

Handbags with HUMANITY



How to look good and feel good, knowing your
fashion purchase has been ethically made

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Have you ever wondered who makes the clothes you wear and the bags you carry? Maybe you prefer not to think too much about it. After all, you're getting your fashion at a great price!

I wrote this report because the fashion industry as a whole has a very bad name in terms of worker welfare. We see terrible stories in the news about factory disasters and awful worker conditions - and it is often like that but it doesn't have to be!

In fact there are some fabulous factory units and great employers who do care about their workers and I am passionate about showing that there is a good side of manufacturing in developing nations - it's not all bad.

For over 20 years I travelled to China, The Philippines and India, while designing for big name high street brands like Esprit, M&S and Next. As a designer you see many aspects of the industry - and sourcing and production are top of the list when it comes to getting your job done. Of course quality and price are very important - and sometimes price overtakes everything in terms of importance to the big companies but most of them check, double check and triple check out their partner factories before letting them make clothes bearing their name. Are the high street brands getting stuff ethically made? I think the answer is maybe.

Where is it Made?

As I mentioned, the larger companies check out their manufacturing units. Some even invest in overseas production to get the quality they want and to have control over the manufacturing process. These companies have teams of people whose job it is to make sure the factory is following their required standards of manufacture and worker welfare.

Unfortunately, many medium sized and smaller companies get stuff made without ever visiting the manufacturing unit, pre-

production.

It was while on a trip with one of these brands that I saw that some of the workers were children, some production rooms were accessed by a ladder into what can only be described as a loft space and the workers were sitting in rags on the floor without proper work areas or any regard to safety.

Why Isn't Anyone Doing Anything?

Governments and industry professional bodies all over the world are supposed to stop these things happening - particularly child labour but in some countries, companies break the law - easily and every day.

Things won't change until we - the fashion buyer is interested and caring enough to ask - really find out, where our clothes and accessories come from and then buy only from the companies that produce our fashion ethically.

Following the horrors I saw as a young designer, I realised that if I ever started my own business and got into production I would make sure I knew everything about the people who make my designs and only work with partners who share my philosophy.

My philosophy is that I will be ethical in business and that starts right from my design work, to the fabrics and leathers I source, to the lovely people who hand-make my products for me.

My Background

It was 2001 when I left my very comfortable and fabulous freelance design job with Next. During my time at Next, I was the Handbag Designer, as well as overseeing Hats, Gloves, Scarves & Jewellery design.

I travelled the world, once racking up 42 flights in a year. I loved working there! It is so satisfying to see your designs on the arms of ladies everywhere. From the supermarket checkout queue to factory workers and stylish students, I saw they all had one of my designs! Sometimes I could see 2 or 3 people in one day carrying the same design! That's mass production.

How Mass Production Works

Every bag and every garment is made by someone. There is still very little totally automated garment production available (although I was lucky enough to be shown around a Scottish knitwear factory recently where they are testing a very, very expensive, totally automated, cashmere knitting machine). Perhaps that is a glimpse into the future!

Most production of our high street fashion is mass production by people. This enables quick production of a large number of products very quickly and at a fairly low cost.

Mass production = low cost.

Mass production = masses of the same design around everywhere.

Mass production = boring jobs for factory workers.

Mass production can also mean horribly long working hours - simply because the company or 'brand' (think they) NEED to have those products in their stores by a certain date, or else (the order gets cancelled - they only pay 50% of the price - whatever....) You get my point. The cost to the factory is too high not to deliver on time, so they are forced to make the workers work longer and harder to get the production finished.

Often the workers live in dormitories at the factory. This seems to be 'normal' in a lot of countries. I have seen this in China where, according to the bosses, the workers travel hours or days from home to come to work there, therefore they need to live at work.

The further they travel the more unlikely they are to see their families very often - sometimes only once or twice a year at special occasions like Chinese New Year, when they get around a week off.

Personally, I don't like this idea. I think the workers should be able to have a family life and a work life in the same place and it should be good for them and good for their employer.

Leather v. Synthetic

Generally leather bags cannot be made in a super mass production environment but it's different when you purchase a synthetic bag. Synthetic leather, sometimes called PU or leather look, comes on rolls, just like rolls of other material, so it can be cut like material. Giant guillotines are employed to cut all the parts of the bag out of the 10-20 layers of PU. This produces the parts of 100's of bags at a time which are then sent to the production line. I'm not saying that all synthetic bags are mass made - but probably very many are.

The Production Line

The production line is literally that - lines and lines of people at tables and at machines doing their work. Some people sew, they sew all day - 100's if not 1000's of bits of synthetic leather together. Probably it's black stitched with black. Can you think of a more boring job? Other people attach zips, metal buckles and magnets - that's what they do. And other people finish the bag, making it look nice before it even gets to the quality control panel. You get the idea, it's a mass production line making garments and accessories as cheaply as possible.

Next time you shop - take a look at the price. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. You're buying something made in a sweatshop somewhere.

It is Ethical?

Mass production can be ethical as long as the workers are treated ethically, the materials used come from ethical sources and the work place is ethically sound. Workers should only be asked to work a reasonable number of hours per day. They shouldn't be forced to do over time. They should have good, safe working environments, be properly paid for the work they do and be allowed plenty of time off to be with their families.

I have to say that even if workers have adequate (but not nice) living conditions, I can honestly say that I have not seen a totally ethical mass production unit. Not totally ethical. Maybe (and hopefully) things have changed, since it's more than 10 years since I was involved with these places.

Have Things Changed?

It looks like the answer is no, things haven't changed a great deal. In fact things may have become worse with mass production moving to new developing countries, all competing to offer lower and lower cost of manufacture.

A low cost of manufacture comes at a price - the price that the local workers have to pay to keep their jobs, in many cases. In most factories that require staff to work long hours - the workers have no choice. Work long or - lose your job. Work in the environment without complaining about lack of safety - or lose your job. Very sadly, the horrific Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh in 2013 made all of this too real. According to an article by the **Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights**, the workers were physically forced into the building on the day it collapsed, or told to go without their wages for the **whole month of April**. It was April 24th.

None of this is acceptable but it's up to us - the buyer of clothing and bags to make sure our purchases come from an ethical source.

I Buy Designer, so it's OK

No it's not necessarily OK. Don't assume that because you spend £100's on something, it's been ethically made. A quick check with **Ethical Consumer** (www.ethicalconsumer.org) will show how a lot of big designer names fall short on many ethical ways of working, even on worker welfare. I think that is just plain unacceptable.

The best thing you can do is to ask a question of the company you buy from. Ask your favourite brand "Where do you get your designs made and is it ethical?" Check out their website. Check out the label in the products. Does it say 'Made in Italy'? Is it made in Italy? You need to ask to be sure.

The Ethical Way



In my opinion, the ethical way to have products made is to find a production unit (I call it my workshop) with a boss who believes in ethics too. I made sure I did and these are our policies:

- 1) Absolutely NO child labour
- 2) The working week is Monday to Friday 9am to 5.30pm with a lunch break at 1pm every day.
- 3) The workers get above the cost of living wages and can earn extra by volunteering for over time.
- 4) When over time is offered, it is only until 7pm on weekdays and sometimes on Saturday.

- 5) The workers are in small groups - changing what they do from time to time so that they learn new skills.
- 6) They go home every evening to be with their families and their kids get to go to school.
- 7) They like their jobs and enjoy coming to work.
Also:
- 8) Materials used in production are also ethically sourced, for example leather preferably only comes from tanneries that clean the water after use . The ones we use have a reed bed system.

The Hand Made Way

Leather and textiles such as tweed, are treated very differently from PU or synthetic leather. First of all leather isn't a square material. It doesn't come on a roll and therefore it has to be hand cut. It's expensive so you can't cut it in layers of 10 or even 2 because you need to see the quality of every skin you're cutting to be sure you've got the best piece for the bag part required. Also, you don't want to waste any of this valuable material.

The tweed I use comes from a few highly specialised Scottish weavers and again, being such an expensive material we cut it one layer at a time to make sure it's done right!

Hand making a leather handbag or wallet takes time. It's done with care and then it will last for years to come. Yes, the products take longer to make because the workers work 8 hours a day, not 12,13 or even 16 hours a day! So, it's **up to me** to build in enough production time and not demand my



designs are made in too short a timescale.

And the best thing: It's not mass production, so when you buy from a small designer, ethically made you have something special and you've contributed to worker welfare in the world. Why wouldn't you want that?



By now I hope you can see how important it is to find out where our clothes and accessories come from. Everyone in the world deserves their workplace to be safe and I believe it needs to be much more than that.

There is a way to make sure you only buy from ethical companies. If they aren't promoting it then ask them! In my experience, more and more designers like me want to make sure we're really helping the communities that make our products.

About the author

Shona Easton is a handbag and accessories designer with over 25 years' experience in the fashion industry in the UK and overseas. When working for large companies she felt powerless to make a difference because she was told 'that wasn't her job'. Now, she

makes it her job. Her designs are ethically hand made in a rural village in India where she employs over 100 women in conjunction with her business partner there. She loves to see the small changes that one person can make to a whole community.

Connect with Shona



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Check out **Fashion Revolution** (www.fashionrevolution.org) and join their campaign to have all our clothes ethically made.