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THE ARTIST ISSUE

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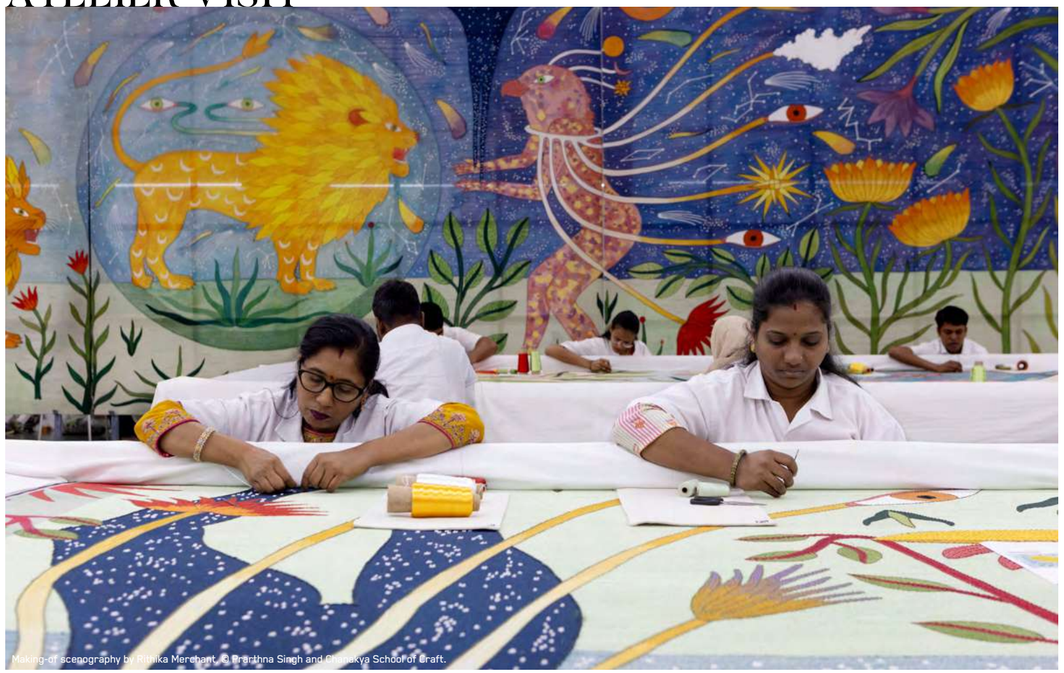
CHANAKYA ATELIER & SCHOOL OF CRAFT

How one atelier in Mumbai preserves legacies, uplifts women, and democratizes creation through craft.

BY ELIZA JORDAN

Installation of artist Rithika Merchant and Chanakya School of Craft at the Christian Dior Haute Couture spring/summer 2025 show in Paris, photo by Adrien Dirand.

ATELIER VISIT



Making-of scenography by Rithika Merchant. © Prarthna Singh and Chanakya School of Craft.

On January 27 in Paris, Christian Dior's Spring/Summer 2025 haute couture collection by Maria Grazia Chiuri debuted in the gardens of the Rodin Museum. Against a backdrop of large-scale textile panels titled "The Flowers We Grew," created by artist Rithika Merchant, the collection revealed a suite of striking new looks for women, blurring lines between the past and the future. Garments inspired by the house's "Trapèze" line from 1958 met feather-embellished crinolines made for today, defying time and space, purpose and poise. The collection provided a physical reprieve from the mundane, surrounded by beauty, rooted in the idea of transformation, and in line with Chiuri's overarching mission to uplift women and their stories.

The show's interior atmosphere was enlivened by nine large-scale panels that hung from the walls, popping with color. Each backdrop represented Indian heritage and values special to the Mumbai-based artist Rithika Merchant—from cows and mango trees, emblematic of community, to birds holding paintbrushes that stood for freedom. To create them, Mumbai-based Chanakya Atelier and graduates from the Chanakya School of Craft embroidered all pieces by hand, mimicking the brushstrokes and chemical composition of the watercolor paintings for which Merchant is known. The collaboration took 306 artisans 144,000 hours to execute, ensuring that traditional techniques were honored while maintaining contemporary standards.

Christian Dior and Chiuri are longtime collaborators of Chanakya. Nearly three decades ago, Chanakya's artistic director, Karishma Swali, reached out to Chiuri when the designer was still at Fendi—and to her surprise, was green-lit for a project. When Chiuri moved to Dior, she tapped Chanakya to create an array of immersive textiles by skilled artisans for the brand's fashion shows, replicating and accompanying art by names like Judy Chicago, Faith Ringgold, and Isabella Ducrot. Since, Chanakya has continued to hand-embroider tapestries for Dior's sets, eventually shifting from the walls of the runway to the halls of the runway—seen on garments and accessories including gowns, bags, and shoes.

In 2014, Chiuri also supported Swali in documenting bygone and contemporary craft forms native to India, followed by the launch of Chanakya's nonprofit, Chanakya School of Craft, in 2016. The latter has taught over 1,200 women the principles, techniques, and global realities of over 300 crafts. Today over 150 women are enrolled in the three-semester program to learn not only how to create but also how to apply the history, theory, and value systems of craftmaking to a personal practice. *Whitewall* spoke with Swali about the importance of preserving, practicing, and promoting handcraft, and how Chanakya is sparking change for generations to come.

WHITEWALL: *Chanakya International was founded by your father, Vinod Shah, in 1984. What was his vision then that you still embrace today?*

KARISHMA SWALI: When he started, his vision was to be able to share with the world India's finest craftsmanship. Indian craft holds a place of honor. It's a medium that is very special because it's a shared medium. It's a form of expression that is a container of our culture but also a container of our collective identities. In India, it's always been a means of preserving our roots, preserving our artisan legacies, and also a means of collective expression.

I grew up in a family full of art lovers. Life was always centered around spirited conversations about art, about craft. And then, when I joined Chanakya—it's going to be my 30th year next year—it was a very natural way of finding ways to express our values and ourselves creatively, but also collectively. Our vision over the years has always been twofold. One is to preserve the act of the human hand and to find ways to keep it relevant—through dialogue, through collaborations, through our own artistic practices—for future generations.

WW: *How does this inform your approach to textile and embroidery work?*

KS: Textile and embroidery are both disciplines with infinite depth, but they haven't been understood. It's an art form that's incredibly versatile, and so much depends on your own foundation, technically, as well as your own understanding of what you can do with the craft. It also depends on what the art practitioner wants to express. For me, it's always been a very fascinating medium because it holds within it values learned by practicing the craft. It also holds within it so much of our collective history.

WW: *We have visually seen that expressed for many years through your longstanding collaboration with Dior. The tapestries Chanakya has made for its fashion shows have embodied powerful stories about women, labor, love, and more. How did this work begin?*

KS: Maria Grazia and I have known each other for over 25 years. We met as kids, basically. I think there was an immediate connection because we both came from places where craft was a very important cultural aspect.

Detail of installation by artist Rithika Merchant and Chanakya School of Craft at the Christian Dior Haute Couture spring/summer 2025 show in Paris, photo by Adrien Dirand.

KS: Craft, in so many ways, is common ground—it's where people come together, talk together, create together. It resonated with us very deeply. I think we spent the last almost 30 years exploring what this medium means—across cultures, across shared humanities, and for women.

In India, craft is taught generationally—only from father to son. And even though textiles are our second-largest economy, there's no space one can go and learn it. It's never been institutionalized. This passion project has been about finding ways to institutionalize it, which is why and how the school came about—and why it's available to women. So, the school was dedicated to women. It's been a journey that's been so much fun, but also, naturally and organically, things have unraveled in ways that have made it so meaningful.

WW: *How did you and Maria Grazia first meet?*

KS: We met when she was at Fendi. She was actually our first client. My brother, Nihal, and I were in Italy, and we had our very first collection of textiles and embroidery ready. We actually just called her, and she was happy to meet us.

WW: *How has this longstanding partnership influenced your creative process, and the evolution of the craftsmanship at Chanakya?*

KS: When I think about Maria Grazia, about what leadership is, and about what she's taught me—amongst a million other things—it's that leadership is so much about creating platforms for others. Where others can grow and be the best versions of themselves. Leadership is also about bringing people together and creating a symphony where they are able to collectively do so much more than they can do individually. She lives that every day, and it's so beautiful. I feel incredibly lucky to have had that mentorship, where you're somehow able to do things beyond your own realm because you're able to inspire everyone around you. In many ways, that's how craft works, too. Collective harmony propels the medium.

WW: *Most recently, Chanakya translated artwork by Rithika Merchant into Dior's set for "The Flowers We Grew." How did you connect with her work?*

KS: Rithika is an artist whom I've admired for a long, long time. We come from the same city. She's also based in Mumbai. What resonated most deeply with me is how she's able to celebrate her heritage and pay homage to it, but also how it's a world-building exercise. She's able to create her own world and also look to the future. We spoke about it in great detail right from the word "go" because it's actually one of the longest collaborations. This is a dialogue that started almost two years ago. Even when we had the Dior show in India in 2023, she came over, and we were already talking about it then.

The left part of the installation was really about her roots in Kerala. Her grand-aunt had this cooperation where she gifted a cow, and in doing so, created this space where women could be independent and be a community. It paid homage to those roots. The wall opposite represented her wishes for the future, where she struck upon values like creativity, nurturing, and courage. Those are exactly the values at the school as well, so it was something we deeply resonated with.

Her works were on a smaller scale for us to create expansive-scale versions of, and we decided on the textile interpretation that would best work for those narratives. It was terribly exciting, also because she's an artist who works with watercolors. For us, translating watercolors with thread was something we hadn't done before. With watercolor, blending can be very seamless with paint. But with thread, you have to do it in a way where the change of color isn't visible. It was something we thought about technically for a long time, and we enjoyed it tremendously.

WW: *How has the Chanakya School of Craft empowering women through embroidery impacted your local community?*

KS: I've been a practitioner of craft for many years. The reason why you practice it most is sometimes not often understood. It's often considered a medium that is repetitive. But for me, the most important aspect of practicing craft was that it's the easiest way to align with yourself. Sharing this with the world was very important—I found it incredibly valuable in my life. But somewhere along the line, I saw a lot of my favorite craft forms go out of circulation. So, with Maria Grazia, we first spoke about academically documenting the different craft forms across the country. We started this documentation process in 2014, and by 2016, we had documented close to 750 genres of crafts and communities. We're nowhere close to done yet, as it's an ongoing process, and the discovery is endless.

When we were academically documenting it, we also realized that it had never been institutionalized and, therefore, not democratized. If you do want to learn to be a master, there is no place to go and learn it unless you come from a family of craft—and unless you're a man. We both felt very strongly about institutionalizing craft. That's really how the Chanakya Foundation and School of Craft was born—to preserve these craft legacies, to teach them in an open environment, and to infuse them with aspects that we felt were missing. Craft practitioners before didn't have access to things like the history of art, color theory, or design thinking.

We've taught 1,260 women to date, and we're doing the next batch of 150 this year. It somehow became a safe haven where you could come and learn at your own pace and find ways of creative expression across mediums. We went on to add weaving, origami, crochet, macramé, and hand craftsmanship. This year, we're adding woodwork and ceramics, and we want to add stonework later.

WW: *It's interesting to think about students learning these methods for the first time, yet surrounded by so much craft their entire lives. Do most that come in have experience, or are they starting in craftwork for the first time in their lives?*

KS: We met when she was at Fendi. She was actually our first client. My brother, Nihal, and I were in Italy, and we had our very first collection of textiles and embroidery ready. We actually just called her, and she was happy to meet us.

WW: *How has this longstanding partnership influenced your creative process, and the evolution of the craftsmanship at Chanakya?*

KS: Most of the women have never had a formal education and have never had an education in craft whatsoever. For 95 percent of them, it's an entirely new world. Maybe they've dabbled with it domestically, but that's completely different. Therefore, the craft and the curriculum start from a base foundational level. It's divided into three key semesters, each one is six months.

The first, basics semester, delves into the technical aspects of the craft. To avoid the language barrier, we've built our own curriculum, where there is a pictorial depiction of each step of each stitch. In the next six months, they'll make their own mini loom. They learn how that loom is really an instrument of expression and how to prepare the loom at 90 degrees to the warp and weft. Sometimes, it can take up to a week because it's so important to be able to prepare your loom correctly.

The second semester delves a lot into Aari, the hook techniques, because they're tougher. You have to be able to use both your hands at one time. It's also the time when we introduce women icons, and we tell their stories to convey the values associated with craft. For example, we talk about Meera Bai, who was a Sufi saint, associated with the value of devotion. So when we are teaching Meera Bai, the value associated is devotion, but through her story, we also learn that she was from Rajasthan, so we learn the art, craft, and architecture of Rajasthan. And then they get to do their own depiction of courage through craft. It's about them being able to depict that value. Similarly, when we teach Frida Kahlo, they learn about Mexican embroidery in craft, and the value associated is courage.
The third semester focuses on more industry-specific knowledge, like quality management systems and timelines. How dreams need to be planned and programmed. How it's important to adhere to industry norms, and how the back of the embroidery is as important as the front. They also learn how to work for the first time as a group because that is an important aspect of craft.

We also really want to find ways to put the practice of doing things by hand back into the education universe because I feel that today's youth need it. It's such an incredible form of expression. So, we are working with design schools to include the curriculum of craft as an art form within spaces across educational institutions. It may take a while, but this is something that I feel is important from an educational point of view. Schools don't necessarily teach the art of living, but craft does.

Rithika Merchant, Maria Grazia Chiuri, Karishma Swali, photo by Laura Sciacovelli.

WW: *As we spoke about earlier, being a woman in India does not mean you are automatically afforded an opportunity. What does it feel like right now to be a woman, living and working in India—an in craft?*

KS: Growing up, I hadn't understood that there were these levels of disparities—and I never experienced them, to be honest. As an adult, I began to understand that these inequalities didn't make sense. The more I understood them, the more I realized the importance of responding by being part of the solution. So, the endeavor was very simple: to create a space of shared and free expression. But what I could never have imagined was how powerful freedom can be and how it can lead to creating a movement where everyone is for everyone's freedom. For each person that feels that they've had this window, I've seen that, as the next step, they want to create another window. Somehow, you hope that these small steps can lead to a larger movement, one that leads to this being a space for shared humanity in its true sense.