Ancient tradition with modern appeal

From festivals to weddings, henna artist creates designs for our times

By Claire Prime

Photography • Tomasz Adamski

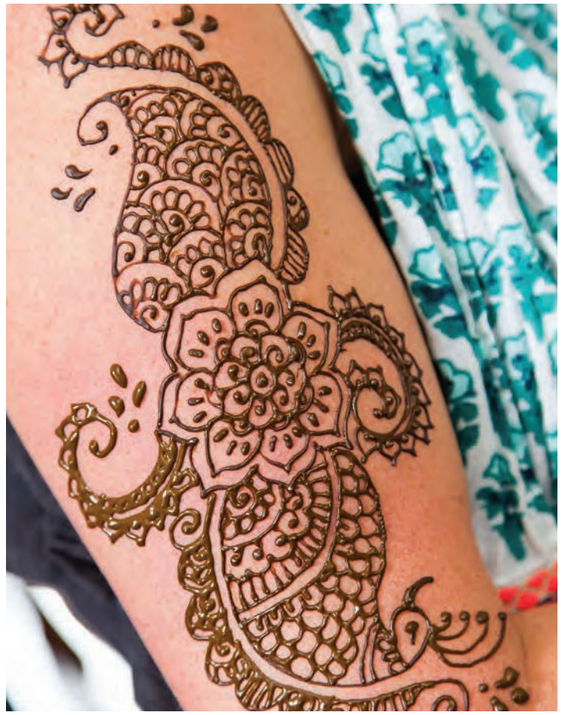
THE WORD MEHENDI is hard to pronounce.

At least that's what Bhupi Rajput found when she tried to move her business, Mehendi Village, to Canada from England. Back then, in 2003, most Canadians didn't even know what henna was, let alone mehendi (pronounced men-dee), the Hindi word for the dye used on skin and hair.

Since then, the Cambridge-based company, now called Henna4You, has grown faster than Rajput had ever anticipated.

Once used where it grew naturally, in the Middle East, southern Asia and parts of Africa, henna art can now be found around the world. It is thanks to globetrotters like Rajput that henna has grown so popular here in Canada.

Rajput lived in Kenya, India and England >>



Bhupi Rajput of Henna4You creates a henna design. Styles vary widely as illustrated in the photos at right.

This group of women gather in Cambridge to model henna designs for our photographer. From left to right are Beverly Davis, Tanya Olsen, Kourtney Parker Beckman, Noemi Bako, Diane Dennis, Connie Watson, Sheila Batty, Kristy Goss.

>> before moving to Cambridge. Her career path has shifted dramatically as well. She found henna at the height of a successful — but exhausting — career in marketing.

Rajput was born in Kenya. Her grandparents had moved to Africa from India after her grandfather was offered a job working on the railroads there. But, when Rajput was a girl, the political climate changed, and she moved to England with her family.

She graduated from high school and university, and followed the path her father had wanted for her: she worked at a bank.

"I absolutely hated it. I walked out after three months," she says.

She returned to university, where she studied marketing and business management, and landed a position at a prestigious real estate firm in London, England.

Soon, she was an assistant manager, then manager. She went from working 45 to 50 hours a week to upwards of 80.

"My friend called me one day and said, 'We should go out,' and I said, 'Oh, we just did that.' She said, 'No, that was in May, Bhupi. It's September. You missed the whole summer in London.' I thought: Oh my God, what am I doing with my life?

"I decided I needed to do something drastic."

She packed her bags and left for India, where she would stay for the next two years.

"The first two weeks were the hardest for me," she says. "They could tell I was a foreigner. They could just sniff me out."

She ended up staying in a home in the village of Pushkar, southwest of Delhi.

Every day on her way to new adventures, Rajput would pass a little girl doing henna on the main street. Intrigued, Rajput sat down next to her one day with a cup of tea.

"I said, 'If you teach me how to do henna, I will feed you and pay you.' And she looked at me and said, 'Why? Why do you want to learn? You're educated, you have money. Why do you want to learn?' And I said, 'For fun.' "

It wasn't fun for the little girl. She was nine years old and married. She would move to her in-laws' home as soon as she reached puberty. In the meantime, she was the breadwinner in her family.

For five days, Rajput would return to visit the little girl, bringing her a plate of food. "When I first started to see her, I was 'Miss.' But after we hung out for five days, she was calling me 'Didi,' or 'big sister.' "

After several days, Rajput said goodbye to the little girl she had grown close to. Since the girl could neither read nor write, staying in touch was impossible.

Bhupi continued her journey, furthering her training in henna with a one-week course at a beauty school in Delhi. In an effort to learn as much as she could about the meaning behind the symbols and its cultural significance, she visited local museums and met with professors at the university there.

After she returned to England, she was asked to be the henna artist at a friend's wedding. After that, requests kept coming in and, before she knew it, a new business was sprouting.

But there was a problem.

Her husband, Sanjeev, was raised in Cornwall, Ont. Before moving to London, England, and marrying Bhupi, the biggest city he had ever lived in was Waterloo.

"He couldn't handle the lifestyle of England. It was too much for him," says Rajput.

The couple moved to Canada with their two young sons, and Rajput started her business again in Cambridge. It has blossomed ever since.

Henna4You now takes Rajput to festivals across Ontario, from Ribfest to strawberry festivals. She has done henna in Pennsylvania, and for weddings in Mexico, for birthday parties in New York, and for the attendees at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland.

She also travels to schools in the area and teaches children from kindergarten to high school about henna, its history and its cultural significance. She sells glassware and ceramics that she has painted with henna-like designs.

And she volunteers at HopeSpring Cancer Support Centre in Kitchener. Henna is sometimes applied to the heads of cancer patients who have lost their hair as an alternative to hats, wigs and scarves. These are called henna crowns.

Her husband and their two sons, Nikhil, now 14, and Shalin, 12, are involved with the business as well. Sanjeev is a website and graphic designer and helps with the henna when Bhupi is very busy. Their sons help at the front of the shop at festivals, answering questions. Bhupi says they worked every weekend last summer.

Rajput stays in touch with trends and designs by watching Bollywood films >>

>> and studying the henna worn by India's celebrities. Her two employees, Jane Bell and Charlotte Carbone, have their own inspirations.

Bell has a background in graphic design and illustration. She studies patterns found on clothing, rugs and architecture from across South Asia. She also incorporates Renaissance fabric patterns into her art.

Carbone is studying fashion design at Ryerson University. She helps Rajput with jobs in Toronto and in Waterloo Region when she's home from school. She finds inspiration in traditional Indian design, through her education and by following the fashion scene in Toronto.

"It could be a Monday morning class at 8 a.m. and someone's dressed like they're ready to walk in Toronto Fashion Week. There's always lots of inspiration and a lot of hip and happening people on campus," says Carbone.

Many traditional Indian symbols are used in henna art all over the world. Flowers represent beauty. Vines represent growth. The lotus flower symbolizes strength and purity. The paisley, an unripened mango, signifies fertility. Peacocks represent grace, pride and joy.

In India, peacocks would be drawn on a woman's hands before her husband left on long journeys. The beauty of the designs was meant to distract her from her loss.

Brides-to-be usually have their henna done two days before their wedding so the stain is at its darkest on the day of the ceremony. The colour tends to be richer where the skin is thickest, on the palms of the hands and the feet. Full bridal henna can run from the fingertips up to the shoulder and from the bottoms of the feet past the ankles. Sometimes the designs are so densely drawn — very little skin shows through. These designs can take upwards of four or five hours to complete, says Rajput.

The colour of bridal henna is of particular significance. It is said that the deeper the colour, the happier the marriage will be.

Brides have another reason to hope for a darker colour: traditionally, while henna stains her hands, new Indian brides are not permitted to do any household chores. Henna typically lasts one to four weeks. When the henna wears off, though, her honeymoon ends and she must make dinner for the groom's family. Luckily, she receives gifts in return.

Some designs draw from symbolic traditions while others are just beautiful.

HENNA ARTISTRY AT A GLANCE

- Henna comes from the leaves of the henna tree, native to the Middle East, southern Asia and parts of Africa. The leaves are dried and crushed, then made into a paste.
- Henna art has been around for thousands of years. Ancient paintings on cave walls in India and Sri Lanka depict women with henna markings on their hands. It has also been found on the fingers, toes and hair of mummies in the tombs in Egypt.
- In Hindi, henna is known as mehendi, pronounced men-dee.
- Henna tends to stain darkest where the skin is the thickest, on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet.
- Henna lasts from one to four weeks.
- Henna body art is traditional in Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Jewish cultures. It is often applied for weddings and coming-of-age ceremonies.
- In Canada, henna art is worn for a variety of reasons. It can be a form of self-expression, a fashion statement or a precursor to a permanent tattoo.
- Henna is painted on the belly of a pregnant woman to bless her unborn child.
- Henna is sometimes applied to the heads of cancer patients who have lost their hair as an alternative to hats, wigs and scarves.

The desire for very dark henna has led to the creation of black henna, henna mixed with other chemicals to make it darker. The belief that the colour of the henna predicts a marriage's success is partly to blame, says Rajput.

"Indian women, the moms especially, really want dark henna," says Rajput. "So what started happening is that people started mixing hair dye into the henna. And it's devastating, the effects. You can get third-degree chemical burns."

Always check the list of ingredients before having henna art applied, says Rajput. At Henna4You, the ingredients used are organic henna powder, lemon juice, tea tree oil and sugar.

Belly blessings, while also traditional in some parts of India, can have similar designs as bridal henna. Sometimes, the pregnant woman's belly is painted with a mandala, a Hindu and Buddhist symbol, or a tree.

"The tree is a symbol of life. Putting a symbol of life on your child is like blessing your child with a long, prosperous life," says Bell.

Henna is not just done for special occasions. Henna can be "something really fun to do to express yourself, just like makeup or clothing," says Carbone.

Sometimes, men and women look for symbols that have a personal meaning to them. The design could reflect a goal they're trying to meet in their lives, or it might act as a reminder to stay on track. Some ask for certain words to be written on their skin, such as "Family" or "Believe," while others choose symbols with a particular meaning to them, such as a Christian cross or a Celtic knot.

"When you think about people today who decorate their bodies, it is often a spiritual thing and it certainly is identity," says Bell. "Henna goes back a long, long ways, so women feel like they are connecting to something that has been done for centuries and centuries."