A Success Story from the Field: The Colors of Pakistan

The Artesan Gateway: An Inside Story of an Artisan Network

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What’s Coming Up
A Success Story from the Field: THE COLORS OF PAKISTAN
From April 25 to May 5, 2016, Aid to Artisans executed its “Rapid Assessment of RANG Design, Training and Marketing Needs” in Islamabad, Pakistan. This was the first activity of its two-year assignment for the RANG project, which is being implemented by influential local NGO, the Indus Heritage Foundation, with funding by the World Bank and the Japan Social Development Fund. The rapid assessment was carried out by Monika Steinberger, Director of Program Management and Development at ATA, Frederic Alcantara, ATA Lead Designer, and Dondrill Glover, ATA Event Specialist.
ATA’s responsibilities included assisting in the merchandising of RANG products at the grand opening event, and at the Saidhpur village bazaar. During the important Roundtable that took place following the opening ceremonies, ATA contributed strongly to the discussion on the subjects of design development, international market demand and Pakistan positioning in world markets.

The overall goal of RANG ("color" in Urdu) is to improve livelihoods of rural artisans in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh. It will alleviate poverty and improve living conditions for weavers and embroiderers, most of them women and girls, and their families. The project aims to assist around 2,600 vulnerable artisan households, especially those headed by women, at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Averaging 7 members in each family in the project areas, RANG is expected to benefit a population of about 18,200 individuals, about 70% of them women.
The specific goal for ATA is to help “bring Pakistan to World”, by means of modernizing the beautiful embroidery traditions still practiced in rural communities and making them relevant to today’s international buyers. Modernizing Pakistani artisan products is one small part of the overall strategy of revealing a “softer” image of Pakistan to the international community.
An Inside Story of an Artisan Network
This month, we met with Nureen Das, a 2015 MRP alumnus who founded the Artesan Gateway, an online network and resource for artisan communities. She shared with us her unique insight and experience about the MRP and her endeavors for the near future.
**ATA:** What pushed you to attend the MRP in the first place?

**Nureen:** Having launched the Artesan Gateway, as an online network and resource for artisan and producer community as well as conscious consumers, I was keen to learn more about the industry and the challenges and opportunities faced by these groups. Many of these organizations are social businesses whose purpose, in addition to retail, is to train and provide employment to marginalized individuals through craft production. Given the competitive nature of retail and the craft sector, I wanted to know more and learn about best practices in the industry.
ATA: What part of the MRP agenda was most useful for your work?

Nureen: The agenda overall was a great introduction to the industry and the steps needed to be ready for the US market. In particular the sections on Key Concepts in Product Development, the Structure of the US Retail Market, Trends in Color and Design and Global Opportunities & Trends for Handmade, were very useful. These sessions provided a great framework through which one could appreciate the different factors that are keys for being successful in retail.

ATA: What in the MRP experience was most significant for you?

Nureen: Aside from networking and the opportunity to connect with some great organizations within my cohort, the experiences that were most significant were the opportunities to tour the NY NOW show and retail tour. For me, both these experiences proved critical in my understanding of retail and the US consumer. Being guided through by expert consultants, provided me with the opportunity to see firsthand some of the concepts we discussed during the workshop.
**ATA:** In what ways, after you attended the MRP, do you continue to benefit from it?

**Nureen:** I continue to benefit from the networks developed during the workshop. The opportunity to connect with artisan groups as well as some of the brands at NY NOW was priceless. ATA’s staff continued to be a great resource too and remained very supportive.

**ATA:** As an MRP alumnus, do you have recommendations for future participants?

**Nureen:** Attending the MRP is a great way to gain insights into the US retail market. As it is one of the largest consumers markets in the world, it is important to understand the opportunities and challenges when interacting with this market base. For artisan groups and organizations that are keen to expand their footprint in the US, this is a great chance to get exposure to the trends and needs of this consumer base. As the MRP is held in conjunction with the NY NOW show, I would highly recommend participants making the most of the opportunity to walk through the show. Take the time to observe the way in which booths are set up and if possible, the interactions between buyers and brands. If I had the opportunity to attend, I would certainly try to spend more time walking through the show.
ATA: What’s next for Artesan Gateway?

Nureen: Our plan for the future is to work with brands/artisan groups on developing surveys to test the market with new products. We hope that this will help with both the design and production phases of product development.
Artisan Spotlight

Meet our Moroccan Artisan Groups
Funded by the US Department of Labor, and in partnership with Creative Associates International, Aid to Artisans has been working in Morocco as part of the five-year “Promise Pathways” program that focuses on preventing child labor in the country by offering youth and households increased opportunities for access to demand driven training programs. ATA’s role in the project is to provide support for artisan groups living in Al Haouz, Chichaoua, and Marrakech. ATA is pleased to introduce them to you.
Fatiha & Aicha cooperative is an artisan group created by two women from the Moroccan region of Al Haouz who are passionate about weaving. Women from this cooperative handcraft beautiful baskets, rugs or purses, with a wide range of materials, including recycled candy and cookies packages’ silver paper, which give them a unique touch and also make them eco-friendly.

Lahssen Imam is a talented artisan who uses felt and local produced recycled glass to make different types of products, from cups and bowls to votive holders and fashion accessories.

Lahssen Boukrim is a young Moroccan artisan from the Al Haouz region who creates lanterns that tastefully mix tradition and modernity. In his workshop, he offers gorgeous lanterns that are made of clear or sanded glass.
Abdennacer Akid is a Moroccan modern potter who owns a workshop with a few workers in the Al Haouz region. They design and conceive a wide range of resolutely contemporary products, such as beautiful lacquered black and white votive holders.

Naima & Fouzia cooperative is a women artisan group in Al Haouz, Morocco, that specializes in weaving embroidery. They create cushions and other home décor items that beautifully display traditional Fes embroidery on linen fabric, hand women wool and pure cotton.

Brahim Tahemmoute and Houssayn Hamd- aoui are traditional potters from the Al Haouz region in Morocco. They handcraft wonderful, solid tagines and pots on which one can read sweet messages in Arabic or Tamazight while cooking, such as “Love”, “Prosperity”, “Happiness” or “Bon Appetit”!

Lahssen Amzil is a traditional Moroccan blacksmith who handcrafts traditional tools in black iron in a remote area of the Al Haouz region.
Hassan Settah is another modern potter who operates in the same region of Morocco, but has a very different style, although very modern as well. He creates very original lanterns and offers a line of high quality kitchen and bath items made of lead-free glaze.

Yassine Zitouni is a skill sewing artisan who started off selling his items at the Marrakech souk (a traditional Moroccan market), before upgrading his line of products by using high-quality materials such as pure linen and leather. He also developed a new line of purses and handbags with embroidery that are charming customers way beyond the Marrakech bazar!

Hajiba Badrouki is a Moroccan artisan who specializes in sewing and embroidery in the Marrakech region. She offers traditional, simple dyed cotton scarves called “chech”, as well as home décor items such as table clothes, runner and placemat.
**Oulila Mohamed** is a potter from the Chichaoua region of Morocco. He uses the local red clay and his ancestors’ traditional techniques to craft beautiful pots and tagines.

**Bihi Chtitih** has a unique knowledge of raffia weaving that he uses to create shoes in his workshop in Morocco. His gorgeous products’ shapes and colors are very modern while keeping the traditional spirit of the Chichaoua region.

**Rida ait Oulhiane** is a master artisan for traditional plaster ceiling and Moroccan ornamentation. Her smart and gorgeous designs are already seducing a substantial amount of customers, in her Al Haouz region of origin and beyond.
Azoulay Mohamed and Hassan El Haddad are traditional Moroccan blacksmith from the Chichaoua region. In addition to producing heavy tools and other accessories for local farmers, they use black iron to make antique figures of animals and others Neolithic persons.

Ahmed Aghla is an artisan weaver in the Chichaoua region who uses a kind of local bamboo to produce many different items, from large basket for harvesting or for bred and traditional bamboo ceiling to picnic sets and bottle refresher.
**Abdelwahed Agzzar** is an artisan tailor in the Chichaoua region and specializes in Arabic women dress. In order to diversify his customer base, he talentedly developed a line of tunics made of linen and cotton voile.

**Hakima Rbbah** is an artisan from the region of Chichaoua, Morocco, who does machine embroidery for traditional kaftan. She creates pompons from recycle threads as well as other amazing products such as miniature pillows filled with local herbs, mint, lavender and citronella.

Please note: Funding for this project was provided by the United States Department of Labor. This material does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the United States Department of Labor, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the United States Government.
What’s Coming Up
Join us this August for the 2016 MRP. This program is a unique hands-on training experience for all those associated with the artisan sector. The program provides intensive preparation for entry into the US market and vital information for building successful export businesses.

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