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***Unique signatures:* Bookbinding by Lunetta Bartz and Lucia Duncan**

Words: Roberta Thatcher



Some may say the luxury industry is a victim of its own success. In a consumption-driven world, luxury items have become so mainstream and accessible that they have gone a long way towards losing their exclusivity.

It's no wonder then that many high-end companies are turning to craftsmanship and traditional production methods as a way to distinguish their brands. Consumers, too, are beginning to see the value of how much time and passion went into the creation of a product, and how much skill was required to conceive that item.

The South African creative landscape is no exception. We speak to eight local companies and designers whose hands-on approach to production is spearheading the craft revival. These makers are creating unique, authentic, tactile, and sustainable products, with which the buyer cannot help but experience a personal relationship. They are defining craft as the new luxury.



Image: Warren van Rensburg

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"Traditional book-binding is not something people really understand in South Africa," says Lunetta Bartz of Maker about the niche craft she has painstakingly perfected over the years. "It's difficult to explain the number of hours and the quality of the materials that go into a handbound project."

Bartz's journey with the craft goes back to 2006, when master bookbinder Peter Carstens opened his studio to a select few students for a six-week course. "Once the six weeks were up, I stayed on for six-and-a-half years. The only reason I stopped was that he unexpectedly passed away," she says.

During her time with Carstens, Bartz sent her assistant, Lucia Duncan, on a course with him, and the two now continue the trade in their studio in Johannesburg. "We've worked on very interesting projects, such as collaged encyclopaedias for a French composer, artists' portfolios, rebinding commercially bound books for collectors, and creating boxes for artists' films," Bartz says. "What we do is almost like packaging, like adding a frame to an artwork," Duncan says. "You end up handling very valuable and precious items," she adds.

The craft makes use of antique presses and tools, quite simply because new ones are not available, and it is a wholly manual process. “That’s what I love about it,” Bartz says. “We live in a society where we use our hands so little: this way we are in complete control.” Duncan adds that hand binding offers a very different aesthetic and functionality to commercial binding. This is due both to the precision and understanding that goes into the process, as well as the materials used, which render them incredibly durable items of beauty. “We use goatskin, handmade marbled papers, embroidery cotton, gold foil, and book cloth,” she says.

As traditional bookbinders with an exceptional aesthetic, Bartz and Duncan are trusted by many collectors and libraries — as well as by artists such as William Kentridge, Haroon Gunn-Salie, and Gabrielle Goliath — to package their films and prints, a process that requires artistic interpretation and creative solutions. “The fun part of the process is coming up with ideas on how to make the binding,” Bartz says. “That said, making it is just as (much) fun — as is seeing a happy customer at the end of it.” makerstudio.co.za

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