



QUEENS OF CROCHET



Spinning a yarn has been revived around the globe like never before – including at Mpumalanga community-based project, Ukuthunga Handmade. Their knots of love are being woven into the fabric of people’s lives in South Africa and abroad.



Leah Mavimbela

✕ Here's the thing: Crochet is cool. So cool, in fact, that there's a resurgence of learning and passing on this ancient skill, as evident in the number of courses and workshops available. But more than that, if international fashion catwalks are anything to go by, the likes of Valentino, De la Renta, and Carolina Herrera certainly seem to think so too. Heard of "yarn bombing"? Check out US-based crochet artist London Kaye.

The origins of crochet are tricky to trace. Earliest known records date back to 1824, but evidence suggests that women, in particular, have been sharing crochet patterns since well before then. Having gained popularity in Europe in the 19th century, some theories have it that this craft evolved long before this from traditional practices in Iran, South America and China.

A Crocheting Community Ukuthunga Handmade was born of the humble offer to teach people to crochet, and exudes virtue. Plant baskets, storage solutions, rugs, shopping bags and doorstops are just some of the beautiful artisanal products created by these women. Their baby range includes blankets, African animals and teddies.

"We are in a frighteningly exciting place. The organisation is evolving in a way we never imagined. Each day brings new opportunity and hope as we continue to grow," says co-founder Tana van Schalkwyk. From thread to thread, the original group of five has blossomed in the last two years to around 100 women from the Msholozzi, Backdoor, Sabie and Mphakeni communities. Their recent recognition at the Mpumalanga Arts & Culture Awards enabled upfront purchase of three months' worth of stock.

THREADS OF LOVE

Spontaneous praise and thanksgiving, through song and dance, impregnates the air in the small, simple, heart-warming shelter where these women practice their newly found skills. In addition to engendering an entrepreneurial spirit, this self-sufficient initiative offers a sense of purpose and hope. It is also flexible in how it operates, affording the opportunity to come and go as you please, based on whether employment is secured elsewhere – be it permanent, seasonal or contract. Unfinished pieces are often taken home for completion.

The model for how earnings are split is perhaps one of the best out there. It drives initiative and creativity, while balancing equitable distribution in that everyone feels included in the whole. Creating a once-off gem sees you earning individually from its sale. Making a standard piece sees the profit split evenly between the Ukuthunga craftswomen team. There are no margins elsewhere within the business.

“ Ukuthunga products are available to buy online from their Facebook page, as well as from local boutiques and retailers. Ukuthunga is NPO-registered and also makes bespoke, commissioned corporate and wedding guest gifts. ”



Gladys Mathansi

KNOTTING PEOPLE TOGETHER

The best part is you don't have to know how to crochet. Ukuthunga offers a rigorous training programme and has a quality-control process to ensure only the best quality and exquisitely handcrafted pieces are sold. Purchasing something from Ukuthunga means acquiring a lovingly made artwork, plus it goes towards a good cause.

Former teacher, Leah Mavimbela, has returned to her calling as chief of crochet training. She also leads innovation – some of her pioneering work includes the giraffe, warthog, hippo, lion, and llama soft toys. "I feel that I belong. We are a community with dignity and hope that puts food on the table. The work we do has far surpassed expectation. Our vision is to generate a R1,000 monthly supplementary income for each person. The golden number to achieve financial impetus would be securing a single order of 1,000 pieces," Leah says.



Namsa Mnisi



Doris Khoza



BY HOOK OR BY CROOK

I bet you didn't know that:

- **Crochet saved lives.** Many Irish people relied on earnings from the crochet pieces they created during the potato famine. There were even schools which taught locals to crochet so they could save up the money necessary to emigrate to America.
- **Corner to corner is an awesome new crochet technique.** Hats off to its inventor, because it's an amazing way to crochet blankets. Corner to corner, also known as c2c, is worked diagonally, as you create "pixels" with clusters of stitches.
- **There is such a thing as crochet boobs.** There's been recent hype over Knitted Knockers, a charity that provides special handmade breast prostheses for women who have undergone mastectomies or other procedures to the breast.
- **The largest ever crochet blanket measures about 36,500 m².** The Guinness World Record for the largest crochet blanket is held by Subashri Natarajan of India. She had the help of over 1,000 people to combine hundreds of 100 x 100 cm sections to create the massive piece. After the record was confirmed, much of the piece was donated to charities. ✂