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Way Off the Runway

As the age of excess fades, a band of nomadic tastemakers crazy for souk shopping and far-flung treasure hunts anoints all things artisanal and handmade the next big thing

By **ALEXIS SWERDLOFF**

Tatiana Santo Domingo and Dana Alikhani are founders of the e-commerce site Muzungu Sisters.

When Natalya Rovner walks through her neighborhood in downtown Manhattan, it isn't her designer bag or dress that people stop to ask her about. Instead they want to know where she got a certain pair of colorful moccasins. "People will come up to me to ask about things I'm wearing, and it's not like I can tell them to go around the corner—I found the moccasins in Beirut."

Ms. Rovner, a 26-year-old Russian transplant who co-owns LuxCartel (a fashion company that introduces emerging American designers to foreign markets, and foreign designers here), is emblematic of a new kind of fashion-forward young woman who is less interested in name brands and more interested in pieces that have an unusual and exotic provenance. "For me, something is special because of where I found it and the story behind it," she said.

Photos: Think Global, Wear Local



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas
A traditional Sicilian basket made for Muzungu Sisters by local artisans.

Due to a surge in sample-sale websites like Gilt Groupe, the cachet once associated with owning a name-brand designer has been significantly diluted; getting your hands on a Marc Jacobs bag is easier than it's ever been. This, combined with a post-recession wariness of conspicuous logo-flaunting and an eco-fueled desire for small-batch, low-impact authenticity, may be shifting the nature of luxury. It's no longer about who made your dress, but at what out-of-the-way dusty market you found it. Call it the Eat, Pray, Love-ization of fashion.

Over tea at Parigot in New York, Ms. Rovner pushed up her sleeve to reveal a stack of bracelets, each one with a backstory—some were wish bracelets from Brazil, a few she'd found while visiting a village in Indonesia and others were made by her friend, Lebanese designer Noor Fares. "When I was younger I was a dresser," she said. "I would get my hair done three times a week, I only wore the big brands." But as she began traveling more (she regularly has to add more pages to her passport, and gets the whole thing replaced about every two years), her style changed.

"No one cares any more if you're in head-to-toe Prada," she said. "Now you have to try harder."



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas
A raffia-trimmed dress from Gypset, Julia Chaplin's line, inspired by nomadic lifestyles.

"It's not so luxurious to have something that everybody else has, that's sold in every city in the world," said Julia Chaplin, author of the 2009 book "Gypset Style," which chronicles the emerging class of creative types living the jet-set-meets-gypsy lifestyle. Last month, she launched the Gypset collection of dresses, pillows and sarongs made from African textiles. Ms. Chaplin notes that finding items from exotic locales also makes for stellar cocktail chatter. "I think there's something cool about saying you got that thing from, you know, some tiny island in Indonesia," she said.

Of course, there's also the implied price tag for items collected in faraway lands. That bracelet may have only cost you 100 pesos in Manila, but the trip that got you there cost a lot more.

For those who won't be jetting off to a souk in Marrakech anytime soon, several online boutiques obviate the need to go through passport control. This past fall, Alisa Ng launched the e-commerce site L-atitude, aimed at both real and aspiring globetrotters. The former Morgan Stanley derivatives trader, who was based in Hong

Kong, spent a lot of time traveling throughout Asia, where she became obsessed with finding unique, local items. "I realized, 'Wow, why is there no online experience that captures that discovery process?' " Ms. Ng said. The site, which you can navigate city by city (Bali, Bogotá, Manila, Mumbai), features handpicked artisanal clothing, jewelry and homewares as well as modern pieces by the cities' up-and-coming designers.

She and her colleagues take regular shopping trips, and employ a team of local "tastemakers" to scope out items for them. Since the site is still young, the "early adopters," according to L-atitude CMO Ashley Wick, "are women that are confident in their own personal style beyond wearing a label; they don't need to wear Louis Vuitton in order to feel like they're participating in fashion." And the nature of the site lowers the odds of showing up to a party wearing the same Turkish sarong as someone else. "We don't buy in mass quantities," said Ms. Wick. "So there isn't the possibility that 100 people will have the same item that you have."

London-based Colombian heiress Tatiana Santo Domingo also noticed a market for carefully curated global goods, and the value of sharing her own personal, bohemian style with a wider audience. "I've been lucky all my life to be able to travel to exotic destinations, and love finding handmade local things," she said. "And when I come back, my friends are always asking if next time I can bring them back that cool scarf or that cool bag." This September, she and partner Dana Alikhani will launch Muzungu Sisters, an online store selling their favorite Moroccan caftans, Peruvian jackets, Venetian velvet slippers, Scottish cashmere socks and Argentinean gaucho pants. "I want it to feel like each of these pieces, taken out of context, could be sold at a store like Colette in Paris," Ms. Santo Domingo said.



SOUK IT UP: The eclectic offerings at Lazypoint boutique in Amagansett, N.Y.

Fashion designers are also jumping on the trend. "As the world keeps moving faster and faster, and fashion has become more disposable, people are seeking out things that have a realness to them; things that are not so obviously cranked out of the widget conveyor," said Julia Leach, the former creative director of Kate Spade, who started her own lifestyle brand, Chance, last summer. The line was inspired by the idea of creating a perfect striped T-shirt, for which she trolled French vintage shops to study time-honed sailor-shirt-making techniques. An online store and pop-up boutique in Manhattan's Nolita neighborhood also sell items Ms. Leach stumbled upon while overseas ("I'm like a pig hunting for truffles when I travel," she said), including espadrilles from a remote Spanish village, and Indian scarves designed by British textile artist Jeanette Farrier.

For many of these entrepreneurs, there's also the incentive to bolster a dying breed of local craftspeople. "Yes, my site is an excuse for me to travel and do what I love," Ms. Santo Domingo said, "but at the same time, I hope I'm able to help these artisans, and support what

they do."

For the second year in a row, seasoned travelers and collectors Claudja Bicalho and Mark Wilson are gathering a hodgepodge of their greatest finds (including artwork, crafts and clothing) at Lazypoint, their summertime pop-up shop in Amagansett, N.Y. "We were able to track down these lace dressmakers who work under a tree in the square of this tiny village in northeastern Brazil," said Ms. Bicalho. "These women are national treasures; and if they don't get support, they can easily disappear."

Designer Cathryn Collins agrees. "Handmade crafts and techniques are almost an endangered species." Her high-end line, I Pezzi Dipinti features cashmere separates and textiles made by artisans in Umbria and India, respectively.

Ms. Collins is also an avid collector of distinct objects with exotic origins. Her proudest find? Exhausted and looking for a taxi one afternoon in Madrid, she stumbled onto a small square and into a family-run store selling authentic bullfighter costumes. "I convinced the shop woman to let me go down to the basement to look through their archives, and she sold me all these amazing vintage jackets." Ms. Collins's favorite is made of bright pink satin. "I'll wear it out to a black tie party, or with cigarette pants, a tank top and a high shoe; it's better than couture," she said, before correcting herself: "It is couture."

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