What Does Handmade Actually Mean?

BY SOPHIE BENSON

Brands are reaching for the language of craft to set themselves apart in an increasingly industrial, AI-driven market — but without a shared definition, 'handmade' risks going the way of 'sustainable'.

Photo: Handmade Future

"All clothing is handmade." In recent years, this has become a popular refrain in sustainable fashion circles, often used to reconnect the clothes we wear with the people who make them. The logic is that no garment is made solely by a machine: even in the most technology-forward supply chains, human hands are needed to manipulate fabric under a sewing machine's needle, perform intricate tasks like adding lace inserts, and fix inevitable flaws.

The refrain is well-intentioned, but experts say it risks flattening the nuances of fashion manufacturing, which ranges from industrial to artisanal. Adding to the confusion is the fact that more and more brands are embracing 'handmade' to differentiate themselves from an increasingly industrial, AI-driven market, running the risk of 'craft-washing'.

This is the case at both ends of the fashion spectrum. The luxury slowdown in 2025 saw luxury brands hemorrhaging tens of millions of consumers, forcing the industry to shore up its position and reaffirm its appeal. One strategy was flexing the artistry involved, referencing a global network of skilled craftspeople who can be called upon for everything from beading to embroidery, using time-consuming processes to justify high price tags.

“We’ve seen a wave of new creative director appointments, from Jonathan Anderson at Dior to Matthieu Blazy at Chanel, with brands applying real budget, ateliers, and manpower to create highly artisanal collections,” says designer Róisín Pierce, whose own luxury womenswear brand incorporates intricate handcrafts such as crochet and lacemaking. “Even their ready-to-wear is blurring the lines, edging closer to couture.”

Backstage at Róisín Pierce’s FW25 show. The collection, Nothing Pure Can Stay, features handmade techniques including crochet, lacemaking, and smocking. Photo: Victor Rakosnik / Courtesy of Róisín Pierce

But the mid and mass-market have been hot on luxury’s heels, tapping into trends such as quiet luxury to appeal to high-low shoppers and create a reputational demarcation between themselves and ultra-fast fashion newcomers. Brands from The Frankie Shop and Ganni to Asos and H&M have also embraced the language and aesthetic of handmade, particularly as techniques such as macramé and crochet have become sought-after trends. While knitting, weaving, and sewing can be done by machine at scale, macramé and crochet cannot, leading to machine-made facsimiles being branded as ‘macramé-style’, ‘crochet knitted’ (an oxymoron), or ‘handmade look’.

Even before Google searches for ‘handmade fashion’ spiked in 2026, the broader industry took note: in 2025, women’s magazine Marie Claire released its first annual Craftsmanship Issue, and Woolmark introduced ‘A Return to Handmade’ as a category for its international talent prize. The term is also increasingly used as a proxy for ‘ethical’ or ‘sustainable’ at a time when such terms

are met with mistrust and confusion. A 2026 study in the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* found that brands use handmade language to signal social responsibility — particularly in times of crisis.

"With AI and this technological revolution, there's a craving for authenticity, human connection, and human touch. Companies have capitalized on that, but some are definitely overusing the term," says Rebecca van Bergen, founder and executive director of Nest, a non-profit that advocates for artisans, makers, and the global craft sector. "We actually keep a running list in our office [of products that are marketed as handmade], as a joke. [Brands have applied it to everything] from potato chips to car parts."

If 'handmade' is to avoid the same nebulous, ill-defined fate as 'sustainable', critical assessment from the consumer side, and clarity from the brand side, will be essential.

Arriving at a definition

To understand when and where the handmade label is appropriate, you first have to define exactly what handmade is.

When you sift through products labeled as such, it's very likely a machine has been involved somewhere along the way, perhaps to weave the fabric that becomes a dress or to spin the wool that becomes a sweater. A piece that has been made by hand from start to finish — spun, woven, stitched together, finished — would likely be prohibitively expensive due to the time intensity, says Janhavi Dave, advisor at HomeNet International, which represents home-based workers across 30 countries. It is reasonable to expect some machine intervention, she says, but the mere act of using hands to operate machines isn't enough to deem a product handmade.

In the 2026 documentary *Handmade Future*, filmmaker Kirsten Dickerson saw this distinction up close, working with artisans to document the heritage and (often uncertain) future of crafts such as weaving, leather work and hand block-printing, all of which involve manipulating materials by hand or using hand tools. At Studio Bagru — which works with 350 families in the Indian town of Bagru, Rajasthan — artisans use a hand-carved teak block to manually apply layers of dye to the surface of fabric. A single block can take 15 days to carve. The complete process is split across three sub-communities: those who carve the blocks, those who wash and prepare the fabric, and those who do the printing.

A behind the scenes shot from 2026 documentary Handmade Future, featuring the Anou artisans from Numedia Cooperative in Morocco, handcrafting Handira blankets. Photo: Grace Copeland

> “Sometimes, when we call something handmade, we reduce it to an aesthetic. We see the irregularity and call it handmade. But the real value is the knowledge and the labor behind the irregularity.”
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> MONIKA SHRIVASTAVA, OKERA STUDIO

Shrivastava, a former creative project manager at Studio Bagru who now runs her own Jaipur-based studio, adds: “Block-printing has a language that exists in the hands of the people [who do it].”

Though many characteristics of handmaking are unquantifiable, some have sought to drill down on a distinct, unified definition. Craftmark has authenticated handcrafted processes from across India since 2006, distinguishing each craft separately rather than applying a blanket definition. For instance, hand embroidery is broken down into five distinct categories of Indian craft, with each then defined by the raw materials, tools, and processes involved. Unesco, meanwhile, sought to create its own definition for ‘craft or artisanal products’, described in its glossary as “products that are produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product.”

A Bagru printing artisan hand carves an intricate printing block from teak. Photo: Monika Shrivastava

Nest landed on handcrafted rather than handmade. Handcrafted products must embody two key aspects: “The use of one’s hands and the physical effort, energy, and dexterity to shape, form, or create”, and “The use of one’s technical skills, knowledge, and experience beyond the utilization of a predetermined guiding form.”

The definition goes hand in hand with Nest Verified Handcrafted, a third-party verification launched in June 2026 to designate products as either fully or partially handcrafted. To date, around 2,500 SKUs have been verified, including a crocheted and beaded dress from Dôen’s recent anniversary collection. Rare rejections usually come down to the technique not meeting the definition of handcrafted. Currently there are 14 verified handcrafted techniques defined in the model, including embroidery, knitting and crochet, and patchwork.

Dôen's crocheted and beaded dress was among the first products to be certified as Nest Verified Handcrafted™. Photo: Courtesy of Dôen

"Part of our hope is that brands can be a little clearer in their communication," says van Bergen, noting that there's nothing wrong with a product being partially handcrafted. "A pillow can be machine-made and the embroidery handcrafted, but there [should] be honesty in [specifying that]."

The people behind the craft

For Dickerson, *Handmade Future* was about honoring the people behind the products and telling their stories. It's an approach brands are beginning to embrace, too.

Australian brand Alémais has incorporated artisanal capsule collections into every release since its launch in 2021. It uses dedicated labeling, product page information, and social media to draw attention to the communities, individuals, and studios it works with, across crafts including beading, macramé, smocking, appliqué, and embroidery. "A big part of this is showing the craftsmanship rather than simply talking about it, allowing customers to see the patience, precision and incredible skill involved in creating each piece," says the brand's founder and creative director Lesleigh Jermanus.

The hand beading process behind Alémais's beaded bags is carried out by artisans in India. Photo: Courtesy of Alémais

Though the spotlight is shifting, the people handmaking our clothes, shoes, and accessories remain largely invisible, particularly because a significant portion are home-based workers, distanced from audited factories and brand traceability programs by as many as seven intermediaries.

Brands collaborating with home-based artisans span the full spectrum of fashion, from Liberty to Gap, says HomeNet International's Dave. To that end, HomeNet International acts as a network federating unions, cooperatives, and membership organizations at a global scale. It currently represents 1.5 million home-based workers. Often informal and ad-hoc, home-based working can draw assumptions of exploitation. These assumptions are not unfounded, says Dave, but HomeNet International supports home-based workers — 95% of whom are women — as they navigate patriarchal expectations to stay at home, a lack of safe mobility to work outside the home, and care responsibilities, while still earning a living through skilled work.

Piece rate (being paid per product delivered) is the norm, another scenario that often sets off alarm bells for exploitation, as many unions globally have fought to have piece rates abolished. However, Dave explains that it *can* work, provided brands engage with unions or producer organizations that can bargain for the inclusion of so-called social protection in their fee. It can cost less than $1 extra per piece for a brand, but tops up piece rates for workers, so they amount to a fair wage that can support rights such as sick leave and holidays. For this to happen, brands mustn't shy away from acknowledging the home-based workers in their supply chains, but identify them and engage, says Dave.

In 2023, for example, Alémais formalized its artisanal sourcing policy and strategy, recognizing the different ways of working and accommodating for longer lead times, different payment

structures, and additional sourcing support, says Jermanus. It also works with formal certifications, where available, to underpin its commitments to responsible sourcing.

One certification available to brands is Nest's Ethical Handcraft Seal. While Nest Verified Handcrafted determines whether a product was handcrafted, the Ethical Handcraft Seal proves it was handcrafted ethically, spanning workers' rights, child labor, fair compensation and benefits, and business transparency.

While Nest certifies handcrafted supply chains, newcomer the Artisan Network And Authenticity Registry (ANAAR) makes them visible in the first place. It will launch as part of British brand Tammam's London Fashion Week show, and artisans will be invited to create a profile from September 19. The blockchain-based system will map makers, materials, and methods to provide "proof of making" to suppliers, brands, and consumers. Free to use for artisans, the system allows them to upload imagery of the making process to the ANAAR platform, immutably linking their profile to products, while protecting confidentiality and intellectual property. The result is a product that holds the details of every single artisan involved in its creation.

Left: master block printers with their handiwork. Middle: fabric hand dyed by artisans drying in the sun. Right: Bagru printing artisan Sushila Chhipa prints fabric by hand. Photos: Handmade Future (film still) / Stacia Hiramine

Currently, designer and ANAAR co-founder Lucy Tammam believes it's too easy to falsify information due to the opaque and global nature of supply chains. A supplier could, for instance, say a fabric is hand-embroidered and a buyer would be forced to take them at their word. "We're removing the opportunity to falsify information, because the verification happens at source with the person who makes it," she says. "Artisans register against a set taxonomy of crafts and specializations, with practice level, years of experience, location, work history, and portfolio, all checked before any of it is public. A profile moves from registered to credential-verified as evidence is submitted and checked."

Valuing skills

For brands selling products under the terms handmade, handcrafted and artisanal, it is crucial that products have indeed been manipulated by human hands. But perhaps even more important

is placing sufficient economic value on the time and skill involved. A beaded bag in Alémais's collection can take up to 27 hours of hand-beading to create, and retails for around £500. At the mass-market level, handbeaded bags can retail for a tenth of that price, belying the hours of work behind them, while those not defined as handmade can retail for as little as £30.

But asking consumers to pay a higher price for a handmade product doesn't necessarily mean the value is passed on to the people that made it. It's common for fashion brands to hike up prices while asking suppliers to produce for less and less. If brands don't want to pass on higher prices to consumers, or pay the required cost to suppliers, they should target simpler, less time-intensive processes such as picking an embroidered trim instead of an all-over motif, says Dave. This would help to sustain a broader market without squeezing workers.

At Okera Studio, Shrivastava says her pricing matrix is set according to factors such as block size, intricacy of the pattern, and the number of colorways, while she sets lead times according to sample trials, factoring in externalities such as family vacations the artisans have planned and even the weather. "[Block-printing] was never made for mass production," she explains. "It takes time. It's a slow process."

The renewed enthusiasm for handmade products could be a boon for reviving crafts that have long been under threat — but it must be underpinned with a unified vocabulary and suitably valued.

> "What's very important for anyone working with craftspeople is deep respect. The handwork, skill, and dedication need to be appreciated, not seen as a commodity."
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> RÓISÍN PIERCE, DESIGNER

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