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Going
Global

Success by
Association

Local
Devotion

i+D

Craft & Culture

Global

When designers source handmade products from artisans in distant lands, the world becomes a better place

Traditional arts and crafts are an extension of a society's culture and history; they reflect geography, beliefs, family systems, and values. But it can be challenging for traditional artisans to meet contemporary society's needs and desires. Enter the growing number of product designers, importers, and global product development experts who have made supporting international artisans part of their businesses over the long term. Thanks to their efforts, craftspeople in corners of the world that might otherwise go undiscovered now enjoy economic and creative opportunities.

At a mill in Nepal, yarn is color-matched and dyed by hand before being woven into couture rugs for Emma Gardner Design.
(Image: Emma Gardner)



Citizens



Patti Carpenter
(Image: Dorothy Shi)



Global Citizens — By Diana Mosher

Among the items Patti Carpenter has helped bring to market are alpaca throws that are made by hand in Bolivia.
(Image: Patti Carpenter)

“You’d be amazed at how little it takes to really change people’s lives, for them to subsist and live happy, well-balanced lives.”

— PATTI CARPENTER, CARPENTER + COMPANY/TRENDScope

Identifying New Markets

“The inclusion of handmade goods adds warmth and personality to a home,” says Patti Carpenter, principal and creative director, global trend ambassador at Carpenter + Company/TrendsScope. “There is a connectedness to our shared humanity from having something that someone else’s hands have touched. Their soul was imbued into that product.”

Carpenter was a design director at Ralph Lauren in 2000 when the organization Aid to Artisans—which promotes handmade traditions of artisans worldwide—invited her to work on a three-year project. The goal was to help workers in Mali retain their cotton and make money off it in order to move some people out of poverty. “At that time Mali was the second largest producer of cotton in Africa, but they sold it off in its raw form to China that then made the money on ginning it, preparing it, spinning it, dyeing it, and weaving it,” explains Carpenter, who decided to leave her secure job to work on international design and development full time.

Twenty years later, she has worked in 57 countries with artisans who specialize in fiber, wood, textiles, glass, beading, metal, found objects, and recycled/upcycled materials. Ideally, she pulls together several communities that know how to do the same thing and gives them training and information on what kind of quality they need, the color stories they perhaps should consider, and patterning or a subtle change to the scale of a motif that would translate to selling success.

Helping preserve culture is also key. Young people will be more likely to learn the skills and craft of their parents and grandparents if they see a path to a sustainable livelihood. Carpenter is currently working with macramé, horn, and metal artisans through an organization called Prosperity Catalyst, which supports, develops, and empowers women-owned businesses in Haiti and Iran. “You’d be amazed at how little it takes to really change people’s lives,” she offers, “for them to subsist and live happy, well-balanced lives.”

When Carpenter debuted her own branded home décor, personal accessories, and gifts collection, the first product she sold through Bloomingdale’s was a beautiful alpaca throw handwoven in Bolivia—locally they are used to carry groceries or babies. Part of Carpenter’s mission is connecting makers and buyers, as well as setting these global artisans on a track for success. “Those women would never have had a path to Bloomingdale’s without my stepping in, and Bloomingdale’s would have never known they existed. That was the goal,” says Carpenter.

“I work with about 85 to 90 percent women,” she adds. “It is a proven fact that when women succeed at something, communities excel and come up out of poverty. When men excel and succeed, so do their families; but, unfortunately, they don’t often look at the community as a whole in the way that we as women do.”



Patti Carpenter works primarily with women artisans, including jewelry makers in El Salvador.
(Image: Patti Carpenter)



Tucker Robbins

Tucker Robbins works with carvers in Cameroon to develop product lines that will appeal to a global design audience. (Image: Courtesy of Tucker Robbins)

Elevating the Maker

Designer Tucker Robbins has established a signature style that has been described as both modern and timeless. What makes his line distinctive is his ability to draw upon ancient techniques and iconic forms to achieve more contemporary, lasting results. In Robbins' view, global artisans present a historic path for the uplifting of humanity and the restoration of the environment. "In the hands of a potter, mud goes from dirt to fine art as illustrated by my ceramic furniture made in Peru," he says.

For more than three decades Robbins has worked with the Njoya family from the western grasslands of Cameroon. The Njoya family is one of the longest-reigning royal families of the Bamum people, beginning in the 10th century until today. According to Robbins, the sultan or ruler of the Bamum is elected among the Njoya, and great favor is given to the artisan within the family. "Hence, the arts have a major cultural and financial impact upon the community's solidarity and welfare," he says. "Today, with Njoya integrity, we create the Snaka Waka, Spider's Nest, and Bangle [tables], and Lattice stools."

During COVID, Robbins has returned to his beloved Sri Lanka—where he had gone in 2001 to recover from 9/11—to work with a unique Sri Lankan material: sunken kumbuk. The kumbuk is a sacred tree planted by the kings of Sri Lanka to shore up and filter the water tanks. Over time, great logs sunk into the water where they have been preserved, and the fossilization process is well under way. Robbins explains how he uses this unique material: "Artisans excavate these wooden bones in the dry season and transport them with elephants and trucks to mills, where multiple blades are being broken to create bespoke siding for a home designed by Bates Masi + Architects in the Hamptons." The wood proves challenging to cut because pebbles and larger river stones grow right into the logs while submerged in the water. Robbins also uses sunken kumbuk for custom slab furniture.

After Sri Lanka, Robbins says, he and teams of designers and master woodworkers will converge on Puerto Rico, where hurricanes and earthquakes have left broken homes and some 30 million dead standing trees. He will teach the art of salvage, carving, agroforestry, milling, and forest management. "The beauty is in the simplicity of creating from materials at hand," he says. "Very few tools are needed—only willing hands and minds—to build independent livelihoods."



Artisans keep a careful eye on quality, leading to well-crafted products that will endure. (Image: Courtesy of Tucker Robbins)

Native Trails turned to Murano, Italy, where glass artistry has been a tradition for 1,500 years, for a new collection of vessel sinks. (Image: Native Trails)



Bringing handmade craft into contemporary settings is a driving force at Native Trails. (Image: Alfred Yan Photography)



Naomi Neilson
(Image: Chris Bersbach)



Bridging Cultures

Handmade products crafted from honest materials can be comforting and grounding, especially during stressful times. When sourcing from overseas, there are more options than ever before and careful importers are mindful today of everything from the quality of the craftsmanship to how the craftspeople themselves are treated. “That is where we step in,” says Naomi Neilson, founder and CEO of Native Trails, which has been a Certified B Corporation since 2019. “I founded Native Trails in 1996 with a dream of bridging cultures, of combining artisan heritage with innovative design and sustainable materials. Bringing the beauty of undiscovered artisans to homes all over the world is a passion I gratefully live out every day.”

Neilson believes business can be a force for good in the world. With this in mind, she worked to find a way to combine her interests in artisan traditions, sustainability, and fair trade practices into a business plan that would open doors for undiscovered artisans. She began by bringing the craft work of central Mexico to central California, ushering in a market for handcrafted copper sinks for the kitchen and bath that would take the company’s business—and the artisans’ work—across North America.

“We work closely with artisan families to combine their age-old artistic tradition with modern design to create functional items with high appeal to interior designers and homeowners,” says Neilson, who adds that connecting their work with a larger market and contemporary design can be critical in preserving artisan heritage, which is increasingly at risk worldwide.

To that end, Neilson and her team do not limit themselves to the craft of just one region. In fact, among the company’s recent launches is a line of spun-glass vessel sinks, made by hand in Murano, Italy, where glass artisans have been working their furnaces for 1,500 years.

“Globally sourced artisan products can enhance the feeling of connection—with the artisans who crafted them and also with the materials and their stories. It’s an overall sense of connecting with humanity, more valued than ever today in the highly digitized, increasingly virtual world we live in,” explains Neilson. “When interior designers bring these products into their clients’ homes, they are often the items that provide that feel-good sense to the homeowner. They satisfy the soul, where we maybe didn’t even realize something was missing.”



Emma Gardner
(Image: Alessandra Mello)

From the beginning, Emma Gardner has worked with GoodWeave to ensure no child, forced, or bonded labor is used in the production of her rugs.
(Image: Emma Gardner)

Promoting Ethical Practices

When Emma Gardner, founder, principal, and creative director of Emma Gardner Design, launched her line of handmade couture area rugs in 2002, she was eager to work with Nepal's talented weavers. She envisioned using traditional methods, local Himalayan wool, and Chinese silk, and she also wanted to be sure to avoid any mills that would exploit child labor. However, she says, "I wasn't in a position to go and tour mills myself to make sure they were all on the up and up." Instead, she contacted GoodWeave (formerly known as Rugmark), a non-profit organization committed to ending child labor in the rug making industry. It was the beginning of a long relationship that has allowed Gardner to maneuver the complexities of the local scene on the ground so far from home while also achieving GoodWeave certification for her products. The GoodWeave label confirms that no child, forced, or bonded labor was used in the production of her rugs, and it means the purchase of the product contributes to programs that promote education for children and proper working conditions for adults.

"The essence of the idea behind the business was applying contemporary design to a centuries-old craft," Gardner says. "The weavers are working in the vernacular that their people have been expressing for generations—even as their language dies, even as the rest of their culture crumbles around them. These rugs help sustain that way of life. I think we all have a vested interest in keeping alive these wonderful art forms and allowing them to evolve. That was the whole point of marrying my contemporary designs with this wonderful and very enduring technique."

Gardner also believes that handmade global goods can have a powerful impact on interiors, as design clients are craving authentic products that result from small-batch production. "Humans just seem to appreciate handmade items at a visceral level," she says. "A weaver's individuality is woven into the rug."

Provenance is of interest, too. "Everyone likes to have a story to tell," adds Gardner. "A lot of our business becomes about the experience of our clients creating a one-off piece with me that was woven by hand in Nepal. When I was in Katmandu with my daughter, seeing the various phases of the process, people really responded to my Instagram posts. I wasn't sure if anybody would care if I showed a photo of the yarn being dyed or the brilliant color matching being done by hand—but they did."



Through her handmade rugs, designer Emma Gardner marries ancient craft techniques with contemporary style.
(Image: D'Aquino Monaco, Costas Picardo)

Trade in the Time of COVID

Global trade has, of course, not been left out of the pandemic's wrath. But, artisan communities around the world are doing their best to adjust their own behavior and work with shipping restrictions and hold-ups to maintain their livelihood.

Fortunately for Native Trails, the first order for the Murano Collection shipped before Italy's shutdown began and shipping issues that did result have since been resolved. In Nepal as well, where Gardner does business, there have been multiple shutdowns of a few weeks each and travel within the country has seen restrictions but, the company has worked with the changes and, at press time, exporting from the region had resumed.

Carpenter notes, "The hardest thing for artisans in rural communities is that when they don't work, they often don't eat. We have certainly faced challenges for those who would ordinarily have to come together to work and we have seen shifts in the rise of cottage communities where they have to work from home. Access to materials is often difficult if they are not allowed to go out and no one can bring them in."

But, these communities are finding pathways to dealing with the unprecedented factors 2020 has dealt. "We have seen some wonderfully clever and agile stories of innovative artisans overcoming some of these challenges," Carpenter says, adding that as spending has slowed in prosperous nations, artisans have shifted focus to local markets and into the production of masks and other products currently in demand.

As the world comes together with the common goal to eradicate COVID, specifying handmade items from global artisans can build connections to our shared humanity and interest and prosperity that will persist in years to come. It's a meaningful connection to a culture other than one's own and a respect for time-honored craft traditions that, if supported, can continue to be passed down through generations. ●

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Native Trails looks to preserve artisan heritage by making their goods available to a wider audience. (Image: Native Trails)