

LIGHT THE FUSE

In fashion opposites attract but blends are beautiful



The Haitian/Italian designer Stella Jean follows what she dubs a “wax and stripes” philosophy: she marries the wax fabrics from her mother’s Haiti with the striped shirting from her father’s Italy. And as in a modern-day marriage, these elements – the ‘folk’ and the ‘urbane’ – function as equal partners. “I want to communicate through clothes a concept of opposite worlds and traditions fusing together in a sophisticated way and standing side by side with equal importance, not covering the other up,” Jean told *The Telegraph* in January.

Indeed, Jean’s exuberant use of colour, mismatched print and nostalgic silhouette showcases the designer’s dual ancestry. But she also plays with the tension between colonial Europe and colonized Haiti, pairing 50s-era ladylike wasp waists and full skirts with generously knotted head ties and bustier dresses over tees and blouses, all in beautiful fabrics. Her clothes evoke a sense of spirit and place, a location that is not immediately identifiable in its hybridity, yet feels like Jean is coming ‘home’.

There’s a ‘virtue of necessity’ quality to Jean’s approach; as in Haiti, where much of the country’s clothing arrives in donations from the United States, ‘matching’ gives way to the ‘mix’. So Jean pairs red gingham with geometric prints, horizontal stripes, and a large bird print, all in the same ensemble. She references both the Haitian karabela dress and the New Look, uniting them through a bold eruption of colour and pattern.

Stella Jean is one of several designers currently reinventing fashion’s approach to ‘folk’ and multicultural influence in order to honor the concept of ‘place’. Aneeth Arora, who is based in New Delhi, India, also looks to her cultural roots via her

collections for Péro. Arora creates smocks, light-weight voluminous dresses, as well as scarves, and recognizes that her clothing gets its 'Indian-ness' from a communal process.

For S/S 2014, Péro takes a 'dot' – what Arora calls “a most basic form” – and follows its interpretation by craftspeople from different regions. As the textile passes through the hands of various artisans on its journey from fabric to garment, the process gives it meaning and shape. And although her clothing reflects local techniques and traditions, Arora believes that the resulting garments make the Péro woman a citizen of the world, someone who would feel at home in Paris, London or India.

For Stella Jean and Aneeth Arora such blends draw on their lived experience, but in other cases emphasis on place and culture can give rise to questions. Should a designer who does not have roots in a particular location or tradition draw on it for inspiration? Does this practice amount to cultural appropriation? For many the line falls between respectful celebration of beauty in its many forms and clumsy caricature. But as journalist Chimene Suleyman points out on her blog, in an era when lingerie giant Victoria's Secret still chooses to send blonde models down the runway in bra, knickers and a Native American “war bonnet”, designers should tread carefully if they seek to walk in another's shoes.

It's a point some find hard to understand. After all if the food world can create delicious fusions, why not fashion? The comparison might be more helpful than it sounds. Perhaps blending is key. Australian Alice McCall has spent years working internationally as a stylist, developing a global eye. Her S/S 2012 ▶





line was inspired not only by Kate Bush's 1980 song "Babooshka", but also by Art Nouveau and stained-glass windows from Budapest. The results engage both folk art and formal illustration, with a hint of the sacred. McCall imagines Russian-doll prints, interpreted via a Morris or Voysey line, as well as through a stained-glass pattern repeat. This tripartite influence prevents one element from overwhelming McCall's designs; even though the collection title references 'babushka', the clothes do not imitate, but represent a dialogue among countries, eras and art, all with McCall's characteristic 'cool-girl' edge.

For twin sisters Tamara and Natasha Surguladze behind the label Tata Naka, 'place' might be a beautifully appointed parlour with an interior that offers a window to the world. Their AW 2014 collection looks to Asian-inspired wallpaper, carpets, porcelain and tiles, as well as paintings by Matisse. In their lookbook models pose against a backdrop of wallpaper and carpet; sometimes the prints clash, at other times they match the paper repeats precisely, redefining 'wallflower'. Matisse himself was influenced by Japanese prints: his *Odalisque in Red Trousers* shows a woman reclining against a floral screen. Tata Naka follows the artist's lead and also dips into the same palette, applying strokes of golden saffron and sage green to their clothes.

These multicultural conversations extend beyond clothing; if Tata Naka draws on decoration to make dresses, the artists behind Eley Kishimoto use prints to breathe new energy into classic objects and shapes. Mark Eley and Wakako Kishimoto, the British and Japanese husband-and-wife team, embrace the motto "Print the World", and their strong, geometric prints have been used by fashion

designers, on home furnishings, and even on BMW motorcycles. Recently they lent their graphics to Clarks' iconic Desert Boot, bringing an unexpected whimsy, even a superhero vibe, to a venerable, almost two-century-old British shoe company.

Multicultural collaborations within established labels can revitalize the line. Kenzo – the Japanese company begun by Kenzo Takada in 1970 – is currently designed by two Californians, Humberto Leon and Carol Lim, also the founders of Opening Ceremony, which offers contemporary, modern clothes. Leon and Lim's friendship began when they met at the University of California Berkeley, and they bring to Kenzo's Summer 2014 collection a thoughtful urban/oceanside hybridity – a West Coast version of 'folk'.

Into Kenzo's traditional colourblocking the duo integrate L.A.'s modern glass architecture via plexiglass joints in a shoe; beach motifs through sequined, embroidered waves; environmentalism via melted-fish prints; all informed by the "California cool" of L.A.'s underground music scene. There's a friendly tension between the laid-back folk-inspired embellishments and the strong shapes; the eye travels as the references come in and out of focus, but settles at 'home' as 'folk' and modernity merge.

'Folk', then, as represented by print, pattern and a noticeable sense of place, is being reimagined and repurposed by this group of designers. Hybridity characterizes the 21st century, and its reach effortlessly extends to high fashion as Stella Jean and her peers fuse multiple traditions to create a new, inclusive one. And as the work of these designers show, opposites not only attract; they are attractive. ●●● **Kate Cavendish**

