

HANDEYE

El Camino de Los Altos

BY REBECA SCHILLER | AUGUST 15, 2013



COURTESY OF EL CAMINO DE LOS ALTOS

Keeping heritage and traditions alive

Take eight French textile designers plus a mix of indigenous and mestizo women from the highlands of Chiapas, Los Altos de Chipas, Mexico and what you get is the El Camino de Los Altos, a non-profit organization, which produces stunning woven fabrics for the home.

The association was established in 2009 with the goal to improve the living conditions of Mayan weavers and their families, but also to keep alive the long-standing ancestral art within the region and give the women the opportunity to further develop their skills as weavers and designers.

To reach this goal, El Camino de Los Altos developed a training center for the weavers and designers, artists, and visitors to meet and exchange ideas that combine contemporary design with ancient techniques and iconography. Workshops are taught including a number of training programs such as dyeing with natural materials, pedal loom weaving, computer-based textile design, sewing, business management, as well as quality control and inventory management. In addition, the association supports travel by the artisans to the region's museums and libraries to learn more about their cultural heritage.

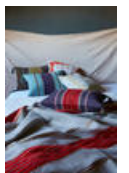
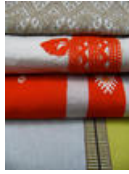
But it's not all about weaving and design; the association also provides a literacy program for the women to learn Spanish and for their children to strengthen their own indigenous language. To make these classes accessible to all the weavers, El Camino de los Altos hired a bilingual teacher to teach at the Center, but who also travels to the five municipalities where the weavers and their families live. For the weavers who have young children, the Center provides toys and a play area.

Currently the association employs 130 women. The weavers design and produce the home decor collections that combine a contemporary color palette with bold hand woven patterns and stripes and brocades. Designers and weaver collaborate on each new design, and on occasion changes or modifications are suggested by the weavers. Samples are later produced and together the team decides whether they will move forward to produce the new items. All products are hand woven on traditional, pre-Hispanic back strap looms and all embroidery and finishing is done by hand. Lastly, the weavers name each style and establish prices in collaboration with the designers.

The weavers now have the opportunity to invest in their children's education by paying school fees and for materials like books with their income. In addition, many have improved their housing, making needed repairs or renovating their homes. And it doesn't stop with the women, now a few of the husbands have joined the association and have learned to weave so that the family can expand their production. The children are also learning and expect to join the association in the future, preserving their heritage and textile traditions.

El Camino de Los Altos is exhibiting for the first time at Artisan Resource at NY NOW® from August 18-20 and can be found at the Tilonia® at Booth 33013 Pier 94. The association will be exhibiting its collection of home textiles, including decorative pillows, table runners and shawls.

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