



MAKER / PALMER & SONS

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Local Talent

From handmade leather goods that turn heads on the street, to garments designed to last a lifetime, we honour the craftsmen and women who create lasting quality in the Lower Mainland

BY KRISTEN HILDERMAN PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL JOSEPH

ON A CRISP MARCH MORNING IN GASTOWN, it's somehow colder inside the shared studio where Palmer & Sons "make" (not "manufacture") their leather bags, belts and accessories. Watching Nik Palmer cut a belt freehand from a massive hide and, working up a sweat while crafting a finished product using only simple, handheld leatherworking tools, it's obvious why he doesn't get cold. He's slightly out of breath after burnishing the belt's edges, sealing the leather by repeatedly dragging a rag dampened with a natural gum down the belt's edge while one end is fastened tightly in a vice. He levels deft thuds of a mallet, securing the belt's hardware in place, while he talks about the importance of his process.

Nik tells the story of an enthusiastic New Balance employee explaining to him the virtues of manufacturing his products overseas, in Vietnam, to maximize productivity and profits. Nik laughs as he recalls his response. "I said, 'No, you couldn't. Because then they wouldn't be my bags. And the point is that with my bags, I made it.'" He and his son, Jack, design and construct the bags themselves, often using each other as test models. Nik will wear a prototype bag around Gastown and, he says, "If I get stopped a ton of times, then that's a good design."

Although Palmer & Sons' clientele is predominantly international – one of his first buyers was a stylist from *Interview* magazine – the company remains in Vancouver, where Nik lives with his family and works full-time in the gaming industry. He envisions Palmer & Sons as something to retire into and pass on to Jack to continue the family tradition and handmade narrative, which is essential to the brand. "You can make the same bag," says Nik, "but it's not the same story."



INCLEMENT WEATHER has never stopped lineups from curling around the block next to Arc'teryx's North Vancouver factory outlet store during any of its four annual "seconds and samples" sales. It might be the lifetime warranty on all products that has inspired this cult-like following, but media and communications manager Jo Salamon credits the superior craftsmanship and crucial role that the gear plays in the "extremely personal" outdoor lifestyle. The rugged North Shore is part of the company's DNA and its employees are just as dedicated to this adventurous lifestyle as its clientele. All of Arc'teryx's gear and apparel concepts originate in the design centre, located next to the factory outlet, and many of its designers test the products in the vast wilderness that lies just outside the office doors. "Our key alpine designer, he's also an ice climber and a mountaineer and a rock climber, so yes, he does go out and test his own gear," says Salamon. The company also tests gear with a network of alpine guides and professionals the world over who find themselves outdoors more than 300 days a year, usually in extreme conditions.

What sets Arc'teryx apart from other outdoor apparel manufacturers, says Salamon, is its design process, whereby designers physically make samples of their own creations, testing and iterating their work as needed and eliminating the need for exhaustive back and forth between factories. "They work with a team of people at our design centre – they work with pattern makers, sample sewers, they have little pods for each category," says Salamon.

Inside the design centre, the quiet hum of productivity permeates the expansive space dotted with workstations, drafting tables and all of the compact machinery that you would find in any of Arc'teryx's nearly 20 global factories. Casually dressed employees toggle between workstations, developing and perfecting gear and apparel that will then be sent off for bigger production runs. The company prefers to produce proprietary technologies – such as the WARP strength harness, with its lightweight yet unyielding materials and construction – close to home at its Burnaby manufacturing facility, along with smaller runs. Maintaining a local factory allows Arc'teryx to develop new techniques more quickly and maintain the rugged West Coast allure and authenticity of the brand. "For us, being in North Vancouver is crucial to who we are as a company and what we do as a company," insists Salamon. "We couldn't be Arc'teryx anywhere else in the world."



LISELOTT MONTESANO'S HUSBAND ADDS a few freshly chopped logs to the crackling fire in her Kitsilano home studio before she settles into a timeworn wooden chair at a glass-topped table scattered with weathered pendants, half-finished necklaces and bowls overflowing with chains and beads. Every antique furniture piece and eclectic Asian adornment in Montesano's cosy studio space reflects the deeply artistic, textured aesthetic of her handmade jewellery line. She is a self-taught artist, a fact that seems to govern her entire process, putting her whims ahead of formalities when it comes to the way she designs her one-of-a-kind bracelets, earrings, necklaces, arm bands and hand pieces.

Montesano's jewellery-making method is organic at its core, often beginning with visions, or inspiration from her West Coast surroundings. "Nature is my biggest inspiration of all," she says. "I could not picture myself anywhere else – Vancouver has all the beauty." Montesano works alone, without assistants, assembling every original piece by hand, often wearing them for a few days to test her designs. Being a one-woman show gives her the freedom to experiment and stray from one design to another, often returning to finished pieces to add embellishments or small unexpected touches, like a dainty pearl dangling from a necklace closure. She employs the "forgotten craft" of crocheting, which she learned from her grandmother while growing up in Sweden, to juxtapositions of lace and metal. "I love the hard with the soft," she says.

Montesano's first customers – about 10 years ago – were from the film industry, and although she doesn't court celebrity clients, stars like Tricia Helfer and Goldie Hawn have been known to seek out her designs. She's humble about her growing popularity among film and TV actresses, but she's more focused on the artistic method than the sales. "If they enjoy it, that's wonderful," she says. "It's more about making it than anything else for me."





MAKER / LLOYD & WOLF

EVERY BAG AND BELT AT LLOYD & WOLF BEGINS and ends with the hands of founder and creative director Larissa Stefani. "I'm the person that checks every single bag that comes in," she says. "I number them and I sign them and make sure that they're just right to go out the door."

Since its 2012 launch, Lloyd & Wolf has split its manufacturing between larger runs in Spain, where patterns are meticulously hand-cut and bags and belts are handmade, and smaller runs made out of a non-descript Vancouver manufacturing space that houses Stefani – when she's not working in her Bowen Island studio – and a lone leather craftsman.

Inside the cool, concrete manufacturing warehouse, scaffoldings draped with cascading hides in a multitude of colours and patterns fill the room with the rich, unmistakable scent of leather. Tucked in the back, Stefani smooths a large swath of vibrant pink crocodile-printed leather over a massive particle-board table. "It's my little dark corner," she jokes, as she sorts zippers and brass hardware, a signature feature on many of her designs.

For Stefani, the process behind her products is the foundation of her brand. Staying headquartered in B.C., where the leather industry has admittedly "kind of died," means working on a smaller scale, but this aligns with Lloyd & Wolf's artistic ethos. "I never set out for this to be an absolutely massive company," says Stefani. "I want to retain the integrity of doing my limited runs. When that stops or if I have to move away from that, then the point of it is sort of lost for me."

