Hand-dyeing resists fashion’s copy trends

Innovative designers are experimenting with Japanese shibori, writes Janice Breen Burns.

YOU can pick apart the average frock, copy its pattern and, in a month or so, truck 10,000 cheap copies of it to shops across Europe, the US and Asia.

It’s done every day, it’s the bane of every genuinely creative designer’s life and it’s one reason that public passion for exotic, “plagiarise-proof” crafts such as the ancient Japanese textile technique of shibori has exploded in fashion.

“People want authenticity now,” says fashion designer Peter Boyd.

“They want a hand (made) quality. They want the flaws. They want the irregularities — anything but that mass, machined look.”

He says that although complicated hand-dyeing and fabric pleating and texturing techniques such as shibori aren’t impossible for unethical factories to copy, “they’re harder”.

Boyd and co-designer Denise Sprynskyj are lecturers in fashion at RMIT and have been partners in the award-winning offbeat Melbourne brand S!X for 15 years.

Next week, they will fly to Paris to curate an exhibition of shibori objects and fashion, Sculpted Packages, by Australian artists and designers.

It’s at the impossibly hip L’Eclaireur fashion store, and is part of the International Shibori Symposium, which draws more than 400 shibori designers and artists to Paris from around the world.

“Shibori basically means ‘shaped, resist cloth’,” says Boyd.

Fabric is bound, crumpled or clamped to control its absorption of colour in a dye bath and produce various texture patterns in the final, dry cloth.

To illustrate one unique method, Boyd pulls an experiment by top Australian-Japanese designer Akira Isogawa out of its bubble-wrap.

It is difficult to describe: a twisted garland of thickly bunched cream silk with what appear to be thousands of tiny cream “antennae”, not unlike a sea anemone’s.

“See, the silk is pinched up and then bound with the string,” Boyd explains, isolating just one of the “antennae”, about a centimetre long and stiff with thread, meticulously wound around the silk peak.

“Normally, you’d dip the cloth in dye and see the design emerge after the (threads) were taken off,” says Boyd.

Consummate, original Isogawa, however, has left the bindings intact as a spiny design feature.

After Paris, Sprynskyj and Boyd hope Sculpted Packages will include work by their friends, international fashion designers Bernard Wilhelm and Walter Van Beirendonck, before returning to Melbourne in the first S!X store, planned to open during the fashion festival next March.
SIX APPEAL

Established in 1994 by RMIT fashion graduates Peter Boyd and Denise Sprynskyj.

Original collections, often based on re-creation and recycling. Mostly bought by local and international artists and creative professionals.

The partners mastered shibori techniques in Chile in 1996.

Designs are valued by collectors, including the National Gallery of Victoria.

Boyd and Sprynskyj were awarded a 2008 Premier's Design Award.

Designers Denise Sprynskyj and Peter Boyd, partners in the award-winning SIX label, at their studio.