

PAKISTAN

ZOHRA RAHMAN

Zohra Rahman learned the hard way that if you want something done perfectly, you might need to do it yourself. The Central Saint Martins graduate set up her eponymous label in Lahore in 2014, and spent her early days struggling to get samples of her jewellery made to her specifications by *karigars* in the markets. Finally, at 23, she took over a room at her mother's office, had a workbench built, and hired her first apprentice, based on a sketch of a stapler he made during his job interview. Five years later, Rahman has four trained apprentices working with her, doing everything from melting blocks of silver to filing, sanding, and polishing each piece.

This July, Rahman exhibited in Paris, and her designs have been featured in *Women's Wear Daily*, *Wallpaper*, and *Interview*, among others. In Pakistan, her creations are snapped up by those willing to invest in jewellery not as a marker of wealth, but of style. Her latest collection takes its cues from

Lahore's urban visual aesthetic and includes bangles, *mannat* rings, necklaces, and earrings with varied inspirations—the font on bumper sticker quotes, the grillwork on the windows and bannisters of old homes. When one of these pieces was taken to the *karigars* where Rahman first tried to produce samples, they examined each with wonder. Where in the world had this piece with such finish and detail been produced, they asked. Surely it could not have been made in Pakistan. ►

By Sanam Maher



(Above and right)
Jewellery by Zohra
Rahman. (Below)
The designer.





(Clockwise from above) Designer Noorjehan Bilgrami; a look from the year 2000; the current Koel collection.

KOEL

It's 1976 in Karachi, Pakistan. Noorjehan Bilgrami, a 26-year-old artist moonlighting as an interior designer, finds a printer pressing designs from hand-carved wooden blocks onto napkins. Despite the fact that their numbers are dwindling away against the onslaught of demand for imported chiffon and georgette, within a few months, Bilgrami is learning from these artisans while her two daughters play to the sound of the block's stamps and thwacks.

A sold-out exhibition follows in 1978—after all, as Bilgrami understands it, an artist exhibits their creations, like paintings, and these printed fabrics are her artworks. And now, in 2019, Bilgrami's label Koel, is a pioneer of handloomed fabrics, naturally dyed with everything from royal blue indigo found on the banks of the Indus river, to burnt red madder and yolk-yellow babul or acacia flowers, to the endless black of soaked iron.

Koel's signature block-printed designs have inspired many imitations and made the traditional craft trendy. But Bilgrami doesn't think of herself as a designer. "I don't believe in the word 'fashion,'" she says. "That implies seasonal change, wearing and discarding. But women who bought clothes at that exhibition in 1978 are still wearing them and passing them on to their daughters. I'm not creating something 'for the summer'. It must be everlasting." Over the years, Koel has produced minimalist bridalwear, hand-embroidered silks spun from cocoons in Punjab, menswear, and a skincare range—the list is long and covers anything Bilgrami's curiosity leads her to. ■ **By Sanam Maher**