

COCKPIT ARTS

Mark Tallowin Leather craftsman



Mark Tallowin has an ambition: to be recognised as the top handbag maker in London. Working with the finest materials, Mark painstakingly handcrafts each bag to exacting specifications. From the 'clicking out' to the finishing touches, each step in the designing and making process is the responsibility of a single craftsman. 'I insist upon a completely handmade product for one simple reason - the end results are far superior,' asserts Mark.

Mark is well aware of the sheer magnitude of the goal he has set himself. He is, after all, up against the luxury handbag market. Yet his passion for his craft is infectious. 'I come to the fashion world as a craftsman,' he says. He believes that a handbag should last a lifetime, rather than be replaced season upon season. Accordingly, he only offers designs which are classic, stylish and timeless, so they will never go out of fashion.

'There's no reason why my handbags can't last for many, many years,' he says. 'Sustainability should not be seen as a desirable 'extra'; absolutely everything we do should be sustainable for the long term. In a tiny way, I want to make sure I am contributing to this.'

Mark comes to leatherwork from a tool making background, having learnt the method of hand stitching while making sheaths for custom knives. Largely self-taught, he spent a year honing his skills before creating his first CORE collection which he launched with a simple but ingenious marketing campaign last year. Called the 4.4.8 experiment, Mark made just four bags and gave each one to four influential people in the fashion industry (including *Guardian* fashion editor Jess Cartner-Morley). After a week, each person sent him their feedback, then passed the bag on to a person of their choosing - and so on, for eight weeks. At the end of the experiment, 32 people had used his products, written about them for his website, talked about them, and taken them everywhere.

The experiment not only created a great opportunity to let the world know about his bags, it also gave him much-needed product feedback. 'Some of the closures looked fantastic, but the functionality wasn't as seamless as it should have been, so I've completely changed that,' says Mark. 'Each bag has had three or four major improvements and loads of little twists. Everything's been honed.'

This kind of tenacity and exuberance for a traditional craft brought him to Cockpit Arts in July 2013, where he now has one of the newly refurbished ground floor studios in the Deptford incubator. Given the very early stage of Mark's business, one-to-one coaching with the Business Development Team has concentrated on



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pricing and positioning for the luxury goods market. 'In the early days, these sessions were like a much-needed MOT,' says Mark. 'I'm very close to my business, so sometimes it's hard to see the wood for the trees.'

'I realise I am being very ambitious in my aims,' he continues, 'and the problem can therefore be that I never quite get my feet on the ground. The Business Development Team are very good at helping me focus on what's important and where my strengths and weaknesses lie,' he says. 'They are also great at holding me to account, checking to make sure I have actually done the things set out in my business plan.'

Mark also cites the Cockpit community as being enormously beneficial to his business. 'There is an amazing density of knowledge within these walls, and people are very generous with sharing their knowledge,' he says. 'It's refreshing to know that even well-established businesses struggle with the same issues that I do.'

Mark believes that if he didn't have a studio at Cockpit, his business would probably be about six months behind where it is now. 'For example, I have recently started gold plating some of the brass fittings on my bags,' he explains. 'Before coming to Cockpit that's something that would have been on the back burner for months, but now I'm next door to an amazing jeweller who can instantly put me in touch with a good platers, so these things happen much more quickly.'

Mark also feels that having a studio at Cockpit Arts has leant kudos to his business. 'Cockpit Arts means something in the wider world,' he says. Open Studios in particular has helped to grow Mark's fan base and at this summer's event lead to several new commissions, as well as making individual sales and meeting existing and potential customers.

With the waiting list for his bags growing, scalability has inevitably become an issue, and Mark hasn't ruled out a more straightforward route to market in the future. He's been approached about teaching master classes in hand stitching, and likes the idea of passing on such highly specialised craft skills to the next generation. He may even take on an apprentice in the future. But for the moment he is happiest taking a slow and steady approach. 'Building my confidence in what I'm doing is much more important to me than saying I'm turning over so much, or stocked in these places,' he states.

In the last year, Mark has completed a commission to make a bespoke case for Billecart-Salmon Champagne and showed work at Christie's as part of the Multiplied Art Fair. His work has been featured in *Elle India* and *New York Magazines' The Cut*, and he was invited to join *Hole & Corner* magazine as Craftsman in Residence during their time at a pop-up showroom in Piccadilly. In February he was invited to join the Fashion Innovation Agency's bank of prestigious designers, alongside Antipodium, Agi&Sam, Oliver Ruuger and Phoebe English.

Mark is currently busy preparing for the imminent launch of a fifth bag which he has added to his capsule made-to-order collection. Alongside this, he has also produced a range of wallets in order to broaden his appeal for the men's market.

Just as we were going to press, it was announced that Mark had won this year's Cockpit Arts/The Leathersellers' Award, an opportunity he says he would never have considered without the support of the Business Development Team. The award will pay for his current studio space for another year. 'Being in craft is a tough life,' he says. 'But when you have the opportunity to make a go of it, it's fantastic.'

(Additional quotes taken from New York Magazine's *The Cut*. To read the full article, go to <http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/06/how-a-designer-got-chic-bags-into-right-hands.html>)