

AHOM: Gift Shop Par Excellence

Written by Valsala Menon

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The power to think sets you free...to fly through the cosmic , to a place without borders, to realise, to reflect and be reborn in the relentless quest for the Self- the AHOM. Situated right in the heart of the city at Ernakulam, is AHOM., a gift shop par excellence. It is a place where one walks into and gets totally transfixed by its elegant grandeur and eye catching display. Small Enterprise India met up with Archana Shankar, to talk in length to her about her exclusive shop.

"AHOM' in Sanskrit means 'Me'. I named my shop this because 'AHOM' brings out the different dimensions of my personality- affirms Archana. She always aspired to be a designer right from her teen days. After graduating in Mathematics from Maharaja's college, Ernakulam, she went on to do fashion designing from JD Institute in Bangalore. Her parents wanted her to return to Kochi after her studies. The opportunities for a designer was very rare and few . Archana enrolled for a brief internship with V- Star creations , sister concern of V-guard but it was really not her cup of tea since it was just embroidery work and she quit.

Madam Institute of home science offered her a teaching post and it was here, that she discovered that she had a penchant for teaching. At Madam's she was entrusted with handling fashion designing course. In her spare time, Archana dabbled in designing silk ties for men and hand painted them based on themes. She organised an exhibition at CMS college, Coimbatore and the response to her designer ties was tremendous.

After her brief stint at Madam Institute, she joined as teaching faculty at International Academy of Fashion in Thrikkakara. The institute was opened by top notch industrialists and academicians who actually wanted to open engineering colleges but they ended up starting a design institute. Facilities were state of the art and the campus huge and sprawling. For four years, Archana worked here. Unfortunately they closed down since they were keen on only an engineering college in the state. Many who passed out of this institute are doing extremely well. One of her students works with one of the top notch designers J.J Wallya, and another did

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stylings for couple of films.

"Before the institute closed down., I organised two exhibitions for my students to show case their talents and we called ourselves the D club"- says Archana.

"I launched myself into styling for ads, both print and film media. I have worked for Seematti, Kalyan silks, Pankaj Kasthuri, to name a few".

Word just spread around and St. Therasas college approached Archana , inviting her to head the fashion designing department . She continued as the head of the department of fashion design at St Therasas college for six years.

"Right from when I joined St Therasas, I have been mulling over the thought of launching my own signature shop. Shankar, my husband has played a major role in this. He has been very supportive in all my ventures through out. I have been very particular that the products displayed ought to be colourful. I am into product design too. I design my own garment collection at AHOM and it's a shop that promotes the spirit and essence of India. When I started out as a designer, I had no one to help or guide me by giving me an opening to promote my designs. At AHOM, I encourage young designers to bring in their unique range of products and I provide an avenue for displaying and show casing their unique style and design."

The interior of Ahom is done in black and white. The tag of each product is done in yellow.

"Shankar and I travel the length and breadth of India and follow our gut feeling when it comes to picking up products"- Archana says.

A bank loan was taken from Punjab and Sind bank just for designing the interiors. Archana has her own garment production unit where she designs garments , her unique style being contemporary and casual. Ahom has accessories and bags which are made out of fabrics plus soft cushions, silk floor pillows, all exclusively designed by Archana.

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"When young designers come to me, I give them inputs . Anything that is properly packaged and branded will interest the customer. People in Kerala have very poor entrepreneurial interest. They do not want to finish the product, show case and sell it. This is a beautiful opportunity I provide for fresh designers at AHOM"-Archana opines.

"India is vast and so many things come in newer forms. For instance, bamboo or terracotta. My mantra is - change is inevitable. Source more contemporary and utility based designs . Utility combined with aesthetics".

AHOM is a place where one resolves to return to , time and again, not only for its exclusivity but also for getting truly inspired by its energetic proprietress Archana Shankar.

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