

Prairie Style on Point

Makers across the Prairies unleash their creativity in fashion, accessories, and homewares

By Jeff Baker

When you think of high-end style in the world of fashion, accessories, and homewares, your mind probably goes to places like Paris, Milan, Tokyo, New York, and London. You probably think runways at fashion week, Anna Wintour of Vogue in the front row, and the bright flashes of the photographers trying to get a glimpse of the latest creations from the major fashion and design houses around the globe.

Well, what if I told you that even at those major international and national events, it's not just the just the big names like Chanel and Dior that make a splash?

Would you believe me if I told you those smaller designers and artisans are coming from places such as Central Alberta, Western Manitoba, and even the Cypress Hills?

Believe it, because that's where some of the most creative, innovative, high-quality, and award-winning fashion, accessories, and homewares are coming from. And they're taking on their own slices of the world in a uniquely Prairie way.

It's definitely his bag

In Manitoba, on a small farm outside Forrest Station, between Minnedosa and Brandon, lives an artist creating and handcrafting internationally award-winning leather goods, including handbags, clutches, briefcases, and belts.

Manitoba artist Adam French, otherwise known as Adan Ballou (which is also the name of his company), has gained recognition

for his lovingly crafted bags made from leathers he tans himself and metals that he hand-pours in his on-site foundry.

The bags today are the culmination of a continuing journey that has so far taken French from Canada to Morocco, Mexico, to places in between, and back home to Manitoba, with each stop being a source of inspiration and energy for his creative process.

Creating and designing has always been a part of French's life. In fact, he's the nephew of Eldon Hagglund, the first Canadian fashion designer to apprentice with Christian Dior in Paris.

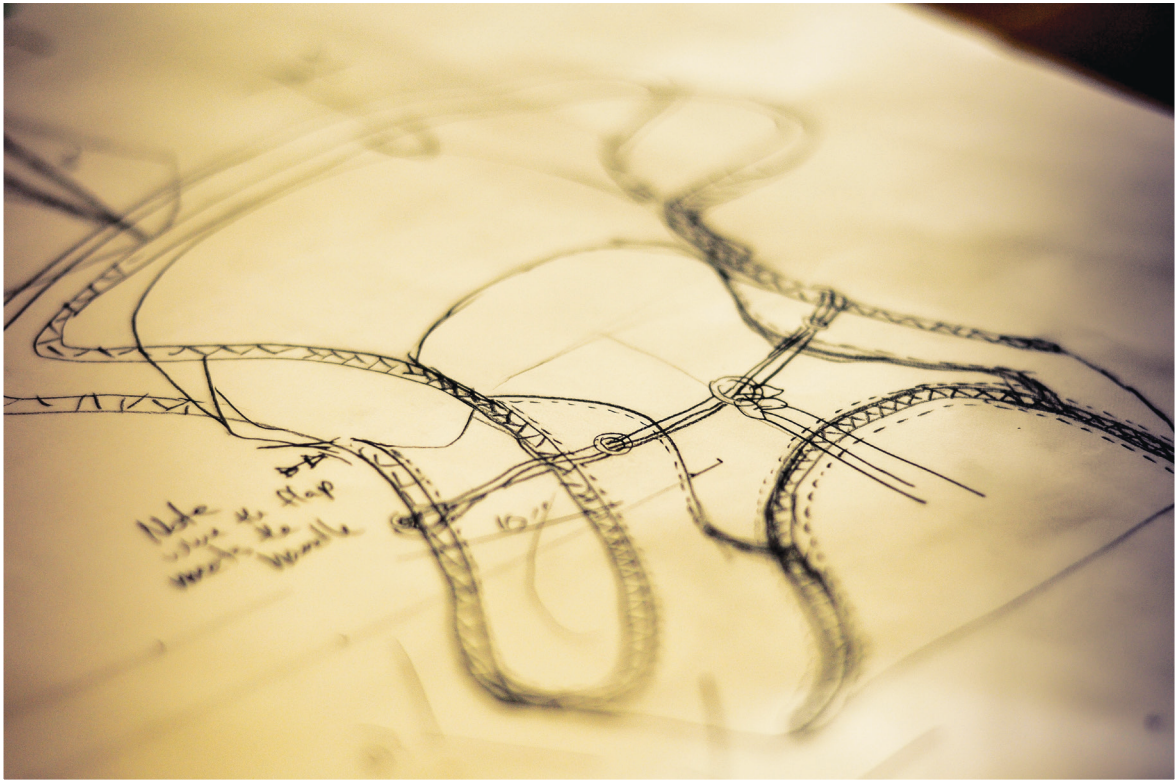
"I sometimes think that 'Eldon Hagglund' is the best answer to the question 'Why is some straight white guy in the middle of nowhere making handbags?'" says French.

Throughout high school and beyond, Ballou pursued artistic endeavours and was never without a sketchpad, and his travels around the world exposed him to a wide variety of style, artistry, and aesthetics.

Hands-on handbags

Adan Ballou leather creations are far from your typical mass-market handbags available in department stores or high street boutiques. Rather, an Adan Ballou bag is made by the artist himself, ensuring each product is unique and crafted to the highest possible standard.

His journey through Morocco afforded French the opportunity to collaborate with artisans in that country that led to the



PHOTOS COURTESY: ADAN BALLOU

"I love the Prairies. It's beautiful, it's wide open, it's the space I need to create, to breathe, to yell. The Prairies give me enough room for all my big f-----g ideas." (Adam French, Adan Ballou)



"I like my work being recognized, but ultimately, I'm a functional artist. My creations need to be useful and practical for the customer. After all, what good is a handbag that isn't really great at being a bag." (Adam French, Adan Ballou)

development and crafting of a handbag that won the Abury Design Experience 2016 Award in Berlin and was finalist for the most sustainable bag at the Independent Handbag Designer Awards in 2017.

Adan Ballou creations have gained further recognition around the world for their quality, innovation, and design aesthetic.

The Winter Clutch Handbag, inspired by the Prairie winter and featuring a pattern rooted in Art Deco murals, won The Brother Best Handmade Handbag at the Independent Handbag Awards in New York in 2019. The Scheer Bag briefcase,

specially designed and inspired by a friend he made during visits to New York, was a finalist for the 2020 edition of the awards.

"I like my work being recognized," says French, "but ultimately, I'm a functional artist. My creations need to be useful and practical for the customer. After all, what good is a handbag that isn't really great at being a bag."

Homecoming

Ultimately, though, after living and working abroad for a number of years, French found himself moving back to the place of his roots – the Prairies.

"I love the Prairies," says French. "It's beautiful, it's wide open, it's the space I need to create, to breathe, to yell."

"The Prairies give me enough room for all my big f-----g ideas," says French.

"The work I do – the tanning, the metal foundry, and experimenting with different materials and techniques – needs the space that the rural areas afford," French explains. "Even in the smaller Prairie cities, I'd be hard-pressed to find the space I need to do my creating. I mean, my workshop here is in a couple repurposed grain bins."

When asked whether he sees his Prairie surroundings affecting his creative

process, French explains that yes, he does; from the aesthetics of his bags to the way he sees his business.

"Some people say they're building from the ground up, but I see my business and my craft as being deeper than that. It's really about building from the roots up."

"I ultimately want Adan Ballou to be an employer, and I want to continue to share my creativity and passion for this work and this place," says French. "As an artist, I'm spoiled with riches here on the Prairies, and I can't help but think big when the land just lets me."

Putting the energy into fashion

The career path for Amanda Preston of Blackfalds, Alberta began much like that of many young people in Central Alberta. The energy sector – oil and gas, in particular – was where the job opportunities were, and it was almost expected that you'd be working closely connected to the resource.

But there was history at play in Amanda's family. She came from a long line of seamstresses that included her mother and her grandmother. Fabric, thread, and patterns were just a part of her childhood, and getting her hands on materials was almost second nature.

"I actually started out doing massage therapy," says Preston, "and I moved from there into oil and gas, but I was still making things – purses, accessories, and stuff like that."

Preston shared that she was actually lugging her sewing machine between home and the remote camps she lived at during her shifts.

"I was always making things for people, and they kept coming back!" Preston says.

Go your own way

In her younger years and between jobs, Preston took the leap and headed to Vancouver for fashion school to further her skills and experience in textiles and the fashion arena.

"I ended up staying in Vancouver for only about five months before a series of unfortunate events really pushed me to my breaking point," says Preston.

"I was in my early 20s, and it was super hard to admit that I had to leave school; I was crushed," says Preston. "I remember sitting in the school counsellor's office basically begging for another chance, saying that I couldn't go back to Alberta, telling them they wouldn't regret giving me another chance."

But Preston was soon Alberta-bound.

Better things to come

Preston found herself back in oil and gas soon after returning to Alberta, but the creative fire was still smouldering within. She got back to her old ways making things for people around her, and she found herself headed down a bit of a different path.

Preston decided to start her own business offering alterations, tailoring, and other clothing-related services in her hometown of Blackfalds. Miss Sew It All was born!

With her mum by her side in the business handling the alteration part of things, Preston found that she had the time and space to flex her creative muscle.

"There really wasn't anyone in our area offering higher-end custom dressmaking for graduations, weddings, and other formal events," says Preston. "So, that's really where my Royal Miss line came from."

"I love textiles, and I love textures. I love being able to marry the two. There's just so much emotion that can be elicited from a tactful combination of the textures and fabrics." (Amanda Preston, Royal Miss)



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“I didn’t know any models! I had a neighbour, and she was very tall, so I asked her.” (Amanda Preston, Royal Miss)

Every line has a process

Preston explains that while she doesn’t have a formal education in fashion, she’s a keen learner and she has a knack for figuring out what works and what doesn’t – in both design and fabrication.

“I call myself an intuitive designer,” says Preston. “I created my own workflow, my own process, and it really works for me. I look at the fabric before me, and I’ll look at my subject or client, and I’ll create based off that. I want to create something that’s just beautiful.”

Preston says, “for me, it’s a very hands-on craft, and it can seem a bit ‘backwards’ to some folks who might be formally trained. I don’t necessarily do a lot of planning or patternmaking. I’ll go in there, throw the fabric around, manipulate it and play with it, and I just go from there.”

“I love textiles, and I love textures,” says Preston. “I love being able to marry the two. There’s just so much emotion that can be elicited from a tactful combination of the textures and fabrics.”

Asked from where she draws inspiration for her Royal Miss line, Preston credits her daughter.

“My daughter is five, and she’s a source of a lot of my inspiration. It wasn’t ‘til I had her that I really realized I could pursue my dream full-time,” says Preston. “It’s important to me to show her that she can live her dreams, too, and she can be successful in her own uniqueness.”

“That’s why each dress I make is unique. They need to speak to the uniqueness of the wearer and celebrate whatever it is that makes her an individual.”

For Preston, the Prairie blood in her veins shines through in her creations by the fact they’re all still functional. “I want people to be able to wear the things I create,” she says.

Hitting the runway

Continuing to find success in her alteration business and her Royal Miss line, Preston was looking to spread her wings and push herself just that much more.

A web search led her to learning about Western Canada Fashion Week, the preeminent fashion showcase in Western Canada with international runway shows and presentations in Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver.

After reviewing the application criteria and speaking with the show’s director, Preston decided she needed to do Fashion Week.



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“There were a bunch of rules for entry, so I worked through them,” says Preston. “I needed a model, and I needed a garment, of course. Did I mention this show was only two weeks away?!”

Where do you find a model when you’re an aspiring designer in small-town Central Alberta looking to enter your first runway show?

“I didn’t know any models!” Preston says. “I had a neighbour, and she was very tall, so I asked her.”

“I paid for her to take some model training, and I created the garment for her,” says Preston. “We made it to the show, and we got onto the runway, and I won third place!”

“When she hit the runway, I was standing backstage, and that’s when I knew I was exactly where I needed to be,” explains Preston. “Everything just felt right, like I had arrived at my spot in the world.”

Ready to... where?

The success at Western Canada Fashion Week helped cement Preston’s place in the industry, but a combination of an economic downturn, a skilled labour shortage, and a global pandemic meant changes for Preston and her business.

“I couldn’t find anyone with the technical skills for the sewing and fabrication side of the work. Plus, so much of what I do is driven by special events, and with everything going on in the world, the demand just dried up, and even my supply of imported materials was basically cut-off,” explains Preston. “I’ve ended up pivoting in a big way.”

Preston was recently commissioned for a short-notice custom gown for a project with a modelling agency in Calgary. It was like Fashion Week all over again!

“They sent me the model’s measurements and a photo, and I just created the gown from there in about a week,” says Preston. “It was awesome getting to dive in and just create something from scratch again.”

Homeware from hell

In the Alberta city immortalized by writer Rudyard Kipling as having “all hell for a basement” due to the expansive natural gas reserves immediately below, there exists a long-standing history of manufacturing of bricks, pottery, glass bottles, and other earthenware products.

Medicine Hat was a centre for manufacturers that relied on a combination of easily accessible natural resources and the

ready supply of inexpensive natural gas to fire the furnaces and kilns. In fact, one brickmaker – I-XL – was founded in 1880 and remains a mainstay on the city’s industrial landscape.

It’s little wonder then that Medicine Hat native Arne Handley established himself as a maker of fine, functional handmade earthenware products that are finding their way into homes and businesses across Canada.

“I started as a teacher in 1972, and pottery was always a great teaching tool for kids, explains Handley. There’s something about getting your hands in the clay and watching something emerge from the work you put in.”

“It was back in those days and even earlier where, instead of a field trip to Europe or Japan, we’d be walking to the clay deposits, to the cliffs that are just everywhere in this city,” Handley says. “It was just a part of growing up here.”

Retire into what you love

After a career in education where he continued to dabble in pottery as primarily a hobby, but also a side hustle that paid for his Master of Education degree, Handley retired into the craft that he loved.

“I’ve always believed that the pottery I make needs to be functional, useful,” explains Handley.

“There’s a Japanese term, *mingei*, roughly translated as ‘folk art’, that describes how there’s a beauty in stuff that’s usable,” Handley says. “It’s a balance between the aesthetic of a piece and the real-life usefulness of that piece, and it’s something I try to incorporate in everything I create.”

Handley says, “the functionality comes from the fact that if you get a mug, it works well as a mug. It lifts well whether it’s empty or full, and it’s straightforward to drink from.”

Creativity grounded in place

Beyond the function, Handley says his design aesthetic is rooted firmly in the Prairies, particularly the region around Medicine Hat and the Cypress Hills of southeastern Alberta.

“The clay I use to make the pieces – the primary physical aspect of my work – is from this region, specifically the eastern slopes of the Cypress Hills,” says Handley. “It’s of this region, it’s processed locally, and I’m working with it locally.”

And when it’s been thrown or formed, the colours that Handley uses on his creations are equally rooted in the geography of his surroundings.

There’s something about getting your hands in the clay and watching something emerge from the work you put in.” (Arne Handley, Arne Handley Pottery)

“When you’re on the Prairies, it’s the sky that dominates everything. It’s all around you, no matter where you look,” Handley says. It’s the countless shades of blue of the Prairie sky that drives my colour selection.”

“The particular blue I use can end up doing a million different things when it’s fired in the kiln,” Handley explains. “There’s something that just happens in there, and there’s a certain emotion that comes through from the firing process.”

“I get to flex my artistic muscle in a real tactile way,” says Handley. “Literally getting my hands into the earth in order to create something both beautiful and useful; that’s a great way to make something of the time we have. ☞



PHOTOS COURTESY: ARNE HANDLEY POTTERY



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