



Belgian designer Laurence Leenaert went from creating leather bags to designing products for the whole home—all she had to do was move to Morocco.

Laurence Leenaert

Marrakesh is an easy place to get lost. Shady paths wind deeper and deeper into the ancient medina, a labyrinth of hidden passageways where men leading donkeys or riding scooters seem to appear from nowhere. It's notorious for leaving people disorientated, especially newcomers. But for Belgian designer and LRNCE founder Laurence Leenaert, Marrakesh's medina provided a clear path to establish herself and her art.

After dropping out of her fashion masters at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, Leenaert founded LRNCE, a brand she intended would specialize in leather bags. But arriving in Morocco exposed Leenaert to a rich craft tradition. Four years since arriving, LRNCE has grown to include ceramics, textiles, sandals, mirrors, wall hangings, and kimono coats.

Leenaert connected with Morocco from the very beginning. She came on a holiday with her sister when she was 25, only to return four months later to camp in the desert and make leather satchels and travel bags out of old blankets.

"I was at a time in my life where I had no attachments in Belgium," she says. "There's so much freedom here. If you're creative, it's endless." A year later, in 2015, she decided to move to Marrakesh where she knew she could source high-quality leather and focus on making bags.

Morocco's ancient craft tradition sprawls many disciplines: pottery, glassblowing, weaving, tanneries—many of which are well represented in the medina by Berber artisans. In this respect, Morocco provided fertile ground for experimentation and Leenaert was in the right mindset for it. "When I moved here, I promised myself I would be very open to try whatever I want, and that I wouldn't put myself in a box." Eventually an artisan asked if she would like to make some sandals. "And I was like, 'Why not!'"

When you know one good artisan, it's only a short time before you meet another and another, the designer explains. And in meeting new artisans, Leenaert encountered new disciplines. One family invited her over for couscous on a Friday night and asked if she'd like to paint some pottery.