

Rohit Bal, 63, 'Bad Boy' and Exuberant Star of Indian Fashion, Is Dead

By PENELOPE GREEN

When Mira Nair was making "Monsoon Wedding," her 2001 film about generational conflict, an over-the-top wedding and the family it nearly unhinges, one of the experts she turned to for sartorial help was Rohit Bal, an exuberant star of the Indian fashion world.

"I wanted the film to feel like our weddings at home," Ms. Nair said. "No one really did it in our movies. There are codes and etiquette and symbolism in all our textiles, and Rohit loved it all and knew it well. He was a star who had taken traditional fashion to a new place, and I wanted to make sure we reflected the fashion of 'now.'"

"When Gudda began, Indian fashion was fairly new," Ms. Nair

'He took something so simple and made it into something fantastic.'

added, using Mr. Bal's nickname. "He created a path that people are now flamboyantly following."

In the 1980s, India began re-making itself, moving away from decades of socialism into a more capitalist society. Fashion, such as it was, often meant traditional garments, tailor-made clothes and what were known as export rejects — Western-style clothing manufactured in India for sale abroad that didn't meet export standards. Mr. Bal was among a wave of designers who essentially created the modern Indian fashion industry, with clothes that nodded to traditional styles but incorporated contemporary flourishes and often couture techniques.

"He was one of a number of designers who realized they could create brands around craft," said Cecilia Morelli, a founder of Le Mill, a luxury clothing store in Mumbai. "They understood the power of craftsmanship."

Mr. Bal died on Nov. 1 at a hospital in Delhi. He was 63. The cause was cardiac arrest, said Reshma Punj, his niece.

Mr. Bal began as a men's wear designer — he liked to say that men were the peacocks of India — but quickly added women's wear. He soon became known for voluminous muslin gowns that were intricately embroidered and beaded using techniques and patterns that reflected the traditional crafts of Kashmir; the disputed region on the India-Pakistan border where he was born.

"He took cotton muslin, \$1 a meter, and used 80 meters for a single piece," said Tarun Tahliani, an Indian designer whose store, Ensemble, a sort of Henri Bendel of India, is where he first met and sold his work. "He took something so simple and made it into something fantastic. He wanted volume. He



Rohit Bal at his showroom in 1997. Over the years, he branched out like an Indian Ralph Lauren. He had stores throughout the country. He had a line of jeans and a line of children's clothing.

wanted excess."

He also worked in velvet, silk, satin and brocade.

Mr. Bal was a beguiling character with an outsized, outspoken personality and a lavish lifestyle that involved over-the-top parties and a retinue of male models. That made him irresistible to the Indian press, which called him "the bad boy of fashion."

"He was so unique," Ms. Nair said. "He looked like a Greek god."

"Rohit was irrepressible and naughty," said Mr. Tahliani, the designer. "He was mad fun. He played the infant terrible role at the gallery, and people lapped it up. But his work never suffered."

Rohit Bal was born on May 8, 1961, in Srinagar, Kashmir, to Rajan and Prakash Bal. The family was well to do, and owned cinemas in Kashmir and Lahore. Rohit's father died when he was 11.

Because he was the youngest of seven children, and because he had blond curls and blue eyes, Rohit was nicknamed Gudda, an endearment that translates to "boy doll" in Hindi. "I was spoiled rotten," he said years later.

He attended St. Stephen's College at the University of Delhi, where he was an honors student, and a terrific dancer, having memorized the moves from "Saturday Night Fever." After graduating with a bachelor's degree, he

worked with his brother, Rajiv, at Orchid Overseas, a business that manufactured and exported clothing and home goods, before going on to study at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, in New Delhi.

He is survived by his brothers Rakesh and Rajiv, and his sister Rupam Khatau.

Over the years, Mr. Bal branched out like an Indian Ralph Lauren. He had stores throughout the country. He had a line of jeans and a line of children's clothing. He made a collection of jewelry for Swarovski. He designed uniforms for the Indian crews of British Airways: kurta suits and sherwanis,



Mr. Bal in 1996. "He was vibrant," said Bandana Tewari, a former editor for Vogue India, "and his clothing was erudite."



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Mr. Bal in 2013. His fashion design "created a path that people are now flamboyantly following," said the filmmaker Mira Nair.

traditional long frock coats, in red and blue. He made costumes for the Indian version of the game show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire." He designed home furnishings: bedding and lush carpets with images of peacocks and lotuses; crystal tableware edged in gold.

He designed the graphics for India's Lucky Strike cigarettes and the interiors of a new-wave Indian restaurant, Veda, that for a time had a London outpost.

When the actress Elizabeth Hurley married Arun Nayar, an Indian businessman, in a sumptuous, days-long, Bollywood-style event, in Jodhpur, India, in 2007, Mr. Bal designed the silver top and skirt she wore for her bridal

dance. He also designed kurtas for Mr. Nayar and Mrs. Hurley's 4-year-old son, Damian.

And at the request of Pamela Anderson, the "Baywatch" star and animal activist, he designed a leather-free G-string with a matching blouse and sari. Apparently, she had long favored the leather kind and was looking for a replacement. Uma Thurman, Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford were said to be fans, as well.

In 2001, Anna Kournikova, the tennis player, walked the runway for his Paris show.

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