

Handiwork & the Human Spirit

Artisanal pursuits are alive & well in the age of technology

Rebekka Seale displays a variegated skein of wool.



T

BY JULIE JACOBS

he artisanal movement is thriving, with handmade goods gaining widespread appeal. According to a 2012 report from The Craft & Hobby Association, an international nonprofit trade organization, “at least 62.5 million people participated in one or more crafting activities” during the previous year. That’s a number that is right in line with the boom of such sites as Etsy and Pinterest, and one that the association’s CEO and president, Andrej Suskavcevic, says is likely to grow.

Facts and figures aside, why is handiwork important to the human spirit? “There’s a sense of accomplishment ... when you’re able to create something,” says Suskavcevic. “If you ask any kindergartner, ‘Are you an artist?’ every hand will go up. We tend to lose that as we get older, for whatever reason. But the need to express yourself and the ability to do that, I think, are critical.”

Meet six Northwestern Mutual clients who have found great satisfaction and success using the human touch. Some have transformed their work into thriving businesses; others rely on word of mouth and keep production on an intimate scale. But they all share the joy of something made by hand.

A WAY WITH PLAY

Ronald “Roc” O’Connell, a retired Federal Reserve banker living in Reading, Massachusetts, has “always enjoyed building stuff.” When he and his wife first married, he built a waterbed, he says. Later, “I put up a shed in our backyard, and then as the kids got older and bigger, I put a second story on our house with three bedrooms and two baths.”

So it’s only natural that he’s still building, albeit for the pint-sized crowd. O’Connell custom-designs and personally constructs backyard playsets, complete with slides, swings, benches, and tables, as well as special extras like telescopes, climbing walls, steering wheels, and hand-carved signs bearing the “owner’s” name. A Roc ‘n’ Playsets (rocnpplaysets.com) construction can take the shape of a pirate ship, fort, monster truck, steam engine and caboose, or other themes, depending on what his customers want.

• “I have a bunch of little kids running
• around saying, ‘I love it, I love it’ ...
• Well, that reward system trumps
• anything you can get in the business
• world.”

• —RONALD O’CONNELL
•
•



“Roc” O’Connell with one of his backyard creations

His designs are “based on the children of the house where I’m going to build it,” says O’Connell, whose first playsets for his grandchildren garnered word-of-mouth acclaim that led him to launch his business in 1999. “I want them to be part of the conversation... The ideas come from them.”

O’Connell typically uses pressure-treated southern yellow pine lumber for his structures, but offers them in cedar or redwood, as well (wood ages better than plastic, he notes). With safety always top of mind, he sands around exposed edges to reduce splinters, uses only bolts and screws rather than nails, which



Tamika Gordon takes a creativity break in her dorm room to craft some jewelry.

“I’m like, ‘Aw, you’re wearing my jewelry. It’s really nice!’” —TAMIKA GORDON

another course at the Corning Museum of Glass. Today, she both buys and makes her own beads, sometimes employing a special technique to blend them with yarn for her knitted goods.

Gordon had been hand-making items for family and friends for a while before a friend who crochets suggested they market their wares together. They have since sold their merchandise to customers of all ages. Gordon also has knitted for charity, creating baby hats for Save the Children and Warm Up America’s Caps for Good program.

Her artisanal work helps clear her mind for academics, but it also gives her satisfaction to know how much her customers appreciate what she has made for them. When she sees people wearing her goods, it “brings a smile to my face,” says Gordon. “I’m like, ‘Aw, you’re wearing my jewelry.’ It’s really nice!”

can pull out over time, and incorporates slides and swings that meet the guidelines of the American Society for Testing and Materials. And if a backyard is pitched or contains a wall of some kind, he designs the playset to fit in the environment.

“I tell people it really isn’t as hard as it looks,” says the self-taught builder, who operates pretty much solo and takes up to three or four weeks to complete a playset, working “at grandfather speed.”

O’Connell caters mostly to families, but did construct a playset that accommodates 25 children at a time for a local preschool. He also sells his building plans to other DIYers.

“I get to design something, to create it, to see it when it’s done, to stand back and say, ‘You know, that’s pretty good,’” he says. “I have a bunch of little kids running around saying, ‘I love it, I love it’ ... Well, that reward system trumps anything you can get in the business world.”

A JEWEL OF A BUSINESS

When Tamika Gordon takes a break from her industrial engineering studies at Binghamton University, where she’s in her fourth year of a combined MS/Ph.D. program, she typically picks up her knitting needles and jewelry-making tools. Gordon creates hats, scarves, socks, baby blankets, earrings, rings and more, and sells them by word of mouth and at craft fairs and jewelry parties. It’s a side business that has not only benefited her financially, but also allowed her to express her creative self.

“I’m a very arts-and-crafty focused kind of person,” says Gordon, a frequent craft store visitor who, as a teenager, learned the basics of knitting from her mother and then advanced her skills while in college by “picking up books and looking at videos online.”

As for her jewelry, it was a bead shop in her native Brooklyn, New York, that sparked her interest in baubles. She later studied glass bead making through a scholarship program called the Bead Project (sponsored by open-access glass-arts studio UrbanGlass) and completed

A SUITABLE GENTLEMAN

Dion Julian Lattimore has an extraordinary knack for styling the perfect look. As a custom clothing designer and the owner of an eponymous image consulting firm, Lattimore outfits his patrons from head to toe with the wardrobe and the wisdom they need to succeed, personally and professionally. His extensive



Dion Julian Lattimore makes subtle adjustments in a client’s suit for a perfect fit.

slate of services includes clothing consultation, hair and eyewear evaluation, color analysis, and tips for grooming, health, and fitness. And his flair for design shines through in every unique garment he creates.

He starts the process by sketching a suit, embellishing it with buttons, lapels, and pockets, and then crafting a pattern tailored to the customer. Fabrics and fittings follow to ensure a flawless final product. "There's a lot of creativity that goes into it, not just the fit, but also the design, [and] putting all the colors together with the right tie or the right shirt or the right accessory," Lattimore notes.

Years before establishing Dion Julian Image Consulting (dionjulian.com) in Beverly Hills in 1994, Lattimore cut his teeth in fashion as a runway and print model, frequently for menswear designer Jonathan Behr. By the time he was in his early 20s, he already had worked with "some of the most magnificent clothes I'd ever seen, and most of them I couldn't afford," he laughs.

When Lattimore decided to pursue a career in suit sales, he apprenticed with Behr, also learning sewing and patternmaking. He later honed his skills at David Rickey and Company, a high-end bespoke shop, where he

"I know what a suit can do to someone's confidence, or even a nice shirt."

—DION JULIAN LATTIMORE

helped design and coordinate the clothing for a *GQ* cover and photo spread featuring Magic Johnson. The assignment went so well that he gained an ardent supporter in Johnson, who urged him toward entrepreneurship and became his first big client with a six-figure order. Since then, mostly through word of mouth about his design and styling prowess, Lattimore has built an enviable customer base that includes Tavis Smiley and Will Smith.

He also helps to dress the less fortunate by donating clothing to various Los Angeles-based missions. "I know what a suit can do to someone's confidence, or even a nice shirt," he says. "They'll make you maybe want to go out and get a job or get your life back together, so I've seen the effects of what clothing can do for people."



In her home studio, Jill DeNardo adds a touch of tulle to a tutu.

A TOUCH OF TULLE

About six years ago, Jill DeNardo decided to hand-make rather than buy a tutu for her older daughter to wear to dance class. "It was me being frugal," she says with a chuckle. Little did she know that her pennywise approach would quickly fuel a successful business that allows her to be creative while employing the skills she sharpened as a marketing and communications specialist.

Now a pro with tulle, DeNardo heads Tutu Twirls (etsy.com/shop/TutuTwirls), designing and creating frilly tutus for birthdays, weddings, recitals, baby's first photo, holidays (Halloween is especially big), and just plain dress-up. She also offers flower-themed headbands, beanie hats, purses, fairy wands, and baby shoes, as well as leg warmers and personalized cupcake-imprinted birthday onesies to complement her tutus.

"I just like people looking at my designs and hearing the feedback that 'oh, that looks so cute!'"

—JILL DENARDO



RIGHT: CALLIE LIPKIN

DeNardo sells her goods—nearly 2,500 tutus to date, made with “the softest tulle and the highest-quality double-faced satin ribbon”—on Etsy and at craft fairs. While most of her customers are moms who find her online, DeNardo has completed orders for the park district in her town of Glen Ellyn, Illinois, as well as the dance school that her daughter attended, where she was first inspired back in 2008. And she has donated tutus to her daughter’s school auctions.

“A lot of my customers will send me pictures of their kids wearing what I’ve made. That’s the part I love the most—seeing how happy the mom is and how happy the kids are wearing it. And so that gives me satisfaction, knowing that I helped to do that,” she says.

An avid crafter who likes scrapbooking and creating themed gift baskets, DeNardo enjoys hand-making tutus because she enjoys working with materials and a variety of colors. With increasing competition on Etsy, however, she says that she just may have to pull herself away from the design a bit, hire staff, and ramp up marketing when she’s really ready to grow her business.

For now, as a stay-at-home mom, DeNardo is content with her part-time schedule for Tutu Twirls. She looks to both her daughters, ages 8 and 10, for funky design ideas for the tween set, and continues to delight in the artisanal process: “I just like people looking at my designs and hearing the feedback that ‘oh, that looks so cute!’”

A YEN FOR YARN

Although Rebekka Seale officially launched her fine yarn business, Camellia Fiber Company (camelliafibercompany.com), just two years

“For me, going the handmade route is just really fulfilling, because fiber is just a very comforting, soothing thing to work with. It’s very soft, beautiful, tactile.”—REBEKKA SEALE

ago, the Tennessee-based artisan has been tinkering with fiber, dyeing, and spinning since high school.

“I’m super into knitting, and so I guess it just kind of evolved out of the desire to create the yarn I wanted for my projects, and then just the fun of experimenting and making the different colors. And I was doing it so much, I could not really afford not to sell it,” she says.

Seale sources from mills, but also hand-spins yarn made from natural fibers, “with a bias toward local Tennessee alpaca fleece,” on her traditional spinning wheel. While mill-spun yarn tends to be uniform and even, hand-spun yarn has a lot of variation and texture, she says.

Some of Seale’s yarns are not dyed. For those that are, she uses natural plant-, wood- and mineral-based pigments, made from flowers like marigolds, wood chips, and copper. The process to catch color can take up to a few days to create just the right hue. When it’s warm outside, Seale takes advantage of the sun for solar dyeing, which allows the yarn to absorb the dye faster.

“For me, going the handmade route is just really fulfilling, because fiber is just a very comforting, soothing thing to work with. It’s very soft, beautiful, tactile,” says Seale, whose customers are knitters, crocheters, and weavers. “You just can be confident that a lot of care has gone into the product.”

In addition to yarn, Seale sells kits to make

Rebekka Seale at work at her studio in Nashville, Tennessee





Theresa Schreiber creates her custom stained glass in Williamsburg, Virginia.

“I like the more handmade route because it’s specific to each individual, what their likes are, and what they’re looking for.” —THERESA SCHREIBER



knitted hats and cowls, and this year began including one-of-a-kind handmade wall hangings in her inventory. She also has started to conduct workshops in her Nashville studio. And she has intertwined her venture with volunteerism, recently establishing a local chapter of Hats for Hope, which collects hand-knit hats for homeless individuals and people displaced by natural disasters.

As an artisan, Seale says her biggest satisfaction comes from working with other artists. “I get to see the product that I make become part of a bigger piece of art or a work,” she says.

VISIONS IN GLASS

You might say that serendipity, along with innate skill, played a role in Theresa Schreiber’s journey to artisanship. The Williamsburg, Virginia, resident, who creates stained-glass windows, panels and lamps, remembers being enamored as a child by the Catholic churches and Victorian homes in her Dubuque, Iowa, neighborhood.

“Just going past, driving past, walking past

[them] ... I was always just very impressed with the stained-glass windows,” she says. “I would basically tell myself, someday I want to do that.”

Schreiber studied nursing in college (today serving as a private-duty nurse for an individual with special needs), but continued to be inspired by stained glass, and her desire to learn the art persisted. About three years ago, while chatting about a career switch with her partner, Bill, she told him about her aspiration. He led her to their garage, where, unbeknownst to her, he had been storing equipment used by his late wife for creating slumped-glass bowls and dishes. He taught her how to score glass and use a soldering iron, and she was a natural at both. With his help, including transforming their screen porch into a studio, she began ordering glass from mail-order catalogs and launched Expressive Glass (expressiveglasstudio.com) in July 2012.

“I like to do very intricate, difficult types of pieces, because I like to be challenged,” says Schreiber, who devotes upward of 25 hours a week to her work, which ranges from Victorian/Tiffany-inspired to Art Nouveau, and sells at local art shows and by commission. “There are some people who want a custom-made piece, which is obviously one of a kind.”

She advises customers on colors, elements, and glass texture. Glass can be flat, transparent or opaque, depending on how much light a customer wants to come through the piece, she says. Schreiber also visits the homes of her patrons to get a sense of their interior-design style and incorporates it into the stained glass.

“I like the more handmade route because it’s specific to each individual, what their likes are, and what they’re looking for,” she says. “That’s really what it comes down to: People who want custom work don’t want to walk someplace else and see the exact same thing.”

For Schreiber, Expressive Glass is a dream realized that “comes down to just simply the enjoyment of being challenged ... and then the outcome in the end.”

Julie Jacobs, an award-winning writer based in New Jersey, is also handy with a needle. Her knitting, cross-stitch, and needlepoint handiwork is displayed throughout her home.