

Inside ISHKAR

The social enterprise challenging us to look beyond the headlines



ISHKAR glassware. Photography by Anna Kidel.

ISHKAR is a social enterprise seeking to overturn negative preconceptions surrounding conflict-affected countries – through craft retail, editorial, photography and travel. For the last four years, it has championed the craft cultures of places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen, connecting artisan makers in these countries to international markets; telling the bigger, more complex stories of places too-easily labelled as ‘war zones’; and offering a hand-picked array of beautiful objects to connoisseurs, collectors and lovers of craft in the UK and beyond.

ISHKAR’s task is not an easy one. When we think of a place we do not know first hand, many of us resort to stereotypes and shorthand simplifications. As our attention spans have shortened in the quick-fix digital world, so too has our capacity to entertain nuanced understandings of other cultures. We think of, say, Afghanistan as a mountainous war-torn country, and never consider that there might also be tremendous cultural richness, vitality, humour and joy buried behind the headlines.

Through its work – the extraordinary glassware, ceramics, textiles, jewellery and other products it sells, and the stories it shares – ISHKAR aims to encourage people to take the time to resist easy labels and see the larger picture.

“Craft is alchemy.”

– Edmund le Brun, co-founder, ISHKAR

The beginning

In 2016, Edmund Le Brun and Flore de Taisne were living in Afghanistan, working for the NGO Turquoise Mountain, when they met the glassblower Ghulam Sekhi. He was from Herat, a city with a heritage of glass making dating back over 2,000 years. In the 1990s there were 12 glass workshops in Afghanistan; two decades later, the country was down to two. Cut off from international markets and tourist footfall by the war, threatened by the rise of cheap imports from China and struggling against growing local trends for factory-made perfection among the Afghan middle class, Ghulam’s business was in danger of collapse.

Recognising both the beauty of the product and the urgent need to keep Herat’s craft heritage alive, Flore and Edmund bought 5,000 of Ghulam’s glasses and set up ISHKAR as a commercial enterprise with a social mission.



Distinctly coloured glass pieces by Ghulam Sekhi, the first ISHKAR artisan.

Since then, ISHKAR has sold more than 17,000 of Ghulam's glasses, and worked with more than 240 artisans like him in conflict-affected regions around the world. Today, ISHKAR's online shop offers an astonishing array of hand-crafted items from overlooked regions, including jewellery from Kabul, furniture from Pakistan, scarves from Syria, cushions from Myanmar, and Afghan-made rugs bearing designs by the likes of Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid.

The challenges

The challenges ISHKAR faces are much more complex than the physical risks associated with operating in a conflict zone. The sheer instability of the business environment is often the biggest threat to success.



Images courtesy ISHKAR.

"Rather than worrying about their businesses being flattened by a bomb or their employees being kidnapped, many Afghan entrepreneurs are more concerned about the government's random changes to custom tariffs, unpredictable currency fluctuations, or the difficulties of complying with Afghanistan's new tax systems."

– Edmund Le Brun, co-founder, ISHKAR

A significant amount of ISHKAR's time and effort is therefore devoted to the logistical difficulties of getting its artisans' work to market, and finding creative ways to overcome the acute obstacles associated doing business in an ever-shifting playing field.

“On any given day we’re battling against border closures, electricity outages and bank transactions that have been blocked due to our partner’s ‘high risk’ status. Of the challenges we face, physical danger of death barely makes the top 10...”

– Flore de Taisne, co-founder, ISHKAR

The craft heritage

One of ISHKAR’s most significant contributions is the role it plays in protecting and preserving traditional craft cultures. Although a growing number of consumers in the developed world have spurred a craft renaissance in recent years, the developing world has been moving in the opposite direction. Price-conscious consumers have been driven towards the factory-made and the functional, and artisans are suffering as a result. And the impact of that isn’t just individual and economic, it represents the loss of texture and richness from everyday life.



Handmade products with a material charm.

“What happens when craftspeople down their tools? We find ourselves working in offices of sheet glass; we have lunch at wipe-clean tables; we go home to furniture designed on computers and made by machines, and we spend much of our lives prodding, poking and swiping spotless smooth laptops and smart phones.”

– Edmund le Brun, co-founder, ISHKAR

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The value of handcrafted objects such as those sold by ISHKAR lies in their unique imperfections, their rough edges and maker's marks. A craft object makes a connection across time between owner and maker, and between maker and the lineage of artisans who came before them. It is a reminder of shared humanity.

"Craft traditions are the result of knowledge passed across generations, from one set of hands to the next. Craft is alchemy. It can take thousands of hours to master, and requires deep, hard-won knowledge of materials and tools. When that knowledge is lost, it is often lost forever. As a result our world is left less rich, less human and less connected with our natural surroundings."

– Edmund le Brun, co-founder, ISHKAR



An ISHKAR artisan making a carpet. Photo by Lorenzo Tugnoli.

ISHKAR asks three questions when deciding whether to work with a new artisan or craft collective. For ISHKAR to work with a maker, they need to fulfil at least two of these criteria:

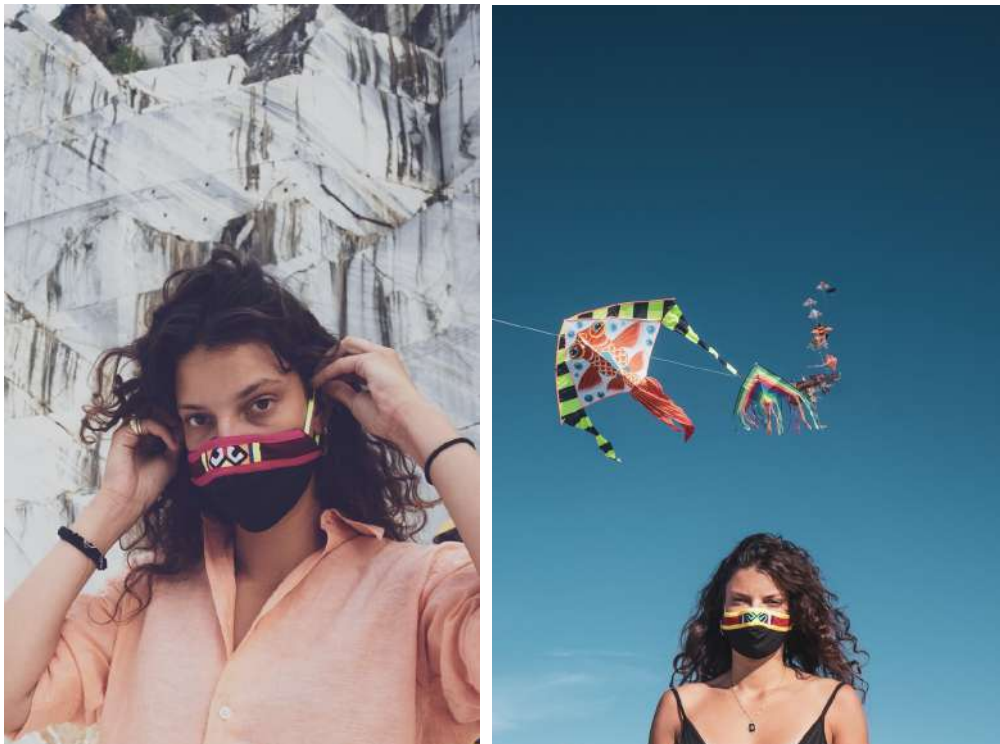
1. Is this craft under threat and does it need support to survive and thrive?
2. Does this piece tell an informative, inspiring or surprising story about the place where it was made?
3. Is the product beautiful, high quality and commercially viable?

The ability to be selective is an important element of what makes ISHKAR effective. Crucially it is not an NGO, obliged to prop-up poor-performing businesses regardless of quality, but rather a private business. As a result, ISHKAR is able to identify talented craftspeople, and work with them entrepreneur to entrepreneur in a way makes them more likely to succeed.

“When we buy products from craftspeople they know we are buying that product for one reason only: we think it is a beautiful, high-quality product. They also know that if they don’t perform on an order, we will use other suppliers. There are no blurred lines, and that clarity is what businesses need to grow.”

– Flore de Taisne, co-founder, ISHKAR

ISHKAR thus acts as the missing link between NGO support and international commercial success. While an NGO can offer craftspeople world-class training and infrastructure support, ISHKAR has the market connections and agility to help those makers secure the sustainable sales their business – and the craft tradition that animates it – needs to survive and thrive.



The Peace Masks Project aims to provide livelihoods to those working in conflict affected areas.

The future

ISHKAR has grown tremendously in size and scope in the four years since Flore and Edmund set it up. Early in 2020, it launched a travel arm, giving people the opportunity to explore extraordinary, rarely visited locations accompanied by expert guides in fields ranging from photojournalism to skiing. Although Covid-19 has of course limited ISHKAR's ambitions in this area, Edmund, Flore and their team are looking forward to developing their travel offering in 2021, with a line-up of eye-opening adventures on the post-pandemic calendar.

"Our focus will remain shining a light on countries, places and people which are poorly understood by much of the world. We expect the means through which we do this to evolve organically. Through travel, objects, events, a magazine – even perhaps a record label – our vision is to become a multimedia, multi-sensory brand..."

– Edmund le Brun, co-founder, ISHKAR



Images courtesy ISHKAR.

Notes to editors

For more information about ISHKAR, copies of the 2020 gift guide, and interviews with Edmund and/or Flore, please contact Sabine Zetteler at ishkar@zetteler.co.uk

All ISHKAR products are available to order at ishkar.com.

To make sure the ISHKAR team can deliver orders in time for Christmas, please make sure purchases are made online by 17 December 2020.

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Real and imagined barriers have isolated countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen, Mali and Iraq from international trade and tourism. The result is that pathways to some of the world's most extraordinary places, people and cultures have narrowed, or in some cases, disappeared altogether. Founded in 2016 by Edmund le Brun and Flore de Taisne, ISHKAR exists to restore these pathways through its unique blend of craft retail, events, editorial, and experiential travel. Working with partners across the world, ISHKAR challenges one-sided perspectives of countries affected by conflict, while creating economic opportunities for communities that urgently need them.



ISHKAR founders, Edmund le Brun and Flore de Taisne. Portrait by Alun Callender.