

Hannah Cawley’s eponymous label brings time-tested handmaking practices into the present day and honours a commitment to local manufacturing.

“Ultimately, I just wanted to make things,” says UK designer Hannah Cawley from her south London studio, a creative sanctuary filled with handcrafted ceramics, recipe books and vintage prints. In 2017 she launched her eponymous label to create the kind of clothes that she wanted to wear – timeless, utilitarian and with a dash of playfulness. To bring her collections to life, she has nurtured a community of artisans, from leather specialists in London to quilters in the north of England.

Getting here – welcoming customers weekly for made-to-order appointments and forging partnerships with some of the best boutiques in the world, such as New York’s Colbo and Rendez-Vous in Paris – required a big leap of faith. She left a full-time design position without financial backing, took on a side job at her local pub and worked on her debut collection in the evenings. Her story is one of resilience in a market dominated by investor-backed brands and conglomerates. But when she looks back on those early days, she shrugs; following her instincts and making things that she loves to wear come as second nature to her. “From a young age I was always doing things after school,” says Cawley, who is wearing one of her signature cotton blouses, a playful ruffle floating around the neckline. “I always felt that I had the energy to do something else.”

FASHION — CAWLEY — London

HUMAN TOUCH

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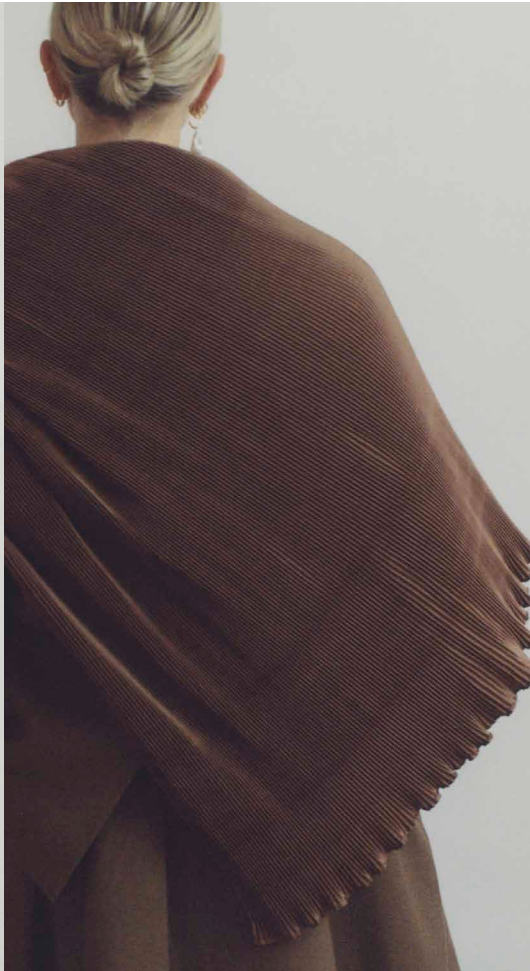
Her resourceful attitude meant that she was quick to find collaborators from within her circle: an ex-boyfriend designed the brand’s cobalt-blue logo; her father has modelled the brand’s now-signature shearling hats, while her mother helps her to smock the sleeves of dresses. “My mum and I developed a hand-smocking technique that we still use to make custom pieces,” says Cawley. “When an enormous order came in during the pandemic, we spent an entire summer smocking. It was a really intense time – some of the pieces require 24 hours of handwork – but equally special that we got to spend it together.”

The image that Cawley paints of sitting on a sofa with her mother in the conservatory of her childhood home, working together, captures the brand’s spirit: one based on intimacy and human connection. Over the years she has gone on to form close relationships with makers and fellow creatives in her south London neighbourhood. A leather workshop on the floor below makes the label’s Collar bags. “They were inspired by a Victorian bag that I picked up at Greenwich market, which was originally used to store men’s detachable collars,” says the designer, who is often found scouring the UK capital’s Portobello and Greenwich markets for inspiration. “I can simply take my vintage leather finds to the guys downstairs and we design contemporary iterations.”

Spontaneity has been possible, especially in the brand’s earlier days, thanks to her proximity to the people producing her collections. “I could send them a pattern and receive the design the next day,” says Cawley, who perfected the brand’s bestselling shearling jackets through a back-and-forth process with her London factory. “During lockdown I suggested that we make our cotton Avis jacket in shearling. It came back with a striped version and we got 30 orders straight away.” The same factory still produces most of her collections.



1. Hannah Cawley
2. Winter layering in the brand’s silk dupion scarf
3. Statement hats finish off every Cawley look
4. Cawley stylist Melissa Jane Tarling in the brand’s signature Etta cape



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“It used to mainly do alterations but we’ve grown together,” she says. “One of the many reasons that we produce in London is because, early on, I couldn’t afford to travel or meet the minimums [of bigger factories]. Of course, it also makes a really nice sustainability story and allows me to celebrate the skills of these people. For me, it’s about clothes being made by those who I have close relationships with.”

Another motivation for her is her desire to offer clothing that’s equally functional and playful in a fashion landscape that seems to favour extremes – collections tend to either be too serious or veer into costume territory. “I wanted to make the kind of things that I like to wear, with easy, oversized silhouettes and designs that feel timeless,” she says, pointing to her new elongated jackets for winter, smart suits crafted from British wool and shearling hats.

“I like dressing a little differently and Cawley can do that for you,” says Melissa Jane Tarling, the brand’s stylist, as she puts on a corduroy suit and a cosy shearling cape. The oversized outerwear, sailor-style collars on cord jackets and the irreverent accessories offer the wearer a point of difference. The winter collection has everything from a hat modelled after a tea cosy to a fish-shaped tote bag crafted from quilted silk. “I found a workshop in the north of England that can quilt both our leather and our silk fabrics,” says Cawley.

The studio is a refuge where Cawley and her team can build their own universe and indulge in their love of craft. “I look at the market and what other people are doing but that makes me want to stay in our little world even more,” she says. “Success is longevity and building relationships with people. It has taken me a long time to get here but I’m happy with how things are. I wouldn’t change anything.” ————— κ

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