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2

The Education of Waris Ahluwalia

The actor/socialite/designer behind House of Waris mines the intersection between love and history



BY KRISTIN YOUNG

Meet Waris Ahluwalia, founder of the House of Waris jewelry line, and you wonder whether you've just met a spiritual guru or Hollywood's latest It Boy.

Adorned in a black turban (the signature of his Sikh faith), Ahluwalia will tell you, in a the-universe-is-speaking-to-you sort of way, that he didn't find jewelry; jewelry found him. "Two months before it all happened, if you said to me, 'You're going to make jewelry,' I'd have said, 'You're going to be an astronaut,'" he says. "There's nothing in my life that led me to that. It just happened."

Ahluwalia was born in Punjab, India, but moved to New York City at age 5. He grew up to become a fixture on the social scene, prompting *New York* magazine to write a story entitled "Waris Ahluwalia Has Much Cooler Friends Than You" (he hangs out with New York City club kings André Saraiva and Paul Seignyn). His distinctive personal style has landed him on *Vanity Fair's* best-dressed list, and he is no stranger to *Vogue* (both the American and Italian editions). On the hot summer day *JCK* visited his office in Manhattan, he was wearing salmon-colored linen pants, a salmon T-shirt, and white Birkenstocks.



Shadow plumage pendant in 18k gold with 1 ct. t.w. diamonds; \$13,690



Pavé Diamond Talon ring in 18k gold with 1.45 cts. t.w. diamonds; \$9,220

AHLUWALIA PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN IRVING

THE LOOK



Jaipur, India's gem and jewelry hub, is home to many House of Waris workshops.

He also rubs elbows with Hollywood elite, such as director Wes Anderson and actress Tilda Swinton, which has led to a surprising number of acting gigs, including the role of Vikram Ray in Anderson's *Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* and the Chief Steward in the director's *Darjeeling Limited*.

To an outsider, Ahluwalia's life seems charmed. But the designer is quite matter-of-fact about his success. "I made it up," he says, as if this kind of trajectory happens every day. "No one handed it to me."

Ahluwalia is no less of an overachiever in the world of jewelry. Armed with a keen eye for materials and proportion, he got his start by making two rings, each stretching across three fingers and encrusted with 40 diamonds. A buyer from the Los Angeles style emporium Maxfield quickly snapped them up. That initial coup was followed by orders from some of the world's most prestigious boutiques, including Colette in Paris and Dover Street Market in London. Barneys New York and Bergdorf Goodman soon fell in step. Then came a nomination for the Council of Fashion Designers of America/*Vogue* Fashion Fund in January of 2010. Ahluwalia is one of 12 designers picked to move into the CFDA's Fashion Incubator, a 10,000-square-foot loft in New York City's garment district. He now operates House of Waris alongside fashion darlings Prabal Gurung and Bibhu Mohapatra.

The fashion contingent may count House of Waris as one of its own, but Ahluwalia is well aware that his is a very different business. "Fashion is always fading," he says. "It's one season to the next, then it's gone. I create forever. I don't mean in a lofty way. But when you do anthropological digs, you don't find clothes, you find pottery and jewelry. These are the materials that people will find now...along with Styrofoam."

In hundreds of years, if someone were to dig up a House of Waris jewel, it would most likely be in gold—Ahluwalia's material of choice because of its history and role in the human experience. "I fell in love with gold," he says, noting that one goal this year is to set up a partnership with a responsible mine. "It's just so



Ruby Wing necklace in 22k and 24k gold with 26.30 cts. t.w. rubies and 1.55 cts. t.w. diamonds: **\$42,400**



Black Flame bracelet in blackened brass with 4.14 cts. t.w. pavé black diamonds: **\$8,950**



Talon Kundun earrings in 23k and 24k gold with 1.85 cts. t.w. diamonds; **\$5,720**

DESIGNER SHOWCASE

INDUSTRY ICONS



Waris Ahluwalia, Chiara Clemente, and Wes Anderson at a 2007 party for Anderson's *Darjeeling Limited*



Ahluwalia as a cranky conductor in the quirky comedy *The Darjeeling Limited*

unfortunate that the price keeps going up. But it's an incredible material. It's got so much life. Before we lusted for oil, it was gold. Our civilization is built on this desire for gold, whether it was the Gold Rush or the Crusades. God, glory, and gold."

Over the years, the House of Waris collection has included a gold and diamond spike ring that looks like a talon, a gold necklace with two hanging rubies in the shape of sheep horns covered in gold chain, and earrings made of rose-cut diamonds set upon swirls of gold. Prices range from \$2,000 to \$75,000.

The line is made by artisans and family jewelers in Italy and India using techniques that have been handed down from generation to generation. Initially, Ahluwalia set off to produce the jewelry in New York, but closed-door policies at workshops turned him off; for a period, he stopped making jewelry altogether. It wasn't until *The Life Aquatic* wrapped in Italy that he

found a workshop in Rome with a stone setter and a goldsmith who were open to a one-on-one working relationship. He later traveled to Jaipur, India, with sketches in his right pocket and money in his left, and concluded the trip having set up relationships with seven different workshops.

Ahluwalia's attraction to ancient techniques is not solely for the benefit of the collections, he says. The designer feels a responsibility to preserve old-world craftsmanship and to foster the art of making things by hand. He thrives on the added dimension of the human connection. "Part of my daily routine is communicating with a former carpenter from Old Delhi, and I'm this guy from New York who's come back to India not as a tourist, but as someone who has a real relationship with the country and the people," he says.

All of this brings something more to the collections, beyond just diamonds and gold. "There has to be a sense of romance in the work," Ahluwalia says. "Not just from the piece itself, but from the very beginning. I don't see House of Waris as a jewelry company. It's an experience and that's what true luxury is."

It's been eight years since Ahluwalia sold his first two rings to Maxfield, but his business still revolves around a handful of top-level boutiques. Ahluwalia has intentionally built House of Waris slowly. For example, the company never sends look books to potential buyers. "I can send the work, I can come with the work, but I don't send look books. I'm happy to fly anywhere and meet with anyone, but it has to be with the decision maker," he says, noting this approach has helped establish long-lasting relationships with buyers. He would also entertain e-commerce, he says, but would do it at the same time he would open his own namesake retail stores. He'd sooner do business with mom-and-pop jewelry stores across the country—"those that are family-owned and family-run," he says. "It's not something that I've said no to, it's just that we haven't done it yet."

That said, a number of new ventures are in the works. In addition to lines of scarves, tea, and home goods, the jeweler is partnering with the high-end erotic emporium Kiki de Montparnasse for a line of jewelry set to bow this September. At press time, details were still firmly under wraps, but to give you a hint, consider that the famously risqué retailer sells items such as \$2,400 pearl restraints, bondage-style double band pavé rings, and diamond rings engraved with the words *F--king Beautiful*. One can only speculate what House of Waris would add to the mix.

To Ahluwalia, it's the next logical step in the business. In addition to the brand's homage to human history, the designer says House of Waris is an exploration of love: "I don't understand either of them. I don't understand love and I don't understand history. This is all a very elaborate, expensive, and shiny way to try to understand. This is just the education of Waris." n