



Tree huggers embrace eco-friendly bags from Smateria. PHOTO SUPPLIERS



Dress made of naturally dyed silk from Up to You. MAYA BALLARD-DOWNS



Tie dyed scarves from Lotus Pond. MAYA BALLARD-DOWNS

Shopping for clothes the natural way

BY MAYA BALLARD-DOWNS AND BYRON PERRY

Anyone who has shopped for clothes lately is well aware of the increasing use of terms like "eco-friendly", "organic" and "fair-trade" in the advertising spiels of designers and retailers. But do these words really mean anything, or are they just the latest in a never-ending litany of fad terms cooked up in the deep, dark bowels of corporate marketing departments?

If given the choice, many consumers will opt to support artisans and independent producers rather than soulless corporations. The trick is determining which manufacturers are jumping onto the "eco" bandwagon just to make a quick buck, and which are truly adhering to the definition of organic as "of, relating to, or derived from living organisms" with an eye towards contributing to a healthier and more equal world.

There are several shops in Cambodia that mean what they

say when it comes to dealing in organic and eco-friendly materials. Among them is Lotus Pond (located at 245 Street 51, Phnom Penh), an overlooked wealth of beautiful textiles, scarves, furnishings and furniture. Thai owner Sompen Kutraron has been in living in Cambodia, and involved in the local textile industry, for 20 years.

Ask about organic goods and you get a detailed dose of reality. Sompen explains that natural dyes are put at a disadvantage by chemical products because colours from natural sources are limited and often dull in comparison to their flashy chemical counterparts. Additionally, raw materials for natural dyes, such as tree bark, are becoming increasingly rare.

However, Lotus Pond continues to focus on handcraft production as a sustainable source of local livelihoods, and almost everything made there is destined for export to Europe or America—Lotus Pond, for example, supplies to Marks and Spencer shops in New York City.

Another project that has managed to remain organic and sustainable despite the difficulties is the Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles (472 Viheachen Village) in Siem Reap. The institute, technically an NGO, is 90 percent self-sustained through sales, relying on donors for the remaining 10 percent of its operational funds.

The institute, founded in 1996 by Japanese national Kikuo Morimoto, reels silk from Cambodian cocoons and grows its own cotton. Everything that goes into their textiles comes from the institute's 23-hectare plot of land in Angkor Thom district. The textiles are dyed with natural substances like indigo, lychee, tree bark and insect nests, and all the weaving is done by hand following traditional techniques passed down through generations.

The natural dyes make for more subdued and earthy colours for the kramas, tablecloths and handkerchiefs for sale. But while the colours may not be bold, the quality of the fabric is first-rate and priced accordingly.

Forty Khmer families live and work at the institute—women weaving and dying, men farming and building houses, children providing general entertainment. The workers are provided with housing, electricity, water and a good salary.

"Technique and experience are important but what's most important is heart," says Morimoto. "Women who have their babies here are happy and they put their love into the textile."

Back in Phnom Penh, Smateria (880 Street 57) is eco-friendly although not organic in the conventional sense. The shop was set up three years ago by two Italian women, business manager Jenifer Morellato and creative designer

Elisa Lion. Smateria is a haven for bags made from unique materials, including mosquito netting, trash bags and recycled milk cartons.

Jenifer explains the materials don't have to be recycled, but they love it when they are. Smateria has made arrangements with big restaurants to receive their old boxes, and has also set up a cart outside the shop for local residents to donate used cartons.

Smateria works with women in An Dong, a community relocated from Tonle Bassac. The 21 women who work for Smateria collect trash bags during the week and crochet them into sellable bag designs.

Although the shop operates according to fair trade practices, Jenifer says she doesn't want to dwell on these titles. First and foremost, she wants people to love her bags for their unique designs; feeling good about buying them is an extra bonus.

Up to You (3 Street 3, Phnom Penh), a boutique that sells silk and cotton accessories and clothes, has enjoyed some publicity in recent months thanks to its fashion show at Le Liban. The shop has been open for four years but has only recently begun selling clothes, thanks to store manager and designer Moline des Pallieres.

Up to You proudly declares itself a fair trade operation, with its silks made by 25 people in Takeo under the guidance of French NGO La Pasetelle.

Moline has sought inspiration for her designs from her travels around the world. Experiments with clothes and tailoring have brought in a new clientele, and now 60 percent of Moline's clients are Cambodian women seeking modern and tailored replacements for their wardrobes.

Although these businesses may label themselves differently, one similarity stands out—they are all "organic" in the sense that they respect the individuals who are part of the manufacturing process. The human touch and conscious understanding of the origins of a product make that scarf that much more beautiful. ☐



A woman weaves silk at the Institute for Khmer traditional textiles in Siem Reap.