

CRAFTING A BUSINESS

The global craft movement has hit Singapore but makers here face challenges

Natasha Ann Zachariah, Lydia Vasko and Kezia Toh

When Mr Colin Chen first started making and selling his line of laptop bags, Fabrix, eight years ago, he did not emphasise the fact that it was a handmade-in-Singapore product.

"There was slight negativity about a label being locally made," he says.

Then, two years ago, he noticed a change.

"All the big brands and online retailers became available in Singapore. Everyone from H&M to Zara to ASOS," he recalls. "Suddenly, there were too many mass-produced products on the market."

"At the same time, people were also starting to explore their individualism. They didn't want to go to a party where everyone was wearing the same Topshop dress. So they started to source for handmade, unique products with stories," says the DIY entrepreneur, 31, who has since expanded his range and co-founded Tyrwhitt General Company, a shop selling items from local crafters, makers and artisans. It is in Tyrwhitt Road.

Like Mr Chen, Singaporeans are devoting themselves to craftsmanship as handmade-in-Singapore goods gain more credibility and cachet.

Local crafters are serious about making wares – from hand-bound books to home-poured candles – with such finesse that they fully dispel the myth that DIY products are cheap and shoddy.

Some Singapore crafters have even quit their jobs to turn what started as hobbies into small businesses, while others soldier on with their passion in their backyards or kitchens after work. More are also enrolling in craft classes to hone their skills and marketing their goods by collaborating with indie stores and online craft marketplaces.

Singapore craft-makers report that interest in their products has grown over the last year, even if prices for their handmade goods are sometimes higher than those of store-bought items. High costs are often attributed to expensive materials and labour, which often lead companies that make furniture and fashion, for example, to outsource to other countries.

Ms Mandy Leena Tan started her chemical-free skincare label Mandy T last June in her home kitchen and charges between \$39 for bath salt and \$59 for body cream. She declines to reveal sales figures.

"There will always be a group of consumers who prefer to pay for cheaper mass-produced products that hide behind international labels," says Ms Tan, who is in her late 30s. "But I have seen a growing trend of niche consumers in Singapore, both local and expatriate, who appreciate well-designed handmade products. They are also prepared to pay a little more for the quality."

Account executive Genevieve Yeo bought three hand-bound journals from book-binding business dddots last year for \$80 each. She was willing to pay what some might consider a high price for what are essentially blank notebooks because she wanted to own and use a unique item.

"It is one of a kind because each page is woven together by hand. I think this is meaningful work and I'm not just paying for the item, but for the time and effort invested in the craft," says Ms Yeo, 34.

The increase in people making their own products mirrors a worldwide trend, dubbed "the maker movement", which has been gathering steam in the past couple of years. This is where crafters from America to Indonesia have come together in their own countries to form a community selling self-made products.

Etsy, a global e-commerce website for handmade or vintage items, has been credited with kick-starting the maker movement when it started in 2005. It now has more than one million artisan sellers. The site, which is used by many Singaporean crafters, made US\$1.3 billion (S\$1.6 billion) in revenue last year.

While there are no official figures on how many crafters are in Singapore, Crafty Singapore Team – The Original Singapore Handmade Team, a group which organises Etsy makers here, has 460 members. This figure includes non-crafters, who can join the group as well.

A local version of Etsy has sprouted too.

In 2012, Mr Joel Leong and Mr Melvin Tiong, both 28, co-founded Haystakt, an online marketplace for crafters to sell their products. Every maker gets his own page, which he manages by listing products and uploading pictures of new items. Haystakt also has a related Tumblr page, which has interviews with the makers of brands it carries.

Haystakt now carries about 70 local brands, such as

theKANG, which makes handcrafted adornments and accessories, and Wheniwastfour, which sells notebooks and bags with a Singaporean twist. Apart from local designs, the website also has 80 overseas labels from cities such as San Francisco and Hong Kong.

The website recently launched "crowd-determined" pricing for project prototypes, in which an item becomes cheaper as more people pre-order it. Those who order earlier get an "early-bird bonus": For every person who buys the item after you do, you get a rebate.

The owners take a 5 per cent cut from crafters for every item sold through its shop or crowdpriced.

One successful project was Skinny Wallet by local company Shiok, which sold 100 of its ultra-thin wallet for \$52.27 each – down from the initial price of \$63.99 – over 28 days in March.

Mr Leong, who quit working for his family's textile business to set up Haystakt, says he started the venture after seeing many of his crafter friends trying to sell their products. "The traffic on the site picked up organically as more people shared about it online and through word of mouth. Singaporean consumers often ask why they have to pay so much for a label that they don't know about. But increasingly, we see people who want to buy, not only because it's handmade, but also because there's a story behind it."

Mr Leong says the site tracks buyers browsing and notice that they scroll all the way down a page to read about the people, inspiration and process behind a product. Skinny Wallet, for example, is the brainchild of two Singapore architecture-trained craftsmen who lovingly describe the concept for their minimalist wallet on their Haystakt page.

Besides a marketplace to sell their stuff on, Singapore craftsmen and makers have other support groups. These include Makers Of Singapore, a non-profit initiative started earlier this year by four university students to raise awareness of the local crafts scene, and Singapore Makers, which was launched in July last year by creative events company owner William Hooi to bring together crafters through events and talks.

One crafter, who was looking for like-minded people, decided to set up her Singapore version of an Etsy Craft Party, which happens every June 6 around the world.

Last Friday, Ms Salinah Zailani, who runs a home-based craft business, Simply-4-Love, selling bespoke felt accessories and bouquets, threw a party for fellow Etsy sellers at the Goodman Arts Centre.

Participants paid \$10 to take part in craft work, which included embroidery floss and rubber stamps. About 45 people turned up – double the number who attended her first party last year.

Ms Salinah, who started her business in 2011 and runs it with her sister, says: "When you do your own craft business, you are always alone and you don't really know who else is doing it out there. When people signed up for the first party, I was surprised. I couldn't believe there were so many other crafters too."

"I think that it's good to meet up because we can learn techniques from one another, if we are willing to share."

But the road to becoming a full-fledged maker is often a bumpy one for those who have tried to turn their passion into a business. After two years of running menswear accessories brand Oldman Handmade, which specialises in brightly coloured and patterned bow ties, suspenders and ties, designer Maureen Koh, 24, is considering closing shop.

Ms Koh, who received a diploma in fashion merchandising from The Academy of Fashion Professions in 2011, says: "Everything in my business is handmade in Singapore, so the cost is very high, and bow ties are not a high-profit business. It is a struggle to find that perfect ratio between passion and profits. I need to make a profit to keep my passion going. The cost of doing business in Singapore is simply too high."

She cannot afford a storefront, so her accessories, which cost \$69 for a bow tie to \$129 for a pair of suspenders, are sold on a consignment basis in multi-label concept stores such as Tyrwhitt General Company and The Corner Shop in Far East Plaza. Consignment means the stores take 40 per cent of her profits.

The three seamstresses she hires to help her make her thrice-yearly collections have to be paid, which takes another 25 per cent of her profits. And then there are the material and packaging costs.

While the maker movement is gaining much buzz in Singapore, it could also prove to be the crafters' undoing. Ms Koh says: "The word 'handmade' has been exploited and has become a marketing gimmick. It's not exclusive or appreciated by customers any more. I have not given up yet, but I will have to see how my current collection sells and then decide what to do."

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BAMBOO BEE BICYCLE AND GREENCHAMP BIKES

Move over, BMX. A made-in-Singapore bamboo bike is making inroads with cyclists – and their kids.

After launching the Bamboobee Bicycle range made from the sustainable material last year, Mr Sunny Chuah (above, right) has teamed up with Dutchman Daniel Heerkens (above, left) to move into the children's market with the GreenChamp Bike, a balance bike for tykes aged 18 months to five years.

It will be launched on crowdfunding portal Kickstarter on Friday to raise €20,000 (S\$34,228) to fund the project. Their Kickstarter project will end after 30 days and those who pledge \$190 will secure themselves a bicycle.

Mr Chuah and Mr Heerkens will be able to make between 300 and 500 bicycles once the project is launched, though the price for the bicycle after the Kickstarter project has yet to be determined.

"There aren't a lot of toys that are made sustainably, so it was an area we wanted to explore," says Mr Heerkens, 28, who is head of marketing and sales of GreenChamp Bikes and engaged to a Singaporean. "It doesn't take away the joy of riding just because it's made of bamboo."

Already, there is buzz about it. Design portals such as Inhabitat, Designboom and Trendhunter have lauded the concept for being sustainable, with Trendhunter calling it the "ideal bike" for parents looking to teach children about being environmentally friendly.

GreenChamp Bike's grown-up sibling, the Bamboobee Bicycle, was given a resounding thumbs up from netizens last year, when 120 people from around the world pledged US\$63,879 (S\$80,027) to the project – US\$20,000 more than what was needed to get it off the ground.

Bamboobee Bicycle (www.bamboobee.net) has three different options, ranging in price from US\$600 for a Green Warrior, which will launch in the next couple of weeks, to US\$3,399 for a Flight bike. The company has sold 300 bicycles since they were launched online.

Mr Chuah says the excitement online over these bicycles is part of the growing endorsement of handmade products.

The Singapore Management University business

graduate, 28, says: "It's happening internationally and not just with bicycles, but also other products, such as leather goods. People want something that's crafted by hand. There's a transition in the market, where buyers want something that's not mass-produced."

Mr Chuah, who is single, tested his first Bamboobee bicycle prototype in 2011 by riding it 6,103km through Central Asia over nine months.

He says: "If you compare our bicycles' prices with those of the same standard, they are very similar to what's in the market, so I think they are value for money."

All the Bamboobee models and the GreenChamp Bike are designed, tested and assembled by a team of five in a studio space in Eunos. There, a team of five assembles the bicycles. Each GreenChamp Bike takes between 30 minutes and an hour to assemble, while the adult versions can take almost three hours.

The rides are made of bamboo harvested in a village in the mountainous region of Hunan province. The material is shipped to a village in Guangzhou, where each part of the bicycle is crafted by hand before being sent to Singapore.

Initially, Mr Chuah had bought the bamboo from a supplier in Singapore for local assembly, but it was expensive and increased his overheads.

By chance, he met a furniture craftsman from a village in Cao He, who specialised in wood furniture in Guangzhou. Mr Chuah was there to check out workshops to find which ones could get his bicycles made well – and cheaper – in China when he met the craftsman, who was unemployed then.

The craftsman, confident of his skill, proposed that they work together to make the bamboo parts. So Mr Chuah employed him to work on Bamboobee bicycles. Once the parts are crafted, they are shipped to Singapore, where Mr Chuah and his team assemble them into bikes.

He says: "I went straight to the source of the bamboo and it cut my price by about 40 per cent. I could cut the price even more by going to cheaper sources, but I want the parts to be of a certain standard."

"It's a labour-intensive process, but we believe we have a good product," he says.

Natasha Ann Zachariah