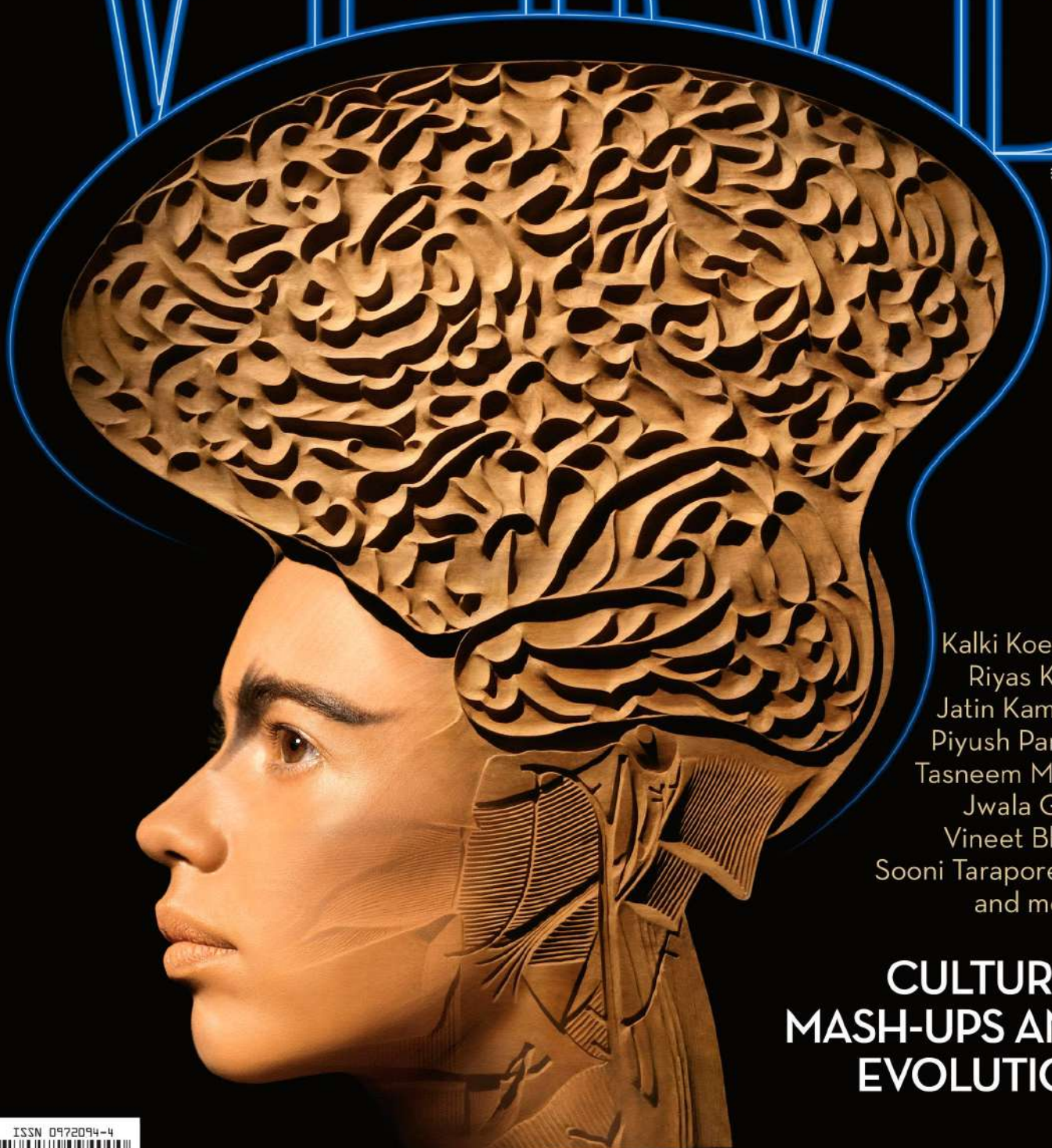


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GENE JUNCTION: COLETTE AUSTIN

Text by Huzan Tata. Photographs By Tejal Pandey

Cosmetics entrepreneur Colette Austin talks about her multicultural roots and her organic beauty brand, The Skin Pantry



"My mixed heritage allows me to be multidimensional and multifaceted."

How many people can you find who'd have fascinating family stories from World War II (WWII) as well as the apartheid? For Mumbai-based Colette Austin, whose ancestry reads like a geography textbook — with a British father of Austrian, Italian, French and English heritage and an Indian-born British mother of Khasi (Meghalaya), Assamese, Bengali and Scottish descent — life has been nothing short of learning experiences from the world over. The journey of the owner of the organic beauty brand, The Skin Pantry, is a sum of many tales.

One world for all

"My mother was born and raised in Shillong, Meghalaya, which essentially has a tribal and matrilineal culture. She instilled in us the belief that women are absolutely on par with men. My father, a WWII veteran, was born in Egypt and immigrated to the UK where he lived till the war broke out in Europe. Having seen death and destruction at such an early age, he was averse to boundaries, segregation and racism of any kind. Both my parents made India their home — where I learnt about the importance of family and looking after my parents as they aged, and found a deep sense of spirituality."

Learning lessons

"My parents instilled in me the importance of freedom. They never interfered with the choices I made, even if they didn't agree with them. I was allowed to make my own mistakes."

Linguistic proficiency

"I speak English, Hindi, Khasi, a bit of French, and enough German to get by."

The 'beige' factor

"I was about 10 years old, when my family was on a cruise from Europe to Africa. One of the ports of call was Durban in South Africa, where the apartheid was still on. As the ship docked, passengers could get off to explore the city. The segregation meant that there were separate coaches for dark-skinned and white-skinned people. My mum had dark skin, and my parents were told to board separate coaches on the basis of colour. Furious, my dad approached the port authorities, requesting that we travel together as a family. When they refused, he sarcastically asked, 'And where do my beige little children go?' I'll never forget that. The question he asked stuck with me all my life. Back home, I never understood the caste, colour and community divide that still exists today...but as bad as the news reports get every day, I know a change is coming."

Multicultural cocktail

"When the roots are so diverse, it's impossible to be 'rooted'. My mixed heritage allows me to be multidimensional and multifaceted. It allows for experimentation, flexibility, acceptance and openness, which paves the way for new experiences, influences and exchanges."

Way forward

"I want to make The Skin Pantry India's most popular organic beauty brand."

Tags: Colette Austin, Cosmetics Entrepreneur, Featured, Gene Junction, People, The Skin Pantry
