

CAREER TIPS

Valuing cultural heritage

For this interview, ENCATC spoke with Elien Haentjens, the creator of Joias, a project-based brand focused on handmade pieces, that brings together Brazilian artisans and Belgian designers. In this “exuberant cultural dialogue”, Elien Haentjens found an opportunity to connect people, stories and cultural traditions, from Europe to South America.



ENCATC: What is your project Joias? What is the story behind it and how did you get the idea?

Elien Haentjens: Back in 2013 I started organising exhibitions about Belgian design art at the fair MADE in the Brazilian city São Paulo. While at first I showed finished pieces that were made in Belgium, after three years I wanted to strengthen the Belgian-Brazilian cultural dialogue. Besides, I also wanted to emphasise the power of artisanal products. While a lot of the artisanal knowledge is lost in Belgium and Europe, the traditional crafts are still very present in Brazil and Latin America. But local people don't always value their cultural heritage, as they should do.

That's why I decided to invite young Belgian designers to join me for a residency in Brazil. The first year we lived and worked at Coqueiro Campo, a village in the Valley of Jequitinhonha in the state Minas Gerais where the women specialise in ceramics. This resulted in a set of vases called Caro Barro, which means 'the sweetest, most precious

clay'. The vases represented the story of the region, which suffers from the invasive plantations of eucalyptus trees. Not only the companies bought all the land from the local people for low prices, but also because the eucalyptus trees soak up all of the water from the ground, the nature of the valley is irreversibly damaged. That's why the ceramics today are an even more important source of income.

For the second project we headed towards the sensual setting of the Delta do Parnaíba, one of the tree biggest deltas in the world. We worked with the sundried leaves of the Carnaúba palm tree, which is environmentally and economically vital for the region. Every single part of this tree is used for the most diverse products, from construction materials to computer chips, and from medicine to artisanal objects. It's not by chance that the Carnaúba is called 'árvore da vida'. This resulted in a collection of tables, lamps, baskets and decorative objects.

The objects of Joias are always the result of an intense co-creation process between the Brazilian

artisans and Belgian designers. They are a silent witness of this exuberant cultural dialogue.

ENCATC: How have you been rethinking taking the project forward due to the impact of COVID-19?

Elieen Haentjens: As the distance between Belgium and Brazil doesn't make things always easier, I often reflect about how to continue the project. While the products are super sustainable, because they are made from natural, sundried, biodegradable and inexhaustible resources, the transport has an ecological impact. At the same time it's impossible to find this material in Europe, and I think it's important to tell the story of people on the other side of the world, in order to keep our minds open towards all aspects of our globalised world.

Besides it's also a hugely enriching experience for the designers and myself to live and work together with the artisans and discover their completely different lifestyle. Moreover, this dialogue has a positive impact on the whole community. Because they notice that foreigners value their traditions, they'll appreciate them also more themselves. This can motivate youngsters to stay in their village, and dedicate their lives to their craft, instead of moving to a big city.

ENCATC: Can you give us some background into your education and professional experience that has led you to where you are today with this project?

Elieen Haentjens: First I studied Art History at the University of Leuven, in Belgium. When I got my masters degree, I opted for a postgraduate of Journalism at Vlekho in Brussels. Soon after my graduation I started working as a freelance journalist, specialising in design, arts and culture. Today I work for several magazines and websites, in Belgium and abroad. Since 2013 I'm also working as a curator. This resulted in my project-based brand Joias, but also in a co-operation with Adorno, the curated digital gallery for collectible design. I take care of the Belgian selection and the yearly exhibition during London Design Festival for this global platform. Both as a journalist and as a curator I love to tell stories by giving a platform – in words in the context of journalism and in objects in the context of Joias - to passionate creative people. I like how they look from a different perspective to this world, and how they bring emotion and sensitivity into our daily life.



Artisan Serachi cutting the leaves ©Joias.eu



Lagoa by Linde Freya Tangelder (Destroyers/Builders) for Joias ©Joias.eu



GuriGuri by Linde Freya Tangelder (Destroyers/Builders) for Joias ©Joias.eu

ENCATC: What skills or other personal attributes do you think you have that have helped you develop and grow Joias?

Elieen Haentjens: If I want to do something, I'm very enthusiastic and I do whatever it takes to make it happen. Besides I'm curious, unpretentious and respectful towards all kinds of people in the most diverse environments. I love organising projects from zero and, by working as an independent journalist, I learned to reinvent myself continuously and take initiatives. I like to follow my own path, I don't feel bound by too many rules or expectations.

ENCATC: What do you wish you had known before starting this project?

Elieen Haentjens: The distance between Belgium and Brazil makes it not that easy to produce and quickly transport the pieces. On the other side it also takes a lot of space and financial input to set up a stock, and I also don't like the idea of having too much stock. This is a challenge I want to conquer in the next projects.

ENCATC: What have been the most difficult challenges you encountered? How have you overcome them?

Elieen Haentjens: Setting up the production after we left the community, and organising the international logistics. By going one step at a time, beginning with a few pieces in one box, and slowly increasing the amount of pieces and boxes, I took the time to reflect and avoid mistakes. Besides it's also not easy to get

everything done. If you want to launch a project, it takes all of your energy.

ENCATC: How did you go about getting start-up funds and how did you use them to get the project up and running?

Elieen Haentjens: As the project has a strong cultural identity, I applied for support from the Belgian government. This made it possible to set up the residency and produce the first pieces, which were exhibited both in Belgium and Brazil. Afterwards I reinvested the profit of the sales of the products in the project. This is not the fastest way to grow, but for me this makes sense, as Joias is a slow, long-term project. It's not about fast growth or mass production, but about slow design, interesting stories and a human dialogue. The combination with my job as a journalist is my strength, so for now I prefer to keep it this way.

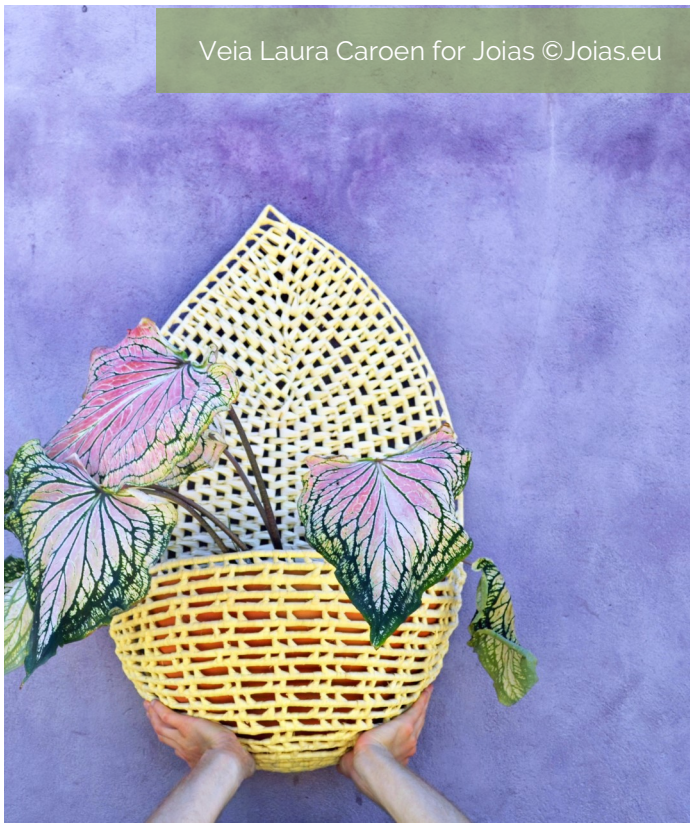
ENCATC: What advice would you give to students or early-career professionals looking to start their own creative projects?

Elieen Haentjens: During their studies I would advise them to see their fellow students as the start of a future network. I would also advise them to take extra courses about aspects of setting up a business which are not included in their curriculum. This can be marketing, social media, or languages.

Once they start working, I would advise them to combine different jobs, which are in some way or



Olho by Sep Verboom (Livable) for Joias ©Joias.eu



another related. It helps to establish a network and to look at what you do from different perspectives. This will inspire them to be creative, and continuously adapt their business to the changing circumstances. The only challenge is to get everything done and divide your time equally between the different jobs.

ENCATC: What keeps you motivated and going?

Elie Haentjens: The ongoing interest and positive feedback from the public when they hear the story of Joias. Joias brings something completely new, which can't be found anywhere else in Europe. So people love the story and originality of the pieces. The idea of going back to Brazil, and setting up new projects so I can live and work again for a few weeks with the artisans. The dream to realise a small, but positive change in this globalised world.



About Joias

Joias connects people, their stories and their cultural traditions. We stimulate a human, intercultural dialogue, bringing together artisans and designers from different places around the world. In doing so, we create authentic, handmade objects that will bring a sparkling *joie de vivre* into your home.

By actively stimulating the cocreation between artisans and designers during residencies, Joias wants to maintain artisanal traditions, but at the same time push its boundaries towards the world of contemporary design. This way, we want to reveal the potential of unconventional materials, techniques and makers across the globe in order to help them to preserve their cultural heritage.

Through its sensual glocal objects Joias invites everybody to a journey around the world embracing the positive opportunities that globalisation brings. Our unique slow design objects are carefully produced in limited series by local artisans. They are the fruit of a human, intercultural dialogue, treasuring each other's identity and local culture. It is from this that Joias draws its emotional power.

Inspired by its cosmopolitan hometown Brussels, Joias invites you to leave the well-trodden paths, get connected to people and stories from around the world and be free to compose your own identity. Cheers to a liberatingly, joyful living.



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