

Stitching a legacy

Was born in a family which started embroidery in 1860. We have always been travellers — my grandfather went to Chicago at the age of 19, my father went to Hollywood at the age of 18 and I, to India, at the age of 19 for the first time, and finally settled in Chennai (formerly called Madras) at 27. I have been staying in the city for 20 years now.

When I came to India during my early days, I was struck to see that the same tradition of embroidery existed in both India and France. It was passed on to these countries from China and Persia during the 12th century.

I decided to continue with my family legacy and embroideries here in India, and found a language to express myself.

I got the idea to create a workshop, along with my associates, where local craftsmen would really be the nucleus of the project. Vastrakala was the outcome. The role of the managers, including mine, was only to frame their talent, to give them a solid base to express themselves and continue to produce beautiful handmade embroideries as they have been doing for over two centuries. I knew it would be successful as luxury products across the world. Today, we supply to places ranging from palaces in France to operas, museums and mansions across the planet and very often, our embroideries co-exist with the most exquisite paintings and artworks.

The project we have started in Chennai is helping people to rediscover embroidery and its multiple facets. People come to see what we do at Vastrakala — ministers, film stars, royalty, millionaires besides extremely normal and humble people express equal shock and surprise to discover the manner in which our artisans are able to create extraordinary embroidered work, day after day and year after year.

When I started living in Chennai, it took me some time to understand it as compared to understanding the other

parts of the country I knew. Chennai has a very specific identity.

Now, Chennai has become home to me because this is where I work with extraordinary artisans from Sriperumbudur, the place where I found my Indian associates who have been my friends for 20 years.

This is the city where people smile most of the time. This is where, when people are educated, they are extremely educated. It is a place where you discover some of the oldest traces of Indian history. It's at the same time a huge metropolis and a giant village. It is a hospitable, welcoming place. People understand excellence.

When I set foot in India, embroidery was perceived to be a sort of ethnic craft and nobody at that time really believed that India could manufacture high quality products. What has drastically changed is that in any field pertaining to creation and design, India is no longer perceived as a place for inexpensive labour; India is a place where people source highly crafted products too.

In Chennai, like anywhere else in India, everything takes time. Sometimes it looks complicated but everything is possible. There is a feeling of freedom which helps enterprise. There is a comprehension for team spirit and there is a pleasure of achieving things together which has given me enormous energy to push our professional projects from six embroiderers 20 years ago to 150 today, and I am not sure that it would have been possible anywhere else in the world.

What I know is that this is the place where I found myself, this is the place where I can achieve what I want. ○



Jean-Francois Lesage

belongs to the fourth generation of a family of traditional embroiderers in France. The House of Lesage, founded in 1862, were the embroiderers for Napoleon III and his court; his father, Francois Lesage, supplied embroidery to the best couture houses — Balenciaga, Christian Dior, Yves St. Laurent, to name a few. Nearly 20 years back, Jean-Francois Lesage found his calling in Chennai and started Vastrakala, a hand embroidery craft company. It employs local craftsmen and trains them to create embroidery fit for the kings. His clients include the rich and the famous.



A reproduction of Napoleon's throne done by the craftsmen of Vastrakala