

Craft is art

With a growing demand for handmade accessories, sellers are turning to the Web to showcase their wares and reach a wider network of customers

FOR the longest time, handicraft was associated with old-fashioned crochet or macrame classes. Not any more as handicraft takes on artisanal connotations and entices more hobbyists to turn their passion into a thriving business. A quick look at Etsy (www.etsy.com) - one of the most popular online handmade marketplaces - shows a growing demand internationally for handmade goods.



QUALITY

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Etsy boasts more than 4.2 million members (over 400,000 are sellers) and recorded US\$180.6 million of gross merchandise sales and in January this year alone, the website saw sales of US\$20.1 million.

Others such as ArtFire (www.artfire.com) and papernstitch (papernstitch.com) have similarly helped to fuel the growing demand for artisanal products.

For the sellers, these websites don't just give them an outlet to showcase their wares, but help them reach a wider network of customers.

Take Singapore-based German Eva Winckler, who sells intricate pieces made out of clay on Etsy (www.chilicrab.etsy.com).

'MAAD was started in July 2006 and the idea then was to provide a regular platform for any kind of original design art or handmade items . . . We felt that by doing so, it would help to grow the creative scene here.'

Shannon Wong,
MAAD founder

'In February 2009 I opened up an online shop on Etsy . . . since then customers and fans of my work all over the world are able to get in touch with me and the other way around,' she says. 'Etsy is easy to use, very convenient and affordable, no matter where in the world you are located.'

Closer to home, flea markets such as MAAD (Market of Artists And Designers) dedicated to handmade crafts and designs are likewise doing their part for the industry. 'MAAD was started in July 2006 and the idea then was to provide a regular platform for any kind of original design art or handmade items,' says its founder Shannon Wong.

'We felt that by doing so, it would help to grow the creative scene here. While we've seen some vendors come and go, there are also some who have gone on to start their own shop and I like to think that our flea market gave them the start that they needed.'

For those new to the artisanal concept, here's a quick sample of what some local craftsmen have to offer.

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Mandy Pan
forestflame.com

WHAT was meant to be a simple - albeit charming - trip to the Ascot in Perth (Melbourne Cup) turned out to be a beginning of a thriving business for Mandy Pan.

'Not wanting to spend money on Ascot hats, my girlfriends and I embellished our plain hats with lots of feathers and craft flowers,' she recalls. 'Early last year, a friend reminded me of my 'Ascot Hat' and I was told that feather headbands were very popular in New York. I thought that Singaporeans would soon catch onto the trend, so I started making headbands using feathers from New York and sold them at The (monthly) Market for Artists and Designers at Red Dot Museum (maad.sg).'

Pan, who also has a day job as a teacher, adds that because she works very long hours, she can only make hair accessories at night and during the weekends. She has even stopped taking online and customised orders as she can't cope with the high volume, choosing to sell once a month at Red Dot Museum because it gives her a month between each flea market to get ready for sales.

Her design philosophy is user-centric - the product must be both aesthetically pleasing and functional at the same time. Most of her designs have dual uses. A hair clip for example, can often be used either as a brooch or a headband as well.

Catering to a core clientele of fashionistas in their mid-20s to 40s, Pan noticed that her designs are worn as daily accessories rather than just for parties or formal events. Even brides-to-be are knocking on her door asking for floral hair pieces.

'There will always be a market especially in the bridal segment,' she observes. 'Besides this, I plan to make theatrical hair pieces for shows and musicals in the future.'

While she admits that it can be difficult to compete with retailers who sell products at cheaper prices, she believes that handmade products go one up on mass produced goods given that they come in limited number and hence more exclusive.

'Some of the cheaper imported hair pieces are poorly made and then there are those at high-end boutiques and department stores that are too high in price,' she concludes.

'To compete with commercially produced items, I make sure my products are well-made, fashionable and reasonably priced. I make sure my designs are unique by making all the fabric flowers and rosettes myself. This way, I can also deter copy-cats who are a bigger threat to me than commercial manufacturers.'

By Melissa Lwee

Eva Winckler
www.chilicrab.etsy.com

EVA Winckler is like the cool mum every kid wishes they had - she's fun, spunky and best of all (if you're a girl that is), she turns bits of clay into some of the most intricate jewellery available in the market today.

'About four years ago, I had a small decoration business running in Germany and when we moved to Singapore in December 2006, I brought tonnes of materials with me,' says the proud mother of two boys

'One day I found some blocks of FIMO polymer clay and started thinking of how to use it to make jewellery. It took several months to finally find a style that I love as well as to refine my technique but since then I've not stopped creating new pieces and improving my work.'

After selling some pieces to family and friends, Winckler was encouraged to start an online shop (www.chilicrab.etsy.com) on Etsy - the leading international platform for handmade goods. She has since won fans from around the world, with most of her customers from North America and Europe.

Winckler adds that her design philosophy is to create jewellery that is both unique and whimsical at the same time in order to 'fulfil the little romantic in all of us'. She adds that her designs - like a new lantern series for example - have been influenced by her stay in Singapore. After all, she did name her shop after one of the most iconic local dishes.

With a price range of roughly US\$18 to US\$89, Winckler's designs are hardly bank-breaking. However, she does say that given the large variety of handmade goods available online, there are customers who lament her 'high' prices.

Which in many ways is perhaps unfair, especially given the amount of work that goes into each piece and the high quality clay she uses which does not break as easily as the more popular (and cheaper) fragile air-dried clay.

'Every piece of jewellery is 100 per cent hand made,' she explains. 'The whole process takes up to three days from idea to the finished product. Bearing in mind that I am a mother of two active boys so my creative time is totally limited!'

Difficult though her path may be, Winckler maintains that she presses on because she 'totally loves' what she does. 'According to Etsy and other online marketplaces the handmade community is still a fast-growing one. Of course, from the seller's point of view, it's a tough business and it's clear to me that only those who are willing to give all their time, love and passion are the ones who will survive in the long term.'

By Melissa Lwee
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Helan Tan
www.gioielli.com.sg

IT turns out that the bridal industry in Singapore was way ahead of the fashion curve when it comes to headgear. Just ask accessories designer Helan Tan who started making headpieces for many a blushing bride more than 10 years ago - way before the start of the headgear craze that has taken over the fashion industry.

'I initially started off as a bridal gown designer but I wanted to offer my clients a complete look so I decided to make my own headpieces and some jewellery to complement the gowns that I had designed,' recalls Tan. 'For many years, the only people who bought fascinators (a type of headband) were the brides, but now, I see so many people wearing them on the streets!' Today, Tan no longer designs gowns, choosing instead to be a full-time mother and part-time accessories designer specialising in custom handmade headgear. 'I make it a point to source for the best material possible for my products,' she

says. 'Often, I use the fabrics, lace and crystals that I find on my travels and I also make special orders from overseas when necessary.'

Tan, who sells online and from her showroom (by appointment only) adds that her unique selling point is that she offers complete customisation services for all her clients - even if they are not in the country. 'The Internet is a great tool in facilitating communication. For example, I had a client who is Singaporean but based in Australia. She asked me to make two pieces for her for her wedding and we discussed what she wanted via e-mail and she was amazed that her desires still came across effectively even though we weren't face to face. I made her four headpieces to choose from and she bought all of them.'

Tan is now focused on upping her game, aiming to create casual pieces for daily-wear as well as more cutting-edge headgear that will stand out during evening events. She says: 'I think it is really important to improve my craft. For instance, I'm currently learning how to make clay flowers so that I can use them as a part of my headpieces. My dream is to one day be able to create pieces like the famous milliner Philip Treacy.'

As a full-time mother however, Tan has her hands full taking care of her two young children which leaves her only a few hours daily to work on her craft.

'I do a lot of work between midnight and six in the morning. I then sleep for a few hours before it's time to take care of the kids who have woken up,' she concludes with a wistful smile. 'But I don't mind at all because this is my passion and that passion fuels and drives me. I would love to see my work making its way to the catwalk someday.'

By Melissa Lwee

Tammy Lee
PLUCK, 31/33 Haji Lane
www.pluck.com.sg

TAKE a walk down Haji lane and you will find items on sale that you don't normally see in your regular shopping malls like Ion Orchard or Wisma Atria. These items range from cheap handmade jewellery by local designers, to expensive clothes imported from Europe. PLUCK, a shop better known for their ice cream, sells something that falls somewhere in the middle of the two - reasonably priced, handcrafted jewellery by UK-based Singapore designer, Tammy Lee. Lee's designs are, in her own words, 'a little quirky and cheeky'. But above all, people are attracted to her products because each piece reflects a mood in a time of her life. I let my personality or mood flow into the items I make. And people who come by to see my works, they will surely find something that catches their eye because it captures the mood of the person at that moment.'

Having a simple dressing style, without fancy or extravagant clothes, she started off modifying her clothes DIY style for more formal events and dinners. On a lazy Sunday morning, she decided to make a necklace for herself for an upcoming party but after completing it, she changed her mind and gave it to a friend as a birthday gift instead, a decision that unwittingly led to her mini business.

'People saw it, made orders and the friends of those people saw it and made more orders. So it went on and on. Things took off even more when my friend went back to America and then I got orders from the US too.'

In 2006, a few Hong Kong socialites and celebrities got wind of Tammy's work and placed orders. Her workload piled up so much that it affected her health and social schedule. As a result, she took a break and made the choice to work only with PLUCK and some shops in England, where she currently resides.

Comparing the market for local designers in England and that in Singapore, she says, 'People in Singapore don't seem to support Singapore products, which I find baffling. The

London market is more open to wearing things that are simple: a charm on a necklace sells like hot cakes. I have seen one artist who hammered tin cans and used it to make charms, wall hanging mobiles etc. I know many Singaporeans will laugh at such things but here in England, it's considered individualistic art.

'I think there is a need for Singaporeans to open up their minds and see things as they are and appreciate the work done behind it . . . just because they don't understand it does not mean they should laugh at it.'

Seeing that her products are popular and she could make an immensely successful career out of her talent, why doesn't Tammy bring her accessories further?

'I'm a one man show, I don't go around advertising but people hear about me through word of mouth. It helps to have a 'come what may' attitude than to be looking for recognition and fame. I am in no hurry.'

By Natalie Koh
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