

A lady's haven

Less than a year old, Mrunal's has carved a niche for itself. By Letha Jose

Mrunal Khimji would tell you that she has been an entrepreneur all her life even though her boutique is less than a year old. Starting off as a 13-year-old holding summer classes for younger kids, in her late teens she moved on to set designing while doing a course in theatre in Switzerland. Even as she worked for six years at Rosy Blue, a well-known international diamond and jewellery firm, as designer and product development manager after a fashion and jewellery design course at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, Mrunal started a small workshop in Mumbai, India, for garments. "Designing began as a casual hobby. I started by designing for friends and it has gradually turned into a full-fledged profession. Before coming to Oman, I had taken up the entire work of the weddings of two of my friends."

When she came to Muscat in 2005 after marriage, Mrunal first joined her husband who was handling the IT division of the family business. But she couldn't come to terms with the concept of her husband being colleague and life partner. Added to that was the fact that her field is creativity. "IT and finance are not my forte. Don't ask me to count money, don't ask me to do billion dollar deals, I'm bad at those." Her husband and in-laws were more than supportive and thus was sown the seeds of Mrunal's.

Her first exhibition here was in 2005 with 89 pieces. It was a small collection, meant to test the waters. "I still remember sitting at the computer making all the entries. I invited only close friends and family and all the pieces were lapped up on the very first day." For a long time she operated out of home converting one of the bedrooms into a studio. But it reached a point that she had so many clients that operating out of a single room became impossible.

An idea turns reality

From idea to reality this self-financed enterprise took nine months to grow. She says it was akin to giving birth to a child. "It was a

painful affair. When you become an entrepreneur, the hardest part is tackling all the little things that ultimately matter the most, even finding the right place. Then we had to get the permissions through, the designs right – it was very difficult. When we were working on this it looked as if it was going to take forever." Mrunal wanted the shop to have its own identity. So it was important to have the right place, the right people to work there and have the right themes. And above all to get the right tailors to come here. She says that is one thing that matters the most, as they are the real craftsmen. "We are designers, we come up with a concept but these are the people who convert our dream to reality." Since her clients



Entrepreneur:
Mrunal Khimji
Enterprise:
Mrunal's (boutique)
Financing:
Self-financed
Since:
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are from around the world, Mrunal says her designs have incorporated influences from various regions. Keeping in mind the clientele's tastes, Mrunal's stocks westerns, *jelebias*, tunics, *kurtilis*, saris and also a small but exclusive men's line.

Personalised service and reasonable rates have ensured repeat visits. Prices range from RO12 to several thousands and ensembles, from everyday wear to party and bridal wear. Keeping in mind the theme of a 'woman's paradise' Mrunal's stocks accessories including exclusive bags as well as diamond and gold jewellery. The jewellery in the shop is designed by her and friends. Is there a premium on the gold and diamond jewellery at Mrunal's because of the designer tag? "I can

guarantee that mine is the cheapest jewellery in Oman. Because I have been in this industry, I know the cost and the price points. I am both a shopaholic and designer, so I don't believe in looting my customers. Price points are reasonable." As she was in a design school Mrunal has friends who are in the same industry. Some of the bags are designed by a school friend, who is an accessories designer. Others are designed by Namita Khimji. Mrunal's has not yet invested in shoes but that is just a matter of time. As of now the boutique employs eight including the two master tailors who are based in Muscat.

Not all about business

However, Mrunal's is not just about designer clothes and accessories, says the young entrepreneur. The shop is the realisation of a vision which she always had. "Women play so many different roles in the society – mother, wife, businesswoman – and most of her life goes in multitasking. Still we live in a male dominated society. I wanted to have a place that makes women feel pampered, a place where they can walk into and forget about the world outside, even if it is for a couple of hours." That is one of the reasons why she decided to have clients in by appointment only. This ensures that they get enough time with each client, discuss in detail as to what she is looking for and even a bit of small talk. Coffee, juice, cookies and sweets are all part of the Mrunal's experience.

They do have walk-ins and Mrunal says those clients are treated as specially as the ones with appointment. It is not all about business always. Sometimes clients come to buy just one gift and end up buying 25 outfits. There are times when someone walks in just for that Mrunal's experience – coffee, biscuits and some small talk.

Pampering and empowering women seems to be a cause held dear to this entrepreneur's heart. She has already set in motion work on a project to help empower Omani women. "Our major goal is to help them find

'The boutique is the realisation of a dream. I wanted a place that makes a woman feel pampered, a place where she can walk into and forget about the world outside'

not able to say anything to the excited daughter because she wants her to be happy. "But we know the mother is probably thinking of the four other younger daughters who will soon be in the same boat. We always try to strike a balance. We have to understand not only a bride's excitement but also a mother's concern and financial budget. It's our duty to understand, cater to both their happiness, needs and luxury."

Mrunal insists her job is not merely that of a fashion designer, it is also that of an event manager. She and her staff have become champions in creating and organising things for everyone, whether it's a party favour they want to give, or a henna ceremony or some other function. "Our clients come here for dresses and accessories. That is something which they pay for. But our other services are add-ons. We give them suggestions and ideas about organising functions." That doesn't cost money. Many come in as clients and go back home as friends. And that is probably another reason why Mrunal's never had to go in for advertising. Her business has expanded purely by word of mouth. So much so that she expects to break even by the end of the year.

As things stand, she has no plans for expansion in Oman or to branch out elsewhere even though there are some clients who buy Mrunal's products for selling in other countries. "But we don't want to open any branches immediately. Mrunal's is such a small baby now, not even a year old. I want to nurture this before I start looking outside. We didn't want this to be one of the places where people will walk in, pick up stuff and walk out. We wanted Mrunal's to be an experience to be cherished. And I think we have achieved that." ■

their feet. Tailoring and embroidery are things that every woman can do sitting at home. We are open to women coming and learning embroidery and tailoring from us. I have this art, which can be shared. And if that helps empower a woman who can't earn anything otherwise, what can be better?" Mrunal's is also considering the option of

joining with an organisation like Omani Women's Association or some NGO working with underprivileged women.

Running a boutique is also about understanding two sides of the same coin. Mrunal takes the example of brides who come all starry-eyed and want all the best things for their most special day. Many times the mother is