

GLOBAL HANDICRAFTS: A FUTURE VISION



by Patrizia Scarzella

In a recent international meeting held last October in Bangkok organized by the International Good Shepherd Foundation Onlus, this issue has been discussed from different perspectives by a wide audience of producers, marketers, economists. It has been as well the occasion to evaluate the results of the design and product development training carried on by the Foundation in the last three years in Thailand, Kenya and Philippines as part of an Income Generating Project called 'Networking Our Way of Poverty'.

Especially addressed to women artisans in disadvantaged social situation who work in the centers of handicrafts production run by the Good Shepherd Sisters in those countries, the training's main aims were to improve the quality of the products, to increase the design competence and creative potentiality, to understand the creative process from a new idea to the product, to achieve better self confidence in their creative possibilities, to create a stronger cohesion of the working team, to foster relations among them and the feeling to be part of a common project that can improve through learning.

Products and materials from the Design Training and Product Development workshops held in Thailand and Kenya (by Patrizia Scarzella) and Philippines (by Patrizia Scarzella and Valentina Downey) for the IGP (Income Generating Project) 'Networking Our Way of Poverty' for the International Good Shepherd Foundation Onlus, 2011-2013.



NINE SEMINARS

These goals and outputs have been achieved through nine seminars of one week each I've carried out (five in Thailand in Nong Khai and Bangkok, two in Kenya in Nairobi, two in the Philippines in Manila) to introduce the artisans involved in handicraft innovation to the fundamental principles of design.

The training methodology has been conceived by me with the collaboration of Valentina Downey. The participants practiced numerous techniques learning how to approach the design process of new products. New collections of home and fashion accessories - mainly in textiles but also in different materials as paper or pottery - have been developed. These handicrafts products can count on a international structured network of distributors that are part of the Good Shepherd Sisters Congregation: in the USA the Foundation Handcraftingjustice, in Australia The Trading Circle and in Europe Sharing Fair Europe and Sharing Fair Italy based in Rome.

This strong network had guaranteed in the past years till now a stable income to the producers: nowadays, despite the great efforts of the marketers and their new marketing and sales strategies, affected by the global economics crisis, they are not able anymore to support the same amount of sales.

SOME QUESTIONS ARISING

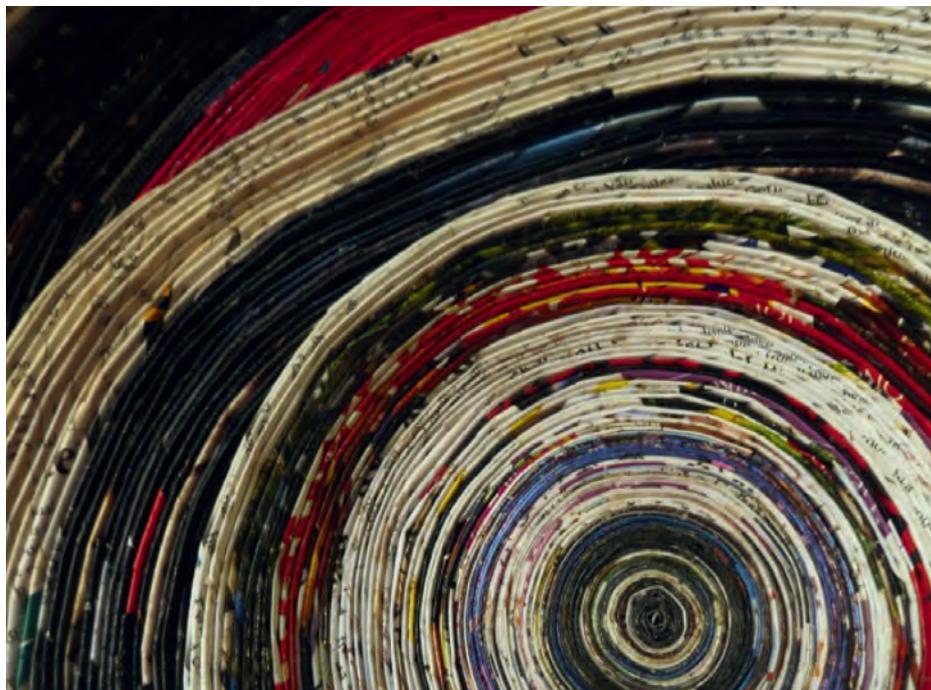
Considering this experience as a starting point, some main general questions and considerations have been put on the stage to be discussed.

In a global highly saturated market, which are the possibilities for handicrafts in the poor countries to survive in the next future and become a sustainable source of the economy?

Is handicrafts still a valid sector to focus on as a potential income generating project?

All the countries must urgently respond to these challenges.

Sustainability is thinking in long terms - on financial side, human capacities building, structures to face with world's challenges - and the struggle to guarantee a sustainable future to millions of artisans in South America, Asia, Africa requires new strategies to be put in place in very short terms before many of them definitely disappear.



Almost all the handicraft products are not competitive in the market of similar products made in China at global level and small artisanal production cannot generate enough income.

Very often they adopt a basic, spontaneous 'supply-driven' marketing strategy: "we produce what we can in the way we can, with little feed back from our customers, then we present the products to the markets hoping that they will buy them".

Most handicraft productions are still relying more heavily on the international markets that is highly saturated and can't absorb any more the increased quantities of handicraft products.

In those markets the general trend in the consumer attitude to spend less on this kind of products should be considered as well as a factor that is changing in short and long term the sales perspectives.

Despite the common thought, the Internet doesn't seem to be such a powerful channel to increase easily sales of handicraft products: too many competitors are struggling on the same stage with very similar products and they cannot challenge at all with the Chinese productions, where the so called 'handmade' handicrafts has reached an outstanding industrial dimension and structure at very low prices.

As a Malaysia private buyer said: "No matter what you say about fair wages, quality, handmade, the final pricing must be competitive. People look at the product, then the price and have no time for the stories".

Facing within this common increasing

mentality, even the handicraft productions based on income generating projects supported by international funds and grants and with the final aim of reaching the economic justice are suffering for their future.

BEHIND THE PRODUCTS

What is behind the products - equity, quality, dignity of the work, a vision of a more economic justice system etc - are values that seem to motivate only narrow niches markets that actually buy handicrafts more for charity reasons than for real need or pleasure.

The reflections on actions to take are focused on some main points to develop that we can assume to be valid for all the handicraft field.

First of all, the urgent need for any handicraft production to look very carefully at local emerging market opportunities in order to diversify their markets by developing a strong local marketing strategy and not only rely on the same channels of the past.

From the financial point of view, the need to adopt a business model and not to rely anymore on the spontaneous 'supply-driven' marketing strategy.

From the human capacities building: improving cultural and technical training of the artisans, fostering micro credit is a strategy that can build the base for independence and for a sustainable economy in the long term.

From the point of view of the structures: strengthening the business structure and management to face with a fast changing world.