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When he's at work, even the stars don't move. **HT City** meets Bollywood's *mehendi*-man



Henna on his mind

Itee Dewan

His designs are on display at London's Royal Victoria and Albert Museum; Julia Roberts, Naomi Campbell and Austin Reed swear by his designs; Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Hrithik Roshan, Deepika Padukone and more recently, Aamir Khan, have flaunted his creativity on their hands and faces.

We are talking about 27-year-old Ash Kumar, the fastest *henna* artist in the world, who has secured a place in the Guinness Book of World Records for making 167 intricate *henna* armbands in one hour. That's one band in 18 seconds, while an average design usually takes anything from 5 minutes to an hour.

The feat comes with absolutely no formal training. "I don't have a fine arts degree. My designs became popular by word of mouth," says Kumar, who attributes his popularity to the increasing demand for *mehendi* in London.

So how did it all happen? "I used

to see my mother (who is from India; Kumar is a Brit of Indian descent) put *mehendi* on her hands. I used to find it fascinating and beautiful. And then I started making my own designs."

Kumar was 18 when he first did a *henna* design. His inspirations are essentially Indian. "I find Indian music, jewellery, clothes and interiors interesting and inspiring," says Kumar.

Besides the regular *mehendi* and the glitter variety, Kumar has also come up with Swarovski *henna* designs that are "hugely popular in London". It's not only hands and feet that he's done *mehendi* designs for; he's used the entire body as a canvas. "I can't specify where, it would be a little impolite," he says with a grin.

For somebody who has hobnobbed with the A-list, any favourites amongst the Bollywood clients? "Aamir Khan and Rani Mukherji," he says, while in Hollywood Julia Roberts wins hands down. "She was fantastic to work with. She is an excellent person. I



Mehendi stars ke naam ki: Ash at work with Deepika Padukone (above) and Aamir Khan

designed an anklet and an arm band for the girl with a million dollar smile," says Kumar.

Has the man ever faced any difficulties from any of the stars? "No. All my celebrity clients have been respectful towards my work. They believe in my services."

Kumar dreams of working with Madhuri Dixit and Drew Barry-

more. Ask him about any Bollywood projects and Kumar doesn't want to reveal much. He says, "There are two big projects with two top-notch directors in the industry." But he reveals that a popular sportswear brand has hired him to design the uniform for the national football teams of Brazil and India.