Meet me in Mallorca

How Espanyolet is bringing a taste of vintage Mediterranean to homes across the globe

In 2013, with not much more than a vision and a plane ticket, Thomas Bossert and Melissa Rosenbauer embarked on a whole new life—one that renounced the busy, New York City corporate hustle, and embraced creativity, culture, art, and nature. The two were determined to master ancient, handmade techniques—for Thomas, ceramics; and Melissa, batik and indigo dyeing. The result: a rediscovered passion for artisan craft that they wanted to share with the world.

Mallorea became their muse, and color theory their method. Their discovery of vintage hemp fabrics was met with a lover’s treble and became the perfect canvas for natural dyeing and hand-painted design. Only three years later, they have founded a flourishing online business, claimed international interior design projects, and launched a celebrated collaboration with Goop, a conscious lifestyle and wellness brand founded by Gwyneth Paltrow. We sat down with Melissa to find out more about how her journey began and her dreams for espanyolet.
CAN YOU GIVE US A BIT OF A BACKGROUND AS TO HOW ESPANOYLET CAME TO LIFE?

We were working at a digital marketing agency in New York called RGA. My career was in client service and business operations, and my role at RGA was director of resource management. Thomas had an MFA in graphic design, and he was heading up RGA’s brand development department. We met at work. Shortly after starting to date, we decided to take a pretty big leap out of our lives and try something different. Thomas had a very strong urge to leave New York, and when a coworker announced that he was going to take a one-year leave of absence and travel the world, we looked at each other and said, ‘Let’s do the same thing!’

It took us nine months to plan our year away—including selling Thomas’s apartment and putting all of our collective things in storage—and in October 2013, we left RGA and started to travel the world. Our year away wasn’t planned based on places to see, but rather, things to do. Our list included make things with our hands, learn a foreign language, be more present in nature, get in touch with our spiritual selves, do nothing. With this list printed out and thumbtacked up on the wall, we chose our destinations. We camped in Africa and New Zealand to be in nature, and we chose Bali for its tradition of handicrafts and artisan-made goods. It was there in Bali where we (re)discovered the joy of making while working in natural indigo batik and ceramics studios. We loved what we were doing—slow design and traditional artisan processes, so it was actually during this part of our one-year sabbatical that we decided to not return to New York but instead launch a small design studio where we could focus on artisan craftsmanship. In 2014, we refined our concept over the course of a year and launched espanoylet in late 2015.

HOW DID YOU LAND ON THE NAME ‘ESPAÑOLEY’?

We entered the island of Mallorca over the course of our travels and fell in love. Expansión is in homage to the neighborhood of Soho; Espanoylet where we built our painting studio.

MALLORCA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SEEM TO BE THE NARRATIVE MUSE FOR THE BRAND. TELL US ABOUT HOW THIS REGION HAS INFLUENCED YOUR CREATIONS. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE OTHER INSPIRATIONS YOU DRAW FROM?

The Mediterranean region is different than what I had experienced. I grew up outside New York, so my beach references were East Coast beaches and the Caribbean—palm trees, turquoise waters, and technology. The Mediterranean is distinct with its pine trees that nearly fall into the water, the smell of fennel and mint that seems to be rich enough to light a candle. It’s clean and bright, but rather faded and rustic. This is our muse.

We’re also really affected by the imperfection and eroded texture of Spain. This is a country that was left in disrepair for so many years, and the beauty that resulted is all around us—a fading wall, an imperfectly painted door, the chipped-away layers of torno coula. These things all make their way into our designs.

IF YOU HAD TO DESCRIBE ESPANOYLET IN THREE WORDS, WHAT WOULD THEY BE?

Imperfect, faded, and unexpected.

THE BRAND’S INTEGRATION OF VINTAGE TEXTILES AND HANDMADE GOODS TELL US WHAT INFLUENCED THAT DECISION?

Originally we were focused on turning the traditional techniques we learned in Bali on their heads—trading with a modern twist. When we built our workshop in Spain, however, we ran across the most beautiful vintage linens and hemp-dyed blankets at the flea market. These two-yard by 2.5-yard super heavy blankets were unlike anything we’d ever seen before, and we were smitten. We invested in two or three of them, brought them home, and started dying them. The vintage textiles took our pieces so beautifully, and from that moment on, we bought up every single piece that existed on the island.

HOW DOES COLOR PLAY A ROLE IN YOUR DESIGNS?

Color is everything for us. It is the basis of our business. Very rarely will we ask to buy unprinted blankets from us, and we don’t love doing that. The beauty of our work and why we get into this business is so we can make things with our hands. Mining colors is by far the best part of our day.

TALK TO US ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY WITH HEMP SPECIFICALLY. HOW DID YOU BEGIN WORKING WITH IT?

We didn’t set out to work with hemp. The beautiful vintage hemp blankets we were buying in Mallorca didn’t come with any information as to their contents, but the women selling them said most were blends of linen and hemp. Once we exhausted all the blankets on the island, we started our search across Europe for similar fabrics. Again and again, the pieces we bought had heavy blends of hemp, and the women were amazed by the beauty, they had a heft and weight that was perfect for what we wanted to make, and they get softer and softer with each wash. We were hooked.

Customers really seem to love hemp, and our vintage hemp throws are one of our best-selling items. I’m not sure there’s a higher level of awareness in the general public of the advantages of buying and using hemp, but one touch and people know it’s a beautiful addition to their home.

WHAT PROCESSES IN YOUR CRAFT HAVE PROVEN TO BE THE MOST CHALLENGING AND THE MOST SUCCESSFUL?

Because we are self-taught, we had no idea that we would be hit by the drum of the weather in determining how colors developed in fabric. Mining pigments from the exact same weights and volumes on a rainy day will yield a very different effect than if exactly the same combination of sand and dry dry day. It’s a bit of a wild card and has slowed us down on many occasions.

The thing we can control is the texture and viscosity of the material with which we paint. We use natural algin from the woods with our pigments, which gives us a smooth and thick gel-like substance that we use to paint. If we didn’t use algin, we wouldn’t be able to layer colors, create gradations, or control how the dye absorbs into the fabric.
HOW DO YOU THINK A HANDMADE, ARTISANAL APPROACH REDUCES OVERALL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT?

The garment industry is one of the most environmentally unfriendly industries in the world due to its tremendous use of water. Dyeing fabrics generally happens in a bath, which uses hundreds of liters of water. We do not do this. We use no more than 10 liters of water for each of our布片. The addition of dye means that our volume of dye actually goes further with less water, so the waste is minimal. So by choosing to paint instead of dip-dyeing or bat-dyeing each of our fabrics, we are making less of an environmental impact.

Additionally, printed fabric must be washed at least two times to rid it of its excess dye. We bath together all our fabrics of the same color to wash it once instead of separately. This adds time onto our delivery schedule because sometimes we have to wait a week or more to aggregate like-colored pieces—but less washing means less water in the end; these decisions contribute to less environmental impact at every step of the process.

TELL US ABOUT SOME OF THE SPECIAL PROJECTS YOU’VE WORKED ON AS OF LATE

We couldn’t be more excited about our Berlin project! Berlin is a really special city for us because we live there part-time and live pretty much everything about it—its energy, its spirit, its opportunities, and its entrepreneurial vibe.

When we bought a small 340 square-foot apartment in the desirable neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg, we knew we would infuse it with elements of spanyolot. The building was built in 1956 and had never been updated, so we were able to preserve some pre-war details like crown moldings, original wide-plank floor planks, and rounded tall ceilings. The question was: How do we keep the spirit of old Berlin while also integrating our soft and modern colors of spanyolot?

It wasn’t enough to just throw some of our pillows and blankets across the bed or sofa, so together we brainstormed unique ways to bring spanyolot into the space. The newly 11 foot ceilings meant that we have huge walls, and after we tore five layers of wallpaper off them, we were left with the most beautiful original plaster—textured and blank canvas. We decided to add our pillows to micro-cement and create a statement wall. This has turned out to be the centerpiece of the apartment: a soft and cool bed, like root-colored wall juxtaposed next to the history of old Berlin.

WHAT WOULD BE THE ULTIMATE DREAM PROJECT/COLLABORATION/CLIENT FOR SPANYOLOT?

I recently went to India to find new materials for a scarves collection we’ll launch in 2019. What started out as a textile hunt turned out to be a pretty great experience for enriching how we source fabrics.

I met with a charitable trust in Mahrashtra called WomenWearIndia. This organization supports the role of women in handloom weaving and is working toward making handlooms profitable, fulfilling, sustainable, and in demand income-generating activity particularly for women in rural areas of India. WomenWearIndia is all about fair trade/fair value for labor, environmental protection, and social enterprise.

These three days in Maharashtra will likely turn into a long-term collaboration with WomenWearIndia. While it exceptionally cool that the women from WomenWearIndia wear pretty much anything we want—hemp, linen, all kinds of—It’s also important that we were able to start a collaboration with an organization that supports women in such a profound way. We are excited about how this will impact the future of spanyolot.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR COLLABORATION WITH GOOP AND HOW THAT CAME ABOUT

Our dear friend and author Odette Williams has been featured in Goop’s Christmas gift guide for the last few years and felt like our goods would do well there, too. She did the introductions and the rest fell into place.

Working with Goop has been a dream because they value our design process and love how each of our pieces is one of a kind. In our experience, we’ve seen some retailers who dismiss the maker, and this was definitely not the case with Goop. They supported us every step of the way. In addition, their customer base is well educated in terms of provenance and investments in handmade, artisanal goods. For this reason, the collaboration between Goop and spanyolot has worked out beautifully. We could not be more excited to be a part of their family.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR SPANYOLOT?

It has been a dream to transition our product design business into concept design. Over the last few months we have evolved from designing soft goods into designing large-scale pieces like the pigmented wall in our Berlin apartment, to sectional sofas in Mahrashtra and Berlin, and hand-painted wall art for private clients. So we love to play with pillows and blankets, and we are looking forward to design overall concepts for their beloved spaces.

We were recently hired by a real estate developer in Berlin to design and stage a model apartment in Berlin beautiful Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood. In it, we are installing the vintage linen sectional sofas we designed and had built in Poland, alongside a few of our soft goods like pillows and blankets. On the center wall in the living room wall hanging paintings done on one of our most textured vintage hemp pieces. We hope to add other projects like this where we were involved in the clients interior design process early on. And of course, entering our footprint in the US and Europe through these kinds of projects is a hope as well.

AS BUSINESS OWNERS AND DESIGNERS WHO SHIFTED YOUR LIFE DRAMATICALLY TO DO WHAT YOU LOVE, WHAT ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS YOU WOULD GIVE TO OTHERS WHO MAY FEEL STUCK IN A JOB OR LIFE WHERE THEY FEEL UNFULFILLED?

feeling stuck is a major thing in every small business owner’s life: it happens a lot and it’s a feeling nothing. We are fortunate to have each other, so we support and nurture each other’s ideas, feelings, and aspirations on a daily basis. Our best piece of advice is to find someone—a friend, a therapist, a partner, or a trusted advisor—who can build you up and nurture your ideas from start to finish.