Labor, trades and crafts uniquely unite us in the act of doing, making and creating. We believe the labor of the world’s working, trades and crafts people should be celebrated and not exploited. We seek to honor the work and empower the worker by fostering respect for the dignity and equality of all. We invite all who share this vision to join us.

–Fetzer Advisory Council on Labor, Trades and Crafts
The John E. Fetzer Institute is honored to partner with HAND/EYE Magazine in the creation of this issue dedicated to Craft and Compassion. Arising from our work of the past eighteen months, particularly from our Labor, Trades and Crafts Advisory Council, this issue represents the collective work of countless individuals who have embraced the values of love and forgiveness as made manifest through craft. We extend our gratitude to the council and Keith Recker of the HAND/EYE Fund for their inspired work in bringing this project to fruition.

Just as musicians craft their instruments, singers train their voices, and dancers forge movement, the artisans featured in this issue take raw materials and, through creativity and skill, create items that transcend function. In so doing, they plumb the depths of spirit and bring forth objects that serve a greater good. The human hand and eye are special instruments of this hallowing transformation of the world. Through the lens of love, people see one another and their world differently. Powered by love, hands heal the world by crafting new forms for living.

This collection of narratives and images celebrates the human dignity and soaring spirit of those who, through the metaphysics of craft, are creating works of functional beauty throughout the world. We hope that, through these stories you, too, will have your spirit lifted, your imagination ignited, and your awareness of love and compassion deepened.

Lawrence E. Sullivan
President and CEO
The Fetzer Institute

We are deeply moved.
As always, we encountered the deep cultural routes and tremendous beauty of craft. Master artisans consistently remind us of the ingenuity of human hands, and the satisfaction they offer the human eye. But this time around we met and embraced the metaphysical aspect of much artisan work, and were deeply moved.

The stories we gathered show that craft is more than its material expression. It is a tool to accomplish post-conflict community building, to address gender inequities, to grow income and jobs in situations where little else will bloom, to integrate into the heart of society groups whose challenges would otherwise place them at the fringes of our world.

Craft is powerful. Craft is good. Craft is deeply human. We’re eager to have you celebrate it with us.

Keith Recker
Editor and Founder
HAND/EYE Magazine

We also offer back issues of: 06 / WORLD TEXTILES 06 / GLOBAL COLOR 07 / NEW MEXICO 08 / PERU 09 / SOUTH AFRICA
Over, under, over, under… the hands of Rwandan weavers have moved fibers for centuries, weaving the delicate, intricate, sophisticated baskets that hold their nation’s soul.

The roots of Gahaya Links are the hands of the women of Rwanda—hands that weave, hands that hold children, hands that wiped away a thousand tears following the Genocide of 1994, and hands that now reach out in healing to help rebuild a nation.

When Janet Nkubana, co-founder, with her sister Joy Ndungutse, of Gahaya Links, arrived from exile in the midst of the 1994 genocide and first imagined a community of creative healing, the streets of Kigali were barren, the wounds wide open, the country pitch-black at night with no electricity.

Gahaya Links (GL) was at the core of healing a troubled nation, lifting its women from the ruins left by the genocide. GL brought together women and men from both sides of the conflict and led the formation of weaving cooperatives throughout their country—using a weaving tradition passed from mother to daughter for generations, a skill that most Rwandan women had. They even trained male prisoners (most sentenced for crimes committed during the genocide) so they could have a livelihood when they were released. The women quite literally wove their communities back together.

Weaving together “…opened up some women to start talking, and then forgiveness started, so they forgave each other. And now we have started talking to each other about business: How can we empower ourselves to get out of poverty?” Joy Ndungutse said.

Gahaya Links’ small group of weavers grew, and in 2005 Gahaya Links baskets were picked up by the American retailer Macy’s. CEO Terry J. Lundgren said he was impressed by the quality of their baskets—and moved by the women’s commitment to their communities and to a better future.

“This was not about a corporate gift, this was not a donation, this was about putting women to work,” Lundgreen said. “Women who have been impacted lost their families, their husbands, their sons to genocide. They had this skill, and this was just translating that skill into a product that could be sold to create a living for these women.”

Between 2003 – 2008, Gahaya Links connected more than 3,500 artisans in 45 cooperatives and associations all over Rwanda. Janet and Joy took their family legacy, their mother’s home in Kigali, and turned it into the Gifted Hands Training Center where women could learn weaving and jewelry-making techniques and receive information about family planning, HIV/AIDS, finances and nutrition. The women found a new sense of self-determination because they are able to earn their own income, take control of their own futures, and play a leadership role in improving their communities. Together, they achieve reconciliation, forgiveness and love through shared enterprise. “You can see that the women are now thinking beyond only digging, cooking, staying home. They are now thinking like entrepreneurs,” Joy Ndungutse says.

Janet Nkubana is a laureate of The Hunger Project Africa’s Prize for the Sustainable End to Hunger—an acknowledgment that hunger, poverty, reconciliation, forgiveness, community, education for children, dignity, hope are all held in the strong hands of the women of Rwanda.

The final weaving together that Gahaya Links has achieved is the linking of women in American and European marketplaces—the buyers—with the women weaving in Rwanda. Disparate cultural perspectives, divergent agendas, the minutiae of pricing, quality control and myriad individual personalities have been balanced and woven together into a living tapestry. Complex and exquisite, holy and mundane, dealing with war, peace, commerce, poverty, abundance, gender, beauty, local, national and global community—and above all humanitarianism and artistry.

Over, under, under, over…Gahaya Links weaves a future for a torn world.

Author Willa Shalit is a warrior in the battle against poverty, and in the global struggle for full equality for women. For more on Gahaya Links, see www.gahayalinks.com.

TEXT WILLA SHALIT ——— IMAGES RECCARDO GANGALE
At 18, Bhavna is already a highly accomplished handloom weaver, taught by her father and grandfather. Clad in jeans, she explains, in quiet confident English, that she feels weaving is a “very, very noble profession.” A lot of young traditional weavers would not agree with her.

The latest official census shows that seven million families in India earn their daily bread weaving cloth by hand. This makes handloom weaving second only to agriculture as India’s largest income-earning activity. But very few traditional weavers of Bhavna’s age aspire to pass their lives at a loom, nor do their parents encourage this. Weaver parents need their children to have a formal educational degree of some sort and to earn more than they feel is possible as a weaver. Across the country, low wages, poor working conditions, and low social status cause an escalating dropout rate amongst young weavers.

If these young people had other job opportunities in the many small rural areas where they live, this dropout factor might be less disturbing. Sadly, they do not. So there is an increasing number of weaver youths who, unlike Bhavna, have not learned traditional weaving skills from their elders because they sought an educational certificate which, unfortunately, qualifies them for nothing. They enter the ranks of the unemployed as “cool, dissatisfied kids.” Like unemployed youth the world over, they have their cell phones, fast bikes and expensive jeans. They are full of dreams, but they have no viable income earning skills and no way to afford their new habits.

This may be the generation in which centuries of inherited handloom skills are lost to the world, as elder weavers fail to pass them along and children are discouraged from learning them. Traditional weaving clusters adjacent to urban areas will be the worst affected.

Fortunately in more remote rural areas, there are enough young traditional weavers, like Bhavna, who are ideal candidates for reversing this trend.

The HANDLOOM SCHOOL, a new institution in Maheshwar, offers young people a one-year course in the art and business of hand-loomed textiles. The goal? To create new ranks of textile artists and professionals who will carry forward skills that might otherwise be lost in our lifetime.
By attending The Handloom School, they can look forward to a lifetime of weaving and to being viable world citizens as well. Like Bhavna, they wish to “help other weaver families.” By taking a one year course in textile design at a private institute in Indore, Bhavna has already proved herself exceptionally entrepreneurial. Indore is the nearest “metro” to her own small, ancestral town of Maheshwar, in Central India. But education in a city like Indore is expensive and very challenging to young people who have grown up in rural environments.

Bhavna’s counterparts will have a better option through The Handloom School program, based in Maheshwar. The school will offer a one year course which includes Design, Textile Technology, Business, Digital Technology, Language, Communication, Ethics and Sustainability.

Small at its inception, The Handloom School will grow to a ten acre campus with multiple facilities and it will eventually have satellite campuses across India.

Thanks to a scholarship program and a clear mandate to teach both girls and boys on an equal footing, Bhavna will be among The Handloom School’s first graduates. She is already skilled in very fine count weaving: silk warp, cotton weft and intricate borders of fine gold thread. Her fellow students at The Handloom School will be young weavers from diverse weaving traditions across the country. There will be much that they can learn from one another.

Today they know of little beyond their own villages. Their sole link with the outside world has been the ‘master weaver’ or middleman, who commissions their work, supplies their yarns and eventually markets their products, juggling their earned wages against the advance loans they have taken from him to sustain their lives.

When they come together at The Handloom School, these students will represent the full range of India’s vast repertoire of weaving: from heavy count cottons and wools to the finest, near invisible handspun khadis, from Benares’ rich silks to Bikaner’s earthy wools.

As graduates of The Handloom School, these students, Bhavna’s counterparts across India, will hold a new place in the world. They will form a tight team, supported by their newly acquired knowledge, confidence and experience and continuously learning through the links forged with each other and with the world.

A graduate of Stanford University, Sally Holkar married into the former royal family of Indore, hereditary patrons of Maheshwar’s handloom weaving. She co-founded Rehwa Society in 1978 and managed it until 2002, when she founded WomenWeave Charitable Trust to support women weavers across India. To support The Handloom School, contact unmesh@sustainabilitycxo.com or women.weavers@gmail.com.

**THESE STUDENTS**

will represent the full range of India’s vast repertoire of weaving: from heavy count cottons and wools to the finest, near invisible handspun khadis; from Benares’ rich silks to Bikaner’s earthy wools.
sisal weaving is literally a labour of love in rural Swaziland, where the tradition of weaving baskets out of thread handspun from the sisal weed is part of Swazi marriage ceremonies. It is a tradition that has spawned another labour of love – in the form of Tintsaba, a small business started by Sheila Freemantle 27 years ago.

With her start-up group of 12 female weavers, Sheila set about tightening the way the fibres were woven and changing the colours to create a more refined style of basket. Quality and master craftsmanship – with all the time-consuming practice that involves – were to become the hallmark of Tintsaba, whose one-off creations have been recognized as world-class by galleries across the United States and Europe, and at trade fairs such as the New York International Gift Fair.

Underpinning Tintsaba’s dedication to quality is its master weaver program, which encourages and motivates the women to improve their skills. Each basket design is graded into one of four quality categories – trainee, market, craft and gallery – which determine how the piece will be sold.

Weavers who show exceptional skill are master weavers whose baskets are judged according to strict criteria: the size of the coil (umcolo), the delicacy of the hand spun sisal (photsa), the creativity of its pattern (hlobisa) and the basket’s shape. A 16cm basket can take up to 15 hours while a 34cm basket might take 50 hours. “The patterns are in their head and not on paper,” explains Sheila. “The master weavers are left to their own creativity whereas the other grades and learners are prescribed the patterns for orders.”

An annual competition pits master weavers against one another, with each entrant receiving a bonus and the top five winners a cash prize. Their baskets have been sold as collector’s items, most recently at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, earning good money for the weavers.

“The competition encourages new patterns and stretches creativity so that the master weavers become mentors in their community,” says Sheila. “This has also changed the status of the craftswomen from ‘crafts done by grandmothers’ to modern women who see this as a career.”

Sheila and the group quickly realized that Tintsaba’s patterns could set them apart from the rest of Africa, enabling a better price for the weaver. At a workshop to discuss new pattern ideas, they decided to explore using images of animals – in particular, lions and elephants, which are considered the king and queen mother of Swaziland, as well as the birds that they know from their villages.

This being Tintsaba, the workshop was held in a nature reserve where the weavers received environmental education and compost-making classes. Improving the women’s weaving skills is just one aspect of the company’s vision to enhance its employees’ lives and their surrounds.

“When we first realized how long the baskets take to make, we saw that we needed to make the women’s lives better as a whole, hence the social programs, and also to develop their skills – for example, into jewellery-making – so that we would make a high-end, unique product that would bring them better income,” says Sheila.

The weavers receive motivational training, attend workshops on HIV/AIDS awareness, a literacy program called Tintsaba Reads and lessons in Brain Gym, which helps concentration, emotional balance, coordination and equalization of both sides of the brain. Tintsaba started a mobile health clinic with volunteer homeopathic doctors in 2008 and funded transport and medication.

“The homeopathic and literacy projects come out of having a big heart and believing that each of the 895 women have the potential to become a great leader or whatever their mission,” says Sheila.

This holistic approach ultimately has its reward in the baskets themselves, as pointed out by one of the master weavers: “One cannot make a good basket if one is not in a good mood. All our love is reflected in our work and it pours back into us.”

To learn more about Tintsaba please visit www.tintsaba.com

Kelly Berman is manager of the Design Indaba Expo (www.designindaba.com), a showcase of multi-sectoral design from Southern Africa.

Opposite: A sampling of Tintsaba’s refined basketry
In the rural community of San Andrés de Tupicocha, 500 highland families live around the city of Chosica, a mandatory stop for migration to Lima since the first decades of the last century. The local economy revolves around cattle and sheep, and the subsistence farming of potatoes, barley, wheat, beans and peas, as well as corn and fruits from the lowlands — mostly old, traditional crops sometimes still carried to and from market in old traditional woven bags called shicras.

As in most Andean towns, the market is the meeting place and the center of commercial activity. There, one can still see people wearing shicras woven from twisted and dried vegetable fibers. Not so long ago, older people remember, all the inhabitants of the area knew how to make shicras and they used them daily for carrying tools or food or seeds to the countryside, or perhaps special foods, flowers, toasted corn and bottles of liquor for celebrations — whether they were births or funerals or communal festivals. Large shicras served as packs for mules and other pack animals. The whole family participated in the weaving process. Even young boys and girls learned to weave as part of their domestic duties, instructed typically by their grandmother or mother.

Shicras, besides satisfying basic needs for transportation and storage of goods, were associated with ritual, ceremony, identity and sociality — functions they addressed with considerable technical skill and beauty. The custom of offering toasted corn in shicras during communal holidays may be interpreted as an act of redistribution, and as an affirmation of social relationships through reinforcement of the shared cultural identity of the townspeople. Gift-giving involving shicras comes into play during the celebration of San Andrés, the saint of the region, guild celebrations, births, weddings and funerals.

Shicras, besides satisfying basic needs for transportation and storage of goods, were associated with ritual, ceremony, identity and sociality — functions they addressed with considerable technical skill and beauty. The custom of offering toasted corn in shicras during communal holidays may be interpreted as an act of redistribution, and as an affirmation of social relationships through reinforcement of the shared cultural identity of the townspeople. Gift-giving involving shicras comes into play during the celebration of San Andrés, the saint of the region, guild celebrations, births, weddings and funerals.

The making of shicras was always a specialized activity, developed primarily by the women of the household with the goal of meeting domestic and ritual needs. Because of very sparse contact with the outside world, little deviation from the traditional materials and methods of shicras-making occurred. No tools were developed: only the skill of a weaver’s hands came into play. Local tree barks served as raw material, with local dyestuffs adding color. The happy result of this relative isolation is that shicras represent one of the most ancient American textile techniques. Associated with the presence of early fishing societies, and used in fishing net bags, there are known shicras specimens up to 5,000 years old.

Recent scarcity of the bark used to make shicras, combined with heavy competition from manufactured bags and packs, threatens the continuity of this tradition. Another threatening factor is the presence of synthetic materials suitable for weaving. Much shicras-making has devolved into cushuri, bags that follow the same format but are done with the a crochet hook, often with non-traditional fibers.

The rescue and revival of the weaving of shicras, and recognition of their emblematic cultural value, can contribute to the improvement of the way of life for Tupicochana women and to strengthen their capacities related to other institutional and professional environments. Turning traditional skills into meaningful income, along with social recognition, can help women weavers achieve autonomy and economic independence.

The Dirección Nacional de Artesanía del Ministerio de Comercio Exterior y Turismo de Peru is developing a program to rescue and develop the weaving of shicras in the area. The long-term goal is to elevate this tradition so that it can continue as a cultural symbol and as a possible source of income for new generations.

Author María Elena del Solar, an anthropologist with a doctorate in Museum Studies from the National Mayor University of San Marcos, consults with arts and crafts development projects.
Jude Hill’s Magic Feather Project inspires exciting and compelling collaboration between textile artists from all over the world, all in the name of creating tools for healing children dealing with trauma.

In her thoughtful, labor-intensive fabric-based art practice, Jude creates hand-stitched story cloths and quilts that touch us deeply. Explaining how they reach deep into the consciousness of viewers (and touchers) requires simile: Just like a cellist preparing for a concert, the first meeting of hand, bow and string may be shaded with tremors and adjustments. As the musician warms to her task, there is a realization that her whole body must be involved. She tilts her head, relaxes her feet into the ground, and listens: player and cello both begin to open, their co-produced sound radiating warmth. Slowly the magic happens, with only cello and player in relationship, but everyone within reach resonating with the notes. The response is joy.

It is this same magic Jude offers to students around the world. Instead of a cello, we have cloth. Instead of strings and a bow, we have needle and thread. Storycloths, rendered from the combination of one’s own inner life and the unique and original teaching skills that Jude generously shares, have found a place in the hearts of a new global community of artists and makers.

Jude’s personal symbol and signature is the magic feather. It has always been a part of Jude, and came into its stitched form during her early cloth work. People from all over the world heard about Jude’s creative methods of stitching through her blog, Spiritcloth. Jude’s voice is welcoming and encourages vital exploration of one’s own truth in textiles. Her hands move skillfully as she teaches, in concert with her voice, until one is so moved by her gentle spirit and kindness that we begin to touch our own deep, often buried, treasures that wait for the soul’s expression. It is a gift to be able to learn from a teacher who continues to learn herself, and who shares both her revelations and difficulties.

Jude Hill decided to broaden her magic feather symbol into a project that will benefit, and be gifted to, children. She asked, through her Spiritcloth blog, whether people could stitch their own version of her magic feather, and share the results so that she could assemble them into a textile made with love, with healing intentions, with hope. The textile would be gifted to a place, or an individual, in need of these magic feathers.

The first place to receive a Magic Feather Cloth will be my Toronto studio, where I work with children around the world who have experienced trauma so that they might start their journey toward inner healing and wholeness. The children who come for therapy are from many different cultures. One important vehicle for their healing, is to work with, touch, play, and connect with handmade textiles created by people from all over the world. When a child connects with the cloth they have chosen, a process of deep healing unfolds. The textiles offer courage, a deep trust of elements both visible and unseen, and an experience of transformation.

Jude’s call to participate was answered with joy. She received nearly 1,000 magic feathers within several months. They flew in from adults, children, and elders living in all parts of the world. She will stitch the feathers onto a larger cloth, with more added details as she goes along. When finished, children will have a chance to wrap themselves in the love, good intentions, and healing wishes of the many makers who helped the cloth take shape.

The world wrestles with issues of power every day, contributing to a hierarchy that develops harm instead of consideration and sustainability. Creativity, through the initiative and teachings of Jude Hill and a worldwide community of makers, is an example of how the balance of power can shift. The Magic Feather Project has become known throughout the world as an ambassador for kindness in action. The Magic Feather Project holds its own by the strength of its makers and their compassion for the children who wait for the arrival of a many-feathered storycloth.

You can follow the progress of the Magic Feather Project on Jude’s blog, spiritcloth.typepad.com. For more on Wendy Golden-Levitt’s use of textiles as a vehicle for healing, see www.handeyemagazine.com/content/textile-therapy-0 and www.handeyemagazine.com/content/hope-arrived-yesterday.
Matenwa is a small Haitian island situated in the bay of Port Au Prince. Life is hard and resources are slim in the remote mountainous terrain of Lagonav, where approximately 110,000 people continue to live today without electricity or running water. Poverty runs widespread and few visitors make the long and arduous journey. 15 years ago, Chris Low and Ellen LeBow, the director of the local school and an American artist, teamed together to help encourage dignity and self-sufficiency on the island. They decided to tap into the creativity of the women who now proudly call themselves Atis Fanm Matenwa—the Women Artists of Matenwa. Together they formed a locally owned artisan collective which has bonded the community, while also spur-ring laughter, hope, and artistic expression.

The lack of government assistance and health care, and depletion of natural resources are all growing concerns. Trees are being cut down, turned into charcoal, and then sold to urban areas as a meager source of income. Ellen states “Povery forces the deforestation that ruins the balance of nature, eroding away the topsoil - which in turn washes down to the sea, killing off edible fish. Women and children travel miles to collect precious water from a scattering of mountain springs.”

To help create alternative sources of revenue, Ellen came up with the idea to produce brilliant hand-painted silk scarves, a craft that is unique in the Haitian market. Ellen explains, “It is low tech, unbreakable and an excellent vehicle for artistic expression.” Inspiration also came from the mouchwa, headscarf in Creole, which is a traditional article of clothing worn by women in Matenwa. “It is both practical in that it protects the hair from sun and dust, but is also a beautiful accessory. It seemed a natural extension of artisanship to take what you already know and embellish it,” comments Ellen.

Plain white silk scarves are stretched tight onto frames, which are then painted with a resist technique to form gorgeous, smooth lines of color and pattern. Picturesque images are inspired by their surroundings, and include depic-tions of daily life, Vodou, and memories of the natural world that is quickly disappearing.

Life for the Atis Fanm Matenwa has already changed for the better, and they are proud of their growing skills and stronger sense of kinship. Ellen observes, “They have become well respected and an influential voice in their community. All of them feel more in control of their destiny and see that there are alternatives to helplessly watching their land deplete or leaving the safety of where they grew up to try to survive in the unforgiving slums of Port-au Prince.” She concludes by saying, “All over Haiti there is a lesson to be learned: No matter how good an idea is, it will fail if it is imposed on people rather than figuring it out together, in partnership.”

For more information, visit artmatenwa.org

Above: Handpainted patterns by Atis Fanm Matenwa
Right: One of the women artists of Matenwa
F R E E - M I N D E D

ARTISANS

CRAFT-MAKING BY THE MENTALLY CHALLENGED

Beautiful and tactile products from the wood and ceramics studios of Shobu Gakuen.
The facility was established in 1973. During the first decade or so, the residents at the facility mostly worked for factories as subcontractors. That changed after the current director, Shin Fukumori, joined Shobu in 1983. Fukumori recalls, “I thought working as subcontractors positioned us in a lower social class and indirectly contributed to discrimination against the physically challenged. Looking at the way our residents and visitors devoted themselves to making crafts, at their pure attitude, I thought we needed to shift from passively taking orders to making our own, unique creations and expressing ourselves creatively. For them, the goal is not to have complete carved wood or embroidery pieces, but to practice their craft daily.”

Kobo Shobu started its independent textile and wood workshops in 1988 and slowly expanded into different areas of crafts. In recent years, they have grown beyond crafts and arts, establishing their own organic farm and a culinary facility. There is even a percussion band and a vocalist group, Ono and Ono. All these things help them live more proactively and sustainably. Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, who has visited and written about Shobu Gakuen, recalls meeting the elderly sister of an artist. Her brother, who used to have mood swings and temper problems, became much happier after joining Shobu and starting to make crafts, the woman told Wada. “What is unique about Shobu Gakuen is that it is a place where adults with mental and physical challenges can lead worthwhile, semi-independent lives. Craft-making improves their quality of life, and lessens the burdens on their family. The fact that the crafts-making empowers the artists in their day-to-day living, and that what they make is powerful and touches many people, is wonderful,” Wada comments.

The crafts that come out of Kobo Shobu, a group of craft-based workshops in Kagoshima City, Japan, show striking beauty and unique aesthetics. But the story behind these beautiful creations is even more captivating. Kobo Shobu is a part of Shobu Gakuen, a rehabilitation facility for the mentally and physically challenged. The artists who make dazzling textiles and wooden tableware face serious challenges, including Down’s syndrome and autism. As a result, Shobu Gakuen is known to be a pioneer in the field, drawing about 1000 visitors a year. Their wildly unique arts and crafts have received much positive reactions and wide media coverage. But that is not the point, Fukumori emphasizes. “Being able to work, being able to greet people, having ties with the community through our trades, they are all important. But the most important thing is our people’s happiness. Because of the workshops, they came to live more proactively and more confidently. These things are huge pluses for us.”

Some residents of the campus as well as commuters, make tableware, accessories, and furniture. Fukumori explained, “Staff members do not tell the artists what to do. Their job is to see what the participants make as a foundation, and figure out a way to turn them into products.” Hitsumi Doi, the manager of the design office at Shobu, added, “For example, when they make things that are usable like tableware, we help them through the process. When they make things that are not usable, we treat them as pieces of art. In both cases, we see the process as a collaboration.”

When asked why Shobu’s crafts are so powerful, Wada commented, “The artists at Shobu Gakuen are free of value judgement and conventional ideas about what art should be. They live in a free world that we do. So in a way it is natural that what they make is beautiful.”

For more information on Shobu Gakuen please visit www.shobu.jp New York-based Yumiko Sakuma writes about art, fashion and culture. www.yumikosakuma.com
Marine biologist JUlie Church saw an environmental challenge, as well as an artistic solution, on the beaches of Kenya

The old saying that “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” has come to mean something rather ominous in the 21st century, where trash heaps are no longer harmless mounds of rusty castoffs, but vast brownlands of plastic and chemical waste posing an urgent threat to our health and our environment. The reckless handling of waste from old cell phones, computers, batteries and plastic water bottles puts in jeopardy the complex system of plant life, animals, land and waterways upon which we all depend for our most basic needs. Plastics in our oceans are wreaking havoc with animal populations both through the leeching of harmful chemicals into the water and by snaring creatures in bits of trash from which they can’t break free.

In ways large and small, artists and designers have been leading the charge to clean up waterways, lakes and oceans, urban environments and landfills, creating works from materials that would never otherwise see the light of day—and in so doing drawing the public’s attention to this growing problem. The sourcing of artists’ materials from trash has become a way for social entrepreneurs to accomplish both environmental and economic feats in one fell swoop. One such mover and shaker is marine biologist Julie Church, who saw a big problem washing up on the shorelines of her beloved Kenya, and tackled it by unleashing a polychromatic stampede of African animals sporting brightly colored post-consumer stripes. You’ve never seen a safari that looks quite like the critters created by the artists of UniquEco.

Sometimes access to a new material can spark a creative revolution for an artist. And sometimes a limitation or challenge, first viewed as an obstacle, can actually trigger creative problem-solving or provide an unexpected bolt of inspiration. Harry Bertoia only began making jewelry when the Second World War made metal hard to come by; small works were the best alternative, and he created wearable treasures that would never have existed if not for the inconvenience of rationing.

Out of the detritus of plastic waste littering Kenya’s beaches, Church has struck a chord with a community of artisans who are transforming the spongy material from which flip-flops are stamped out by the millions into jewelry, Christmas ornaments, sculptures, laptop cases, home decor and personal accessories. Church came up with the concept for UniquEco by noting the habits of her neighbors on the northern beaches of Kenya, and increasing numbers of people are aware of the need to clean up our oceans. UniquEco now scours urban areas for raw materials as well, and their products are sold in Africa, Europe, the United States and South America. Church says that her team is now developing Ocean Brand, which includes trading companies like the Flipflop Recycling Company and a retail shop in Nairobi called Marula Studios.

Church began this project by hoping to kill two birds with one stone, as it were, but she has done much more than that. Artisans are creating joyous works and developing craft entrepreneurial skills, selling their wares and making more money than they were before. There is less rubber on the beaches of northern Kenya, and increasing numbers of people are aware of the need to clean up our oceans. UniquEco’s logo-picture solution is evidently good on all terrains.

For more information, see www.theffrc.com

Living in a “first world” city like New York, or even somewhere as starkly rich and poor as Cape Town, it can bend the brain to imagine that culturally ordained practices as brutal as female circumcision are taking place while we sip on a cappuccino or have our hair cut. But for some women in Kenya it’s not even the worst of the problems they face. When Rebecca Lolosoli and 16 other Samburu women founded the village of Umoja Uaso in 1990, their main mission wasn’t art, but survival.

Not only had they suffered rape, beatings, forced marriage, genital cutting, and other domestic crimes—they were also homeless. But things took a major turn for the better when they participated in an artisan mentoring program conducted by global partnership Vital Voices, which supports emerging women leaders around the world. So began the amazing tale of a group of courageous and resourceful women who launched their traditional craft into the world of high fashion, and totally reshaped their lives with the proceeds.

Living up to its name, the village of Umoja, which means ‘unity’ in Swahili, is now a violence-free zone. Unique from neighboring villages and tribes, no grown men live there and the women enjoy independence over their own lives. Today, Rebecca and other Umoja leaders hold workshops throughout Kenya for both men and women on such issues as the rights of the girl-child, female reproductive health and HIV/AIDS, violence prevention and women’s rights. In March 2011, Newsweek magazine named Rebecca as one of the 150 Women Who Shake the World and, more recently, she was chosen by Samburu elders—all men—to run for local office. She will be the first Samburu woman to do so.

The striking beaded pieces made by the women of Umoja can be bought online and all the proceeds from the sale of these creations go directly to the artisans. Their popular ‘Unity’ necklace has become a high-fashion item sold by New York designer Diane Von Furstenberg. Through the support of a non-profit foundation, the women are paid in advance for their work, with deposits made directly into their community fund.

Any profits and donations to the foundation are used for community projects and to support their school, shop, and training center for the promotion of human rights, economic empowerment, and the preservation of indigenous art and crafts.

Each item, from broad beaded collars to warrior necklaces, is unique and all Umoja’s jewelry pieces are made by hand from glass beads bought from Indian merchants in Nairobi. The surprising thing is that Western tastes aren’t necessarily as foreign as they might initially have imagined. As it turns out, the designs that stay closest to the exuberant color combinations found in Samburu traditional ceremonial jewelry have proved to be the most popular.

“For the past three years, the Umoja Uaso Women’s Fund has sponsored Umoja at the prestigious Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, where Rebecca and Umoja have been featured artisans,” says Jane Wilner, one of the fund’s directors. “During the summer of 2011, our foundation also sponsored Umoja to sell its items at the Dallas Wholesale Market, and organized events for Rebecca to personally introduce Umoja, its craft, and its message in various cities across the United States.”

Located near the Samburu Uaso Gate of Samburu National Reserve, the Umoja village is also an extraordinary place to visit. It continues to inspire change, not only in surrounding communities, but in the minds of everyone who is lucky enough to experience it first hand. Promoting reconciliation, forgiveness and love, it is a truly unique village and a testament to what can be accomplished when women are unified in strength and purpose and community.
They say that when a butterfly flaps its wings in one corner of the world, it can cause a hurricane on the other side of the planet. But who would guess that by buying an ultra-chic braided cuff embellished with silver chains at Colette in Paris you could have a direct, positive affect on the lives of a community in Banda, a small village situated on the perimeter of Nyungwe Forest National Park in Rwanda? It may sounds like a miracle or an urban legend, but that’s exactly what we can do. By 2010, latrines and water tanks had been launched to help community members to start and sustain small enterprises. Today, economic empowerment activities have drastically reduced prostitution and the spread of HIV. And that’s not even half of it. So successful and sustainable are the interconnected programs at Kolunga Beach, that Kageno’s Kenya programming has been handed over to the community there, while the same model gets pioneered in Rwanda, with plans to replicate the program in other remote villages too.

“But what does that have to do with designer jewelry in a luxury department store in Paris?” you may well ask. That’s where Kageno’s extraordinary craft project enters the picture. “Perhaps the largest effort under our ventures program is a crafts project that creates goods in the Rwandan villages where we work and sells them abroad,” explains Nicole Otero, a member of Kageno’s small but turbo-charged New York-based team. “In doing so, we give villagers an opportunity to earn wages and we also bring awareness to the needs and conditions of their village.” What Kageno sells are not just any old goods. Through its impressive international network, which is almost 100 percent volunteer based, Kageno sets up collaborations between village co-ops and leading designers who want to make a real difference in the world. “One of the things we pride ourselves on is having a diverse support base,” says Otero. “The Kageno family ranges from fashion designers and models to doctors, graphic designers and architects. What this means for our work is that we have an incredible network of volunteers who can lend their skills and expertise to help the communities we work with.”

“Kageno’s growth has been quite organic,” Otero continues. “Initially it was a close-knit group of friends of our executive director, Frank Andolino. Perhaps by virtue of being entrenched in NYC life, this word-of-mouth, grassroots effort grew and gradually caught the interest of new volunteers, partners, donors and supporters. We really have some amazing people in Kageno who spread the word because of a genuine passion to support our work.”

The results have been both aesthetically and socially awe-inspiring—like the Banda range of woven grass bracelets embellished by the House of Bepossi. Designed by Gaia Repossi, artistic director of the esteemed Paris jewelry house, bracelets, cuffs and arm bands are hand crafted by a vibrant women’s co-op in Banda, then embellished with silver and gold chains as well as small precious rings. “This covetable creation features gold-streaked rutile quartz square beads sewn between natural cotton cord and finished with a recycled silver tone silver commemorative button,” explains Otero. “What makes these pieces even more beautiful is the thought that all profits go towards building hospitals, orphanages and schools for children in Rwanda and Kenya. And then there’s the gorgeous collection of earthy and elemental candles made from Rwandan beeswax with a local blacksmith for Donna Karan’s Urban Zen. “This model of philanthropy and commerce creates enormous empowerment not only within the fashion community, but also with our clients, the consumers, by allowing them purchase power to assist others in need,” says the celebrated designer, capturing exactly what makes these kinds of transnational collaborations so genuinely cool.

To learn more about Kageno, please visit: www.kageno.org
The monument was built in the early 12th century, and prominently features relief carvings depicting women wearing traditional silk garments: a symbol of silk's prominent role in Cambodian history. Nearly a thousand years ago, raw silk was one of Cambodia’s main exports to China. Now however, the country imports the vast majority of its silk.

Yet, the tool Kikuo Morimoto deeply cares for is the loom. And his passion is traditional Khmer weaving. When he moved to Cambodia from Kyoto to lay the foundation stones of what would become IKTT, Cambodia was a country heavily scarred by the Khmer Rouge’s regime, and most ancestral crafts and skills had been effectively exterminated with exception of a few still practiced in remote places. Obsessed with the quality of historic Khmer woven cloths, Morimoto started to track the master weavers down – only to find that barely a handful had survived, all in their 70s and 80s, living in deep poverty, paid mere pennies for their painstaking work, and desperately struggling to make ends meet.

Morimoto managed to convince a handful of these ‘silk grandmothers’ with his vision. Together they worked towards reviving their art. He managed to find a market for their products, and gave them a chance to do work that matched their skills, and to be paid for it accordingly. The initial team of weavers gradually expanded as trainees were taken on: young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, among them many who never had the opportunity to receive an education.

Despite IKTT’s somewhat remote location, there is a considerable waiting list of people looking for work, and as a result Morimoto has made it his principle to turn everyone away initially. If they return within days for a second try, and then a third time shortly after, he considers them determined enough to try to learn the old techniques.

The very first trainee was taken on some 15 odd years ago, and is today one of the head weavers. She used to work for one of the many clothing factories in the country, but fell ill as a consequence of exhaustive long hours and exposure to the fumes of toxic finishing chemicals. After months of recovery she joined IKTT.

The latest arrivals are a young mother and her recently-born child who, starving, without family, work, or means to maintain themselves, had been abandoned by the husband. The mother went to the regional children’s hospital in Siem Reap in order to give the child up. The hospital got in touch with Morimoto in late 2011, and the mother has worked at IKTT since.

IKTT’s “Wisdom from the Forest” project, the name of their woodland campus, is home and workplace to around 100 families. Weavers develop their weaving skills, and learn the art of painting. At local schools their children have access to education, including foreign languages. The community hopes that their sericulture program, conducted in harmony with the forest, will soon provide all the raw materials needed for their weavers to practice their craft. It is with this goal in mind that they invest considerable effort in improving their knowledge of natural dyes, breeding native Cambodian golden silk, mulberry leaves to feed the silk worms, growing indigo and other dye plants, sensitively harvesting timber to build looms, and growing organic fibers needed to bind the intricate ikat warps these Cambodian master weavers are famous for.

For more information about IKTT visit: www.iktt.esprit-libre.org

Dr. Pamela Ravasio is an ethical fashion expert, consultant, researcher and journalist, and the publisher of the award winning eco fashion site Shirahime (www.shirahime.com).
Teaching design

At Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, traditional artisans are taught design fundamentals, but they also gain ownership of their craft, shifting the “poor artisan” paradigm into something much more dynamic, meaningful, and successful.
Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya was created by Frater in 2005 as a program of the arts preservation non-profit Kala Raksha, with the help of a prestigious Ashoka Foundation Fellowship. In addition to helping artisans produce more viable products, Vidhyalaya also introduces them to the transformative power of education. For rural artisans with little to no schooling, the experience can be life-changing.

“I had no clue we’d actually learn designing,” said Khimjibhai, a recent graduate. “I thought a designer would tell me what to do, and I’d do it. The first few days were hard… but I never imagined such a school!”

And often, the learning is a two-way street with the designers that Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya recruits to teach its courses.

“Over the years, craftspeople have become accustomed to (being) told by designers what to do so their response is: ‘You just tell us what has to be made and we will do it.’ Being a teacher helped me look at each craftsperosn as an individual, in order to help them to build their potential,” said Aditi Prakash of Dastkari Kaat Saati, a Delhi-based non-profit crafts association.

By encouraging individual artisans to find their voice and own their craft, Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya also helps to upend the “poor artisan” paradigm that is often found in fair trade projects. But in a society influenced heavily by caste, religion, and gender, having the freedom to explore one’s creativity can be difficult. The Tunda Vandh campus helps, in part, by providing a safe space in which to learn and create, without the pressures of the outside world.

“We wanted the artisans to have protected time and space to find inspiration from nature and their own traditions, to explore and reflect,” says Frater. “The open atmosphere of our campus, its rural bucolic isolation, I believe encourages open-minded thinking.”

Over the years, Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya has been lauded for its innovative approach to opening markets for traditional artisans, with Frater picking up honors like the Sir Misha Black Medal for Distinguished Services to Design Education and the Crafts Council of India Kamala Award for service to the field of crafts. More telling of the program’s success, however, are statements from the graduates themselves.

“After the second class graduated, we went to Delhi to participate in a seminar at UNDP,” said Frater. “When we introduced ourselves, one graduate, aged 21, said, ‘My name is Bhagvatiben, I am from Sumrasar village, and I am a designer.’ That’s when I knew we were on the way to empowerment.”

For more information on Kala-Raksha please visit www.kala-raksha-vidhyalaya.org.

Jessica Marati is a New York City-based freelance writer and authors the blog toutlemon.de.
In 2008, Krochet Kids International earned its non-profit status. Today the organization has established a community of 160 women in Uganda and Peru who make hats, head wraps and bow ties. “We come into communities that are in need and have a desire to change their circumstances. We provide training in crocheting (knitting and looming in Peru) to allow individuals to begin earning an income and begin to save money for future endeavors. Some women may continue to use their craft, while others will be pursuing careers and jobs they are passionate about outside of the artisanal [realm],” says Kohl Crecelius.

Currently, KKl employs women, but Crecelius concedes that in the future within different contexts and new programs, the organization will eventually work with both men and women. In the meantime, he notes, “What has been amazing to see is how entire families’ are being empowered through a woman’s wage. Many of our women in Uganda have helped put their husbands to work through the purchase of a motorcycle, or farm land or livestock. The supplemental income only improves the families ability to become self-reliant.”

Among the women who have benefited from KKi’s training is Akkullu Winny, a dramatic example of a woman with the ambition to lift herself and her family out of poverty.

Among Winny’s many responsibilities was taking care of her sick mother and selling sweet potatoes at the Gulu market, but her earnings weren’t enough to support her family. And then came KKi, which gave her the opportunity to learn a skill and finance a bright future.

As a crocheter for KKi, Winny has helped pay for her sister’s university tuition, and she’s saved part of her income to launch her own clothing store where she employs her mother—and her sister during school breaks. She keeps up with her savings through the KKU SACCO (Savings and Credit Cooperative) and intends to build a house for her family—with the bricks for its foundation already in place.

“What has been amazing to see is how entire families are being empowered through a woman’s wage”

For more, see www.krochetkids.org.

Three Dudes

Long before there was Krochet Kids International, there were three dudes from the state of Washington—Kohl Crecelius, Stewart Ramsey and Travis Hartanov—who did typical dude activities like skiing, skateboarding, surfing and … crocheting.

The crocheting trio—dubbed by their local newspaper in Spokane, WA as the crochet kids—had an entrepreneurial flair and sold their crocheted custom hats to finance a hot air balloon ride for senior prom. After graduation, the three friends found themselves at different colleges and during their summer breaks, they traveled and volunteered in developing countries. There they learned about the complexities of poverty, and that the majority of people had the desire to work and provide for themselves rather than receive handouts.

There was an “aha” moment after Stewart returned from a summer in Uganda and shared what he learned about generations of families living in government camps. The former crochet kids decided to take their entrepreneurial spirit and create an enterprise that would teach crocheting to people in undeveloped countries—a practical skill that would help break the cycle of poverty, but that also provide dignity and a sense of pride.

And a Crochet Needle

In 2008, Krochet Kids International earned its non-profit status. Today the organization has established a community of 160 women in Uganda and Peru who make hats, head wraps and how ties. “We come into communities that are in need and have a desire to change their circumstances. We provide training in crocheting (knitting and looming in Peru) to allow individuals to begin earning an income and begin to save money for future endeavors. Some women may continue to use their craft, while others will be pursuing careers and jobs they are passionate about outside of the artisanal [realm],” says Kohl Crecelius.

Currently, KKi employs women, but Crecelius concedes that in the future within different contexts and new programs,
Drea Ms woven text JEANNE GOLLY —Images Courtesy of EDRIC ONG

Well as ripples of water reflecting the sunlight filtered through leafy Borneo’s rivers: densely intertwined trees, branches, and roots as the silk cloth what can be witnessed firsthand on a boat trip along show their own flamboyance. flowers— it dies back so that younger palms may grow up and after the adult palm bursts forth with its beautiful mast of white Palm. In depicting the palm, they show what naturally occurs majestic “Tree of Life” represented in their culture by the Sago ests’ grandeur, the sun and moon’s life-giving forces, and the roots of their craft. In their cloth, they celebrate their rain-for-pression of their artistic talents and adapting the deep cultural for peace, not war. The weavers, some of whom are men, perform the Ngar ceremony for the community’s men to launch head-hunting raids. To today the weavers, some of whom are men, perform the Ngar ceremony for peace, not war. The weavers’ energies are directed toward gorgeous ex-pression of their artistic talents and adapting the deep cultural roots of their craft. In their cloth, they celebrate their rain-for-resses’ grandeur, the sun and moon’s life-giving forces, and the majestic “Tree of Life” represented in their culture by the Sago Palm. In depicting the palm, they show what naturally occurs after the adult palm bursts forth with its beautiful mast of white flowers— it dies back so that younger palms may grow up and show their own flamboyance. One can see in the spirals, curls, and other motifs woven into the silk cloth what can be witnessed firsthand on a boat trip along Borneo’s rivers: densely intertwined trees, branches, and roots as well as ripples of water reflecting the sunlight filtered through leafy canopies. The fluid, tone-on-tone play of light and shadow comes through in the astonishingly complex patterns of pua kumbu.

In 1994, UNESCO, recognizing Bangie and her mother for the beauty of their naturally dyed silk ikats and their dedic-tion to amity and peacefulness, declared them joint winners of the UNESCO Award of Excellence for Handicrafts, an inter-national competition that brought considerable honor to them and their extended families. Also recognized as a National Craft Teacher, Bangie travels throughout Malaysia to teach pua kum-bu, and around the world to accept other countries’ textile prizes. The Ong family has been in Sarawak for six generations, and are important members of Malaysia’s large Peranakan Chi-nese community. Since the time of the 19th-century Brooke Rajahs the Ong family has been known for its community leadership and appreciation of art, music, and literature. Young Edric grew up surrounded by family heir-toms and travelled with his father, director of Inland Fisheries, to the highlands where he stayed in Iban and Bidayuh longhouses.

His early appreciation of “nice things” led him to study archetype, at the University of Singa-pore and was the beginning of his love for creating original living environments distinguished by refined forms, colors, and perspectives. Branching out into the design and production of fashion apparel, accessories, textiles and crafts is, he says, a natural extension that en-ables him to explore different media in his work. Edric also reports that community empower-ment fuels his drive to “enrich cultures and humanity by creating awareness, sparking revivals of endangered tradi-tions, and contemporizing traditional designs.” He extends the reach of his practice to a global level with his work with the World Eco Fiber and Textile Forum, the ASEAN Handi-craft Promotion and Development Association, the jury of the World Eco Fiber and Textile Forum, the ASEAN Handi-craft Promotion and Development Association, the jury of the World Eco Fiber and Textile Forum, the ASEAN Handi-craft Promotion and Development Association, the jury of the UNESCO Award of Excellence for Handicrafts and UNESCO’s panel on Intangible Cultural Heritage.

As in much of the world, lifestyle and educational shifts make the future of pua kumbu weaving uncertain. But Edric and Bangie are devoted to continuing to guide weavers in what they love to do—express artistry, build community, and preserve cul-ture as well as the environment.

For more on Edric Ong, see www.edricong.com Jeanne Golly, a professor at NYC’s Fashion Institute of Technology, is currently at work on a manuscript on contemporary textiles of Southeast Asia.
Healing: The Afghan Heart

Text: Cheryl Robertson
Images: Courtesy of Mikail Gaisumov for Hamlet Magazine
Afghans are healing their country’s tattered heart by reviving ancient traditional arts and culture at the Afghan Institute of Learning.

Watching her own mother become pregnant 16 times yet deliver only five healthy babies made Afghanistan-born Dr. Sakena Yacoobi yearn to become a doctor. Years later, while training female teachers and opening underground girls’ schools in Afghan refugee camps in Peshawar, Pakistan, during the Taliban regime, she realized another burning need for desperate Afghan women: education. To address the issue, she set up the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) in 1995 in Herat, Afghanistan, to provide teacher training, support education for boys and girls and to provide health education for all. AIL has been re-establishing war and strife with education, because “...when you educate, you will bring knowledge and wisdom, and you will transform the society,” said Dr Yacoobi, now executive director of the non-profit organization. AIL has played a major role in reconstructing the heart of Afghan society. It supports communities that approach it with a need. Initially Afghans craved basic education and job skills: now they are re-establishing a culture for the most part obliterated by war.

“Trade is impossible without art, and a proper education is the only way to get rid of sinister difficulties and poverty,” says calligraphy teacher Mir Wali. “Art...is a window to prosperity, success, happiness and a brilliant future,” he commented.

Young calligraphist student Nahim wants eventually to teach because she believes that through calligraphy her community will find peace. She wants to write a book about it for Herat’s high schools and offers to teach students on a voluntary basis. Nahim finds life in Afghanistan hard. “There is a lot of teaching and war and suicide attacks; it is difficult for the people to work and be quiet.”

Art influences art too. Miniature painting student Mohammad Amin found compassion for his subject. “I paint a picture of one woman that was disabled during the civil war of Afghanistan,” he said. “This picture shows that many women have been disabled during the civil war and now they need help. This picture connects the women to each other and can illustrate the picture of civil war.”

Women like Gul Sum have found self-esteem and empowerment through art. Married with six children yet illiterate, she generates her own income from carpet weaving. Since she now pays the rent, her family respects her.

“Before this class I didn’t have any way to earn money; in fact, my husband didn’t respect me. Now he has changed and we have a comfortable living because my family doesn’t have any violence,” she said. “This is the impact of AIL.”

Carpet weaving teacher Maitha (not her real name) found hope through art. Married with six children yet illiterate, she generates her own income from carpet weaving. Since she now pays the rent, her family respects her. “I want to keep alive the feelings and art of our ancestors,” said tile making teacher Haji Sultan Ahmad. “It is clear to all the people of the world that Afghanistan once had the finest quality arts and crafts. Our art can change people’s behavior.”

He was sad that Afghanistan’s 3,000 year-old tile culture had dwindled to just one operating factory, and that the government did not provide any incentives for more. This last factory is, however, supported by AIL. “Professor Sakena Yacoobi heard our voice and has helped us to continue our art,” he said.

Many Afghans have forgotten or never learned the cultural heritage of their country, yet when Dr Yacoobi was a child her people used poetry and literature to gain knowledge. “My dream was to someday try to teach others to gain trust, justice, equality, fairness, and love through our rich poetry and literature, but, at first, we were not able to do that because we needed to bring up the level of education and then approach this higher concept,” she said.

AIL now has offices in Kabul and Herat and in Peshawar, Pakistan. Traditional arts classes are given in various centers in Afghanistan. In Herat, The Citadel, an historic fort, has been transformed into classrooms. The teachers are all Afghans, some with degrees and some with accomplished craft skills. The students learn carpet weaving, calligraphy, needlework, miniature painting, silk weaving, glass making, tile making, drawing and painting.

“Tranquility is impossible without art, and a proper education is the only way to get rid of sinister difficulties and poverty,” says calligraphy teacher Mir Wali. “Art...is a window to prosperity, success, happiness and a brilliant future,” he commented.

To learn more please visit www.afghaninstituteoflearning.org.

Cheryl Robertson is a journalist based in Dubai. Originally from Zimbabwe, she writes news and feature articles on subjects across the board. simbacom.com/cheryl
M
aybe what typically happens after a victim is rescued from the sex trade is the cru-
est blow: in much of the world they are shunned, dismissed as tainted human debris. Their only misstep, for which they are entirely free of blame, was falling into the hands of modern slave traders who specialize in selling children for use as sex toys.

But now there are rescuers with a plan - a plan not just to extricate young girls from lives as slaves but also to equip them with life skills that will let them prosper. For one leading rescue organization, the mission came into focus with a movie. Made by Survivors co-founder Sarah Symons saw The Day My God Died at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2003. This gritty documentary features graphic footage of Mumbai brothels called The Cages, where young girls lose their childhood, their dreams, sometimes their lives.

The movie changed everything for Symons. She felt she had to help, and she persuaded her husband John Berger to share her mission. He quit his 17 year career as a banker and the two of them plunged into fulltime research into the needs of children who had been rescued from the sex trade.

The biggest need, especially for older survivors: a craft, a trade, some way for them to make a living. Most of the girls have little, or no, formal education. They are socially stigma-
tized as bad girls. Some are HIV positive.

Symons recalls the moment she got her brainstorm dur-
ing a visit to a Kathmandu program that was working to help trafficked girls: "During a tour of the shelter, we came upon a small room piled high with sparkly purses and beaded jewelry which were being made as part of the informal education pro-
gram. Well, it was obvious what to do! I brought a few hundred dollars of samples home and showed them to all my friends and family. My husband John came up with the idea of selling the products at home parties, because this would also allow us to raise awareness about human trafficking."

In 2005 they formally founded Made By Survivors and, by now, they sponsor some 200 children, often in cooperation with established rescue organizations, in five countries: India, Nepal, Thailand, Cambodia and Uganda. Made by Survivors operates production centers where girls learn to make jewelry and handbags.

Much of the output is sold online to a global audience that wants to do good, but these buyers also want eye-catching, unique pieces that tell a story. The stories certainly make themselves known: each piece encapsulates a gripping arc that moves through pain, humiliation, terror — and ends with joy and self sufficiency.

This transformation is made possible because one woman saw a movie - and now tens of thousands of us buy the artisan goods made by girls who refused to give up on them-

erselves and now are on the fast track to good lives.
Muy-Theam Lim’s much-admired effort to help restore Cambodian culture embodies his dedication to reconciliation, restoration, integration, and community while allowing him to indulge his passion for art and peace.

Muy-Theam Lim is a visual artist living and working in Siem Reap, the charming gateway to the temple complex of Angkor Wat. His painting focuses, in his words, “on healing and creating love, compassion, and forgiveness after the Pol Pot era.” That he receives significant attention from major galleries and museums around the world is ample evidence that his progressive advocacy for Cambodian culture and his vision of the future resonate with viewers.

But Theam’s restoration and preservation of Cambodian culture go beyond his painting. Since his return from Paris in 1994, when he was reunited with “those I had left behind,” he has spent part of each day helping to revive the Cambodian craft sector by teaching teams of young rural apprentices to create art out of time-honored materials like lacquer, stone, wood, silk, and cotton. In the process, these largely unschooled 18–24-year-olds from poor families learn how to successfully integrate themselves into and build community while earning livings that are highly esteemed by the culture and founded on ecological and social sustainability. Also that are fitting illustrations of Theam’s business model—built as it is on “human value, identity, authenticity, and respect as well as sustainability.”

The very appealing and much admired craft these young artisans produce is rooted in venerable Khmer belief and lifestyle. It is lovingly exhibited and sold in Theam’s House, a handsome traditional wooden structure magically set on the outskirts of Siem Reap in gardens full of flowering foliage and ancient trees which, when lit by candles at night, look like altars to the gods. Visitors are warmly welcomed into this large and growing family mansion when lit by candles at night, look like altars to the gods. Visitors are warmly welcomed into this large and growing family mansion man value, identity, authenticity, and respect as well as sustainability.”

Theam, the head of a large and growing family mansion, is helping to revive the Cambodian arts and artifacts I could lay my hands on.” By 1997 he was invited to join the European Union’s Siem Reap-based Chantiers-Ecoles program, where he enthusiastically set to work on the creation, branding, and execution of the now-famous Artisans d’Angkor project. He served for 12 years as its artistic director before launching Theam’s House—home of his team of artisan protégés—and embarking on his own creative painting journey.

Rightfully heralded as one of the few overseas Cambodians helping to heal broken hearts ravaged by war, disease, famine, and social instability through his efforts to revive the Cambodian craft sector and reduce rural poverty, Muy-Theam Lim provides us with daily reminders of the transformative power that love and forgiveness can have in our lives.

To learn more, please visit www.theamshouse.com. Jeanne Golly is a professor at NYC’s Fashion Institute of Technology. She is at work on a manuscript on contemporary Southeast Asian artists.
Skilled hands at work on an Arshi tapestry.

Right: Wedding Palanquin by Surayia Rahman.
Surayia Rahman’s finely stitched tapestries are like paintings coming to life, depicting pastoral scenes, colonial days, and memories of growing up in Bengal, South Asia. She is a modest, radiant being who sees art as love, development, and freedom. Surayia’s life story tells how one Bangladeshi Muslim woman overcame social, economic, and physical hardships by creating some of the world’s most memorable embroidered tapestries.

Surayia was born in 1934, the youngest of seven children. For as long as she can remember, she dreamed of being a painter. Over the years, she was quietly discovered and began painting for Women’s Voluntary Association, Catholic priests, nuns, and patrons from around the world.

One moment changed her life and many others forever. Cathy Stevulak explains, “In a twist of fate, a Canadian woman asked Surayia to design embroideries based on the nakshi kantha tradition in Bengal, and to teach underprivileged women how to stitch them. She wanted to give a chance to the poorest of the poor, believing—despite the disbelievers—that these women could produce works of great beauty.” With compassion, Surayia turned her back on her dream of life as a painter and helped hundreds of Bangladeshi women find ways to empower themselves.

Surayia was a mentor, auntie, and a pillar of support for this community of women. They seamlessly worked together, regardless of religion, class, or background. As their art was gaining recognition, Surayia’s life took another turn. For various reasons, she was told to leave the project. After her dismissal, it wasn’t long before women started knocking on her door, asking for work. She couldn’t turn her back, so she opened her home and bravely started her own organization, Arshi, which translates as mirror, and is intended to instill love and hope in all their works of art.

Surayia explained to Cathy, “One young woman would go back to her village with a design, thread, and needle, and then seven more women come from near and far. Soon there were hundreds who wanted to work.” Surayia always dreamed of returning to painting, but instead she continued to teach embroidery for over twenty years. Surayia’s relationship with all of the women was symbiotic. They needed one another, as Surayia would draw the detailed scenes that they would finely embroider.

Surayia’s imagination was always limitless and she would ask, “Why could our kanthas not be seen as the finest tapestries in the world?” While many did not believe in the ability of uneducated women to learn fine skills, Surayia proved them wrong, as their pieces were soon internationally appreciated and respected.

For Surayia, art is love, and she continues to inspire. She is humble when looking back on her life and she refuses to take credit for her accomplishments “These women simply helped themselves by working hard,” she says, deflecting credit away from herself.

Surayia Rahman reminds us how one person can make an impact and affect future generations with compassion, dignity, pride, and everyday actions.
Taking on projects that help break the cycle of poverty for Afghan women and their families has been ARZU Studio Hope’s all-consuming priority. Since its founding by Connie Duckworth in 2005, ARZU Studio Hope has been recognized for its products—stunning artisan rugs and hand-woven peace bracelets that provide sustainable, culturally acceptable employment to Afghan women. But behind the products runs the deeper story of the transformation that unfolds when women’s employment needs are met. Their ability to earn income changes everything, including a fundamental shift in self-esteem.

But when the women’s employment needs largely answered, and families and communities begin to change, what about the men? ARZU discovered that many either relied too much on their wives’ income and weren’t working, or were simply unable to find jobs.

Bamyan Province in Afghanistan is known for its extreme weather conditions. Snow, rain, and heat can be punishing—not to mention the Taliban’s destruction of many homes in the region, which ultimately created a housing crisis. In 2011, with private funding, ARZU created new jobs for men with a five-month project. They built three structures: a 300-square-foot dome for storage; a multi-room cloverleaf house for a widow and family; and a 1200-square-foot, vaulted-ceiling space that is now an ARZU preschool—the first of its kind in Afghanistan.

After researching numerous options, ARZU selected the Superadobe construction method, which met ARZU’s sustainability requirements: low-cost and low-tech protocols were followed, and the dwellings can withstand inclement weather. Twenty-six men were trained as apprentices, and the buildings were built using locally sourced materials that included dirt, sand and barbed wire, as well as plastic bags from Pakistan.

The pilot project was a resounding success for the entire community and especially for the men trained in the Superadobe method. Their enthusiastic response embraced a practical new trade, and the resulting new jobs, but also something deeper: self-worth.

For Fatima, a beneficiary of the men’s work and of ARZU, entering her new Superadobe home was the happiest day of her life. Widowed after the Taliban killed her husband, Fatima lived in a single room with six family members, including her three children. Rent was so high that she couldn’t afford basic living necessities and food. Now her new Superadobe home includes a sitting room, a kitchen, and bedrooms. An added bonus: ARZU furnished the home with the necessary basics.

With the success of the initial program, Bamyan Provincial Governor Habiba Sarabi asked ARZU to take the lead in building a housing project in Bamyan for the displaced Hazara people who had been brutalized under Taliban rule. “Many Hazara families, typically widows with children, still lack adequate housing and are forced to take shelter in the surrounding mountains, in caves without heat, windows or even doors. The winter of 2012 has been the fiercest in 15 years. Governor Sarabi would like to create a housing development for these people outside of Bamyan City, the Provincial capital, and has asked ARZU to build homes using Superadobe,” said Melissa Bertenthal, ARZU’s Director of International Programs.

The dwellings to some might be humble but to Fatima and others, they are home sweet home. For the men who build them, they are jobs and a newfound, positive role in the community. For more information, see www.arzustudiohope.org.
Again and again, mankind has sold-off the vital assets of our forests to bring in short term riches at the cost of long term, sustainable wealth and well being. The Mezimbite Forest Centre in the Miombo Woodlands of Mozambique is trying to shift that imbalance with steady forest conservation techniques and an emphasis on quality artisanship.

The brainchild of architect, academic, environmentalist and cabinet-maker Allan Schwartz, Mezimbite is its own mission-driven ecosystem, balancing the financial, environmental and social needs of a forest community that was once plagued by poverty. Schwartz believes that poverty and environmental destruction go hand in hand. Without the capital to effectively protect and preserve their natural resources, forest communities are vulnerable to exploitation. Mezimbite works because it has broken that cycle: instead of simply offering aid, it has given its community a system that works both economically and environmentally. The key to it all is an eye for design and a well-trained team of artisans hard at work in the forest.

Founded in 1994, Mezimbite tackles the problems of poverty and deforestation in two ways: the establishment of indigenous nurseries to replenish the forests, and the production and sale of beautifully designed products made from the wood that grows there, rather than selling the wood itself. All of this requires training and practice, and that is no small challenge in the face of poverty.

Mozambique has the fifth highest rate of HIV infection in the world and it ranks 7th in AIDS-related deaths. 70% of its population lives below the poverty line, and it is one of the most corrupt, least educated countries on earth. The average life expectancy in the area around Mezimbite is 31 for men and 32 for women. Most people would throw up their hands in the face of such daunting statistics. Allan Schwartz prefers to take action, and by starting small with a great idea, he has created an inspiring model for forest communities facing poverty around the world.

Mezimbite may focus on being an agent of economic and environmental change, but that doesn’t mean that the look and feel of the goods it sells is unimportant. In fact, a big part of their success is Schwartz’s early determination that their products must be impossibly crafted and beautiful: the system doesn’t work unless consumers want the goods. Mezimbite produces furniture, jewelry, textiles, food products, household goods and personal care products, and their reputation is growing. Part of their mission is to educate the local population about the short term and long term value of their forest, so education takes the form of practical design and craft training, alongside cultivating community knowledge of the threats of illegal and unsustainable harvesting which usually goes unchecked by the government.

Looking at the jewelry and furniture that Mezimbite produces, it’s easy to see why indigenous hardwoods are so desirable: bowls and platters, chairs, tables and benches have carefully considered, unpretentious forms that allow the exceptional beauty of the wood to shine through. Some objects are carved with a characteristic circular design animating the woods’ surface, while others are polished smooth. All objects are finished with local beeswax and natural oils. Jewelry from Mezimbite is not for the timid: carved bracelets and cuffs and beaded neckpieces are sober in color but exuberant in shape and scale.

Training is serious and includes design principles, hands-on apprenticeship in the operation of power tools and hand tools, and broad-based understanding of how objects designed and created with skill and integrity can endow the forest itself with value that transcends raw timber. It may seem counterintuitive that the way to save a forest would be to make goods from the trees that grow there. But Mezimbite thrives precisely because the products they make are so desirable. There are cultural, economic, personal and environmental reasons to keep the Miombo Woodlands growing and intact.

Visit www.mezimbite.com for more information.
TO DYE FOR CHANGE

TEXT ELAINE BELLEZZA
IMAGES OLIVIER ASSELIN and ELAINE BELLEZZA
all and regal with a commanding quiet presence, Boubacar Doumbia founded and manages what many consider one of the most successful social enterprises in Mali, and perhaps in West Africa. His double commitment to quality products and empowering youth and women has enabled Ndomo to garner numerous awards and accolades, including Belgium’s Harubuntu Award for social entrepreneurship, and the Ashoka Fellowship award and grant. He has also been named an Honorary Citizen of Segou for Social Entrepreneurship by the government of Mali.

Doumbia, and his social enterprise Ndomo, do not rest on their numerous laurels. The workshop is continually abuzz with production, meeting deadlines, hosting tourist visits, training women in the extended community, negotiating with international buyers, and designing new products. What has made Ndomo’s social enterprise such a success? Since its inception in 1990 as Kasobani Segou, Doumbia pulled disenfranchised youth into the workshop to train them in the Malian traditional textile dying technique of bogolanfini (mudcloth) to help them earn sustainable livings. Ndomo requires all trainees to open a savings account. At the end of each year they are expected to have saved a certain amount. If at the year-end meeting someone has fallen significantly short of the goal, peer pressure is strong for them to get on board with the program and to save for their future. Ndomo also trains youth in literacy, entrepreneurship, management and accounting. Having started with just 3 trainees in 1990, to date over 100 trainees have gone through the group. Women leaders of these cooperatives have gone on to participate in numerous international fairs and trade shows, getting even more orders for the women in their communities.

But social is only one half of any successful social enterprise. Running the business soundly is the other very important half. Because of Doumbia’s relentless insistence on quality, consistency and creativity with taste, Ndomo has been able to satisfy the stringent demands of the international market, increasing sales every year. Additionally, they are beginning to use primarily locally grown certified organic cotton to further increase their visibility as a socially responsible and green company. Their clients span the globe, from the US to Europe to Japan.

To learn more about Ndomo, please visit www.ndomo.net

Elaine Bellezza lives in Africa and has been working with African designers and artisans for the past 20 years, currently the Home Decor Advisor for the USAID West Africa Trade Hub. She focuses on product design and access to markets.

Bolivia is a country of wildly divergent landscapes and dozens of local tongues. In the midst of this incredible diversity, Kirah Design is working to unite and empower the nation’s artisan community. Launched in 2008, the company brings together hundreds of Bolivia’s most talented artisans to create traditionally-inspired home décor collections that speak to the common values and shared vision of its creators.

“My hope was to find a way to merge modern design and distribution with the traditional techniques and materials artisans have been using here for centuries,” explains founder Gabriela Flores. “I wanted to find a way to support the talent I saw all around me, to help develop a network of individuals that together could bring their work to the world.”

Flores made it her mission to create an enterprise that offered the country’s artisans an opportunity to showcase their talent while earning a living as part of a dynamic business. Kirah creates real partnerships with their artisans, offering them training not only in production processes and quality control but also in motivation and entrepreneurship, and in engaging with recycling and reusing as integral to a 21st-century artisan ethic.

In the forests of Chiquitanías, inspiration is found in the natural shapes and patterns of collected rosewood (morado). While the scraps they collect are left by others to be burned, Kirah’s artisans transform forgotten stumps and broken branches into soulful bowls, vases and cutting boards. The artisans carry with them ancient techniques and generations-old woodworking expertise learned from the Chiquitanías, Jesuit missionaries who established themselves in the region in the 16th century. There is an impressive breadth to the pieces Kirah Designs creates. In addition to the rosewood vessels, Kirah’s artisans transform recycled glass into elegant hand-blown decanters. Woven sacks traditionally used to bring potatoes to market are imaginatively reinterpreted as striped pillow covers. And original hand-hammering techniques have been recovered to create stunning pewter bowls that mimic the design of traditional Totora boats that have been sailing on Lake Titicaca for thousands of years.

Achieving a sense of harmony across their collections is all the more impressive considering that the company works with over 700 artisans scattered throughout Bolivia. Though the artists that create them often speak different languages and live hundreds of miles from each other, the pieces in Kirah’s collections speak to something shared and elemental. They reflect a deep appreciation for nature and for local tradition. Evident in all of their work is a desire to preserve what is ancient and essential, in both the materials and in the techniques.

Kirah’s success underscores a vision for development that not only understands the need to protect Bolivia’s rich natural and cultural heritage, but actually supports the flourishing of that tradition. Strong contributors to their local economies and to national conservation initiatives, the artisans that work with Kirah are paving a path towards future development that is founded on respect for indigenous communities, honor for local traditions and a commitment to loyal stewardship of the country’s rich but endangered supply of natural resources.

Holding tightly to their past, and working boldly towards their future in a sustainable way, Kirah’s artisans manage a graceful balance.

Laura Aviva, founder of L’aviva Home, has traveled extensively throughout Bolivia, and other parts of the world, in search of artisan partners. Selected pieces from Kirah’s rosewood collection can be found on lavivahome. For more information on Kirah Design visit www.kirahdesign.com

Left above: The fine wood carvings of Kirah Designs.
In early 2012, Katharine L’Heureux and Ryan Clements, founders, respectively, of Kahina Giving Beauty and “Fashion. love, Africa”, embarked on a collaboration that links organic agricultural practices, environmentally sound craft-based production, income generation initiatives, socially responsible consumption, and, above all, women from around the world. The result, a limited edition blue bag produced specifically for Kahina Giving Beauty by “Fashion. love, Africa”, embodies the power of the handmade to sustain communities by reviving and preserving traditions, as well as fostering new ones.

Katharine L’Heureux founded Kahina Giving Beauty in 2008 after discovering the benefits of argan oil as a nourishing moisturizer for the skin while traveling in the dry Moroccan desert. Inspired by the rich traditions surrounding the use of this native plant, L’Heureux embarked on a journey that would bring organic argan oil to women outside Morocco, while simultaneously supporting women’s cooperatives and other sustainable businesses in the region south of Agadir, where the company’s oil is produced. In the four years since its inception, Kahina Giving Beauty has become a trusted participant in Morocco’s argan oil sector, as well as a valued partner to the communities where the oil is created.

At the core of Kahina Giving Beauty’s philosophy is the goal of connecting women across the world through the practices surrounding beauty. It was only natural, then, when the company joined forces with “Fashion. love, Africa,” a company that grew out of the enormous resourcefulness of a group of women living in the Gioto Garbage Slum outside of Nakuru, Kenya. When founder, Ryan Clements, met these women, part of a community living in extreme poverty, on a trip to Kenya, they were transforming post consumer garbage, grocery, and street vendor bags into saleable hand-crocheted accessories.

Clements’ young company works with fifteen of these women to create a line of bags appropriate for the global market. The materials still come from the active garbage dump Gioto. Once collected, the bags are sanitized, dried, and then cut into strips in preparation for crocheting. The initiative offers a consistent income to the women involved, and additionally gives back to the community by contributing ten dollars of the remaining profit from each bag sale to relocation efforts for the community, education sponsorship for the children of Gioto, and medical assistance for all community members.

The bag “Fashion. Love, Africa” designed for Kahina Giving Beauty is bright blue, a hue chosen by L’Heureux for its resemblance to the sky she encounters on her trips to Morocco. The closure is made from argan nuts. The bag is an object that communicates tradition, resourcefulness, and a deep respect for the interconnectedness of women around the world.

To learn more about Kahina Giving Beauty and to shop for its argan oil-based products and the “Fashion. love, Africa” for Kahina Giving Beauty bag, please visit www.kahina-givingbeauty.com and www.fashionloveafrica.com. Emma Bowen is an educator, design historian, and social entrepreneur who currently teaches at Parsons: The New School for Design.
Marcella Echavarría — Images courtesy of Amina Ageuznay

Amina sees diversity from all sides: as a designer, she works in all the expected ways to make and sell her product. But she also goes further, working with people whose physical challenges marginalize them from mainstream society. She also works with unusual found materials from both urban and natural sources. Her passion for this combination of unique hands and unique materials is why she calls herself an artisan createur.

“I have made jewelry out of stones or pieces of wood I have collected in various regions of Morocco. I then moved to paper, using Canson paper and acrylic paint. I have crocheted with viscose thread usually used for caftan embroideries and buttons. I have worked with plastic bags, burning them on wire structures to make small scale sculptures such as necklaces, bracelets, etc. and large scale structures that form installations. I also produced an installation made out of fishermen’s nets with women artisans from Bouznika.”

As tempting as it may be, we cannot let her sense of adventure and her high aesthetics obscure the fact that her products are beautiful both inside and out.

Amina’s work is based on collaboration. Her starting point is her artisan partners’ knowledge, combined with a group observation of traditional customs and traditions. One of her great sources of inspiration is the souk or traditional marketplace in Morocco. She calls it her “laboratory of design experiences,” and it’s the main source of the diversity of her materials, the vast variety of color and shape in her work. A walk through the souk provokes interesting transformations of everyday objects or materials into new endeavors such as the boucherite (rag rug) made out of recycled sweater yarns or shredded clothes.

But she does more than scout for materials at the souk: “We explore aspects beyond…shape, color and texture and we look at how we sit, how we eat in this part of the world. I am more interested about the use rather than the looks of an object.”

Amina’s message to the design world inside and outside of her native Morocco is “Accept the difference, the different ways a product is designed and produced. Also, accept that different people have different skills. I am a member of the non-profit association Amicale Marocaine des Handicapés, based in Casablanca. One of the most rewarding experiences of my career happened when I started a workshop with seven disabled women in 2010 and 2011. The main discovery there was for all of us to understand that instead of limitations, the women had a unique savoir-faire which made their work special.”

Interactions, the first exhibition of this work, at the gallery Shart in Casablanca, featured contemporary jewelry and fashion accessories using various artisan techniques and materials. The artisans’ stories and creative process was shared through film and photography, deepening the tenderness and tactility of the products themselves.

From idea to exhibit, Amina’s way of working is inclusive, responsible and beautiful — an exemplary combination of creativity and respect, listening and sharing.

For more information on Amina’s work, please visit: aminaagueznay.blogspot.com

Amina Ageuznay blurs the boundaries between fashion and sculpture, commerce and sustainability, business and humanitarianism.

Left: Jewelry designs by Amina Ageuznay. Above: An artisan at work on one of Ageuznay’s net designs.
The IOU Project presents something rare in the fashion world: a complete supply transparency. Scan an IOU garment’s QR code, and you will be introduced to the farmers, weavers, dyers and tailors who made it.

Will this revolutionary premise change the fashion world?
The IOU Pipeline

1. Locally grown cotton

The IOU Project has created a new online shopping experience, revolutionizing the way we think about fashion. This is an exciting new experiment, as the company’s vision runs counter to decades of fashion marketing protocol by adopting transparency as their guiding principle. Through revealing their entire chain of production in a personal, visual, thorough way, they emphasize the interests of people and the planet—the antithesis of fast fashion. IOU has created a largely web-based platform to connect with the artisans, and to talk about sustainable production issues and brainstorm solutions to the problems created by the prevailing disposable fashion paradigm. For example, shopping with IOU becomes a more intimate and guiltless experience. You can access a wealth of audiovisual material that chronicles the process through which the item was produced. Products are also sold via specialized social e-commerce tools and trunk show hosts. End buyers also have the opportunity to become part of the story by using a unique QR code on the items which digitally links them to the specific artisans and craftsmen that created their unique piece. We use social networking in a way that creates a rich consumer experience through multimedia storytelling. This includes videos and photos of the artisans who make the fabric in India, as well as of those who assemble all of the garments in small workshops in Europe. The traceability methods also fulfill one’s desire to know the provenance of the products. By creating social networks, and exchanging ideas, we create a platform for social commerce that is built on personal insight over traditional advertising.

IOU’s chic and classic madras check fabric has been their main focus, by working with the Tamil Nadu handloom weavers cooperative society which was established in 1935 in South India. Kavita explains, “This organization was funded by the state government and is comprised of over 250,000 weaver members. They have also been pioneers in the education of local cotton farmers about the benefits of returning to organic farming. This cooperative is important to support, as mills are popping up around India, trying to create the madras fabric even faster and cheaper than that which is hand woven. Children of the weavers are leaving their villages in search of work in overcrowded cities to make a few dollars a month more, by becoming machine operators, and in the process losing their traditional, culture-based skills.”

IOU’s mission is “working to promote responsible consumption by disrupting existing supply chains and transforming them into what we call ‘prosperity chains.’” Founder and Creative Director, Kavita Parmar explains, “This allows the consumers to connect with the artisans, and to talk about sustainable production issues and brainstorm solutions to the problems created by the prevailing disposable fashion paradigm. For example, shopping with IOU becomes a more intimate and guiltless experience. You can access a wealth of audiovisual material that chronicles the process through which the item was produced. Products are also sold via specialized social e-commerce tools and trunk show hosts. End buyers also have the opportunity to become part of the story by using a unique QR code on the items which digitally links them to the specific artisans and craftsmen that created their unique piece. We use social networking in a way that creates a rich consumer experience through multimedia storytelling. This includes videos and photos of the artisans who make the fabric in India, as well as of those who assemble all of the garments in small workshops in Europe. The traceability methods also fulfill one’s desire to know the provenance of the products. By creating social networks, and exchanging ideas, we create a platform for social commerce that is built on personal insight over traditional advertising.”

IOU takes the time to visit all of the team members, to talk with them about their needs, concerns, and frustrations. They have also done the same with their artisans in Europe, igniting a sense of collaboration as well as community. Loads of energy have been carefully put into this model, and as Kavita points out, “We had to undo a lot of methods which encourage manufacturing items fast and cheap.”

For more information, please visit www.iouproject.com

All in all, IOU strives to de-commoditize fashion, bringing back its original emotional experience. Kavita states, “When you put the consumer face to face with the artisan who produced a piece, you begin to appreciate a product’s true value. In the last 150 years, we moved from seeing clothing as a valued asset to seeing it as disposable goods. It went from a mostly bespoke category (both for poor and rich consumers) to a mostly industrial product...from a display of skill, local culture, and personality to an increasingly global manufacturing monoculture. For us to move from an industry where global brands are lulling consumers into purchasing with the promise of conformist glamour, towards brands that return responsibility to the consumer, and with it pride of ownership to the artisans, is a revolutionary idea. This is what I would call a true prosperity chain.”
Variations on a Theme

Above: A traditional rebozo used for a traditional purpose.
Right: The rebozo redesigned by Carla Fernandez into a contemporary garment. Background: An indigo-dyed, handwoven rebozo.
For designer Carla Fernandez, a well respected tradition can represent the greatest, freshest innovation. She has developed a revolutionary way of preserving so-old-but-so-new clothing techniques and motifs by intelligently floating the rules of global fashion.

Carla Fernandez looks with the eye of a designer at the immense treasure that Mexico can contribute to the world by sharing its traditions. In fact, she has built her career around these traditions. We are talking here about the garments that most Mexican women have worn for untold generations: rebozo, sonoro, guachipelin, fajas, etc. But that’s just a starting place, because Carla not only innovates from tradition but also has her own approach on how she works with artisans all over Mexico. She has designed a unique way of working where ideas, tradition and hand work are all respected and paid for, giving access to artisans to the higher margins of the business, something unthinkable in the mainstream fashion industry.

Through her travels and research, and from her personal passion for everything Mexican, Carla came to understand Mexico’s pre-Columbian way of constructing clothes. The old ways work along origami-like principles with squares and rectangles taken directly off the loom and sewn together. There’s no cutting in pre-Columbian couture, a simplicity still preserved today in traditional clothing in spite of the influence of European fashions, where wrapping the body is the main principle. In addition to respecting old methods of construction, Taller Flora also uses ancient local materials like cotton and vegetable dyes, including indigo from Oaxaca, and Coyuché cotton from the Mixteca. There are also wool yarns dyed with mud in San Juan Chamula.

“We are a mobile workshop going to where training is needed all over Mexico, from the highlands to the coasts, always in close collaboration with the communities,” says Carla. In fact, her greatest innovation is that Taller Flora pays the artisans for their ideas, allowing them to access not just the portion of the selling price captured by makers, but also to the higher margins of the designer component of the business. This bold move is nearly unthinkable in the mainstream fashion industry, whose propensity to borrow cultural assets and the creative efforts of artisans is seen as a sign of success. But for Carla, who affirms that to design in Mexico is very challenging “The main challenge is the customers who are not aware of the process involved in making traditional garments and their reluctance to pay fair prices. For example, the rebos, one of the most amazing pieces of traditional Mexican apparel, is not well understood. A rebobo takes thirty days to make. Thirteen pairs of hands are involved in the various processes that go into it.”

Time, skill and cultural capital should all be able to command a higher price point for pieces that carry this value and this can only be achieved if the artisan’s contribution is valued in equal terms to that of the designer. This is especially challenging with Mexico being the United States’ next door neighbor. There is a tendency to buy American design and disposable fashion as opposed to local, well made, culturally sensitive designs.

Taller Flora goes beyond the model of seeing the artisan as a manufacturer. Tradition should be preserved by valuing ideas and creativity and not only what can be made tangible by the work of their hands. Through this new way of working, Taller Flora shows how it is possible to have the best of both worlds.

Embroidery is done partly by hand and partly by machine. The drawings are placed on fabric. Beautiful, detailed motifs emerge when the paper is cut away. The drawings are used to create the embroidered pieces. One of Carla Fernandez’s favorite traditional embellishments uses the charro embroidery technique.

Taller Flora pays the artisans for their ideas, allowing them to access not just the portion of the selling price captured by makers, but also to the higher margins of the business, something unthinkable in the mainstream fashion industry. This innovative way of working has not been easy for Carla, who affirms that to design in Mexico is very challenging. “The main challenge is the customers who are not aware of the process involved in making traditional garments and their reluctance to pay fair prices. For example, the rebos, one of the most amazing pieces of traditional Mexican apparel, is not well understood. A rebobo takes thirty days to make. Thirteen pairs of hands are involved in the various processes that go into it.”

To learn more about Taller Flora, please visit carelfdez.com