



## Emerging Designers

+ SENPAI  
KOHAI

PIA + MELISSA

Fashion manufacturing is the lifeblood of the fashion industry. In this month's edition of Emerging Designers, I sit down with Pia and Melissa of Senpai+Kohai to discuss their brand, U.S. Manufacturing, and Philadelphia's fashion industry.

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### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR FASHION BRAND AND YOUR DESIGN TALENTS

SENPAI+KOHAI was a dream shared between the two of us when we met in college in 2003, which we hoped to bring to life one day. After many years spent working in the corporate world as designers, stylist and sales girls, we both decided it was the perfect time to start designing, as we had reached a milestone in our careers. Melissa was living and designing in India for Urban Outfitters, Inc., while Pia was freelancing as a stylist for clothing brands such as Anthropologie, Free People, Urban Outfitters and David's Bridal. We had both collaborated on a few projects and had made several first attempts in starting a clothing line but this time it felt right and we were ready! We spent only three months producing the first Senpai+Kohai collection in time to launch for Holiday 2012 and came out with twelve one-of-a-kind Indian textile inspired pieces, which we individually handcrafted at home.

### WHAT DOES SENPAI+KOHAI MEAN?

SENPAI+KOHAI is a Japanese term that refers to the balance between the relationship of a mentor and their apprentice. We are inspired from what we have learned from the past and apply it to our modern world.

## WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST FOR PHILADELPHIA TO BE A FASHION CITY?

**Pia:** Having manufacturing and production companies available in Philadelphia for young designers to work with. Having the resources designers need here, make for affordable production cost. For example, Melissa and I are finding out we have access here in the city for getting handmade textiles we use in our designs. We've been working in collaboration with local manufactures and other designers as well, who feel the same way we do- in that we're realizing and recognizing that manufacturing and production can exist in our city if we keep producing here.

**Melissa:** One of the nice things about Philly is that it is laid back and low key but that kind of reflects peoples style here as in they throw on whatever and go out. Philly has a long way to go in defining its "style" and I think therein lays the opportunity for Philadelphia to be a fashion city. People need to adopt a sense of their own personal style instead of shopping where everyone else shops. People should look for unique designers. The thing with Philadelphia is that most people don't want to invest more than their bare minimum on their wardrobe. Developing a sense of style is becoming easier thanks to the internet and seeing fashion bloggers' own sense of personal style. Bloggers influence others and make people want what they put out there.

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## WHY DO YOU CHOOSE TO MANUFACTURE YOUR LINE LOCALLY?

**Pia:** Because of the resources that are available and the fact that we're still a small company, who has to be very financially careful, we pay very close attention to manufacturing. We can't manufacture overseas and we really have no interest in doing so. One of the best things about producing locally is being on top of quality control, being hands on, present to see what's going on and personally talk to someone in the factories. For example, we work with T&T in North Philadelphia and it's nice because we are able to go there to see what they are doing, who they are working with, what they have done, and then also talk to them and get production done as fast as we can to meet deadlines.

**Melissa:** We also have a group of local seamstresses who are our go-to; working with local women in our community who are skilled in the industry. Producing garments overseas requires doing large volume and we're a small company, doing one-of-a-kind pieces, so overseas wouldn't work for us. We like keeping it local.

## WHY DO YOU THINK LOCAL MANUFACTURING IS IMPORTANT FOR PHILADELPHIA'S FASHION INDUSTRY?

**Pia:** Production used to be here! Philadelphia used to be the #1 production city for textiles, clothing and more for a long time; once manufacturing went overseas, it dwindled down to less than half. But I think there seems to be more awareness within the current textile and fashion industry to bring it back. Especially with the designers in incubator programs and emerging young designers, the city is realizing that it's important for manufacturing to come back here.

**Melissa:** And I think what Philadelphia is starting to do is great. There are still quite a good number of factories. I know of one recently, that closed and I wonder if this could have been prevented if more designers knew about them to hopefully draw interest as another way to find work. There are people looking for work that really need the work. Normally, factories have a 100 pieces minimum so for a small designer that may be too much but for some independent studios that exist, they can cater to smaller quantities. A great opportunity is there to bring factories and designers together.



## WHICH MANUFACTURING COMPANY SHOULD DESIGNERS KNOW ABOUT?

**Pia:** Made Studios! The best thing about Made Studios is that they are helping to train and teach people in the city how to sew. Anyone that's interested will have the opportunity to take sewing classes. Some of the women would like to find work in apparel production and with studios like Made; they can help refugees find work. With a demand for small quantity production by young designers, these women will be able to accommodate. T&T is another production house, located in the Kensington, who is open to working with young designers looking for small quantities.

**Melissa:** I think that also goes back to why fashion is slow and difficult in general because people aren't learning how to sew anymore and once you know about fabrics and construction, when you go shopping you'll be able to know the difference between poorly constructed and what a good quality garment is. You'll see value in better quality products so I think that's one thing that will really help our fashion industry is if people learn how to sew, which is what Made is doing, so it's awesome.

## WHAT IS NEXT FOR SENPAI+KOHAI?

**Pia:** Right now we're in the middle of producing a few small pieces for our fall collection. We have some fabrics that we've wanted to try and work on some outerwear, along with a few, hand-dyed silk pieces.

**Melissa:** Collaboration with Southeast by Southeast, it's part of the Mural Arts program, so we're working with a few artisans whom we're teaching some workshops to in the next few weeks, from Bhutan. Also, we are currently working on a few selling opportunities in the coming season to sell our new collection.

Check out a few of SENPAI+KOHAI pieces at boutique [Toile](#) on Frankford Ave.

Visit their [website](#), like them on [facebook](#), see them on [instagram](#) and send them an [email](#) today!

