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An Inside Look with Adele Hammond: Embracing Contemporary Style and Handcrafted Traditions

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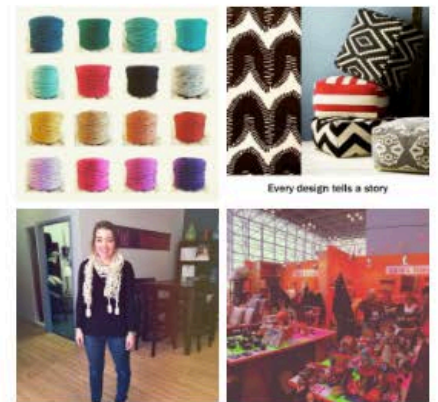
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AN INSIDE LOOK WITH ADELE HAMMOND: EMBRACING CONTEMPORARY STYLE AND HANDCRAFTED TRADITIONS

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Adele Hammond (middle) poses with two weavers from Oaxaca dressed in brocade huipiles

For someone who still wears her sister's hand-me-downs, Adele Hammond never thought she would be working in the fashion industry. But after living in a small village outside of Oaxaca, Mexico with her family from Oregon, Hammond had no idea their lives would fundamentally change forever.

Five years later, as the founder of *Abrazo Style*, Hammond works with artisans in Mexico to “fuse the best of contemporary style with the rich artistic traditions” of Oaxaca and Chiapas. Committed to supporting the artisans and their families through sustainable fair trade, Abrazo Style works toward positive change in indigenous communities of Oaxaca and Chiapas, Mexico.

Sharing the goal of helping artisans around the world, Hammond partnered with ATA as an importer and helped develop new colorways for a line of “Infinity” scarves, originated by ATA designer, Docey Lewis, that were shown this past August at *NY Now*, formerly the New York International Gift Fair.

After a successful showing at NY Now, ATA sat down with Hammond to share her experiences of starting her business and working with the artisans in Mexico.

What is Abrazo Style?

Abrazo Style is our line of accessories and clothing but we work under the Latin Threads Trading



Abrazo Style's booth at NY Now

Company, which is our LLC. The name came from the idea of “thread” meaning connection and history as well as “thread” meaning sewing and textiles. However, we were trying to dip our toes into more of the fashion side of the accessories business and the name Latin Threads Trading seemed a little too hippie for some people. I had written an e-mail to a friend of mine and signed it “Abrazo.” He saw me the next day and said, “You know, I have no idea what that means but it completely knocked me out. That’s a fabulous name for a business. It should be yours!” Abrazo means ‘embrace’ in Spanish and that’s really what we do. We embrace traditions, culture, and the indigenous people that we work with. To me, it’s very emblematic to what we do, that is, to carry forward traditions, embrace them and reinvent them in a contemporary context.

How did the partnership with Aid to Artisans come about?



Celina Cruz (Hammond’s Mexico manager), Adele Hammond, Maru Piñeda Melendez (ATA Mexico Director) and Cecilia Gomez Diaz (ATA Field Coordinator) review prototypes for tassels for tote bags

I first got in contact with ATA about a year before the Mexico project began in 2012. I’ve been working in Chiapas for a couple of years although we’re mainly based in Oaxaca. We travel there about every month and a half or so to meet with the groups of women that we’re working with. In the market, we follow the women whose traditional clothing we would identify as the village we wanted to work with and establish relationships with them. A friend of mine led the investigative tour that Monika Steinberger [ATA Director of Program Management and Development] was on. My friend, who’s very knowledgeable about the highlands of Chiapas, told me about this trip he took with the Aid to Artisans group, and what Monika’s role was and what they were planning. I asked if he could give me her contact information and I contacted her immediately. I expressed my interest in collaborating and having a partnership where we could help one another and develop the possibilities in Chiapas.

How did you start your business?

It all started when we were living abroad in Oaxaca, Mexico for a year to learn Spanish and experience living a different way of life. We went with the knowledge that we could very likely grow some roots and stay for a little bit longer but we never expected to stay for five years. One day, I had a radical shift in the work I was doing as an artist and an editorial graphic designer for clients in the US. I couldn't stand one more day of it and took a year off. During that time, I met a poor young woman standing on the side of the road. I offered her a ride home and she asked if I wanted to buy some embroidery. I felt for her and so I invited her to come to my house. The next morning, I found her and her mother-in-law waiting in my driveway. Together, we determined that with their embroidery skills they could make small alterations on clothing, which would create work for them to do. Each time they came back, we would take their work one step further and then another. Soon their work had improved so much that I began selling some of the blouses they had altered and redesigned at trunk shows in the US. More people started wanting to work and, lo and behold, I found myself creating my first official shipping for export to the US.

Have you always wanted to be in the fashion industry?

It's quite funny because somewhere in my blog I wrote that for someone like me who still wears my sister's hand-me-downs, I'm not exactly the type to be working in the fashion business but we've been drifting into it. We're so much more than fashion. We're really about the story and the journey. This business is not for the faint of heart. You have to be completely in the game with the culture, the language, challenges of culture, and the obstacles that get thrown at you on a daily basis for creating consistent, quality products that arrive on schedule from Mexico. On some level, I've always imagined myself working in the international, artistic, and creative business that would involve handmade products but I never would have thought it would manifest in this way.



An artisan works on a scarf for the new line of accessories for Abrazo Style

could be based on language or their understanding that we want the blouses no matter what and who cares if it's not exactly the way we ordered them. However, we've seen a subtle shift in the dynamics in a relationship between a man and a woman in a village where women don't have any respect or rights. When a woman suddenly becomes an earner in the family, she becomes more respected. To me, that validates everything we do and excuses all the "you asked for a long-sleeved

What is it like working with the artisans?

I love working with these artisans because it's extraordinarily interesting and wonderfully fulfilling. It's both satisfying and frustrating at the same time. There are cultural riffs and misunderstandings that

blouse, they make short-sleeved blouse. You ask for a white blouse but they make a black blouse.” You really get an entire gamut of experiences from laughing with the women and apologizing for using sad colors or white because that’s what people want to buy to having a woman come to me who has been beaten up by her husband. I think it’s a huge commitment that I don’t take lightly at all.

You mentioned on your website that “fairly-traded goods are quickly becoming the ‘haute couture’ of the fashion world.” Why do you think that’s so?

In our society now, I think people are getting fed up with the instant gratification and the lack of history, story, and intrinsic value behind the things that they buy. Today’s youth are more socially conscious and aware than the generation that preceded them. I think it’s a logical cycle that people swing from an instant gratification kind of society back to things with heart and story. My only problem with the whole “fair-trade” label is that sometimes it’s commercialized to a degree that people are sort of numb to it. It’s tough for us because big clothing brands are doing what looks to be hand-embroidery when it’s completely machine-made and are charging double than what we charge for our products. What we try to create is a story and a romance behind our products. Our customers care about where our products came from. We want to show that you can be fashionable and also support handmade.

What’s next for Abrazo Style?

This coming year, we’re releasing a broad line of apparel. That means we’ll be expanding our market and the level of embroidery and weaving work. Capacity



The different colorways for Abrazo Style’s infinity scarves developed by Hammond

is going to be our biggest challenge for the future because it’s not physically possible to produce thousands of an item in the span of time that people these days expect to be able to get it. What we’ll be working really hard to accomplish is to produce solid designs, a greater diversity of clothing, and in larger amounts to offer our customers. We’ll be continuing to respond to the fashion world’s needs by following trends in our own way in respect for the artisans.

What long-term goals do you have for the artisans in Mexico?

Eventually, I would like to set up a foundation for girls education because the lack of education is the great barrier to success and sustainability, especially for all these women who were never allowed to learn how to read or are in abusive relationships because they felt like they had to be. We want to be in the background supporting them rather than leading them because change comes from within the community not from the outside from people like us. I've been in a situation where I was borderline meddling in the community but I backed out quickly. There's a balance and protocol that exists within these communities that you have to be respectful of. With ATA, we're working to create something permanent that will continue to grow not just as a one-time thing.

Photos courtesy of Adele Hammond and Abrazo Style

For more information about Latin Threads Trading Company and Abrazo Style, please contact Adele Hammond: abrazostyle@gmail.com or visit their website: www.abrazostyle.com

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