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A GOOD YARN

Manos del Uruguay's artisan cooperatives

Sometimes a simple question can produce powerful answers. This is the case for Manos del Uruguay, makers of ethical and sustainable garments and yarns. The countryside had always been a place of hard work for women, and despite being at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they were often the sole financial providers for their family. With this in mind, in 1968 a group of women, Olga Pardo Santayana de Artagaveytia, Sara Beisso de Souza, Dora Muñoz de Cibils, María del Carmen Bocking and Manila Chaneton de Vivo asked themselves the question of how best they could improve the quality of life for rural women in Uruguay?

The answer was found in their personal experiences of knitting, inherited from their mothers, and in wool, the most popular material of the Uruguayan countryside. And so Manos del Uruguay (Hands of Uruguay) was born. Since then it has grown into a worldwide non-profit organisation with sustainability, ethics and beauty as its core values. To this day, 52 years later, it remains solid to these founding principles.

Manos del Uruguay is made up of a group of twelve cooperatives that bring together 224 artisans distributed in different rural areas throughout the country. There is a Service Centre that is located in Uruguay's capital Montevideo, with 65 employees that help with product design, sales, production, financial advice and training for the organisation. Thus, the artisans are the owners of Manos del Uruguay making them part of a non-profit association whose objective is to continue generating work for rural women. The type of work, which blends the best of artisanal production with cutting-edge design, allows them to remain in their

home towns, generate income and develop their personal skills. All of this while they pass on, from generation to generation, traditional techniques for working with wool.

Manos del Uruguay works with merino wool. With an excellent climate and pasture lands Uruguay has the environmental conditions favourable for high quality sheep rearing. With a sheep population of 6.42 million, sheep meat, sheepskins, lanolin are an important part of the economy. Various breeds are bred in farms, including five sheep breeds of British origin: Suffolk, Romney Marsh, Hampshire Down and Southdown, and the British Texel.

Starting with very fine locally reared wool, Manos del Uruguay spins and dyes their yarns in cooperatives located in the small towns in Uruguay's countryside. Each Manos skein has a tag with the name of the artisan who made it and the cooperative's location. The yarns are hand dyed to produce a rich colour palette with the subtle irregularities which the hand of each artisan gives to it.

Their Huella Line (huella meaning fingerprint or footprint in Spanish) is made up of ruanas, shawls, ponchos, scarves and throws; sophisticated, modern version of Uruguay's gaucho traditional clothing. Each piece is warm yet super light and so soft it must be a pleasure to wrap up inside one on a cool evening, perfect for the chilly nights of Uruguay's east coast beaches. The Huella pieces are woven in an airy and textured yarn made of extrafine merino with a touch of linen, and they are produced in every colour from chic and subdued to headily vibrant. Ana de Prado, designer at Manos del Uruguay,

explains: 'We produce garments with typical elements of the gaucho's aesthetic; simple and geometric shapes that take on different forms according to the body.' She continues, 'The poncho is a historical garment, but at the same time extremely modern. It has no gender or size: the style is provided by the person who wears it. The poncho refers to indigenous origins, but by force of shape and design, this garment continues to resonate in contemporary fashion. In the 19th century, gauchos of African, indigenous or Spanish descent who travelled through the Río de la Plata region used it as a pillow, bed and table to play cards. The poncho, in many cases, was their only possession. The gauchos used it in the 19th century and men and women use it today due to its versatility and cultural imprint.'

At Manos del Uruguay, designers and artisans work together to develop new colour palettes and styles every year. Prototypes and dyes are developed in the central office and are then shared with the different communities. The company has had great success combining the traditional technique of the manual loom with a very simple and modern aesthetic, and their yarns also have a dedicated following. These yarns are hand dyed in large kettles to create a marbled, subtly striated effect that forms a rich palette of colours. No two skeins are exactly alike and there are no dye lots. Every skein bears the name of the artisan that dyed it.

Uruguay has not been without its problems. A series of economic crises put an end to a democratic period that had begun in the early 20th century, culminating in a 1973 coup, which established a civic-military dictatorship. The military government persecuted leftists,



socialists, and political opponents, resulting in several deaths and numerous instances of military brutality. Military rule gave way to a civilian government in 1985, and today Uruguay is a democratic republic, ranked first in Latin America for democracy, peace, low perception of corruption, the adoption of e-government, and is first in South America when it comes to press freedom, size of the middle class and prosperity. Today, nearly 95% of Uruguay's electricity comes from renewable energy, mostly hydroelectric facilities and wind parks. The country is also regarded as one of the most socially progressive countries in Latin America, ranking high on global measures of personal rights, tolerance, and inclusion issues.

Against this backdrop, three milestones have come to define Manos del Uruguay. In 1972, the artisan groups become part of a cooperative system. By 1983 the management of Manos del Uruguay was made up exclusively of artisans, some of whom also have managerial positions within the organisation. In 2009, the cooperatives were accepted as members of the World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO).

Today, the biggest challenge is to expand the brand internationally. Uruguay is a small country, with only 3 million people, so the customer base needs to grow to ensure the sustainability of the brand. With such solid principles, an excellent raw material, a legacy of over half a century, and the global popularity of knitting and everything knitted, the international expansion of Manos del Uruguay is on the right path for the times. ♦♦♦ **Marcella Echavarría** www.manos.uy