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# The NEWS

The Chilluxe in 'Himmel', Dhs7,200; the Chilluxe in 'Lin', Dhs7,200, both Halm

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*Middle Eastern culture, craftsmanship and the art of authenticity are the key ingredients for the UAE's most exciting new accessory undertaking...*



The Chilluxe bag in 'Avo', Dhs7,200

“WHAT HAPPENED TO APPRECIATING HOW LONG IT TAKES TO A CREATE A BEAUTIFUL BAG, TO VALUING THE SKILLS OF THE ARTISAN AND CRAFTSMEN?”

Hanna Ransjö

Every bag tells a story, each with the power to say so much. For those who care what they carry, a new handbag is far from a fleeing frivolity; it's a carefully executed investment that, if done correctly, ensures you as the buyer will see the right return. With an industry shift towards conscious consumerism and luxury with meaning, a bag has to be so much more than just the sum of its parts. It needs to be a conversation starter, to have a back story, and with it, bring a sense of belonging.

This September, one brand takes these essential elements and delivers a new lesson in astute accessorising, launching a collection that marries intriguing backstory with beautiful craftsmanship all wrapped up with a very considered execution.

Halm, the brainchild of Hanna Ransjö, a Swede who has called Dubai home for 25 years, features 31 bags in five silhouettes, all designed here, in the UAE. Born from a desire to create bags that Hanna wanted



Raw hides of the tannery in France, waiting to be dyed into the Halm signature palette

to buy, that weren't overly plastic or treated, and following a childhood spent stitching her own clothes and making her own handbags, Hanna's research project began in 2012. "I was seeing too many novelty bags with a short lifespan, too much mass production or poor quality at too-high prices," says Hanna, an art and interior design consultant, and now founder and creative director of Halm. "What happened to the beauty of the natural, to owning a bag that looked like it had a wonderful life with you? What happened to appreciating how long it takes to create a beautifully crafted bag, to valuing the skills of the artisan and craftsmen?"

With a vision in mind to create a brand based around both quality and authenticity, four years of research ensued, alongside artistic development, bag testing, design trials and setting up workshops in Dubai. "It took a long time to do this. We had a lot of trial and error, but we haven't taken any shortcuts or cut any corners. I was brought up to do things very thoroughly, so I already have that in me," Hanna tells *Bazaar*, referring to her family's background in academia.

The 'we' Hanna refers to when explaining Halm's story, includes Hannah Louise Brewer, the brand's design associate (and Temperley London alumnus), who moved to Dubai in 2015, and Astrid Dando, the company's business development director, who has been here for a decade; a triumvirate of talent that has, they say, literally poured their hearts and souls into Halm. With no outsider investors brought on board, in order to give the team full control of the creative and direction of the brand, the pressure is felt more acutely. "It's a start-up, so it's very, very scary," Hanna says. "But it's

such a personal project and I had such a specific vision that I didn't want to be governed by big investors. I have the designs, I have the right people on board, so for me, it was kind of now or never."

Things have moved at lightning speed. With the team fully in place as of early 2016, work on Collection 1:1 began immediately. Geography is the team's trump card. With their office in Dubai's Tecom (though a move to a bigger space in D3 is underway) and their workshop in Jumeirah, where all the leathers and machines are housed, proximity generates creativity as



much as speed. "Sometimes Hannah will sketch something in the morning, and we run it over to our workshop, to our super-talented leather cutter Musthafa, and he will have come up with a prototype that same day," explains Hanna. "It's funny, because when we met manufacturers in Bologna last month, they looked at this backpack prototype he had made, and they were so excited. They couldn't believe that it had been made in just a day. Musthafa is so talented and I am 100 per cent certain Halm would not have worked if we did not have this guy on board," she adds.

It also means that sketches can be sampled almost immediately, with those that don't work cast aside or tweaks made to lead to something new. "Often the design of one bag comes from the start of something else," explains Hanna of the design process. "We'll go with an idea and look at all the possible options, sift through every detail, exhaust all angles, often coming back full circle to where we started, so we know it's the right thing. We are our strongest critics, but if we don't feel something is right, or we need more time, we give it to ourselves."

The 'Chilluxe', the collection's signature piece, went through several adaptations before Hanna, Hannah and Astrid settled on its final form. "I don't know how many prototypes we did, because we wanted to give it the feeling of being strong, with a good core and support, very much like a woman's undergarments," smiles Hanna, "but also to look soft, natural and relaxed." Musthafa pulled off a miracle and created a prototype that even defied the manufacturers in Italy who didn't believe one could achieve both softness and structure. "But we knew it would work, because Musthafa had created it in our workshop. We said, 'if we can do it,

“WE WANT OUR BAGS TO BE TIMELESS, SO THAT THEY CAN AGE BEAUTIFULLY WITH YOU”  
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Clockwise from top left: Team Halm's brain-storming meetings at Harper's Bazaar Cafe in D3, and the first outing for the baby 'Boxer' bag; Samples of the Arabesque silk scarves the team is working on; Final colour choices for leather in Halm's design studio in Dubai; A moodboard for inspiration

why can't you?" Hanna says, proudly.

Having the manufacturers on side is key to the success of any brand, and it isn't just as easy as "ringing the door bell and saying 'hello, we would like to make some handbags,'" says Hanna. "They actually pick you as well, because if they don't believe in your product, they won't spend weeks and months of development time that potentially stops their production, and invest in something that they don't believe is going to work. So far, touch wood, we've had really good feedback from them, which is one of the highest compliments."

This meticulous approach to the whole process of designing beautiful bags, curating the right craftsmanship and the business behind a brand launch will stand Halm in good stead. It is far from a flash-in-the-pan vanity project, it is a painstaking labour of love in which the team has studied and evaluated every possible angle, really getting to know the industry and everything from the "leather, metal and chemicals, to the notches and stitches," says Hanna.

Collection 1:1, launching this month, is designed for a "woman of the world", "someone who appreciates relaxed luxury, who doesn't need to make a statement in extreme embellishments, but who prefers to let the understated luxury of a bag complement the woman, not the other way around," says Hanna. "I see my very elegant 86-year-old mother loving Halm, as well as Hannah's trendy friends. We want them to be timeless, with a quirky twist and superb quality that embraces the natural characteristics of the bags, so that they can age beautifully with you."

With price points starting at Dhs4,386, the trio want their pieces to be seen as investments that reflect the quality. "It's not a handbag that most would pick up on the way to the supermarket, ►



FRANCESCO SCOTTI. PRICES APPROXIMATE



Above: Colour swatches and material samples. Right: the 'Tote', in Lin, Dhs9,660, Halm



for sure," says Hanna of the pricing, "but that's because we've spent so much time ensuring we have the very best quality and of course, quality costs. But at the same time, we really did not want to inflate the prices either." As a start-up, the team knows they don't have a name or reputation for customers to buy into, so quality is paramount. "If we feel we settled for second best, our heart is not in it. We either choose the best quality or we don't do this," Hanna explains, with Hannah adding, "We want to stay true to our brand and be able to stand by our bags."

The quality of craftsmanship can be seen in every seam, stitch and millimetre of bag. The leathers used in Collection 1:1 are mineral tanned grain bull leather and smooth bull leather – both full grain, which means left in its natural state, "showing the natural element of a beautiful animal" – and nubuck bull leather, in beautiful powdery shades of blue, cream, pistachio and dusky pinks, the beautiful complement to Arabia's alluring backdrop. The interchangeable straps, of Italian-made woven webbing, went through their own rigorous trials – they were weight-tested, soaked in hand lotion and perfume and covered in lipstick and pens, "All the things you'd find floating at the bottom of your handbag," laughs Hannah. To ensure this quality, aside from the work of Musthafa, Halm uses a family-run manufacturer just outside of Florence in Italy, a tannery in France which has been established since 1927, and a world-leading thread supplier who has been in business for over 250 years.

In their quest for authenticity, Hanna decided to launch Halm here, in Dubai, rather than follow external advice to launch in a more familiar fashion market, such as Paris, London or New York. "It just didn't feel genuine to me to just open somewhere for a name," Hanna explains. "We're all about genuineness and honesty. Dubai is where I live and work, and it's part of who I am and how I think. We get so much inspiration from the cultural fusion of the city, the vibrancy and strength of the women here, how educated the market is about trends, quality and design, and the open-minded attitudes that inspire our creative thinking. I also love the fact that Dubai is investing so much time and serious investment on art and design at the moment. I don't think there is anywhere else in the world right now that has this incredible vibrant mix. So it felt very natural for me to do this here."

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forward," says Hanna.

Beyond the brand itself, Hanna's focus is on helping to put the Middle East on the map. "It's one of the reasons why I started Halm here, in the Middle East. We want to be more on the map from a fashion perspective, and get the attention of the world focused on Dubai, in that aspect. That's why we say it proudly on our bags, 'Dubai Stockholm'. Of course we need to write Made in Italy, because at the moment the bags are, but we are working on an idea that would also say 'Created in Dubai', because that's the Halm ethos." ■