

WHEN SCANDINAVIA MEETS AFRICA

Byhand African Artisans

There's a reason why old traditions in craftsmanship have been passed down from generation to generation of artisans: undisputed quality.

Wanting to keep age-old handicrafts rich in heritage alive, Byhand African Artisans create handmade slow design products by cooperating with artisans from all over Egypt, and other African countries. By collaborating with artists that work with salt, alabaster, clay, copper, and embroidered wool-cotton from all over the country, designers Ellen Simonia and Henrik Georg have been able to build a sustainable and ethical business platform that fuses the simplicity of Scandinavian designs with exceptional craftsmanship passed down countless generations of artisans.

Having settled down in Siwa, the designers (who are partners in life and love) were inspired by the aesthetics and potential of the oasis desert dwellers, which soon became the beginning of the Byhand African Artisans venture.



STORY

What was it about living in Siwa that inspired you to start Byhand African Artisans? And who were the first artisans to sign on for the project?

Before moving to Siwa, we lived in Sinai working creative jobs. We first came to Siwa as part of a documentary team to shoot a short film about the annual peace festival Siaha on Dakror Mountain in Siwa. From that very first visit, we both knew that Siwa had captured us and we would have to come back to stay. A couple of months later, we packed our few belongings on a pickup and drove all the way. The simple aesthetics and the golden light of Siwa is addictive; it's like a peace just falls upon you when you arrive.

Siwa created a safe and loving atmosphere for our two children. They got to roam around the narrow streets of the oasis visiting their friends, everybody looking out for them and knowing them. It's a childhood that is hard to compete with anywhere else.

Being a family, we quickly connected to local families in our neighbourhood. Two of these families later became important players in the company. One of the families now manages the embroidery section of our work, and the other the salt carving.

The traditional work of the artisans in Siwa is truly inspiring. So much craftsmanship and, at that time when we moved there in 2007, very little experimentation lured our creativity which became the start of Byhand African Artisans.

How do you decide which artisans to work with? You work with a variety of people from Siwa to Darb to Khan El Khalili. Do you seek them out or does it just happen organically?

We normally actively seek out our artisans. The work that we do is based on mutual understanding as much as talent and craftsmanship. We travel a lot with eyes wide open trying to notice crafts and ideas from the cultures we encounter. When we see something with potential, we research and travel, often on less-travelled roads, until we find the artisans we are looking for.

Every artisan is different. Some groups of artisans such as stone carvers in Egypt and wood carvers in Kenya are more organised and have a strong core; when an artisan group already has a structure and management, they are normally easier to work with initially. Other groups have never been exposed to selling their items before and have never been asked to produce larger orders that are not only for the community itself. These groups take time and patience to work with. It is our belief that development should never be pushed, but should happen organically in the pace that the community is ready to embrace. Sometimes that means years. That is why we seek to make timeless designs that stand out for their simple aesthetics and functionality, rather than religiously following the current trends in the interior market.



DESIGN

Tell us a little bit about the design process when it comes to your products.

The first step when we embark on a new collection (which we do twice annually) is discussing which materials we would like to work with and which artisans groups. We might have some ideas already about the designs, but it is only after visiting the groups, seeing what ideas they themselves have and introducing the ideas we have, that we go back to the drawing table and actually start designing.

The dialogue between us as designers, and the artisans as craftsmen, is what makes the handmade product unique. Our eyes see things very differently, and often the artisans will open our eyes to things we didn't even think about. After we talk about the new designs with the artisans, they will often get back to us with their interpretation of the design. This is one of the most interesting processes of our work: the dialogue and the meeting of different design cultures.

Is it difficult to strike the balance between the age-old traditions of the artisans with the sleek and minimal Scandinavian designs?

What you refer to as sleek and minimalistic design from Scandinavia is the design and the aesthetic expression we grew up with. It is imprinted in our minds. Even if we can appreciate the beauty and craftsmanship in intricate Arabic, Ottoman or Swahili designs, it often feels cluttered which blurs the artisanal ability and shades the beauty of the raw materials. When you peel all the unnecessary away and look at the core of the design, the capability and the craftsmanship stands out. Most of the artisans know our style and taste by now and they try to accomplish the simple and pure look of artisanal perfection.

Times are also very different now compared to the time when, for example, many of the traditional Egyptian brass/stone designs were created in the Ottoman era. Back then, natural was not fashion. Today, with so much artificiality being around, nature and pure materials create bliss and peace for the eye and the mind.



ENGAGE

What is the main mission behind Byhand Artisans?

Our mission is to run a commercially based design company sustainably and ethically in cooperation with all our artisans. It is to build up communities and generate income to as many people as possible through a transparent business platform. In our eyes, this is the most realistic and sustainable way of building up capacity in societies. Even if it takes time, we will give it and the artisan communities the time it takes. We receive no funding/nor will we, as part of our aim is to prove for ourselves and the artisans that a sound business can flow and blossom if you commit and work hard, even if it's ethical and sustainable and follows fair trade principles.

With the markets being flooded with cheap knockoffs from Asia, how do you keep this sustainable business afloat?

The sustainable handmade interior market is a niche market and we would never be able to compete with large international commercial design houses in terms of sales. Handmade design takes time to make. However, there are shops and consumers who are willing to commit and invest in conscious trade designs. But we have to look at the world as our market, not a city, or even a country, but the whole world. And to access a market that spread out takes time and energy.

Where do you showcase your designs? And is your client list mostly local or international?

2017 was the first year we showcased our products in Egypt (10 years ago, Egypt was less ready for this kind of design than it is now). We initially focused on the Scandinavian market, as it was the market we knew. Nowadays, we sell mainly to distributors who then place our things in shops around the world. www.byhand.dk

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