



SYMBOLGY: FASHION WITH A FOCUS

When fair trade and human rights meet style

Piper Anderson

When it comes to Symbology Clothing, garments are more than just garments. They are wearable art, dresses that flow gracefully in the wind and shimmer with whimsical patterns. They are fabrics dotted with beaded flowers, scattered with symbols representing love and humanity and hope like a breath of stars across the sky.

Symbology is a clothing company that partners with female artisans in India and the West Bank to produce beautiful apparel, created using traditional art forms such as block printing, weaving and embroidery. The women who make the brand's products are paid livable wages, allowing them to become more independent and positively impact their communities.

Symbology was born with the mindful goal of making fair trade sexy – and in doing so, producing ethical fashion, promoting sustainability and providing jobs for women. Founder and UNC-Chapel Hill alumnus Marissa Heyl has always been interested in fashion, but she never studied the field because she generally found the industry exploitive and superficial.

"I really wanted to focus on women's rights and overall human rights – and fighting poverty and working for social justice as a whole," Heyl says. She took a trip to India during her time as an undergraduate. As she watched an Indian mother block-print a gorgeous design onto tablecloth fabric, Heyl's imagination started spinning; she envisioned that fabric, with tailoring and the right colors, as a stunning, high-fashion dress.

In that moment, the idea for Symbology sparked; Heyl had found a way to work with something she loves – fashion – while pursuing her passion for human rights. "Human rights is such a crucial issue that needs to be addressed and made mainstream, and fashion and social media do that in a really powerful way," Heyl said. She sees the clothes as transformative not only for artisans, but for wearers, too. "Symbology makes these really heavy and depressing issues that

have a small level of interest into something cool and popular." In this way, the company's customer base practices conscious consumerism, which is a powerful avenue for affecting global change.

It was not until several years after she graduated that Heyl made her dream into a reality. In 2012 she founded Symbology out of Chapel Hill's 1789 Venture Lab, a start-up accelerator that supports social innovation for students and alumni.

THE WOMEN BEHIND THE CLOTHES

Heyl says she wanted to make Symbology different from other fair trade organizations touting savior complexes that are not empowering to anybody. "It ultimately does not create change if you're giving a hand out, if you're giving a fish to someone instead of teaching them to fish – and for us the metaphor is that we are buying the fish," Heyl says. "I have a big problem with the Western superiority complex, and talking about (underdeveloped communities) as charity cases instead of recognizing our shared humanity."

Block printing and weaving are sewn into the cultural fabric of places such as India and Palestine; these are skills many women in such countries' rural communities already possess. Using these artisans' expertise as an avenue for social change therefore requires little additional education, infrastructure and investment.

"In a lot of communities in South Asia, women aren't allowed to go outside by themselves, but through Symbology they can work with other women and relate to other women who aren't part of the family," Heyl said. "It might seem like such a small thing to us because it is second nature to go out and spend money and connect with other women, but for them it is very empowering."

In order to make it easier for the craftswomen

to work, workshops are often built inside of homes. Heyl works specifically with women in order to push back on the idea that they are second-class citizens. It is incredibly dignifying for them to have discretion over their income, to talk about their work as artisans and contract workers – not charity cases – who create designs demanding a high level of talent.

"A lot of times this is the first time they are able to have a sense of independence and earn their own money," Heyl said. "And that might seem inconsequential, but it is very empowering for them to view themselves as independent of the family unit and have a sense of agency in determining their own life."

The big question: What does it mean to be empowered? In underdeveloped communities, mothers spend their money on their children's education; it is unusual for them to really focus on themselves. Heyl said women in developing countries invest around 90 percent of their income back into their communities and families. The Western world, on the other hand, is more individualistic and focused on material and immaterial passions. "We can both learn from each other," Heyl said.

Some of the artisans Symbology partners with are master craftswomen who have been working in their textile art forms for 10 years or more. They are highly skilled, take on leadership roles and train other women in the village.

Heyl has had a particularly strong connection with an experienced block printer named Asha. After Asha's husband passed away, she had to find a way to support four children in an environment that – like most rural Indian communities – relegates women to the home and does not educate them. In spite of these obstacles, Asha became a full-time block printer who independently ran her household and began to send her children to school. She is a bright and empowering figure in her community, and she represents the qualities Symbology wants to instill in other women.

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THE BRAND

Flowing long dresses, kimonos and jumpsuits are characteristic of Symbology's collections. The brand's main customer base is in California and Texas, where people typically embrace a free-spirited style.

The company's look is boho-chic with a refined aesthetic; it elevates the loose, natural vibes of bohemian style through elegant cuts and sophisticated color palettes. And, as is fitting for a company named after the study of symbols, the fabrics' patterns are the true show-stoppers.

"The prints are really the signature of the line, so we always have whimsical and sometimes almost tongue in cheek prints, like the kissing elephants with their trunks. And we have a baby cacti print and constellations," Heyl said. "They are prints that make you smile. From far away the baby cacti print looks like polka dots, but when you get closer to it, you realize, 'Oh, that's actually a little cactus.' So there is a sense of wonder about it – and cleverness and appreciation."

Each collection is based off a motif or symbol, so when Heyl conceptualizes the collections, she thinks about how the designs can be applied to a block print.

The signature symbol for the brand is its kissing elephants print. Heyl said elephants are an auspicious and beautiful creature celebrated by a lot of different cultures. They symbolize the world's shared humanity, and so they perfectly represent Symbology's mission.

"Cosmos, the latest collection, was started as a discussion around the idea of the mother goddess and creation myths that a lot of different cultures have," Heyl said. "There is a lot of meaning imbued in the stars and the sun and the heavens above, and it just so happens that star prints are trending right now."

Cultural textiles are disappearing because of globalization and middlemen; but by adapting these textiles in a desirable way for the modern market, they can be saved. "We are celebrating art forms that are dying out because of globalization," Heyl said. "So if we can make them desirable through branding, we can revitalize them." Commercializing cultural textiles can also reconnect the Western world with the source of its much of its clothing and transform the communities in which these textiles are made.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Turning artisan jewelry and textiles into high fashion is nothing new; oftentimes, however, companies that do so use communities for one collection, only to pull out subsequently and move on to the next big thing. Heyl said this practice is not part of the Symbology business model because her company strives to provide a steady income for the communities in which it is involved.

Symbology connects with craftswomen by partnering with companies that connect artisans with buyers, such as Ten Thousand Villages. Heyl mostly communicates with the artisans remotely, so recent technologies and applications have been integral to running her company. "It's interesting because you're merging really traditional ancient art forms with very modern technology," she said.

The majority of Symbology's apparel is block printed because the technique is an efficient and flexible art form. Block printers can produce up to a substantial 200 meters of fabric per day while also having enough

versatility to easily switch prints and fabrics. Weaving is more challenging to adapt for different designs and is also more time-consuming.

Heyl said it is hard to find retailers and buyers receptive to her company's slower time cycle. Block printing, the company's fastest avenue for production, pushes collection production time to eight or nine weeks – which is double the industry standard. Major fast-fashion retailers such as Zara and H&M, on the other hand, bust out new collections every week.

Symbology's products are mainly carried in small boutiques throughout the United States, but Heyl hopes to get into Nordstrom some day. She also says big things are in store for 2017, as the brand will be collaborating with a fashion media company. Above all, Heyl finds it important to establish good, long-lasting relationships with businesses that have the company's humanitarian goal in mind.

Compared to other companies that focus on women's rights issues and fair trade (such as ones that sell artisan jewelry), Heyl said clothing is harder to produce through craftspeople because of complicating factors such as draping and sizing. Cultural challenges also arise; different countries have varying outlooks on productivity, workloads and timeframes, and balancing those differing business practices with American retailers' expectations is no easy feat.

In essence the fashion industry is an oversaturated market with brands that make clothes a lot faster than Symbology does. Financing is one of the company's greatest challenges because finding buyers and investors interested in ethical fashion is difficult.

"I am not in it to make money because if that or designing was my main goal, there would be a thousand other ways to do it," Heyl said.

Building an affordable luxury brand is a difficult undertaking that constantly requires making new collections and taking risks. It requires establishing credibility and securing public relations and celebrity endorsements. It requires finding the target customer: who they are, where they shop, and what their interests are. It requires discovering who can afford the brand's price point and developing techniques to reach that customer.

In the future Heyl plans on expanding to other parts of the world such as South America and growing relationships with weavers in Mexico and embroiderers in Native American tribes such as the Navajo.

Symbology is a company about love and empowerment and art. Each piece of clothing is handmade with care – a manifestation of ancient, exquisite art forms – empowering the women behind it and changing their lives. Wearing a Symbology piece is a celebration of the world's shared humanity. It makes a statement and starts a conversation. It is like wearing joy and hope, inextricably woven together.

"(This) is not just a woman's issue," Heyl said. "It is a global issue. It is an issue of fighting poverty and developing economy across the board.

Shop the brand at symbologyclothing.com.

