

## MEET THE MAKERS

# Vāhe Ensemble

TRADITIONAL KASHMIRI PAPIER-MÂCHÉ CRAFTING TECHNIQUES INSPIRE HAND-SCULPTED MODERN ABSTRACTIONS, IN A SERIES OF HAND-SCULPTED OBJECTS AND LUMINAIRES BY VAISHNAVI WALVEKAR OF VĀHE ENSEMBLE



WORDS: VAISHNAVI NAVEEL TALAWADEKAR PHOTOS COURTESY: VĀHE ENSEMBLE & STUDIO BRINTH

It was during a summer trip to Delhi that Vaishnavi Walvekar first met a Naqaashi artisan from Srinagar. It was in Dilli Haat, she recalls, and his name was Riyaaz ji: “His stall had all these lightweight, ornate products—all made of recycled paper. I was pursuing my MFA in Industrial Design at the Academy of Art University, San Francisco at the time, and had flown back for the summer.” That this particular summer would change the course of her career—and her life—was something she would only discover later.

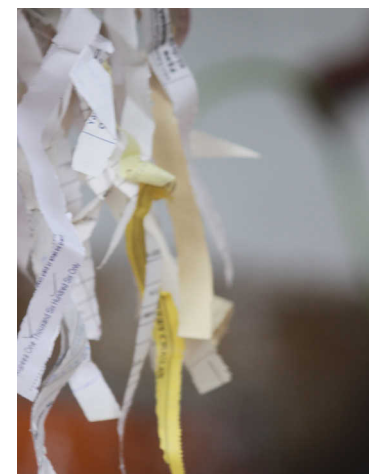
The chance encounter with Riyaaz ji led Vaishnavi down a rabbit hole of discoveries. “I was enamoured by the intricate papier-mâché paintings in his stall and immediately remembered a similar papier-mâché vase I had picked up in a Cochin artefact store years ago. The design language remained unchanged, and I was intrigued by the idea of these wondrous paper objects,” shares the designer, who soon visited Srinagar in a bid to learn more.

“After working with a few Sakthasaazi artisans (the community that moulds the paper pulp objects), I developed my very first concepts with a lovely artisan named Younus ji, who flew down to Pune to co-create the prototypes. I was keen on a new reinterpretation of the craft, moving away from conventional trinket boxes and curios to full-scale furniture in the form of sculptural and functional art,” recalls Vaishnavi, adding, “The magic of each object lies in the layers it wears, guarding its core of precious paper pulp.”

Constructed from waste paper pulp and natural binders, each Vāhe piece is meticulously hand-sculpted in several layers and sun-dried. “We produce slowly, in small batches, and our pieces are made-to-order. Some products make it from sketch to prototype within days; others have taken us a year, especially those that involve a material mix,” reflects Vaishnavi. The brand tips its hat to the environment in more ways than one. All the waste from pieces that don’t make the cut is reused as raw material, and chemical finishes are avoided at all costs. The paper is sourced from various local scrap vendors in the city.

Vāhe’s maiden ensemble, 34 74, draws its name from the geographical coordinates of Srinagar. The outcome envisions a range of brutalist-inspired pieces including sculptures, lamps, furniture and mirrors. What began as a nomadic experiment with bases in Srinagar, Delhi and Pune, is now a burgeoning studio soon to be anchored to the capital. In June 2022, Vāhe debuted at Salone Satellite in Milan—the international design event dedicated to emerging designers at Salone Del Mobile, and today, retails on three international platforms—Movimento Club, 1stDibs and The Artling. ♦

vahe.co



Clockwise, from top right: Multiple experiments and reinforcement techniques paved the way for new interpretations of the craft; Application techniques that take the material from raw to refined; Paper pulp ready to be fashioned into objects; Raw material used in the production process (OPPOSITE PAGE) Vaishnavi Walvekar with the Pillar Sculptural Lamp from Ensemble 34 74