BEJEWELED BLING

Posted on

Her artisanry gives bling to an austere hand-woven ensemble that is making a statement in style and sustainable fashion. When everyone needs a place to keep their things, Vanessa’s Creations provide a unique space that is well-designed and handy and is an essential element in every woman’s wardrobe.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. **Photography** Menaka Aravinda.



Vanessa Selvaratnam is harnessing the well-known universal truth of a woman's love for handbags. She has resurrected the mundane hand-spun rush and reed bags for women to carry as a statement accessory every time they step out. What makes these bags unique today is their beautiful place in history. Not so long-ago rush and reed bags were used in people's daily commute. They were fixtures that were evolved out of necessity. The box-shaped bags were laden with oil and joss sticks and other religious articles on the way to the temple. The tote-shaped bag was the commonest. In various sizes, they were the everyday weight-bearing staple of the natives. These bags were spared of ostentatious accouterments, just a bare necessity of daily living because they were utilitarian in nature. They were the bag for all seasons and occasions, for long journeys out of the village and trips to the town's market. It was a bag carried by women and men in the hand or perched on the head. By the 1990s, there seemed to be a pause in their use. Fewer were seen except in areas that made and sold them and at handicrafts stores. The emerging modern landscape of the 1990s gave us alternatives, synthetic replacements that didn't take long to run their course. Being stylish was created at the expense of our environment, where fashion culture was woven around pollution.

Enter the creative dabbler – Vanessa Selvaratnam used the pandemic and the lockdowns as the push factor to fiddle with a few rush and reed bags. So, in October 2020, with her head heavy with ideas, she decided to decorate them. It was a fun project, a way of releasing pent-up energy during a very sedentary period under lockdown. Vanessa wove her magic around the motifs she attached to the bags, the veteran painter and decorator that she is. She managed to pull off a balance between successfully retaining the value of a traditional home-spun craft while embellishing them to connect with women's current wardrobes. It's not surprising that her spin to a classic ensemble was immediately embraced by her children Nayantara, Sheaam, and Natashiya and friends. Vanessa still remembers her first customer Mayomi De Bruin with oodles of admiration for the bling, followed by famous chef Koluu, actress Angela Seneviratne, and socialite Priti Fernando. These individuals were not just amping their finishing touch with Vanessa's stylish new creations. They were making a case for the traditional Sri Lankan bag by carrying them.

Vanessa Selvaratnam is no stranger to Colombo's entertainment landscape. For over two decades, she has rendered her voice as a compere, and singer, a talent that her father Claude Selvaratnam, who had his own band, had bequeathed on Vanessa. Her engagement in the creative industry extended to painting and making

handicrafts. She is famous for her vibrant collection of pottery art that she exhibited and sold widely in Sri Lanka in the 1990s before her creative prowess was kept in brief abeyance as she invested time in parenting.

Today, Vanessa’s Creations is a small home-based business that gives a fillip to an age-old cottage industry in Sri Lanka. Her decorated rush and reed ware bags are an ode to generations of weavers in the country who use sustainable practices that range from traditional to contemporary processes that use standard and rudimentary preparation methods in home-based workstations. The bags are essentially straightforward. The twist to the simple ensemble comes from the beautiful and intricate cord around the handles in silver and gold and the embellishments that make them strikingly prominent. Each one is a visual creation of Vanessa’s. No two bags are the same, as she mixes and matches colors according to the dictates of her creative mind. Cleverly combining a native product with present style quotients, she uses ethnic themes and images tastefully emphasized with rhinestones, beads, and sequins. Her clever choice of motifs to showcase Sri Lanka’s identity, culture, and history through snapshots of the temple procession, the caparisoned elephant, the dancers, and drummers enrich their quality. The demon mask is intricately carved with dazzling rhinestones despite its unusual features. Just as effortlessly the beautiful celestial nymphs of the Lion Rock in Sigiriya float on the clouds, they adorn her bag’s face with that ethereal gaze. Many are the beautiful floral motifs sumptuously embroidered with stones, giving them the quintessential yet novel feminine look. Vanessa is gradually introducing several home-décor items such as the decorated winnower and a native oil strainer called the ‘Pehe Malla’ made out of cane.

Each bag is personally selected by Vanessa, who travels to Weweldeniya in the Gampaha District in the Western Province. The bags are made from Pang rushes harvested from the marshes by hand, which are cleaned, dried, and dyed, and from Pandanus leaves, which are boiled, and dried. Despite the challenges, weavers use indigenous materials like juices of leaves, fruits, and flowers to dye the stalks in different colors that are alternately woven into the sand-colored stems. Her bags have been given as gifts abroad, generating significant interest among her foreign acquaintances who encourage her to explore the potential in the export market. As Vanessa continues to relish the gains of her small business, she is exploring avenues of expansion with emphasis on quality and treatment of the dried raw material.

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Vanessa loves what she is doing as she invests loads of passion into the project. Similarly, she wants her clients to love what they carry, be it to the office, a party or formal meeting, travel, or the market. She wants her decorated bags to speak for themselves as a new accessory. The simple utilitarian bag has transcended its ubiquitous role to become a positive style statement. It has become synonymous with the modern style compass that borrows from the past to transform it into a chic accessory that boasts of native and ethnic vibes.

Vanessa has just explored that space and is doing an excellent recreation of the past with ample bejeweling. As her bags blare the bling, they call for a mindful reworking of one's wardrobe so that when you carry one of Vanessa's Creations, what was unnoticed before will get noticed now.

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Vanessa Selvaratnam, Founder of Vanessa’s Creations



Each bag is unique and designed using attractive embellishments.



Traditional design patterns on Pehe Malla as a home-décor.



Displaying Sri Lankan culture is part of Vanessa’s Creations.





Rush and reed ware bags are fashioned into eye-catching statement bags.