANEE Soigné Kothari brings a mountain of sumptuous Indian designers to Madison Avenue with a low-key, softly thumping trance soundtrack and a laid-back staff.

SWAMI The designs are rich — Gaurav Gupta goddess dresses resemble bright variations of Rick Owens Lilies — but prices are modest enough (\$575) to seem ... outsourced. F.Y.I.: The stuff is cut for small ladies, so don’t cringe when you reach for an L.

CALL YOUR MOMMY These ain’t your mama’s saris: pre-draped classics with easy-fit zippers up the side mean no more crying bridesmaids in the ladies’ lounge at Trump Taj Mahal.

Soigne K, at 717 Madison Avenue, NYC, was leased by Faith Hope Consolo and Joseph Aquino of Prudential Douglas Elliman's Retail Group.
