


PERMANENT COLLECTION

The philosophy behind the Korean label Oma





“An object in a museum case... must suffer the denatured existence of an animal in the zoo;” observes Bruce Chatwin’s narrator in his novella *Utz*. “In any museum the object dies – of suffocation and the public gaze – whereas private ownership confers on the owner the right and the need to touch.” Chatwin’s *Utz* is speaking of porcelain, but he voices a sentiment that regularly troubles the revival of traditional craft skills. Museums archive examples but keeping skills and knowledge alive – rather than offering custodianship of objects – is a different challenge entirely.

“I started to think about precious things,” explains the Korean designer Oma when I enquire about the origins of her eponymous design label. Based in Seoul, Oma now spends several months of each year overseeing hand production in the picturesque region of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. The launch of her first clothing collection in 2010 at the celebrated Livingstone Studio in Hampstead was prompted by her sense that traditional textile production methods in Korea were dying out. “I was ashamed to see ancient textile practices disappearing,” she explains; hand crafted textiles were visible “only in a museum or gallery – but not really alive.”

Oma’s approach offers us an antidote to fast fashion, although she is quick to correct the assumption that fashion alone is the culprit. “It is not fashion and textiles only. All consumption is going so fast,” she

reminds me, referring to our “speed obsessed environment”. Fast fashion is sold to us as an expansion of choice. Don’t like what you see this week? Come back next week: colours, hemlines and cuts will have changed. Bored with your look? Minimal investment can correct it all: bin everything and start again! Oma doesn’t subscribe to this logic, instead seeing that “mass production potentially narrows choice.” We may now be awash with volume, but as consumers we do not enjoy much variety of choice. In response to this quandary, Oma set about sourcing textiles made by hand that could become the basis of the collections she designs. “We work by hand as much as we can – it has different energy – a human spirit.”

Admittedly, it is a business approach fraught with challenges. “There are very few artisans left in Korea,” she explains. A technical rather than hands-on education is popular throughout the region and traditional techniques do not – at least for now – interest many emerging Korean designers. (Oma’s own textile education in Korea focused on technology and she admits her interest as a student in studying natural dye recipes from the elderly women still practising was hardly a popular course of action at the time.) Today her inspiration continues to come from “an artisan’s way of working”. She sees the steps to textile production by hand such as spinning or weaving as “processes that are spiritual” and cites the Indian textile design company Raag as a model of inspiration, again taking the local but working with a sophisticated contemporary eye. ▶





Two years ago Oma began work with artisans in northern Thailand, specifically weavers who plant the very cotton they later spin and weave into cloth. Here too traditional skills are disappearing, although her diagnosis is that rather than lacking in skill, Thai artisans are hampered by a lack of design development. "The skill is great, but the design is not. In Thailand now, traditional skills are disappearing because the design is too ethnic." She has found Thai artisans "more open minded" and receptive to change than her efforts to work with Korean artisans who, she concedes with a chuckle, "sometimes keep doing things their way and just don't want to change."

For a designer (with experience in London at Alexander McQueen's studio prior to the start of her company) this business model offers great potential. Oma needs skilled artisans to execute her designs – garments which nod to their Asian roots but are a far cry from out-dated tourist craft. She describes her collections as sharing an "uncomplicated garment line" before clarifying that she "does not want to represent local or national things" with her collections. The clean garment lines allow for an emphasis on subtle differences in texture that remain unique to hand production. The resulting style is multi-national in the most factual sense of the word. Rather than the flattening of local difference as the media and consumers alike bemoan, Oma's multi-nationalism is about a sense of skill and care that draws the attention of customers in London

and Amsterdam, as well as Tokyo and Seoul.

From her atelier and showroom in Seoul, her mission is in part didactic. She admits that many customers are not familiar with the details of hand-produced textiles, but are curious to learn. Images and video footage are on hand to help teach new customers about the labour and knowledge behind the garments. A small loom on site allows for sampling, but also reminds customers that cloth does not just fall, fully formed, from the sky. Each collection rejects the relentless seasonal hunger of the fashion cycle. Instead she prefers to show once a year with a collection that covers spring to early autumn and keeps this calendar conspicuously out of season. Venues tend to be static exhibitions in galleries, rather than the thrum of the catwalk, and friends often act as the models.

"I am happy to show on this scale – I do not want to grow," she explains when I ask about the future. "When the brand grows, I cannot handle it myself. Small production with local artisans is something important that I believe in." Her stated desire to keep things small is understandable, but deceptively unusual. How often do we allow ourselves to say, next year I hope to be just about where I am now. In her case this is no mean feat. "Not many designers go this way – it is not an easy way," she admits. But craft is alive, understood as Chatwin observed, through touch. *** **Jessica Hemmings**
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