

VIA dEsiGn

VIA is a company working in partnership with small local businesses and artisans in the majority world. It provides training in design and product development for tailoring and crafts, and helps build sustainable enterprise in marginalised Indian communities where few other opportunities exist.

An artist with a passion for justice, and a vision to empower disadvantaged people through design and business, I founded VIA Design in 2005 in response to a challenge which came when I was least expecting one. I had reasonable financial stability, a fulfilling and creative job for a London NGO, and had just bought my own flat... but a restless feeling, which I couldn't quite identify, had started to bubble up in me.

Memories of India

After finishing my degree in Fine Art, I had travelled for a few months in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. I visited many villages and cities, fascinated by the beautiful colours and light and by the people I met. In the villages, at the 'paddy field' level, I was struck by the use of nature-inspired patterns and motifs, as well as by the practical, functional and aesthetic aspects of design which were reflected in everyday objects like clay waterpots and the rangoli welcome patterns (sand or rice-flour painting) drawn freshly on the ground outside many of the houses each day.

My travels, and the people I met

on them, prompted me to change from fine art to applied art and design, with a desire to use my creativity in a more social context. Whenever I tried to unravel what it was that inspired me as an artist and as a Christian - to understand what I was trying to express in my painting - my thoughts always seemed to come back to people: to the human condition, and especially to the indomitable spirit and resourcefulness of the poorest people I had met in villages and on journeys.

I thought of the villagers who had taken time to sit and drink tea out of small clay cups with me; of the older women, their faces beautiful, yet wearied by years of caring for their families and of walking miles to fetch water each day; of the small children who ran up and held my hand and walked along with me. Wherever I went on that first journey to India I was accepted and felt at home - and yet something always made me feel uneasy. Although I was not rich I had something that most people I met on that journey had never experienced... the opportunity and freedom to make my own choices.

My Indian experience was also the catalyst for my MA project at the Royal College of Art in London, where I researched issues and challenges facing artisans in the majority world. During those first years of my research much of the Fair Trade movement was being established. Many of the movement's instigators were Christians, who felt compelled to make a difference through trade, and by paying fair prices to crafts and food





your time and your talents. What are you doing with all the creativity I gave you? What about the women in India you met all those years ago?" I can recall that moment as vividly as if it were yesterday. The voice was gentle, more of an invitation than an ultimatum, and prompted me to start praying about my creative future: how could I integrate my professional design skills with my Christian faith in a way that could really make a difference? I made a commitment to listen and respond to God, and in less than a month new doors began to open, and six months later my life took a radical new direction – back to India.

producers globally. In those early days, though, emphasis was placed on just getting the products sold, and the design side of the business was often ignored. I was saddened when I saw many of the products that were being imported from developing countries, as I felt they were a poor representation of the amazing skills and potential of the people that I had met on my travels. And indeed my research confirmed that design and marketing - what to make and how to sell it – were vital, but missing, links in making Fair Trade viable.

The challenge

Ten years after completing my MA, as I sat at my desk in London on a Monday morning, I heard the still, small voice of God say to me: "One day you will stand before Me and I will ask you how you used



VIA Design

The word 'via' means 'the way through', and the purpose of VIA Design is to help release people from difficult circumstances and irregular income. Our bottom line is not just about making profit – we're here to empower people and their communities.

VIA Design acts like a link in a chain – working to provide design assistance, to guide sample and product development so that the production process can run smoothly, and to help procure orders and increase routes to market. More than thirty designers and business professionals have worked with VIA since 2006, for periods of two weeks up to two and a half years. Most of them have been volunteers who have raised their own support in order to make this vision of empowering people via design a

reality. It is this shared vision, passion and commitment that has helped make VIA a success.

We have received some wonderful feedback from clients and customers on the quality and design of our products, which has been of great encouragement to the women who work in the production unit. We recently held a training workshop in machine-knitted textiles, which we hope will lead to a new product line. A corporate client is working with us on scaling up, helping to leverage larger orders and become more sustainable.

The women we work with in Tamil Nadu are enjoying their new status within the community, and the challenge of developing valuable skills. One young woman recently informed us that she would like to start

her own tailoring business within the next three years, using the skills that she learned through VIA. She plans to be able to provide employment for up to five people. We were delighted to hear this, and will ensure that she gets the business support that will help her dream become a reality.

VIA has also been able to help with fundraising for a new medical centre, over the last year, which will benefit the local community of several hundred farming families – currently the nearest hospital is 15 kilometres away. Building work will start by early August.

We've seen encouraging progress over the last few years, and are just about to launch our online shop (www.viadesign.org). Starting a new business is never easy, but when people come together with a shared vision it becomes very exciting. We have plans to expand over the next five years, so that the VIA concept - vision, inspiration, action - can benefit other communities, and countries beyond India. But good planning on its own is not enough... we need God to hold all our partnerships together. With Him at the heart of VIA, and by reflecting Christian values in the way we work, we will continue to not only empower people through business and design, but offer them hope and a future through God's unconditional love. ✨

Janet is a UK Partner and a designer with extensive experience in development and business and strong links with India.

