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A MODERN GREEN EVOLUTION



HEMP + CBD

Meet me in Mallorca

HOW ESPANYOLET IS BRINGING
A TASTE OF VINTAGE MEDITERRANEAN
TO HOMES ACROSS THE GLOBE



In 2013, with not much more than a vision and a plane ticket, Thomas Bossert and Melissa Rosenbauer embarked on a whole new life—one that renounced the busy, New York City corporate hustle, and embraced creativity, culture, art, and nature. The two were determined to master ancient, handmade techniques—for Thomas, ceramics; and Melissa, batik and indigo dyeing. The result: a rediscovered passion for artisan craft that they wanted to share with the world.



Mallorca became their muse, and color theory their method. Their discovery of vintage hemp fabrics was met with a lover's tremble and became the perfect canvas for natural dyeing and hand-painted design. Only three years later, they have founded a flourishing online business, claimed international interior design projects, and launched a celebrated collaboration with Goop, a conscious lifestyle and wellness brand founded by Gwyneth Paltrow. We sat down with Melissa to find out more about how her journey began and her dreams for espanyolet.

CAN YOU GIVE US A BIT OF A BACKGROUND AS TO HOW ESPANYOLET CAME TO LIFE?

We were working at a digital marketing agency in New York called R/GA. My career was in client service and business operations, and my role at R/GA was director, resource management. Thomas has an MFA in graphic design, and he was heading up R/GA's brand development department. We met at work. Shortly after starting to date, we decided to take a pretty hard right pivot out of our lives and try something different. Thomas had a very strong urge to leave New York, and when a coworker announced that he was going to take a one-year leave of absence and travel the world, we looked at each other and said, 'Let's do the same thing.'

It took us nine months to plan our year away—including selling Thomas's apartment and putting all of our collective things in storage—and in October 2013, we left R/GA and started to travel the world. Our year away wasn't planned based on places to see, but rather, things to do. Our list included make things with our hands, learn a foreign language, be more present in nature, get in touch with our spiritual sides, do nothing. With this list printed out and thumbtacked up on the wall, we chose our destinations. We camped in Africa and New Zealand to be in nature, and we chose Bali for its tradition of handicrafts and artisan-made goods. It was there in Bali where we (re)discovered the joy of making while working in natural indigo, batik, and ceramics studios. We loved what we were doing—slow design and traditional artisan processes, so it was actually during this part of our one-year sabbatical that we decided to not return to New York but instead launch a small design studio where we could focus on artisan craftsmanship. In 2014, we refined our concept over the course of a year and launched espanyolet in late 2015.

HOW DID YOU LAND ON THE NAME "ESPANYOLET"?

We visited the island of Mallorca over the course of our travels and fell in love. espanyolet is an homage to the neighborhood of Son Espanyolet where we built our painting studio.

MALLORCA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SEEM TO BE THE NARRATIVE MUSE FOR THE BRAND. TELL US ABOUT HOW THIS REGION HAS INFLUENCED YOUR CREATIONS. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE OTHER INSPIRATIONS YOU DRAW FROM?

The Mediterranean region is different than what I had experienced. I grew up outside New York, so my beach references were East Coast beaches and the Caribbean—palm trees, turquoise waters, and technicolor. The Mediterranean is distinct with its pine trees that nearly fall into the water, the smell of carob, and the light that seems to be rich autumn light year-round. It's not clear and bright, but rather faded and rustic. This is our muse.

We're also really affected by the imperfection and eroded textures of Spain. This is a country that was left in disrepair for so many years, and the beauty that resulted is all around us—a fading wall, an imperfectly painted fence, the chipped-away layers of terra-cotta. These things all make their way into our designs.

IF YOU HAD TO DESCRIBE ESPANYOLET IN THREE WORDS, WHAT

WOULD THEY BE?

Imperfect, faded, and unexpected.

THE BRAND'S INTEGRATION OF VINTAGE TEXTILES IS SUCH A UNIQUE APPROACH TO HOME GOODS. TELL US WHAT INFLUENCED THAT DECISION?

Originally we were focused on turning the traditional techniques we learned in Bali on their heads—tradition with a modern twist. When we built our workshop in Spain, however, we ran across the most beautiful vintage linen and hemp dowry blankets at the flea market. These two-yard-by-2.5-yard super heavy blankets were unlike anything we'd seen before, and we were smitten. We invested in two or three of them, brought them home, and started dyeing them. The vintage fibers took our pigments so beautifully, and from that moment on, we bought up every single piece that existed on the island.

HOW DOES COLOR PLAY A ROLE IN YOUR DESIGNS?

Color is everything for us. It is the basis of our business. Very rarely people will ask to buy unpainted blankets from us, and we don't love doing that. The beauty of our work and why we got into this business is so we can make things with our hands. Mixing colors is by and far the best part of our day.

TALK TO US ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY WITH HEMP SPECIFICALLY, HOW DID YOU BEGIN WORKING WITH IT?

We didn't set out to work with hemp. The beautiful vintage dowry blankets we were buying in Mallorca didn't come with any information as to their contents, but the women selling them said most were blends of linen and hemp. Once we exhausted all the blankets on the island, we started our search across Europe for similar fabrics. Again and again, the pieces we bought that had heavy blends of hemp were the winners; they dyed the most beautifully, they had a heft and weight that was perfect for what we wanted to make, and they got softer and softer with each wash. We were hooked.

Customers really seem to love hemp, and our vintage hemp throws are our best-selling items. I'm not sure there's a huge level of awareness in the general public of the advantages of buying and using hemp, but one touch and people know it's a beautiful addition to their home.

WHAT PROCESSES IN YOUR CRAFT HAVE PROVEN TO BE THE MOST CHALLENGING AND THE MOST SUCCESSFUL?

Because we are self-taught, we had no idea that we would be at the mercy of the weather in determining how colors developed on fabric. Mixing pigments of the exact same weights and volumes on a rainy day will yield a very different effect as those same dyes mixed on a sunny and dry day. It's a bit of a wild card and has slowed us down on many occasions.

The thing we can control is the texture and viscosity of the material with which we paint. We use natural algae from the sea to mix with our pigments, which gives us a smooth and thick gel-like substance that we paint with. If we didn't use algae, we wouldn't be able to layer colors, create gradations, or control how the dye absorbs into the fabric.



HOW DO YOU THINK A HANDMADE, ARTISANAL APPROACH REDUCES OVERALL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT?

The garment industry is one of the most environmentally unfriendly industries in the world due to its tremendous use of water. Dyeing fabrics generally happens in a bath, which uses hundreds of liters of water. We do not do this. We use no more than 10 liters of water for each of our batches. The addition of algae means that our volume of dye actually goes further with less water, so the waste is minimal. So by choosing to paint instead of dip-dyeing or bath-dyeing each of our fabrics, we are making less of an environmental impact.

Additionally, painted fabric must be washed at least two times to rid it of its excess dye. We batch together all our fabrics of the same color to wash at once instead of separately. This adds time onto our delivery schedule because sometimes we have to wait a week or more to aggregate like-colored pieces—but less washing means less water. In the end, these decisions contribute to less environmental impact at every step of the process.

TELL US ABOUT SOME OF THE SPECIAL PROJECTS YOU'VE WORKED ON AS OF LATE.

We couldn't be more excited about our Berlin projects! Berlin is a really special city for us because we live there part-time and love pretty much everything about it—its energy, its spirit, its opportunities, and its entrepreneurial vibe.

When we bought a small 540-square-foot apartment in the adorable neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg, we knew we would infuse it with elements of espanyolet. The building was built in 1906 and survived the war, so we were able to preserve gorgeous pre-war details like crown moldings, original wide-plank pine floors, and soaringly tall ceilings. The question was: How do we keep the spirit of old Berlin while also integrating our soft and eroded colors of espanyolet?

It wasn't enough to just throw some of our pillows and blankets across the bed or sofa, so together we brainstormed unique ways to bring espanyolet into the space. The nearly 11-foot ceilings meant that we have huge walls, and after we tore five layers of wallpaper off them, we were left with the most beautiful original plaster—textured and blank canvases. We decided to add our pigments to micro-cement and create a statement wall. This has turned out to be the centerpiece of the apartment: a soft and cloud-like rosé-colored wall juxtaposed next to the history of old Berlin.

WHAT WOULD BE THE ULTIMATE DREAM PROJECT/COLLABORATION/CLIENT FOR ESPANYOLET?

I recently went to India to find new materials for a scarf collection we'll launch in 2019. What started out as a textile hunt turned out to be a pretty pivotal experience for rethinking how we source fabric.

I met with a charitable trust in Maheshwar called WomenWeave. This organization supports the role of women in handloom weaving and is working toward making handloom a profitable, fulfilling, sustainable, and dignified income-earning activity particularly for women in rural areas of India. WomenWeave is all about fair trade/fair value for labor, environmental restoration, and sociocultural vitality.

These three days in Maheshwar will likely turn into a long-term

collaboration with WomenWeave. While it's exceptionally cool that the women from WomenWeave can weave pretty much anything we want—hemp, linen, silk all together!—it's also important that we were able to start a collaboration with an organization that supports women in such a profound way. We are excited about how this will impact the future of espanyolet.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR COLLABORATION WITH GOOP AND HOW THAT CAME ABOUT.

Our dear friend and author Odette Williams has been featured in Goop's Christmas gift guide for the last few years and felt like our goods would do well there, too. She did the introductions and the rest fell into place.

Working with Goop has been a dream because they value our slow design process and love how each of our pieces is one-of-a-kind. In our experience, we've seen some retailers who devalue the maker, and this was definitely not the case with Goop. They supported us every step of the way. In addition, their customer base is well educated in terms of provenance and invests in handmade, artisan goods. For this reason, the collaboration between Goop and espanyolet has worked out beautifully. We couldn't be more excited to be a part of their family.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR ESPANYOLET?

It has been a dream to transition our product design business into concept design. Over the last few months we have evolved from designing soft goods into designing larger-scale pieces like the pigmented wall in our Berlin apartment, to sectional sofas in Mallorca and Berlin, and hand-painted wall art for private clients. So while we love painting pillows and blankets, we also love working with clients to design overall concepts for their beloved spaces.

We were recently hired by a real estate developer in Berlin to design and stage a model apartment in Berlin's beautiful Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood. In it, we are installing the vintage linen sectional sofa we designed and had built in Poland, alongside a few of our soft goods like pillows and blankets. On the center wall in the living room will hang a moody painting we did on one of our most textured vintage hemp pieces. We hope to add other projects like this where we're involved in the client's interior design process early on. And of course, extending our footprint in the U.S. and Europe through these kinds of projects is a hope as well.

AS BUSINESS OWNERS AND PARTNERS WHO SHIFTED YOUR LIFE DRAMATICALLY TO DO WHAT YOU LOVE, WHAT ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS YOU WOULD GIVE TO OTHERS WHO MAY FEEL STUCK IN A JOB OR LIFE WHERE THEY FEEL UNFULFILLED?

Feeling stuck is a major thing in each small business owner's life. It happens a lot and it's a sinking feeling. We are fortunate to have each other, so we support and nurture each other's ideas, feelings, and aspirations on a daily basis. Our best piece of advice is to find someone—be it a friend, a therapist, a partner, or a trusted advisor—who can build you up and nurture your ideas from start to finish.



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