



Handwork Studio taps into the craft expertise of communities around the world to produce apparel, accessories and housewares.

OBJECTS OF CONNECTION

The duo behind Handwork Studio tell **JANNA ZITTRER APPLEBY** how shopping for mementos can create a closer sense of place

Since launching Handwork Studio in Toronto in 2014, Munira Amin and Rachel MacHenry have been working to connect skilled artisans with people who appreciate the design, quality and cultural significance of their craft. But while their own work focuses on building economic opportunity by creating a market for indigenous design, the duo's time in the field scouting unique talent and products from Pakistan to Peru has also made them experts on tracking down beautiful souvenirs.

In the pursuit of inspiring pieces, Amin and MacHenry have learned that a little research goes a long way. "Local markets can be a good starting point, and government or NGO-run craft centres will often bring together high-quality work from many different producers," says MacHenry. "Specialized guidebooks and magazines, such as Fiona Caulfield's *Love* series of Indian guidebooks, can also be super helpful in pinpointing the most interesting local designers and shops."

"While you're shopping, look for good design partnered with high levels of workmanship, artistry and skill," adds MacHenry.

"Support retailers who support artisans – this can mean looking for brands or retailers working closely with artisan communities in supporting cultural traditions, being environmentally and socially conscious, providing fair pay and not being exploitative."

Both designers with a passion for collaboration, Amin and MacHenry met at the Contemporary Textile Studio Co-op in Toronto, where they connected over a shared appreciation for traditional working practices and a circular design approach that pushes the production process forward. "We feel there is nothing more compelling or luxurious than objects made with high levels of skill and cultural knowledge, and that support communities with dignity and respect," says Amin.

Handwork's portfolio includes pillows covered in abstract indigo prints, baskets and tote bags woven from toquilla palm fibre and cozy accessories knit using Peruvian wool. Fortuitously, Handwork's approach has coincided with a shift in shopper preferences away from high-volume, mass-produced products to more sustainable, small-batch goods. "It is a good moment for artisanal, handmade products," says Amin. "There is a consumer

desire to connect with the maker and an interest in the story behind the products. The new luxury values craftsmanship, uniqueness, preciousness, quality and the exclusivity of made-by-hand."

Recently, Handwork began developing a line of textiles in partnership with 7Weaves, a bioregional silk initiative with the Rabha people in Assam, India. "The project focuses on fair economic return through profit redistribution and is built around the ecologically balanced production of eri silk, from the rearing of the cocoons, through the processing, spinning, dyeing and weaving of the luxury eri silk fabric," says MacHenry. Handwork's partnership with 7Weaves has resulted in a new textile line that will be presented as part of the Ethical Fashion Show at Berlin Fashion Week in July.

If you're seeking your own unique and authentic design experiences while traveling, MacHenry advises considering specially focused trips led by cultural experts, such as Shila Desai's Eat Your Heart Out Tours in India or Yoshiko Wada's Slow Fiber Studio Tours in Japan. "There are also experiential destinations for the design-curious, such as the living craft centre in Laos, or traditional weaving, dyeing and embroidery workshops in Oaxaca, Mexico."

For a peek behind the scenes, she also recommends Annie Waterman's AOW Handmade city guides, which focus on innovative local craft and design. "Above all, keep your eyes open," says MacHenry. "You never know what you will come across, and if you stop, look and chat, you will make all sorts of discoveries!" ■