



In Stitches

THE ONLY TIME WE SAW THEM SIT STILL WAS WHEN THEY BEGAN TO STITCH. DYNAMIC, LEATHER-LOVING DESIGN COUPLE TRINA AND RUBEN FLORES INVITE US INTO THEIR HOME-TURNED-WORKSHOP AND TRACK HOW IT TOOK THEM A FASCINATION WITH MATERIALS, SOME JAPANESE ILLUSTRATIONS, AND A BIG FRAGILE STICKER TO GET FROM BAG 0000 TO BAG 0738.

By Nina Unlay
Photographs by Sonny Thakur

What it must be like to come home to the smell of leather. That's all we could think about as we stepped into the Bags by Rubbertree headquarters—a cozy house filled with cool things we'll describe as relics: dusty old bikes and paintings that Trina told us she made way back when for her art classes in college. When we stepped outside to their patio, we found the source of the addictive leather aroma; rolls upon rolls of hides in different colors and textures, comfortably piled atop one another. There were tools foreign to us spread across a table. We offered to wait and watch while Trina and Ruben finished their work, but they warned us that they might fall into a Zen-like trance.

Besides the eponymous bags, the duo also makes accessories, such as key fobs, cable organizers and an ingenious "pen hoarder," all of which are made with leather. All these pieces are hand-stitched and -punched, which explains the state of concentration they fall into when working. We took short breaks in between our leather addiction (which involved a lot of touching different piles and pieces of leather) to find out more about Bags by Rubbertree.

GRID: How did you figure out that you wanted to start Bags by Rubbertree?

TRINA: We started a few years back. But even a couple of years prior to that, we got our first leather hide. It was supposed to be a gift for me [*Ruben laughs*]. We're very much into materials with our line of work. We're designers. Part of our routine is to look for materials. We went to a leather warehouse here in the Philippines.



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RUBEN: I went straight to work. I got the hide, found the piece, created a pattern, cut the leather up, and then I decided to start stitching it. So, I went online to search for methods, when I realized, "Trina, kailangan pala ipa-punch ito..." so that was that. We were done styling the piece, so we rolled it up and placed it on the shelf. It stayed there for three years.

TRINA: Three years until I found this Japanese lady who hand-stitches bags. She had a book, so we ordered it. We were so excited, but we ordered via post, so the seller told us it would take three weeks. By the fifth week, we went to the post office ourselves. Of course we were very excited. But when we opened the book, it was all in Japanese. So we had to kind of figure out what she meant really; at least the book was very well-illustrated.

When did you launch the shop?

TRINA: It's good to have a big family and a lot of friends. [Laughs] We chronologically number our bags, but from Bag 0000 to Bag 0020, the first 20 bags maybe, we had to note that it was a study. We tagged the bags as Study 0001, Study 0002, until we were more confident. For our first art fair, we had 12 bags, and we had a few small pieces. We didn't even have a catalogue. Now, we're at Bag 0738.

Do you have any favorite bags with interesting stories?

RUBEN: We try to make special pieces for the nice round numbers.

TRINA: Bag 0500, that's the rolled up travel bag. That one, on our trip, we had to check it in because it was too heavy for us to hand-carry. We didn't want to but I realized it was best if we went through this rather than someone who bought it from us. So, I told the lady to put a big fragile sign on it. And she asked, "Is there anything fragile inside?" and I said, "No, it's actually for the bag..." We were praying while it came out of the conveyor belt that it would be okay, but it was. It was a-ok.

Where do you purchase your leather?

TRINA: We purchase it locally, but it's still imported. Largely from Japan and Taiwan.

RUBEN: A few from Europe.

TRINA: It always comes as a surprise to us because supply isn't steady. The hides we get will only be available at a particular time. During the next leather-shopping trip we make, [the suppliers] won't have it anymore. It makes the bags interesting, really, because it becomes one-of-a-kind in that sense. We always say that even if we use one full hide, and two identically cut bags, when they're constructed, they look totally different from each other.



What do you look for in your materials?

RUBEN: We've learned to choose leather with the natural grain intact. Others might use leather with the stamp grain.

TRINA: We try to veer away from pressed and stamped leather. Stamped means that they might add some sort of grain to the material apart from the natural story of the hide.

How would you describe your design process?

TRINA: Our peg is ourselves. How we use bags. I firmly believe that your bag is an extension of your body, so it shouldn't have any unnecessary items on it or with it. All the bags by far are edited and designed that way.

RUBEN: The basic shapes are pretty simple because we usually use one whole piece of leather as a single bucket, so we have no stitches or attachments on the bottom, nothing to break down there.

TRINA: And it makes the bag much lighter. A lot of people are surprised that our bags are light, and it's because of how we construct it. Through the years we've seen how strong the material is. I used to be afraid of letting it get wet or scratched, but now we just leave it alone and we know that it'll be okay.

RUBEN: Same with the stitching. We used to do a lot of double-stitching, everything was doubled up. Until we realized that as long as the stitches were properly positioned, it didn't need to be that thick.

TRINA: As long as the tensions in the piece are well distributed, the bag will last you a long time. We make sure that it's not overbuilt. We have to make room for the owner to make the bag his or her own, we can't dictate like, "this pocket is for your cellphone, this pocket is for your pen and you can't put anything else in it!"

RUBEN: Everyone uses their bag differently, so we try to put some generous pockets that are open for use.

TRINA: We also don't line the bags. We don't mix materials, meaning no fabric or polyester. The leather will naturally outlast the lining. If someone asks for five pockets, those will be five pockets of leather. We feel like it adds an authenticity to it. You know you're getting quality leather, and you know you're getting good hide because it's thick and it's clean inside and out.

*We're in love with their leather creations, and you'll find yourself falling for them, too, after you check out **[bagsbyrubbertree.com](#)** and go through their Instagram account **[@bagsbyrubbertree](#)**.*