

Handbags that check all the boxes

Made to last a lifetime, Vancouver designer’s line is just plain cool

LIZ GUBER
THE KIT

“It’s the difference between catching a fish in the river or going out and buying one at the grocery store,” says Stephanie Ibbitson.

She’s talking about handbags, specifically her own, which Ibbitson designs under the brand Sonya Lee. Local production is the core of her brand. Each bag is made in Ibbitson’s Vancouver studio by a small team of three.

The line was born in Toronto in 2014. “I felt that accessories were very fragile and dainty, and just didn’t reflect the modern woman.” Ibbitson wanted to create pieces that last a lifetime (in fact, her bags come with a lifetime warranty) but didn’t have to be treated with special care.

“With some bags, it’s almost like they need to be in a museum. You can’t put it on the ground, you can’t get it wet, can’t do this, can’t do that,” she says.

Plus, Ibbitson wanted the craftsmanship to match the level of men’s leather goods. “I was always looking at my spouse’s leather belt or wallet, they were always full-grain leather, with really nice stitching. But with women’s leather, it’s lambskin that’s glued to some cardboard.” Ibbitson’s designs skew minimal. They’re sleek and unfussy,



Sonya Lee’s Maya bag, which comes with a customizable chain strap, \$286, sonyalee.co.

but there’s also a toughness to them. Most are rendered in black leather and finished with weighty silver-tone hardware. They are not dainty or precious, the branding is incognito.

“People call my bags edgy, but I just want someone to put on the bag and feel the best part of themselves, their power and their strength.” The pieces are meant to beautify with wear. “As the oils from your hands get on the bag, it gets this really nice patina, it reminds me of old Coach bags from the ’80s,” Ibbitson says.

Events (or, to put it differently, non-events) of the past year have changed the designer’s approach to her brand. “I realize



A model with the Sonya Lee Maya bag, each of which is made in Vancouver by a team of three.

that a lot of people are not in the same financial situation as they were in in 2019 or 2018. I really wanted to create pieces below the \$300 price point, but I also didn’t want to compromise on the materials.”

One piece is the Maya, a baguette-style bag made in buttery croc leather. The bag’s chain is customizable and

shoppers can choose from a variety of different chain straps.

Ibbitson is all about simplifying. “We don’t have anywhere to go, so a lot of us aren’t even carrying bags right now.”

Her bags are getting smaller but still big enough to fit a canvas tote, a wallet, phone and hand sanitizer. Although her bags are utilitarian, Ibbitson hasn’t let go of the role of fantasy in fashion.

“I want a bit of both worlds, I want it to serve a purpose. Plus, I want to look at myself in the mirror and be like, ‘Yes, I’m strong, I’m beautiful, I’m powerful.’ I wanna convey that to the world.”

It goes without saying that running a bag brand involves more than just tinkering with leather.

“It’s so much research and reading. I live and breathe this thing,” says Ibbitson, adding that she’s had some tough years as a business owner.

“I’ve had some major breakdowns. This year, I decided to give it all I’ve got because my brand could be gone next month. I’ve seen so many brands, so many retailers, so many restaurants, just ... gone.”

As she tells me this, Ibbitson doesn’t sound sad, but motivated. “I’m just trying my best to design pieces that people are going to love, and that they can afford.”

I can’t think of a better pitch for a new purse.



Handbag designer Stephanie Ibbitson with one of her creations.

Savouring the sweet smell of virtue

This warm, heady scent is the latest launch from a great Canadian brand

EDEN BOILEAU
THE KIT

At this point, whenever I mention The 7 Virtues among my fellow editors as an example of a great Canadian brand; or a green, natural brand; or woman-led brand; or do-good brand, I have to preface it with “I know say this every time, but ...”

I can’t help it! The 7 Virtues is a shining example of a company that comprises all those attributes.

And Santal Vanille, a warm, heady, sweet, spicy embrace of a scent is The 7 Virtue’s latest launch.

With its notes of coconut milk, cardamom, myrrh, black pepper, sandalwood and vanilla, taking in Santal Vanille is slipping into a warm bath, sidling

up to a fireplace, crawling head-to-toe under a blanket, breathing in a hot spiced tea, burying your face in a cashmere scarf — and my new favourite fragrance.

It joins my existing 7V library of earthy, green, sexy Patchouli of Rwanda (an original 7V scent now replaced by Patchouli Citrus); Orange Blossom, the ray of sunshine I wear (used to wear?) on vacation to tropical climes; the delicious candy of Blackberry Lily; and Rose Amber, a powdery, warm floral.

Like all 7 Virtues perfumes, Santal Vanille derives its scent from ethically sourced, fair-trade, organic essential oils and is free from phthalates, parabens, sulphates and formaldehyde.

But the best aspect of each fragrance is the how its production helps farmers in the countries from where the essential oils are sourced (such as Haiti,

Madagascar, India, Afghanistan and Egypt) with steady income and fair wages.

Brand founder Barb Stegemann launched The 7 Virtues from her Halifax garage on International Women’s Day in 2009 after starting with a cup of neroli oil sourced from Afghan farmers and \$2,000 charged to her credit card.

She has continued to launch her every new scent on International Women’s Day since (this one’s a bit early). From a successful stint on Dragon’s Den early in the brand’s journey to a six-month brand incubation and mentoring program with Sephora, 7 Virtues is now Sephora’s top-selling new clean fragrance brand.

With all those virtuous attributes, the scents themselves are almost the least of the reasons to love this homegrown brand — but really they’re the most.



The 7 Virtues Santal Vanille eau de parfum, \$97 (50 ml), sephora.com.

Cold comfort

Soothing salves for winter-weary skin

KATHERINE LALANCETTE
THE KIT



Egyptian Magic
The recipe for Egyptian Magic, a nondescript tub filled with just six ingredients — olive oil, beeswax, honey, bee pollen, propolis and royal jelly — is said to be modelled after a cream found in ancient Egyptian tombs.

Egyptian Magic all-purpose skin cream, \$51, amazon.ca



Elizabeth Arden Eight Hour cream

Elizabeth Arden had originally intended this salve, created in 1930, to soothe her horses’ legs before it became an iconic beauty cream, recipient of more than 100 awards.

Elizabeth Arden Eight Hour cream skin protectant, \$29, elizabetharden.com



Eucerin Aquaphor multi-purpose healing ointment

If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, right? Patented in 1925, this ointment banks on petroleum jelly and lanolin, with glycerin, a humectant, and panthenol, a skin protectant.

Eucerin Aquaphor multi-purpose healing ointment, \$11, shoppersdrugmart.com



Honest Beauty Magic Beauty balm

Jessica Alba’s Honest Company makes Magic Beauty balm for everything from lips to cuticles to elbows and even hair: a blend of coconut, olive, argan and jojoba oils.

Honest Beauty Magic Beauty balm, \$30, shoppersdrugmart.ca



Cēla Miracle multi-use oil

Canadian skin care brand Cēla, the brainchild of Hammam Spa founder Celine Tadrissi, markets this solid-to-liquid Miracle Multi-Use Oil, which features a stress-relieving scent.

Cēla Miracle Multi-Use Oil, \$45, thisiscela.com