

Friday

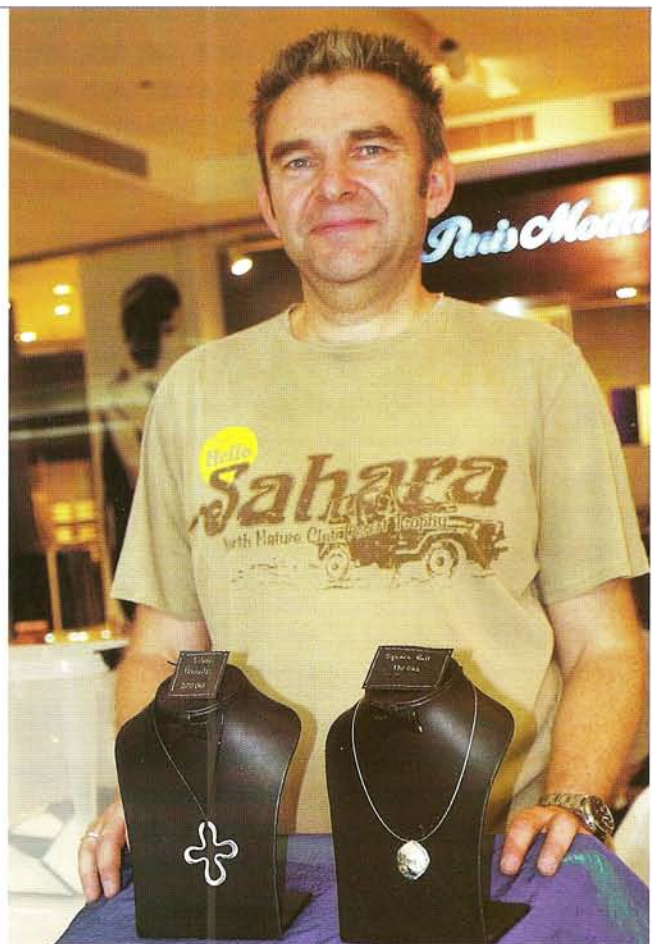
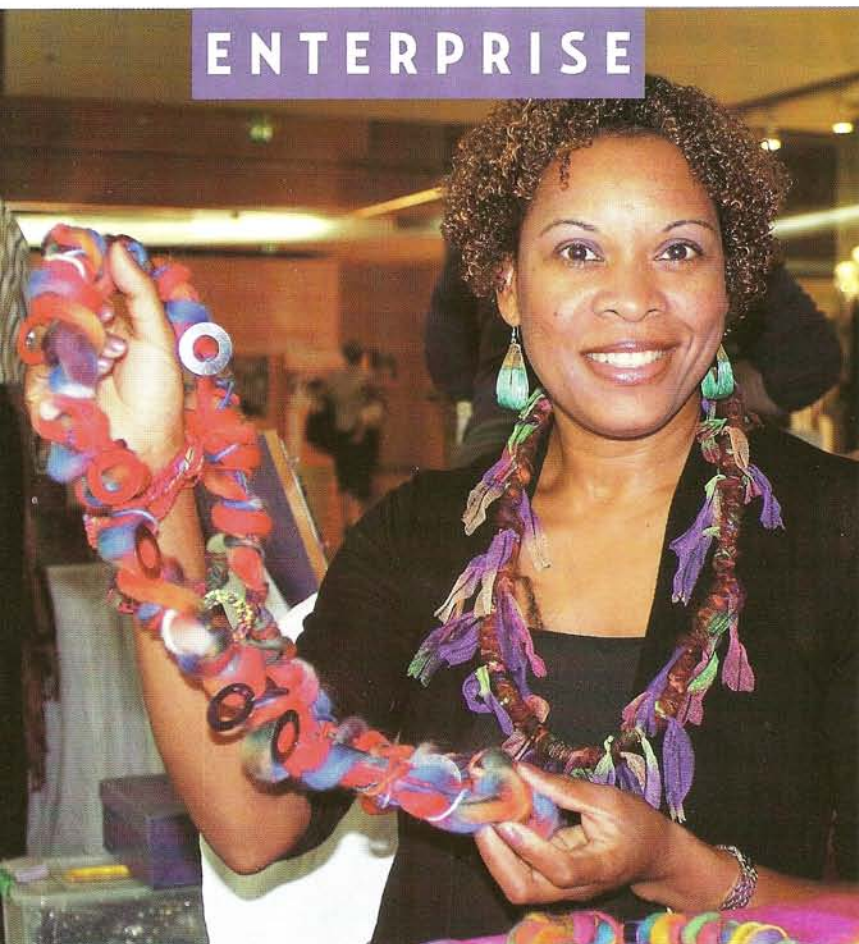
NOVEMBER 28-DECEMBER 4, 2008



Step it up

Haute looks for the cool season 86





ARTE in the making

A PLACE WHERE craftspeople find an outlet for their creativity; ARTE is all about that. Preethi Janice D'Sa meets a few of the artists who've brought it name and fame

Years ago, expatriates in the UAE felt the need for a forum that would not only provide them with a platform to display their creativity but one that allowed them a healthy interaction with similar-minded people. This need gave birth to the Dubai Arts and Crafts online group which has now matured into Artisans of the Emirates (ARTE), a community of 930 artistes and artisans who have found a mention in international media for their creativity and spirit of enterprise.

ARTE is serious business. It has provided an affordable platform for its members to display their handcrafted products. In fact it has enabled some of its members to go on to open their own businesses and given them the confidence to realise their dreams.

Here are a few of those who have been able to carve a niche for themselves in the burgeoning handicraft market of the region:

Paul Townsend

Paul Townsend is one half of the team that has been the key to ARTE's success. The other half is Miriam Walsh. Townsend specialises in silver smithing. He has been silversmithing for nearly six years now. Like Walsh, he's also had a name, Beaujangles.



SUPPLIED PHOTOS

Create art for ARTE's sake
(from far left): Rose Lowe, Paul Townsend, Namali Weerasinghe and Miriam Walsh.

"My wife, Claire, and I were trying to come up with a name. I love jazz, and for some reason the name Mr Beau Jangles (a song by Robbie Williams) came into my head. The domain name was not taken and so, as they say, the rest is history."

So how did Townsend start out to do something as complicated as silversmithing? "I used to do a lot of metal work at school. One summer, when I was stuck in Dubai (my wife and kids were in the UK), with nothing to do, I landed up in a Magrudy's bookstore one day browsing through the craft section and came across a D-I-Y book on silver jewellery and decided to give it a try. I bought some tools and went on to make my first jewellery piece, a pair of earrings for Claire. A couple of days later, my neighbour came around and asked me if I could make a pair for her as

MIRIAM WALSH

Walsh started with Wardolf dolls in felt. "I have been making things with felt for 4-5 years now. In fact, I was known as the Felt Lady. You see, in those days, vendors referred to themselves by their area of expertise. So there was a Card Lady, Crystal Jewellery Lady, Cushion Lady, and so on. Now, however, I don't use it much anymore. I suppose I have grown into Miriam the Felt Maker." Each doll takes from a few hours to several days to make. "It is tough work and so I tend to make them during the summer when everything seems slow."

These days, however, her clients are queuing to buy her Nuño Scarves, which are basically sheep's wool felted into silk. "The sheep's wool literally hooks into the weft of the fabric and remains there. Because wool has the ability to shrink and other fabrics not so much, it puckers the fabric with it. When I see a client twirling in front of the mirror and looking at how gorgeous she looks in

my soft scarves, I step back and tell myself: 'Wow, Miriam you are amazing!'

Well, so are her scarves. In fact, Walsh sells only at ARTE, yet she has had boutique owners knocking at her door, buying her scarves off her and selling them on. "Very successfully, I hasten to add." What about commissions then?

"I find that commissions are tough. I lose confidence, fear rejection and feel insecure. I prefer making scarves from my own soul. It is important for me to stay connected with the process. My scarves are special and it is a tough technique. However, one day I would like to make a carpet with friends."



She may be the Felt Lady, but Walsh is indeed the First Lady of ARTE.

Walsh, as an ARTE organiser, has more to her load than just sheep's wool, Nuño felting and pipe cleaners. "It was tough when the kids were young and I was participating in many craft fairs. My husband, Stephen, has always provided me with enough space and support to reach my personal goals."

Talking about the members of ARTE, Walsh says, "Each vendor is interested in ARTE with a view to selling his or her own work. I am proud of our vendors and I feel that Paul Townsend (the other face of ARTE) and I have done a terrific job. We both believe in supporting the artisans to the best of our ability and in the true community spirit." It hasn't been easy as sometimes vendors can have high expectations, they pay late or not at all, but at the end of it all, she feels it's all worth it as the creative energy of the group inspires her to scale greater heights.

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NAMALI WEERASINGHE

Weerasinghe is from Sri Lanka and has been living in Dubai for the past two decades. She has been stitching for over 15 years now and designing dresses for the past three years.

"My two sisters and my mother have been the biggest influence in my life. They are all very talented seamstresses. Strangely enough, my love for needlework developed only when I moved to Dubai. My first job in Dubai was with Coats Tootal Emirates, which was an Anchor Needlecraft Company. While working there, I was introduced to cross-stitch and embroidery, thanks to a colleague and a friend who was very passionate about needlework herself. It was her passion that rubbed off on me and now I love what I do.

Due to her familial commitments, Weerasinghe had to take time off from her craft but now she is back doing what she loves most.

"Recently I designed a few flower girl dresses for my little niece. They were very well received which led me to realise I liked designing enough to work my way into that field. I love white colour and linen. Aida, cotton and Thai silk are my favourite fabrics."

Weerasinghe's husband Rohitha totally supports her in her participation at ARTE fairs. "My 20-year-old daughter, Pasangi is currently in the United States and studying for a degree in international rela-



tions and economics. She recently took up cross-stitching after years of watching me doing it and just finished her first graduation record, which she did for a friend.

She has also inherited the love for designing from my family. Last December, she designed her first ever sari and blouse which I must say was quite exquisite. However, as she is still in the midst of her studies, I doubt if she'll pursue it more than just a hobby."

So how do ideas come to her? "I've always loved watching little girls wearing dresses that are the epitome of grace. I also remember the pretty dresses my sisters and mother sewed for my daughter when she was small. Some of those patterns are still very popular

and are my biggest inspiration." What does Weerasinghe have to say about her three-year-old membership at ARTE?

"ARTE has played a very important part in promoting my needlecraft. It has given me the opportunity to showcase it to a variety of people and gain a lot of exposure.

I love feeling on top of the world when visitors compliment my work. I am planning to open my own boutique in Sri Lanka in the near future along with my sisters."

She has just started her silk range of designer dresses and hopes that it will be well received. "Most of the work is done by hand but I do use the machine to add some finishing touches."

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make 120 pairs of cufflinks and 80 pendants. I worked very closely with them on the design and once this was signed off, I worked with one of my contacts in the jewellery market to produce and package the product for a price and quality level that would probably not be achieved to that level anywhere in the world. It was a great experience for me and one I would love to do again."

What is his advice to those who aspire to pursue silver smithing? "For some of my designs such as custom bookmarks (with a customer's initials) I do use a PC to design using various available fonts, but for the majority of my designs I use the old-fashioned method of pencil and paper. Ideas come to me all the time. Once I have an idea I will then either make it direct from silver rods and sheets, or I will carve it from wax and then have this cast depending on the design selected."

What is next on the list for Beaujangles? "I have been saying for a long time that I want to have my own exhibition of one-off pieces but at the moment most of my time is spent just trying to keep up with current orders, which I'll admit is a nice problem to have!"

Now the crunch question. How does he handle being an ARTE organiser as well as have time for silver smithing, a full-time job and a family? "I have never been the type of guy to sit in front of the TV watching soaps! I have to be doing something. ARTE has grown in size way beyond my wildest dreams. It is something that Dubai needs. Small entrepreneurs are producing some great arts and crafts but cannot compete in a market as the rental spaces in malls are so expensive.

"There is obviously a lot of place for mass-produced products but I believe you need space for those who produce exclusive, one-off products also. That is what we are trying to promote in ARTE.

"We are trying to find a more permanent location where people can buy selected products from some of our more prominent artisans due to popular demand, as we feel that holding the market once a month can be very inconvenient for a lot of people due to their hectic work and personal schedules. We are also looking at the possibility of setting up an online shop on the ARTE website, where customers will be able to buy products online and have them

well. Within a week, orders were pouring in."

Over the years, Townsend's work and his reputation have grown immensely. For instance, he now receives so many bulk orders that he has to get his design cast to be able to meet the demand for identical pieces. "I still love to make one-off rings, though. Since this market is saturated with gold jewellery, I feel that is the reason why people seek jewellery pieces that are not only of a different

metal but look exclusive as well. That's what makes artists like me popular. My most popular piece online at the moment is my Pac Man cufflinks, and my most popular piece in Dubai is probably my camel cufflinks or square Ball." Townsend also sells his work in Art House Gallery and may go on to sell his cufflinks at his local gents' hairdressers.

He narrates his great commissioning experience. "I was asked by an international airline to

Designer dress or Diamonds?

AED 290



AED 364



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**"I am inspired
by colour,
texture and
design based
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ethnic/urban
experience."**

delivered or they can pick them up from the vendor at our next craft fair."

Like Miriam, Beaujangles has some pretty good parting words. "Keep experimenting, keep trying new ideas. Don't get yourself caught in a rut. Follow the seasons and try to keep your product current. Always try to improve the quality, presentation and packing so that you stand out from the crowd."

www.beaujangles.etsy.com
orders@beaujangles.com

Rose Lowe

Rose Lowe is an American and has been creating accessories since 1989. She has been living in Dubai for the last two years. Her accessories line goes under the name 'Rose Lowe Accessories', which is a collection of colourful necklaces, scarves, bags and hats. Colour is the main theme for all her work. The main fabrics used are silk, wool and yarns which she completes with feathers, shells and other innovative materials.

Lowe has lived in many countries. "I studied fashion design in New York City and started making hats when I was in California. From there I moved to Milan, Italy, where I lived for 16 years. My husband is from the place and my daughters, Jasmine and Daisy, were born there. In Milan, I added bags and scarves to my hat collection. In Dubai it evolved into necklaces made from colourful yarns. I enjoy travelling in search of new styles, fabrics and designs. I am inspired by colour,

texture and design based on the latest ethnic/urban experience. My desire is to offer my gift of fashion to others for the purpose of motivating the mind to embrace colour, thus creating a more stimulating planet."

From the concept to the creation, her accessories do take considerable time as she aims to weave passion into her unique pieces so that each piece speaks for itself.

So what, according to her, is the USP of her designs? "I believe that my line caters to both the conservative dresser as well as the fashionable wearer. It is the art of presenting fashion to the eye through vibrant colours and unique pieces. My scarves and necklaces have proved to be the most popular."

Lowe is only a year old with ARTE but what has her experience been like? "ARTE is more centralised now and has opened a new door which is an important focal point for local handmade crafts in the UAE. The fair has proven to be very successful and attracts a diverse clientele."

So what is next on the line for Lowe? "A line of kidswear named after my daughters."

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(ARTE will be organising a fair dedicated to handcrafted jewellery, accessories and designer wear at Times Square, Dubai, on November 29.)

Visit ARTE at: www.arte.ae

- Preethi Janice D'Sa is an Abu Dhabi-based freelance writer