

Auromode eyes the Indian market

Auromode specialises in manufacturing fashion garments and accessories made of silk, cotton, linen and natural viscose. But unlike many of Auroville's garment design units, Auromode's focus is on mass-production. "We provide work to 150 people, producing over 2,500 pieces a month," explains Prema, who has been running Auromode since 1986. "We work for clients in India and abroad. Most clients want their own designs executed; some like us to help finalize their designs." Auromode also designs its own products, which it sells in boutiques in Pondicherry, Auroville and Chennai.

"Quality and pricing are the main issues of today's international market," says Prema. "Quality demands have gone up. There is increasing competition, mainly from China. The quality of their raw materials, such as linen and silk, is often better and cheaper than that which is made in India. We were already undertaking a meticulous quality control of our raw materials and of our finished products, but we needed to intensify it. Things that were accepted in the past, such as a weaving mistake in

silk, are no longer acceptable today. The market has forced us to pay attention to every detail to ensure that our products meet the highest international standards.

"The European market has become challenging, with its stress on quality and its demand for low prices, and with the increasing competition. Our products are often seen as expensive, even though our pricing hasn't changed much over the last five years." The development is slightly worrying. "Our clients cannot increase their prices, so we cannot pass on the increase in our wages and raw material prices which are well over 20%. That cuts sharply into our profit margins," explains Prema.

For these reasons Auromode's market is gradually shifting to India, which on its way to becoming the world's fifth-largest consumer market. The Indian middle class, estimated to be 300 million people, is fast becoming used to Western culture. American-style shopping malls, built in all the main Indian cities, now offer high-couture western fashion brand products. "We used to export 70%, and sell about 30% of our products in India. But in the near future, the Indian markets will dominate," predicts Prema.

Aiming for the perfect paper product

"We want to express beauty. It was the main reason why we started Auroville Papers," says Luisa, one of the executives. "It was at a time, in 1995, that our parent company Auroville Press was looking to expand its work to create stability. My late partner Serge felt that manufacturing handmade paper would be a good complement. So we started making handmade paper, just like they do at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram."

"But we soon developed other products," says Hervé. "One day, a heart-shaped baubinia leaf fell down on the soft paper pulp. When we took it out, we noticed it had left a sharp imprint on the paper. That was the turning point. We started experimenting with other leaves, petals, stems, bark, sheets and seeds. And as no leaf is identical, each sheet of paper became unique. We then drifted away from making handmade paper to using this leaf-paper for stationary covers, coasters, mouse pads, bags, photo albums, and wrapping paper. We also started making large decorative sheets as posters for home decoration."

"We are all experimenting, working in different directions," says Christine. "At the beginning, of course, there was cotton, the base material of our environment-friendly paper. But other plant materials also got our attention. We perfected a method for making paper out of banana fibre. Once that was achieved and we were happy with the texture and shade of that paper, we experimented further with those same fibres. The result was a lace-like paper structure which can be used as home decoration. It is one of our best selling products. We also worked with bamboo and rosella stalks, but the results were not as satisfactory. Experiments, of course, are ongoing, for example in using organic cotton and natural dyes."

Hervé adds that not only the staff of Auroville Papers experiments, but also artists contribute to the unit's development. "A visitor taught us the techniques of paper-mâché. We experimented further; instead of using paper pulp, we used a mixture of cotton and paper pulp. Now we produce cotton mâché art objects such as *kujas*, photo frames, vases, even stools in a variety of colours. Another development is a line of cotton mâché bijoux such as earrings, bangles and necklaces."

Maroma's sustainable products

Maroma, Auroville's oldest and largest commercial unit, is the undisputed leader in Auroville's aspiration to manufacture products of the highest quality. The unit's signature line is *Encens d'Auroville* with a range of 50 fragrances. Over the years, many more incense lines have been added, such as a *Kalki* line, the *Sumaya Spa* and *Maroma Spa* lines, *Veda Incense*, and the *Deva* and *Devi* ranges of 'divinely inspired aromatics'.

To ensure quality, stringent checks are made at every stage of production. All fragrances are formulated in accordance with the periodically updated guidelines of the International Fragrance Association, Brussels. In this way Maroma ensures that its products are safe to use.

Maroma has branched out into other fragrance products such as ambient perfumes and reed-diffusers – a recent trend to create a welcoming fragrant environment. Other scent-related products are insect-repellents that contain no chemical insecticides or toxic ingredients, natural anti-moth sachets to protect woollens, and scented candles.

Research led to further product diversification. The development of home fragrances was, in time, followed by a wide range of body-care products such as bath soaps, shampoos, conditioners, shower gels, body lotions, bath salts, and body and massage oils. Wherever

possible they are made with natural products, using extracts from flowers that are grown in Auroville such as the hibiscus. There is even a *Maroma Men* product line.

What makes Maroma's products special is the striving towards sustainability. The ingredients used in the fabrication of the products are recyclable and contain no harmful or toxic ingredients. "Even the packaging is sustainable," says Namrita who has been Maroma's packaging designer for the last six years. "Almost all packaging is made from recycled handmade paper and another Auroville unit screen-prints it. Our packages now carry the by-line 'recycled paper, screen-printed by hand,' and people appreciate that." She is now designing minimal packaging. "The world is moving away from 'over-packaging'. Being in Auroville we should create an interesting and eye-catching packing, made with minimum waste."

Though being primarily an export-oriented company, Maroma has now begun nurturing the Indian market. "Our incense and body-care products are doing very well within the country," says Roma, Maroma's general manager. "We have just opened a shop in the new Express Avenue Mall in Chennai and will soon be setting-up more shops across the country. The local market is developing strongly; it may soon change our present ratio of 90% export and 10% production for the Indian market."

STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE

Auroville has a reputation in India and abroad for the quality of its craft products. Auroville Today randomly selected 6 of its over 200 commercial units and asked them about their way of doing business. Aiming at quality and striving for excellence, it emerges, are indeed the prime motivations.



Two designs of Auromode: a hand-painted silk blouse and bead strings made from silk



Lace-like papers for home decoration, made from banana fibres. Kujas made from cotton-mâché



Leaf-imprinted paper is used for posters (left) as well as for other purposes



Above left: bath soap from the *Maroma Men* line; above right: the *Devi* incense; below: the reed-diffusers



Two designs from Miniature: block-printed blouse (left) and a wrinkle-blouse (right).



The collection of Glimpse at the Kaiki Boutique, Auroville Visitors' Centre. Below: three lampshades of Glimpse



Above: view of the Amano collection at Mira Boutique in the Auroville Visitors' Centre. Left: An Amano bag; careful handstitching.

About Miniature

When I visit the workshop it's in the dark. "Power cut," says Lilianna, sitting on the floor amidst a dozen girls, leafing through cloth samples. "The Tamil Nadu Electricity Board has announced a power outage today, and our generator is not working. It is one of the inconveniences of doing business in Auroville. But you get used to it."

Lilianna, originally from Italy, is the executive and main designer of Miniature, a garment design unit. "Fabrics are in my blood," she says. "My father was a textile importer, so I grew up with fabrics from all over the world." Lilianna opened her first workshop in Italy at a young age, designing not only garments, but also shoes, accessories and jewellery. In the 1980s she began specialising in textiles and materials from India, Indonesia and Pakistan, selling the products in Italy and throughout Europe. But since she came to Auroville in the mid 1990s, she has been working almost exclusively with Indian textiles and craftspeople.

"Indian textiles are uniquely beautiful," she says. "We work with silks and cottons woven in traditional weaves and patterns from all over India. Many are hand-woven, some are hand spun in the khadi tradition popularised by Mahatma Gandhi." Other sources of inspiration are the traditional embroidery and block-printing

techniques. "Miniature directly employs a few families of quality craftspeople in a village in Rajasthan to block-print cotton cloth with our own designs," she says. "They use natural vegetable or mineral dyes. We bring them new designs every 6 months." As an aside she mentions that she is happy to be able to support the livelihood of these artisans. Due to changing tastes and mass production their craft was almost wiped out.

Working with modern and traditional textiles takes Lilianna all over India. "I travel at least four times a year," she says. "I source finely-made antique saris, blankets, kantha work, and other Indian textiles in striking colour combinations." They are used to create exquisite garments, which are a blend of Italian/Mediterranean chic and oriental/Indian flavour. We purchase sarees and cut them to make various garments; each saree is cut differently, each garment is made from a different part. In this way each piece is unique. All the little bits in-between are put together as jewellery, bags, and other accessories. Difficult to repeat, impossible to mass-produce. Because of this, the products of Miniature are created in small quantities.

With a staff of 30, Lilianna prefers to stay within the 'miniature' scale. Many of products are exported, but she is increasingly producing for the Indian market.

The lampshades of Glimpse

Normally, thread is a device to hold garments together, but at Glimpse it's all about the thread itself. They twist and turn and twist and turn it. What comes out are beautiful lampshades with a very special look. Other lampshades are made of handmade, transparent paper wrapped around metal wire frames. "We now offer a large choice of high-quality lampshades of all possible colours and sizes: plain, round, oval, randomly shaped or tailor-made according to special request," says Txuma. "We don't use machinery, just people's energy. This makes every piece a uniquely-crafted artefact."

Txuma started Glimpse about three years ago. It was a turning point for the professional musician, who never had worked with lighting before. "I was a bass guitar player in Spain," he says. "My group specialised in funky jazz. With a repertoire of about 150 songs – we would add a new one each week – we performed all over the country. When I came to Auroville, I continued to perform, together with a number of good Aurovilian and Indian musicians. But after my friend Stefano passed away, my interest in jazz sort of faded. I now only play classical Spanish guitar, for my own and for my small son's enjoyment."

The transition from musician to craftsman wasn't easy. "You see," he reflects, "when I play music I can touch and express something that I am not able to reach in any other way, something intangible, something fleeting. That gives a thrill of joy. I didn't expect that I would experience anything like that at Glimpse. Yet, it does happen, when I am creating new shapes, when I see something growing under my hands, when something, as it were, moulds itself. It is like a new baby coming up. That's the thrill of designing."

However, over the years the demands of Glimpse have put a damper on creative expression. "Production kills creativity," he says. "I am now responsible for a workshop that feeds 17 employees and my family. I have to do administration and deal with the Indian and Auroville bureaucracy, things I used to run away from. But that's how it is." Asked if he foresees a growth of Glimpse, he nods. "There is a large market in India. Auroville is getting more and more known for the quality of its products. There are many good craftsmen and craftswomen in Auroville, and bringing quality is inherent to being in Auroville."

The bags of Amano

"Many people think that the name 'Amano' was chosen as it sounds like the well-known fashion brand 'Armani'. But 'a mano' in Spanish and Italian means 'by hand', which is how my leather bags are made," says André.

"I started leatherwork in the late 1960s in France, when I was living in a commune. This first exposure showed that I had a bit of talent for leather. Then I went to India and for ten years I didn't touch it. When I went back to Europe, I went to Spain. There I connected with someone in Ibiza who was making leather bags. I worked with him for three years."

"When I returned to Auroville for good, 21 years ago, I started a leather unit as I had to do something. I went to Madras and bought a few hides. I made a few bags and sold them all to friends. Rather proudly I went back to Madras and bought another six hides and I made more bags. This led to my first order from a customer in Mumbai. That's how it started."

"I had to get used to Indian raw materials. In the early days the material wasn't up to my standard, so I had to do some additional cleaning and dyeing by hand. Looking at my early products I can only say that the quality was rather rough – I still keep a museum piece from that period, for sentimental reasons."

"But India has developed into one of the biggest leather exporters in the world. Nowadays I just phone the supplier, and get first-quality leather home-delivered. I am aware that Indian tanneries produce a lot of environmental damage, but environmental awareness is definitely on the increase and quite a few tan-

ners have set up wastewater cleaning plants.

"Over the years my unit slowly developed. I now have 25 workers, whom I have trained myself. I do a lot of office work, but if we have big orders and are behind schedule, I work alongside my workers, cutting and stitching. I can do the whole process, and they know it; whenever there is a technical problem, they come to me. They know that I demand high-quality products."

"The beauty of Auroville is that there is a common aspiration to do better, both on the spiritual and on material levels. That common mindset is an unbelievable support. I follow it as much as I can, in my personal as well as in my business life. I try to get better leather, the right thickness, the correct softness. Instead of lining my bags with cloth, I use split lining leather. I use the best locks available and design my own buckles and have them bronze-cast by someone in Pondicherry. I source first-class zips that do not break or rust. I stitch my bags with thread that is so strong that it is not breakable by hand – I tell my customers that if they can break it by hand, they get the bag for free – so far nobody has managed. I think that I can honestly say that we make very good bags."

"Business is doing well. My production is about 300-350 bags a month. They are available in Auroville, Pondicherry, and at a few boutique shops elsewhere in India. About 40% of my production is exported."

"I could easily double or triple my production, but I do not want to. I do not have the aspiration or drive to start a factory. This is a conscious choice. I need my space. I prefer to remain small and concentrate on quality and good designs."