

Hout Bay designer's rooibos purses score shelf space in Paris

Gracious Dube from Hout Bay in Cape Town is delighted to have her handmade purses, which are upcycled from rooibos tea bags, stocked in a fashion boutique in Paris.

Growing up in Zimbabwe, a career as an artist wasn't encouraged by her parents, but when she moved to South Africa and got involved with a company called, Original T-Bag Designs in 2006, her creativity took flight.

Original T-Bag Designs is a company that started out as a social responsibility project by founder, Jill Heyes, to help impoverished women from Imizamo Yethu - an informal settlement in Hout Bay - to earn money by making unique arts and crafts from tea bags and boxes. Heyes, a former art teacher, trained Dube in various art mediums and encouraged her to trial new product ideas as a way to boost her income.

Dube's tea bag purses caught the eye of French fashion designer Carine Khalil, who focuses on upcycling products, when she spotted them at the V&A Waterfront while on holiday. Khalil has since worked with Dube on recreating her rooibos purse for the Paris market, which sells for €26 at Ithemba Design Ethik, a fashion and decor boutique owned by Khalil.

Beginning of a burgeoning business

Dube says the experience of working with Khalil has been awe-inspiring. "Khalil knows the ins and the outs of the fashion business and has given me lots of advice to help me grow my business."

To make her fashionable purses, which are lined with silk, Dube starts off by drying and ironing about 45 to 50 rooibos tea bags. Once done, the tea bags are varnished and either glued or carefully stitched onto the silk. Some purses are also decoratively painted to add to the unique look.

Dube says one of the reasons she specifically uses rooibos tea bags in her design, is because it's her favourite tea. "I love drinking rooibos and it was whilst drinking a cup that I came up with the idea of creating a purse from tea bags. Initially, I tried making it with lots of different tea bags, but the rooibos tea bags were ideal. Not only do they give my purses a beautiful rich colour, but they also tend to be a lot stronger than other tea bags."



Gracious Dube

Kahlil has also commissioned Dube to make a lampshade and basket from rooibos tea bags, which are equally big sellers.

“Funds generated from my designs have helped me to secure a flat in Hout Bay where I live with my 11-year-old son, Dion and my mom. I’ve always believed in the power of education and am now able to pay for him to go to a good school that will open doors for him. From a business perspective, Heyes has also taught me the basic principles of marketing such as pricing a product right, knowing what products customers want and to never compromise on quality.

“I’d like to think that this is just the beginning of a burgeoning fashion business. I have so many ideas buzzing in my head and can’t wait to try them out. My mom and son are also very supportive and just love that my purses are making headlines in Paris. They often help me to prepare the tea bags, so are very much a part of my success,” says Dube.

Unique canvas

Adele du Toit, spokesperson for the SA Rooibos Council (SARC) says she's pleased to see artists incorporating rooibos tea bags, leaves and even boxes in their art. "It's also a great way to upcycle and gives rooibos tea bags a second life. The concept of painting on or using tea bags in fashion is truly unique and forces artists to work on a canvas that isn't blank but is instead imprinted with odd colours and textures. The creative possibilities are endless," comments du Toit.

Like Dube, other artists from Original T-Bag Designs also use recycled tea bags that are donated by tea-lovers from all over the world to make anything from animal sculptures (out of paper mache – the final layer of which is decorated with a variety of tea bags) to gift cards, trays, notebooks, dolls, paintings, soap, fridge magnets, handbags and other décor items such as keepsake boxes, heart-shaped door signs/posts, coasters and even beaded jewellery.

Rooibos and other tea bag/box donations of preferably dried and emptied tea bags, can either be dropped off at Original T-Bag Designs at the Kronendal, Main Road, Imizamo Yethu or their store at The Watershed, V&A Waterfront. Alternatively, it can be posted to PO Box 26227, Hout Bay 7872.



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