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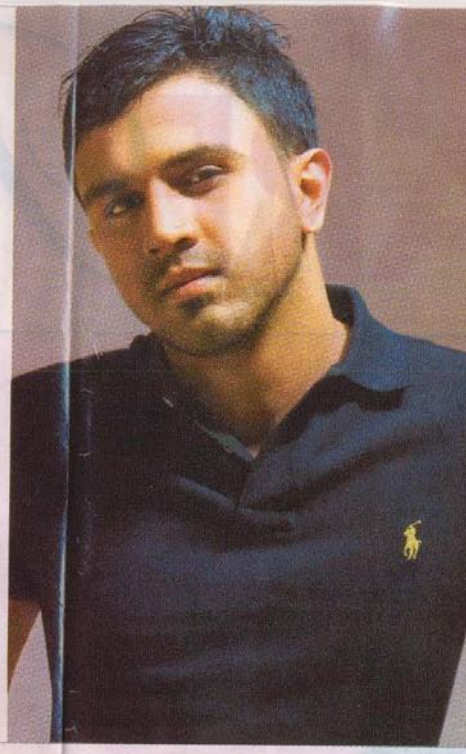
THE HENNA PRINCE

His East-meets-West designs coupled with his record-breaking speed have enthralled patrons globally. 27-year-old Mehndi artist Ash Kumar traces his design inspirations and career path

BY NEHA NAIR



Ash Kumar's world revolves around paisleys and curlicues, fragrant with the heady scent of henna. At the age of 17, when most teenage boys fantasise about fast cars and gadgets, Ash found himself drawn to the art of mehndi. The UK based artist then travelled to India to learn the form. "Things just fell into place," he shares.

His first break came when he was invited by the BBC to make an appearance on daytime television to share his inputs on the therapeutic benefits of henna. This brought him immediate recognition and then the Guinness Book of World Records beckoned. Ash Kumar earned the title of the Fastest Henna Artist in the world in 2001, creating a unique niche for himself. But speed does harm sometimes, as Ash experienced with his first celebrity client Julia Roberts. Ash regrets the fact that he completed the design very fast. "I should have been really slow and enjoyed every moment with her!" he recalls. Ironically, this Hollywood attention came before he started work with the Indian film industry. Ash, who specialises in bridal henna, has an impressive celebrity clientele that includes Sophie Dahl, Calvin Klein, Rani Mukerji, Hrithik Roshan, Abhishek Bachchan, John Abraham, Aamir Khan, Saif Ali Khan and Salman Khan.

Corporate families like the Mittals utilised Ash's services for their high-profile weddings. For Vanisha Mittal's wedding, Ash took 12 days to construct an exclusive design that matched the embroidery of her bridal outfit. Ash plans to introduce his brand in India by conducting workshops later this year. If you're planning on having him design your palms for your special day, be prepared to endure a year-long waiting list!

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Was it easy to set shop in a market that is controlled by women and functions with zero branding?
It's true that this is an industry dominated by women. So, breaking into the market was tough, especially as the only male mehndi artist in the UK. A woman entering a world dominated by men might encounter aggression, but I fell foul to gossip. So the first thing I got was, "He's gay!" or "He has to be married to do this." Neither of that is true but those challenges only made me more determined. I changed the game!

What sets you apart from other mehndi artists?
I have a drive for innovation—thinking out of the box. My greatest satisfaction comes from giving people what they want and meeting the demands of fashion. For a creative person, freedom of expression is the one thing that keeps them going. And that is the case with me.

Are you happy with your professional growth?
I have been in this field since I was very young but I cannot measure my success yet as my brand is still growing. My success is for others to gauge.

Where do you find the inspiration for your designs?
Anything Indian inspires me—be it music, architecture, clothing or art. Indian music is a major source of inspiration. When I listen to music, I doodle and come up with new designs. It's almost as if I'm in a trance. My creativity is at its best between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m., so that's when I design. I think that as Indians, we are fortunate to have the most creative culture on the planet.

What would you suggest to a modern Indian bride who does not want the fuss that is associated with henna?
In India, intricacy of design is of prime importance. The We prefers the "less is more" style. It's more a fashion statemen than tradition. This is precisely why my designs are a conflu ence of the Orient and the Occident, making it perfect for th modern Indian bride. What better proof of its universal app than the fact that henna is also popular across the globe as tattoos for men!

Who would you like to add to your list of clients and why? Where do you see yourself five years from now?
Drew Barrymore and Madhuri Dixit, who I consider to be my muse. I hope to be the world's leading mehndi artist and pro vide international quality services and products worldwide.