

# Aid to Artisans

Spring 2019 Newsletter



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Cover Image: Mamatle Rantsane, a member of Maseru Tapestries and Mats works on the finishing touches of a MaXhosa by La Duma designer rug in Lesotho, Photograph by Lauren Barkume

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Photograph by Paola Martinez

## Putting cultural legacies first in Mexico

Balancing innovation and tradition while respecting cultures.

The Highlands of Chiapas and the Yucatan Peninsula are a few hundred miles from each other in Southeastern Mexico, yet their cultures are vastly different. "Each time you turn into a new community, they are making something completely unique. I find that fascinating," says Mimi Robinson, a San Francisco based designer who works with Aid to Artisans (ATA) and its Mexican-based project, Manos Vivas (MV). Robinson was in Mexico this spring working with Paola Martinez, Design and Production Manager for MV in ATA's Mexico office, who is helping artisans develop product lines for international sale. "You find nine different embroidery techniques in Chiapas alone," says Martinez.

Robinson calls it the "cultural legacy" of a community, and sustaining it is key to her design approach. "It's not just a product. It's, 'Who's behind the product?' and 'What does the product reflect?' It's 'What are the challenges this community has faced?' and 'What's the history behind the community?'" Robinson says she asks herself those questions while crafting a product development strategy. The strategy includes curating, designing and merchandising the MV Collection which will be shown at the upcoming Las Vegas Market Trade Show at the end of July and NY NOW two weeks later, in New York City. The line Robinson is developing will include the diverse artisan products from 12 municipalities including



ATA Designer Mimi Robinson introduces designs to weavers Amalia López Guzmán, Juana Cruz López, Rosa Pérez Cruz & Arcadia Pérez Gómez in El Pozo, Chiapas Mexico

Gregoria Ochoa Uluac & Librada Ochoa Uluac weave hammoc samples in Tixmehuac, Yucatán



Traditional hammock by Aguja Mágicas in Tixmehuac, Yucatan, Mexico  
ARTISANS: Cerafina Loaeza Ku & Silvia Colli Yam

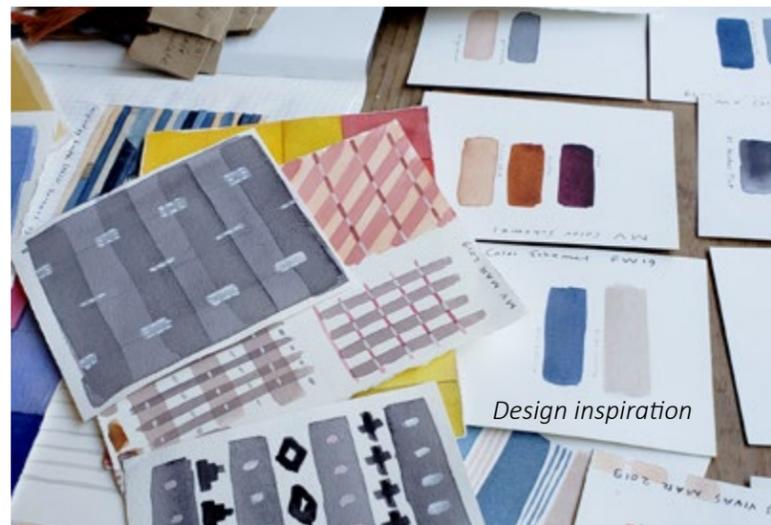


weaving, macramé, brocade embroidery, cross-stitch embroidery, hammock weaving, and machine embroidery. “In the end, it really comes down to ... how can we raise the voice and visibility of these communities through what we are doing? ... How can we tell [their] stories. I see product as a vehicle for that,” Robinson said. Products in development include pillows, placemats, table runners, pouches, tote bags and scarves.

By collaborating with the artisans, MV is creating a bridge for artisans to sell in international markets. The goal is to develop products that faithfully respect traditions, and artisanal techniques while at the same time teaching marketing, control quality and how to build a collection using better materials and colors that will sell.

### New colors, new collection

Robinson used color as an organizing principle for product lines and collections from the many different communities. Before arriving in Mexico “I spent a lot of time creating color palettes, looking at trends in the US and European markets and also looking at the



cultures we’re entering into.”

With a laugh, Martinez remembers the reactions of the artisans when MV presented the muted, matte, earth tone color palettes. At first they were “curious” about the colors. Then, after a while they had the courage to tell her, “These are not pretty” and we “don’t

really like them.” Used to working with bright colors, Martinez says the artisans thought that people wouldn't buy their products using the on-trend colors Robinson had chosen. “I showed them images of what other artisans from other communities were doing so they could see how we are building collections, [that] many of our artisans are using these colors.” Martinez says the visuals reassured them.

### New products are an “aha moment.”

Over the course of two weeks, Robinson, Martinez, Mexico-based ATA designer Guillermo Jester and local ATA personnel created samples with each of the artisan groups that will participate in product





Mimi's design introduction with Jalab Antsetik in Chiapas Mexico



development workshops. They followed rules that Robinson has honed over 25 years working with ATA around the globe: First, “Be receptive, listen and observe and be informed by that.” Then, “You look at the technique, you look at a capability, you look at the capacity. You listen to the artisans, what their dreams are and what they’re interested in and you put all these things together to come up with new ideas.” Since it can take, for example, up to two months to weave a hammock which may not appeal to the global marketplace, innovation is important. “So, we’ll say, ‘This is an amazing technique. What else can we do with that technique? If you take [the hammock-making] technique and turn it into a beach bag, then all of a sudden you are expanding your market into people who buy personal accessories.’ It only takes about a week to weave a bag or a scarf. Faster product turnaround means the artisans earn more money. “It was an ‘aha’ moment for the artisans,” say Martinez as they developed new products. “They were very happy because they never thought about new products that could be so marketable.”

### An empowering process

“When you can have sustained relationships over time with [the artisans], the further you get ... the more you can gain trust of a community,” says Robinson, grateful to have the MV team on the ground, moving the projects forward in between her visits.

“It’s collaborative,” says Martinez of her daily work with the artisans. “Me, the promotoras (locally based ATA staff), the artisans we all find a way to ... bring new things to the table.”

Yolanda Hernandez is a promotora who works closely with eight groups of artisans. “The

women are really interested in learning [in the workshops] how to make new handcrafts and products to sell ... I work well with them. There are good leaders in every group who have the trust and respect of everyone.”

The approach is empowering, Martinez says. The artisans, “Feel part of the process. They understand they are helping themselves move forward.”

Part of empowerment is teaching the artisans the value of their time. “If you ask an artisan how long did it take you to make a hammock, she will say two months. But if you ask, how many hours, they don’t have any idea.” And, they don’t add into their calculation how long it takes to prepare a loom, for example. Martinez is working on strategies to help artisans use their time more effectively. “Maybe they have an order for 10 placemats. So instead of preparing 10 looms, they can use one loom for four placemats and that reduces the time for production.”

### The biggest surprise of the trip

For Robinson, the “most amazing surprise” of her spring product development trip took place in the Yucatan. “There was a very humble dwelling with a thatched roof and a group of ladies who are very, very, very shy, [are] sitting” there, Robinson recalls. “All of a sudden they start pulling out ... this extraordinary embroidery which was just off the chart with details of green parrots in the jungle and tropical flowers and we were all amazed by their work,” Robinson says, laughing as she remembers how in awe she was of the skill level. When the artisans saw the response, Robinson says they “ran back



Backstrap loom weave & brocade by María Hernández Hernández



*Amalia López Guzmán & Adelina Méndez  
Santiz of Jalab Antsetik prepare backstrap  
loom materials in San Juan Cancuc, Chiapas*

to their homes [to] bring back more of their work because we were so amazed by what they were doing and the quality of it. [Yet], they were so shy ... it took a while to really see the breadth of their work.”

### What's next

Robinson is hoping to use the incredible embroidery of the Yucatan artisans in the upcoming summer shows, but she is not certain. “In terms of talent they are ready ... I don't know in terms of production capacity.” While short timelines are a challenge, Robinson is considering their embroidery for the edges of pillows or blankets.

With only about a month until the two big trade shows, the collection will be edited based on the results of the samples the

artisans are currently making. Then, after New York and Las Vegas, Robinson and her Mexico-based team will reflect on the feedback from the shows and further hone the collection.

*Written by Cari Shane  
Photography by Paola Martinez*

## ATA's “Artisans Organize” is a success in Lesotho

A role playing game helps artisans to prepare for future orders

Aid to Artisans Training Director Lauren Barkume returned to Lesotho this spring and brought with her a training simulation called “Artisans Organize,” a program originally developed for rural artisans in Djibouti.

“We are making Artisan Organize an integral part of our methodology in other locations,” says Maud Obe, Director of Programs at ATA, who debuted the program in Djibouti last year. “We now know that this simulation method can be used to develop almost any artisan businesses, even if the artisans cannot speak English, read or write,” says Obe who points to monumental program outcomes in Djibouti. (See accompanying article on Djibouti). “Artisans Organize can also be used for more advanced organizations, since it can be used to identify and improve missing key skills. It's applicable to everyone.”

“It was fantastic,” says Barkume of the role-playing method she put to the test in Lesotho, a landlocked, independent kingdom in a

*Rethabile Mako, a traditional hat weaver based in Maseru*





*A weaver interprets a sketch from a buyer in a role playing game*

weavers participated in the workshops. "Our goal for the workshops was to prepare artisans for large orders. We showed their products in Las Vegas Market in January 2019 and had serious interest from large buyers," says Barkume. "Since we knew the artisans weren't ready to handle large order production we needed to role play the process of fulfilling a big order so they can anticipate challenges they might face and how to handle them."

It's not the first-time buyers have been interested in woven products by Lesotho artisans who use a yellow-green grass which they sometimes dye purple or black. Their traditional hats are so popular that previous artisan development programs expanded the weavers' product lines, adding basket designs. Unfortunately, the new designs didn't provide a significant uptick in orders. Barkume says is confident the Artisans Organize workshops will be the difference maker.

mountainous region in South Africa. "People were so engaged in the game. They found it fun and they could see the lessons we were trying to teach."

During her two-week visit, Barkume ran Artisans Organize workshops for three hat weaving associations with men and women from Butha-Buthe, Tsime and a new group of hat weavers in Maseru. Approximately 20

Using simulations to fulfill a new order "It was exciting to see how powerful the simulations and role-playing games were as a learning experience. It made it so real," says Barkume. "I was thrilled to see how engaged everyone was in tackling the challenges we threw at them. The artisans were able to think through how to handle logistics, and how to manage potential challenges. They were excited to do so. It was great to see how much learning can happen in a short period of time with this game."

Purchasing agents participated in the workshops, playing themselves and asking the questions they would normally ask when placing an order. They "purchased" materials and went through quality control simulations, so participants would understand why some products were acceptable and others were not. "That made it really, real," says Barkume. "The artisans began to clearly understand the process as



*Export agent Mohapi Lephallo demonstrates a final quality control check during the role playing game*

they conversed with the agents. The artisans had to respond to agent questions around production, price, and how many items they could make in a certain period of time. It was those interactions that really brought the lessons home," says Barkume.



*Members of the Tsime Basket Weaving collective participate in a role playing simulation game*



*Exporter Mantai Mpesi of Handmade Lesotho discusses an order with Postively Empowered Artisans who create fabric covered beads and jewelry*



A member of Leribe Craft Centre spins mohair into yarn

## Product Costing & Pricing

In addition to the role-playing simulations, Barkume worked with the artisans on product costing and pricing. The weavers work independently, getting paid a per piece wage for their labor. One of Barkume's goals was to highlight the important role the associations can play in the growth of each artisan's individual business.

She underscored the associations' roles in marketing, creating product lines, checking quality, receiving and distributing earnings. She also explained how the associations were beneficial for buyers, acting as a hub for agents who were not prepared to contact 150 different artisans. Barkume highlighted the need for increasing individual pricing to reflect a higher buy-in to the associations so the collectives could afford phones and electricity as well as administrative costs such as marketing and outreach. "They were only adding 3% as a markup for the association. 3% is tiny. When they realized that all these costs related to communication, marketing and administration, must come from somewhere, they understood that meant adding [those fees] to the cost of their own products. Ideally, they should include a percentage based on their real overhead costs, plus 15% profit for the association," Barkume says.



Leribe Craft Centre manager Mamojaje Mojaje with ATA Training Director Lauren Barkume

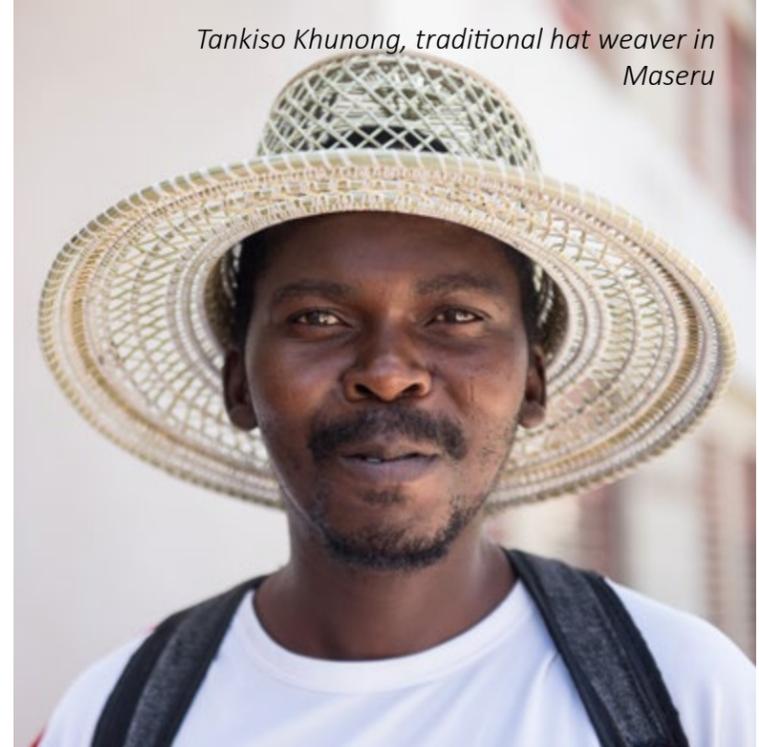
## Market Readiness

With a possible program extension on the horizon, Barkume hopes to test whether the artisans are ready to enter the international marketplace. "Our plan would be to do a marketing mission in nearby South Africa," says Barkume. We would introduce Lesotho artisans to buyers in Johannesburg who would place wholesale or retail orders, so the artisans can put into practice what they learned by role-playing. They would have a chance to practice their new skills with an order." If the World Bank extends the CIEP II program with ATA, the test run would help the artisans to define the roles of the associations, teach them how they can distribute products, show them what a real timeline looks like — from order to delivery. "They will have to do all those things for the first time," Barkume says.

If the test is successful, Barkume believes a major international order could be fulfilled. "Working with large buyers who are placing orders for hundreds of baskets could change their lives," says Barkume. "The interest is there. The potential is there. But they need to take the initiative and be organized to make it happen." If they succeed in fulfilling a big order, it would be a first for Lesotho's artisan weavers. "They have beautiful products that people want, now they need to figure out how to turn their craft into viable businesses," says Barkume.

Written by Cari Shane  
Photography by Lauren Barkume

Tankiso Khunong, traditional hat weaver in Maseru



Masetumo Lebitsa, Manager of Maseru Tapestries and Mats



Manteboheleng Mako, traditional hat weaver



Artisan association representatives from Ardo and Hamzeh Isaack, Marketing Consultant for ADDS meet with ATA's Monika Steinberger, SVAMC Marketing Manager Elena Rizzo

## Hidden figures emerge in Djibouti

How artisans from a rural community made a game changing sale to the Sheraton Hotel

To reach the isolated, rural villages of Djibouti one must drive roads so crude that it can take hours to drive a few miles. The villages are not only physically disconnected; they are culturally remote as well. "Village girls are not educated and are often hidden away," says Monika Steinberger of Aid to Artisans (ATA), who returned from the tiny country on the Horn of Africa in April.

So, when ATA was able to facilitate an agreement with the Sheraton Hotel Djibouti to purchase products from female artisan associations, it was unprecedented. First, in December 2018, the hotel purchased from

the rural artisan group, Ardo Association, wall decor baskets that now hang colorfully in the shape of Africa in the hotel restaurant. Then in April, the Sheraton asked another group of artisans to fulfill an even larger order — nearly 200 baskets. "It was monumental," says Steinberger. "No one had ever connected rural Djiboutian women and professional Djiboutian buyers. It was like connecting two different worlds," says Steinberger of the artisans who buy their raw materials from camel caravans and usually only sell their products locally.

The Sheraton plans to purchase 187 baskets made by made by three artisan associations

from the communities of Tadjourah and PK12. The simple, flat, round designs will be placed in guest rooms to display toiletries or snacks. "This is the second order from the hotel and bodes well for continued business for this artisan association," Steinberger emphasizes.

While ATA and its local partner, the Djiboutian Agency for Social Development (ADDs), facilitated the meeting between the artisan association and the hotel, it was the manager of the Sheraton, Daniel Van Der Hejden and Sales Executive Kadan Ali, who made the breakthrough possible. "This manager really feels that he owes something to the country and needs to include locally made items and services in the running of the hotel." Steinberger says the manager's attitude is rare.

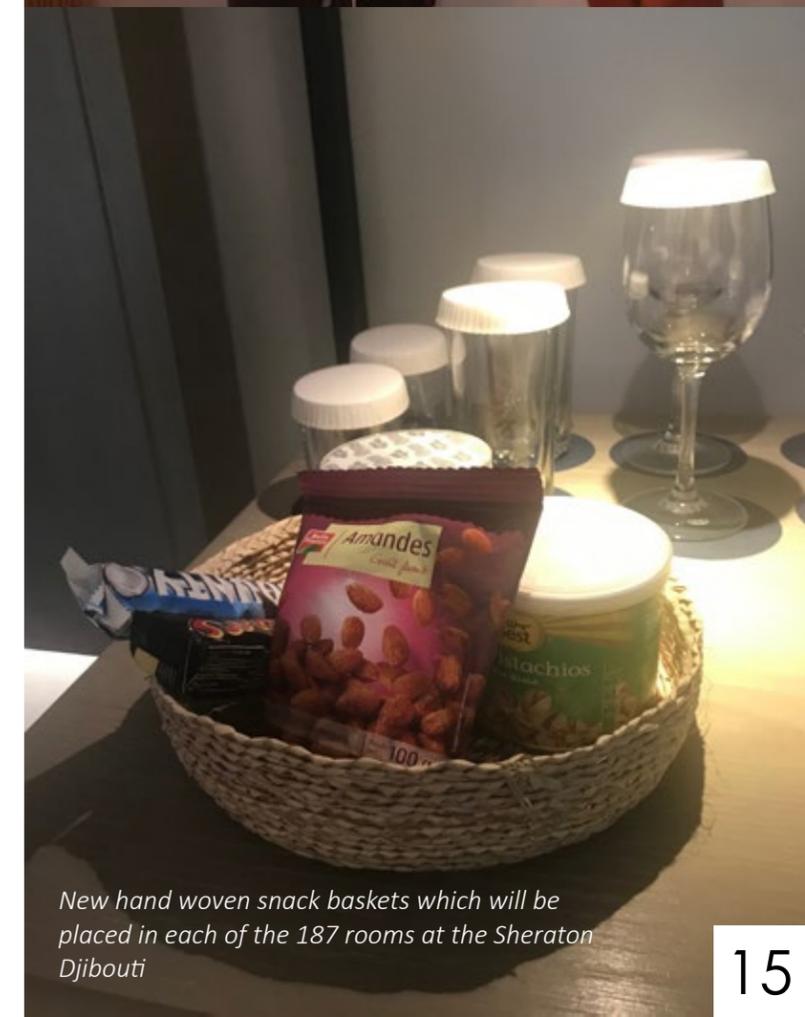
### How it happened

12-months ago, ATA's Director of Programs, Maud Obe worked with ADDS to lead 300 artisans from 17 different associations through ground-breaking "Artisans Organize" workshops. The program was specifically crafted to teach illiterate artisans to be business leaders, facilitators and marketing directors. ATA has since adopted this workshop's approach in other regions, including Lesotho.

In a country where women are expected to be unassertive and silent, participating in the workshops was barrier breaking for most. "ATA has to ensure that the experience is safe and positive, so we involve men in the process to be sure that the women have the support of the men in the community," says Steinberger of ATA's approach. "This brings great potential rewards for them but also means means ATA



Sheraton Djibouti General Manager Daniel van der Hejden and Fato Bourhan, an artisan from the association Ardo with the new basket display



New hand woven snack baskets which will be placed in each of the 187 rooms at the Sheraton Djibouti



The new basket displays in the dining area of the Sheraton Djibouti



TEAM Mentors and Exhibitors at the January 2019 Las Vegas Market

has to ensure that the experience is safe and positive. ATA's mentoring and coaching makes this possible."

The breakthrough with the Sheraton's purchases is life changing — but not only financially "It's going to require time for these women to develop the confidence to run the business relationship with the Sheraton on their own," says Obe. "They are so, so, so shy that simply introducing themselves in a workshop, stating their names and their goals was difficult for them." But, Obe and Steinberger believe the women will succeed. As Obe put it. "I know that the Sheraton is

committed to take the time and make it happen. They are willing to pay the women artisans directly, helping to ensure that it is the women who are receiving the benefits of their work."

"Whenever you generate income, it has a powerful effect in the communities," says Steinberger. "I hope with our coaching, mentoring and guidance that the positive impact is permanent. My hopes are high, I have a hard time expressing how big this is for them."

Written by Cari Shane

## What's Next!

### Market Readiness Program™

Applications are open for [2019 August MRP](#), the Market Readiness Program that takes place annually in New York City. This program is a unique hands-on training experience that runs during NY NOW, the largest gift show in the U.S. The MRP is a crash course in everything it takes to succeed in the artisan marketplace. We provide an intensive preparation for entering the US market including product development, design and trends.

Throughout the 4-day event, industry experts are mentors for the participants. "The MRP gives a clear picture of what the handmade sector in the U.S. looks like and where an artisan fits in," says Lauren Barkume ATA Training Manager. "People come away with inspiration and an action plan for their businesses." The MRP is your one-stop-shop for a Modern, Real and Practical training support for your artisan based business.

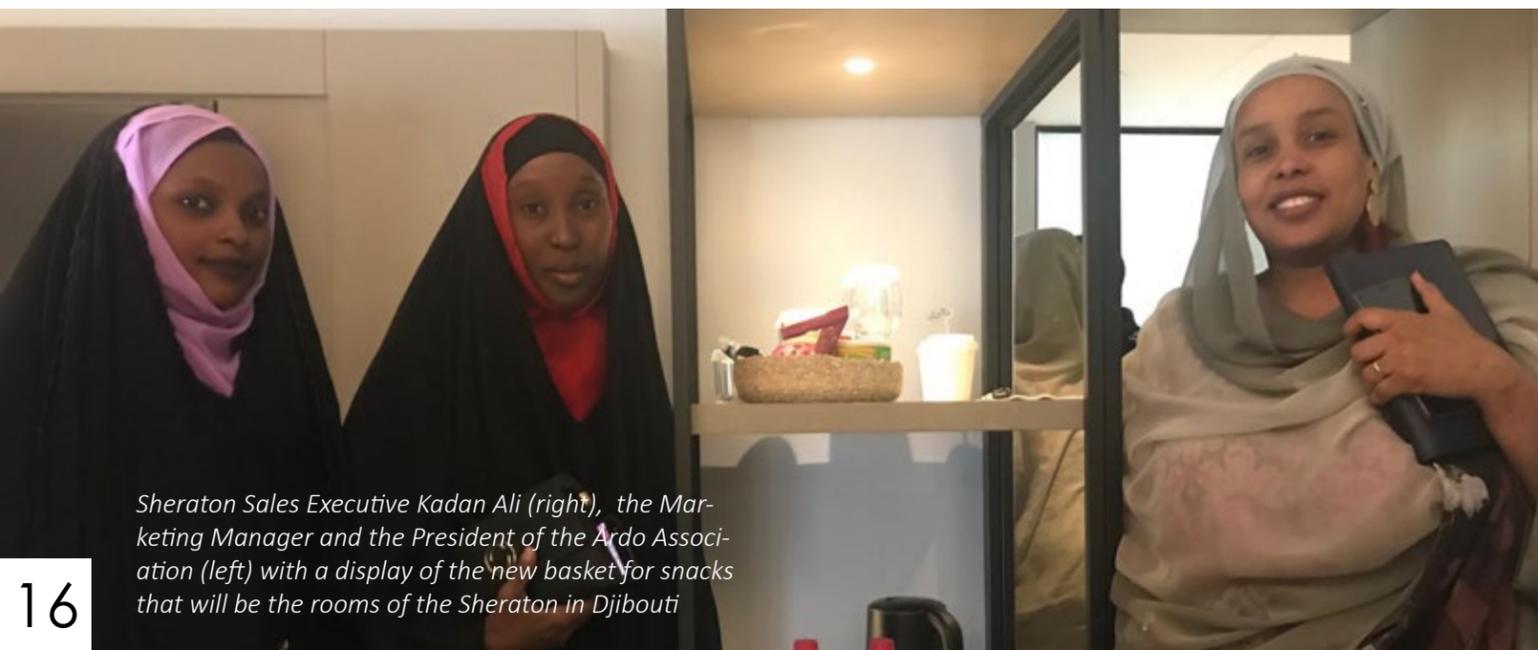
WATCH THE VIDEO [HERE](#)

### Summer 2019 Las Vegas

We will be exhibiting again this July at [TEAM](#), Training Entrepreneurs in Artisan Markets at Las Vegas Market. Though July TEAM 2019 is fully booked, it is not too late to apply for the January 2020 program. TEAM is a full-support trade show experience for exhibitors--training that gives artisan businesses real opportunity to learn about selling and exhibiting and then participating in a US trade show. As part of the TEAM experience, ATA provides pre-show webinars and feedback on everything from pricing to merchandising.

#### What are our alumni saying?

"The climate of working with a team of experts who have been in this industry is invaluable. The team dives you right at the heart of the well of their long term experience and business relationships with their long known buyers. Such networking and expertise they offer is worth every penny for the future performance of the business." - Mohapi Lphallo TEAM '19 Alumni



Sheraton Sales Executive Kadan Ali (right), the Marketing Manager and the President of the Ardo Association (left) with a display of the new basket for snacks that will be the rooms of the Sheraton in Djibouti

# Aid to Artisans

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