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(FROM LEFT) VENUS LEE,
SUSANNA PANG AND
BENNY LAU IN THE SOIL
SHOP, WITH MYANMESE
LACQUERWARE AND
PHOTOS OF THE
CRAFTSMEN.
PHOTO: NORA TAM

A crafty way to help

A shop opened by two art and design enthusiasts is supporting Myanmar's economic recovery, writes **Mabel Sieh**

Burmese human rights campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi is recognised around the world for her tireless efforts to encourage democracy and freedom in her home country, Myanmar.

Having spent 15 years under house arrest, the Nobel laureate set off last week on her first trip abroad for 24 years, helping to promote business growth in Myanmar at the World Economic Forum in Bangkok.

Two Hongkongers are playing a small part in promoting Myanmar industry, too – by promoting traditional Myanmar lacquerware in their shop.

Susanna Pang Bik-tsui and Venus Lee Lan-kiu have just opened Soil, a “pop-up” shop at a

ceramics workshop, in Sau Wah Fong, Wan Chai. Their crafts shop, which is open until June 30, sells mainly lacquerware from the Southeast Asian nation.

Although neither woman is an artist, both have worked in the creative industries for many years and make ceramics themselves.

Pang visited lacquer ware workshops in Myanmar to watch the production process. “It’s fascinating to realise they’re still using ancient methods to make crafts,” says Pang, who used to work at the Hong Kong Design Centre, and who recently studied cultural leadership.

“I really appreciate the skills and [human] stories behind the creations.”

Her business partner, Lee, runs her own online marketing

company, but was moved by the pieces to get involved.

Lee says: “Susanna showed me lacquerware she bought in Myanmar; I thought they were so beautiful. We started discussing creating a platform to introduce traditional art to Hong Kong. We also invited local artists to work on some designs.”

In January, Pang, Lee and three Hong Kong artists visited lacquer workshops in Myinkaba, a village in Bagan, an area noted for its temples and lacquerware workshops. They talked to craftsmen, and returned with beautiful items made of traditional materials like bamboo and horse hair.

Hong Kong designer Benny Lau Siu-tsang was one of the three artists to go to Myinkaba with the pair, and was hugely impressed by the Myanmar craftsmanship.

“Their art work is exquisite,” he says. “Techniques are passed from parents to children over generations – you can see how

intimate they are with their creations. Each pattern is original and different – very personal. You can feel the life behind it.”

Lau also appreciated the traditional business model that benefits both environment and community.

“They make use of the natural

Their art work is exquisite. Techniques are passed from parents to children over generations

resources around them, use no chemicals and hire local people,” he says.

“The business generates income for the family and benefits the whole community.”

Having worked in the design industry, where speed is highly

prized, for more than 10 years, Lau sees real value in a horse hair tea cup that takes five months to make. “I asked myself, ‘What is design for? Is it only for efficiency and profit making?’ It seems wrong if that’s the case.”

Pang agrees, saying: “Hong Kong needs more diversity to sustain its creative development.

“We hope Soil will offer a platform for people to come together, not just to buy things, but to learn about the history, culture and humanity behind a piece of craft.”

Julia Chan Wing-kwan, who attended one of Soil’s Burmese lacquerware workshops, says: “I was touched by the devotion to creating something using such a long, slow process; it’s the essence of craftsmanship. Hong Kong is too commercial and all about the brands.

“A healthy society should allow greater diversity and be more creative.”