



ARTISAN WORK IN AMSTERDAM

Among the asylum seekers coming to the Netherlands are plenty of artisans with 'a pair of good hands'. A foundation called the Refugee Company is connecting them with Dutch students, artists, companies and organizations so that they can put their craft to use instead of losing these skills.

Professionals can always recognize each other's talent. You don't need to speak the same language; your hands do all the talking. "You can tell by looking at how someone manages a sewing machine or handles woodcarving tools," says architect and designer Femke Bijlsma. "Are the movements automated? Can you tell there is muscle memory? You can see it, and recognize it in each other, and it also makes it possible to tell what level of skill someone has." Femke is one of the founders of the Refugee Company, a foundation in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, that helps refugees make use of their skills while they are waiting for their residence permit. Furniture makers, Frans Konijn (Dutch) and Ousama Alahmad (Syrian), for example, crafted various pieces of furniture together, which were then displayed in a pop-up atelier.

"Frans only needed to demonstrate how something was done one time and Ousama was then able to do it," Femke says. "Frans could immediately tell, yes, that's a pair of good hands." Making things together is a great way to connect. "Power imbalance or dependency issues don't play any part then," Femke says. "You are all on equal footing."

Syrian artist Yara Said, coordinator and designer with the Refugee Company and in the Netherlands since September 2015, adds that many Syrians "don't realize that much of what you see in the shops here has been imported from other countries. In Syria we make far more things by hand, and it wouldn't hurt for Syrians to become more aware of how special that is. It's a winning combination: We give you our hands and you teach us more about creativity." >

Tailor Mahmoud Al Omar from Syria and Stacy Denzel Janmaat surrounded by rolls of denim fabric in Denim City in Amsterdam.

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SORRY, NO GOOD

Stacy Denzel Janmaat of Denim City—a center for craftsmanship and innovation in the denim industry in Amsterdam—was already interested six years ago in working together with refugees from the Middle East—although he prefers the term ‘New Dutchies’. “The respect you get over there when you have a measuring tape dangling around your neck is something you just don’t get to experience very often over here,” he says. “I’m self-taught, and I really wanted to meet a tailor from the Middle East who could show me better techniques.”

Via the Refugee Company, he finally came into contact with Mahmoud Al Omar from Syria, who started training as a tailor at the age of nine. “In Mahmoud I have found someone who understands me, even though he doesn’t speak Dutch,” Stacy says. “I’m creative and I have wild ideas, but I sometimes find it difficult to turn these ideas into reality. I can’t draw and I cut, stitch and mess about for as long as it takes to make what I want. Now, when I explain to Mahmoud what I want to create—using my hands and feet to communicate—he makes it exactly like I want. You don’t have to understand each other’s language to be able to understand each other. Mahmoud is illiterate, so he can’t read or write Arabic. But he’s learning Dutch and the funny thing is, sometimes I’ll use sounds to explain something, like *psshhh* to indicate something needs ironing, and he’ll say, ‘Not *psshhh*, *strijken*’, the Dutch word for ironing.”

The mediocre culture that, Stacy says, Dutch people grow up with, is unacceptable to Mahmoud. “Sorry, no good,” he says to the students of the Jean School (where craftsmanship of denim design and development is taught) when they submit mediocre work. “When you’re at school, that kind of work will get you a pass, but

ASYLUM SEEKER OR REFUGEE?

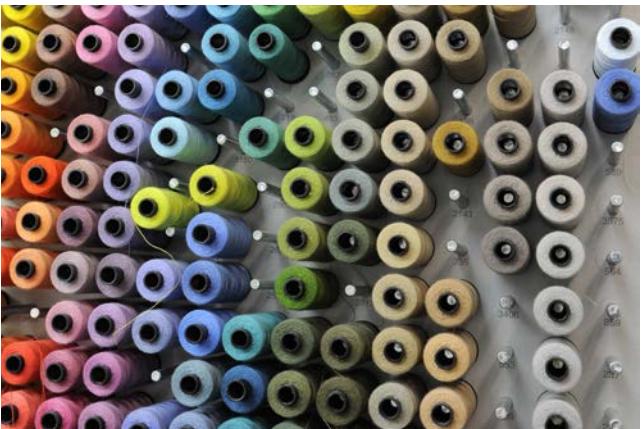
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An asylum seeker is someone who has requested asylum—protection in another country. The immigration service of the country where asylum is sought must then determine if the person requires a safe haven; once they have, a residence permit is issued to the asylum seeker, who is then considered a refugee.
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not in the real world,” Stacy says. “In business it has to be good or it won’t be accepted. Those three words, ‘Sorry, no good’, also mean ‘You can make more of yourself, like I did, so go do it’. When Mahmoud is asked what he learns from Stacy, he says: “Creativity. And working patiently. Before, I had to meet a certain production target, and sometimes things would get finished differently than intended.” Stacy adds: “When Mahmoud would break a thread, he would just rethread and continue, but I can’t do that; I want the entire stitching to be done all over again, which is kind of a bummer if you were almost done. So that caused some disagreement.”

COOKING WITHOUT ELECTRICITY

Artist Fiona de Bell is the initiator of Cascoland, an organization that offers a platform to people with many qualities that are not instantly visible. Danawid Tesfawne from Eritrea met Fiona via Femke Bijlsma; Danawid was holding an Eritrean coffee ceremony in the atelier of the Refugee Company and it soon became apparent that she is also a terrific cook. After that, Cascoland built a mobile kitchen at FabCity, a temporary self-sufficient city in Amsterdam, and thus gave Danawid a platform to show her skills in baking *injera*—an Eritrean type of bread that is also eaten in Ethiopia. Danawid learned how to bake this spongy flatbread—which is made from teff, a wheat from that region that is also available in the Netherlands—when she was nine years old from her mother, who learned it from her mother.

“FabCity was an off-grid campus, so there was no electricity,” Fiona says. “In Eritrea, and in Italy and Mexico too, they have been baking bread in a low-energy way for centuries, namely for two or three minutes in a pan. While we are used to preheating an oven and then baking the bread in it, which is relatively high-energy use for a small loaf of bread. That’s what we tried to show in FabCity, that there are other ways to bake bread and that every culture has its own techniques.” As there was also no refrigeration at FabCity, they had to find an alternative way to store food. “We looked at old ways to preserve food, such as pickling, fermenting and salting,” Fiona says. “We asked our grandmothers and mothers about how they used to do this. Danawid also shared her knowledge about preserving food and we supplemented it with new techniques. We have lost a lot of knowledge about these methods because we live in a time when we can go to the >



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- 1. Mahmoud Al Omar busy at work at Denim City in Amsterdam.
- 2. Mahmoud and Stacy. The pair works well together and Mahmoud is able to create exactly what Stacy has in mind.
- 3. Artist Fiona de Bell, and Danawit Tesfawne from Eritrea.



1. Danawid with a plate of injera.
2. One of Feras Dahhan's artworks.
3. FabCity, a temporary self-sufficient campus on Java-eiland in Amsterdam (Spring 2016).
4. Metal artist Feras Dahhan from Syria and Eelco Wagenaar, artist.

supermarket and buy fresh food every day. In the old days, you would preserve the abundance of vegetables available in season; it's a very good way to prevent food surplus."

LAMPSHADE COLLABORATION

Dutch artist Eelco Wagenaar needed some help with an art project that involved a lot of metal work. He found it in Feras Dahhan from Syria, whom he met through friends who work in refugee centers. Feras is from Aleppo, and used to own a large atelier. He was what you could call a metal artist; he made decors for theaters and concert halls, as well as his own work. His father had a metal workshop and that's where Feras learned the trade. "I was making a gigantic steel lampshade that was large enough for ten people to stand up in," Eelco says. "A fire in the middle creates a play of shadows, wherein the forms of the people inside the lampshade can be seen on the outer part of the fabric." Eelco believes that working together is better than making things on your own, and Feras helped him several times in making steel constructions.

"It was really funny working together, actually," Eelco says. "Feras looks at things from a completely different angle. He looks at things like an artisan. I come from an industrial background; I was trained as an engineer and have a lot of technical knowledge. Feras completely disagreed with the way I was doing some things. For example, I had made some tools for curling the metal beautifully and he didn't really approve; he wanted to make things by hand. I thought that was a pretty interesting difference between how we are used to making things in the west and his labor-intensive way of working."

Another instance was when it came to creating an entrance for the lampshade. "I needed a kind of doorway so that people could easily step inside," says Eelco. "Feras found a great solution for that, which I wouldn't have been able to think of."

The artists and designers at the incubator space where Eelco works collected tools for Feras so that he could continue working independently. Today he is working on a show of his own work and giving workshops to children via the Refugee Company, where they make little animals out of metal. "Working with children is new for me, and I'm really enjoying it," Feras says. "Maybe I could become an art teacher." ●

TEXT CAROLINE BUIJS PHOTOGRAPHY CAROLINE COEHORST STYLING ANNE-MARIE REM

SAVE THE CRAFTS

Femke Bijlsma and Fleur Bakker are the founders of the Refugee Company, a foundation in Amsterdam that helps refugees make use of their skills while they are waiting for their residence permit.

"Fleur and I met at a think tank meeting for alternative shelters," says Femke. "Fleur had years of experience in organizing activities for children at asylum seekers' centers, and I had just graduated with a design for new ways for people, such as asylum seekers, to live together. You can try all you want to make things 'more fun' in asylum seekers' centers, but in the end there is only one thing that counts: Being part of society or at least finding a way to get a foot in the door. Many refugees stand outside of society; they have barely any contact with the locals (in our case, the Dutch), and vice versa. Why is that, we wondered? It's so unnecessary, surely, to have these parallel worlds. We could see people, regardless of their education level, entering the Netherlands with great skills that we are barely familiar with here anymore: Some knew how to make rugby balls by hand, for example. And there are plenty of people in the Netherlands who find that very interesting. Students at the Design Academy, for example, often travel to regions where they can learn very specific regional crafts. Well, now they don't have to travel so far."

But in the period before people attain refugee status they are not allowed to work. "Often the waiting periods are so long, people lose all sense of motivation and drive," Femke says. "So there is this large group of people who are not allowed to work legally, but there is something they are allowed to do and that is work on their craft skills. Which is why we created Save the Crafts, a program within the Refugee Company."

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- * Refugeecompany.com
- * Denimcity.org
- * Cascoland.com
- * Facebook: World art Feras Dahhan