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—culture curry— Design tapestry from Ceylon

An seasoned architect from Sri Lanka recalls his journey across the globe in places that are inspirational havens for designers



Sri Lankan architect, artist and designer, Tilak Samarawickrema

PRIYANKA BHADANI

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For some, it's never too late for new beginnings. At least, in the case of well-known architect, artist and designer from Sri Lanka, Tilak Samarawickrema who showcased his exhibition, "Woven Tapestries" — an exhibition of textile designs in the capital recently, his first in India.

After spending more than two decades as an architect, Tilak found his calling in designing tapestries. "It's not that I've quit architecture. It's just that I've also found my interest in textile designing," he says.

Tilak designs tapestries that have vernacular Sri Lankan designs and are yet very contemporary. According to Tilak, it was while working as an architect that he decided to break away from the regional designs and experiment. "As an architecture student in the 60s, I was working for Geoffrey

Bawa every vacation. He was an idol for all architecture students. He was evolving vernacular designs and I was fascinated to him because of that. But in time, I got bored of working with vernacular designs as people elsewhere in the world were experimenting a lot," says Tilak, who thought cities like Paris and Milan were inspiring as far as

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experimenting was concerned.

So, he went to Italy and spent 12 years there. "I did urban designing from Milan. Soon I went to Rome and spent more than two years there too. Again, people were high on experiments. They were doing a lot of mix and match. They didn't follow any rules and norms," says Tilak, who considers himself a keen observer. It was then that he learnt the art of mixing and matching.

He also remembers how the well-known architects in these countries were visiting India. "They considered India a

colourful country. And thus they visited the country for inspiration," says Tilak, who himself drew ideas from various places around the world.

While he already had an idea of aesthetics in Rome, Milan, Paris, after returning to Sri Lanka in 1983, he did many programs in many other countries which helped him even more. By this time, Tilak had also found his love in textile designing. He was sent to Guatemala by Unicef for a fund-raising program. "I observed the women working there. Trust me, I have never experienced similar work culture among women. They used to weave with their kids tied to their backs. Another fascinating aspect was the presence of creativity. Every region is identified by the dress of the women. Every few kilometres, the design and the pattern of the dresses that they wear changes. The country is known for weaving not without any reason. But it's sad that it still remains a very poor country," says Tilak.

"ARCHITECTS CONSIDER INDIA A VERY COLOURFUL COUNTRY AND VISIT IT FOR INSPIRATION"

However, he came back and started working on tapestries. He set up an industrial unit with the help of few local craftsmen of Talaguna, Uda Dumbara (the oldest weaving village in the island). "I later taught them the technical aspects of designing and now my firm is producing contemporary Sri Lankan tapestries," he sums up.