

Artistry on Small Canvases Takes Flight

by Jodee Thompson

Original T-Bag Designs Sells Products Made From Recycled Tea Bags

The women of Imizamo Yethu, an informal settlement outside Cape Town, South Africa, decorate mini canvases made from recycled tea bags to help support their families. One artisan, named Nomsa, recently earned enough money by painting tea bags to move from an inadequate shack to a solid new house. "The most wonderful thing in the world," Nomsa said, "is hearing the rain on the roof and knowing that my children are warm and dry."

Various South African groups donate used tea bags for use by the women, who dry them in the sun, empty out the leaves, and carefully iron the bags. Then the bags are ready to serve as a canvas for their decorative creations.

The artisans painstakingly paint each tea bag with a unique contemporary design. Each woman has her own style and keeps a notebook of her best designs. When asked where she got her inspiration, one of the women said simply, "It is in our heads." They also paint designs for western tastes—such as stars, hearts, logos, or Christmas trees—upon request.

Each woman is able to paint the bags at home while caring for her family. The women gather together several times each week to assemble the bags into finished products such as ornaments, tea light holders, candles, journals, and greeting cards. Each product has at least one hand-painted tea bag on it and, like fingerprints or snowflakes, each tea bag is unique.

In 1996, former art teacher Jill Heyes moved to South Africa from England. Jill was shocked by the lack of opportunities available to the Imizamo Yethu residents. When her neighbor's maid, Thelma, approached Jill for an additional day's work, Jill replied that although she did not want a maid, she could teach crafts

so the women could generate income by selling their products.

Thelma gathered together a group of five women. They started with papier mâché, moved on to potato printing, and finally, after three years, discovered what has become the lucrative art of painting tea bags. Two years ago they opened a booth at the waterfront market. Now 13 women are in the group, and they are learning retail skills by working at the booth. They hope to open a tea parlor and shop where they can market their products, learn business management



An artisan named Sweetness displays note cards made with paintings on recycled tea bags.

skills, and, eventually, showcase the work of other crafts groups who could demonstrate their work on-site.

In May 2004, their products hit the U.S. market. When Thelma was asked what she would tell the people in America about the tea bags, she said, "Tell them if they buy our things, we can have wings. We are like birds. We just need wings to fly."

Crafts Center member company Original T-bag Designs sells the products in the U.S. For more information, call Jodee Thompson at 856-769-7829.

Original T-Bag Designs imports products which range from ornaments to candles to journals.

