



Trashmagination Podcast #35 – Suitcases and Backpacks

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Today we'll talk about what to do with an unwanted or broken suitcase or backpack. We'll explore luggage made from recycled materials. To finish, I'll share stories about artists who incorporate luggage in their work.

So what can you do with suitcases or backpacks in excellent condition? I recommend donating it to an organization that helps children in foster care. It is still common for these children to carry their items in a plastic bag. Many organizations put together care packages in backpacks or suitcases. In the Washington DC area, we have Comfort Cases [<https://www.comfortcases.org/>], which was started by a dad who grew up in foster care and then adopted kids from foster care. Comfort Cases encourages people to have "packing parties" where you load the backpacks with toiletries and a small blanket. This is a great service project for Scouts.

What to Do with Broken Suitcases

Now let's talk about how to reuse broken suitcases. If it is a vintage hard-sided suitcase, these are popular to make into side tables, dresser drawers or cabinets. To make shelves, sometimes people cut suitcases in half. My five favorite projects made with vintage suitcases are:

- **Art supply storage case** – People put pockets and dividers in the suitcase to keep things organized and ready to travel to their next art class or for plein air (outdoor) painting sessions [<http://www.hawk-hill.com/2016/12/vintage-suitcase-art-supply-storage/>]
- **Dollhouse** – We just talked about making dollhouse furniture from recycled materials in our previous episode. In addition, you can also make the dollhouses from recycled materials. People add room dividers and decorate each section as a different room in the house. This is a way to use up wallpaper or fabric scraps.
- **Pet Bed or Cat Tree** – There are lots of pet bed ideas on Pinterest. I was impressed by a cat bunk bed for a multi-cat home, as well as a series of platforms made from suitcases for a cat climbing structure.
- **Display Case at a Store or Craft Show** – A great way to show merchandise is to store it in a vintage suitcase, which also provides an easy way to carry your crafts into the show.
- **Speaker / Portable Picnic Table** – In the show notes, check out a video that shows how to transform a suitcase into a small picnic table which includes an embedded speaker so you can have music during your picnic. There is a company called Loud Luggage [<http://www.loudluggageco.com/>] that transforms suitcases into speakers.

I made a Pinterest board of ideas to creatively reuse suitcases [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/suitcases/>] which includes instructions on how to replace a lining, decoupage a new design on the outside or add legs to a suitcase to make it into a table. Many local crafters would love your vintage suitcase.

If you have a modern soft-sided suitcase, you could still use it to make a pet bed. I have used these suitcases to store winter clothes in the summer and summer clothes in the winter to reduce closet clutter. I have also used them to store sentimental items like my husband's hockey jerseys or framed family photos that we don't have in rotation right now.

If you don't already have a home emergency kit, this is a great use of a suitcase that doesn't have to be in perfect shape [<https://www.ready.gov/build-a-kit>]. Maybe this can be one of your 2018 family goals.

If your luggage is in terrible shape, Terracycle has a Zero Waste Box for luggage [https://www.terracycle.com/en-US/zero_waste_boxes/luggage-and-travel-bags]. You can fit more in the box if you take apart your luggage first. Check out my podcast episode on Take Apart Events [<http://trashmagination.com/24-take-apart-events-and-e-waste/>].

What to Do with Large Backpacks

Today most backpacks have an internal frame, but when I was growing up, many backpacks had a metal frame where you could attach your sleeping bag and other items. There is a whole market for these backpacks because they are useful for carrying heavy loads. Trail crews attach lumber, chainsaws and other tools to these frames. Some styles are considered to be collectibles. So don't toss your pack just because it's not what most people use today.

My son's Boy Scout troop encourages people to borrow packs while they are growing. They have a collection of donated packs. If you have an unused backpack, you could donate it to Scouts or other community hiking groups such as Sierra Club Inner City Outings [<https://content.sierraclub.org/outings/ico>].

Next, I saw an artistic use of external shell backpacks at the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival last year. A group called Wise Fool New Mexico [<http://wisefoolnewmexico.org/>] was teaching how to make giant puppets that you wear on your back. They started making these puppets as part of political street theater. The head of the puppet was carved from clay, and then overlaid with a papier maché. Once that dried, the mask was removed from the clay and painted. The clay can then be reformed into a new shape for a new mask. The painted mask was attached to a tall pole with a horizontal piece to form the puppet's shoulders. Fabric formed the body of the puppet. I learned there is an organization called Clowns Without Borders [<https://clownswithoutborders.org/>] that brings comedic performers to refugee camps and places that have experienced natural disasters.

Luggage Made from Recycled Materials

When it's time to get new luggage, the first priority is to buy something long-lasting. Some luggage comes with a lifetime warranty, such as Timbuk2 [<https://www.timbuk2.com/content/about-environment.html#>]. Many companies make luggage with fabric made from recycled plastic bottles, including Litegear Bags [<https://litegearbags.com/>], Pinqponq [<http://www.pinqponq.com>] and Naturkompaniet [<https://www.naturkompaniet.se>].

Another option is to purchase luggage that supports creative reuse. I'm going to share stories about luggage made from:

- Leather Airplane and Car Seats
- Uniforms
- Vinyl Billboards
- Plastic Feed Bags
- Rubber inner tubes
- Truck tarpaulins
- Denim jeans
- Seat belts

If you'd like leather luggage, you will find many craftspeople make backpacks from recycled leather coats or couches. Search for "recycled leather backpack" on Etsy. If you want fancy leather, there is a Canadian company named Mari Claro [<https://www.mariclaro.ca>] which makes luggage from the leather seats of high-end cars, including brands such as Audi, BMW, Jaguar and Porsche. You can also get leather bags made from leather airline seats. Delta Airlines partners with Skyebags [<http://www.skyebags.com/>] to transform leather seats into bags. Southwest Airlines and Alaska Airlines work with a company called Looptworks [<https://www.looptworks.com/>] as well as organizations in Africa which make shoes and soccer balls.

Another airline which recycles items into luggage is JetBlue. They send uniforms to be made into messenger bags through a company called Manhattan Portage.

If you want colorful luggage, I recommend luggage made from vinyl billboards. Vinyl billboards can be featured for as little as four weeks, and they create a lot of waste. The best known company that makes bags from vinyl billboards is Rareform [<https://www.rareform.com/>]. They were featured on the tv show Shark Tank in March 2017 which increased their reach considerably. They gather thousands of pounds of billboards per month. They make many items from wallets to duffel bags as well as bags to carry surf boards.

In Colorado, I visited Ecologic Designs which sews messenger bags from vinyl billboards [<http://www.ecologicdesigns.com/>]. Ecologic Designs also makes items from wetsuits and bicycle inner tubes. I am a big fan of things made from inner tubes and I plan on doing another podcast episode about that. For now I'll mention TUBE Bags [<https://tubethailand.com/>], a company in Thailand that makes backpacks from inner tubes.

In addition to vinyl billboards, other sources of plastic sheeting can be recycled into luggage. For example, a company called Torrain [<https://torrain.org>] makes backpacks and messenger bags from plastic feed bags. A company called M-24 Bags [<https://www.m-24.co.uk/>] makes bags from truck tarpaulins.

Many artisans make backpacks from denim jeans because it is such a hardy material. I like the ones by a company called Upcycled in the Netherlands [<https://www.upcycled.nl/upcycled-english.html>] because the bottoms of the bags are often made from leather from old couches with denim patchwork up the sides.

My favorite creative reuse idea for luggage are those made from recycled seatbelts. I'm a fan of Salvage Goods [<http://salvagegoodstn.com/>]. I will share a video of Clay climbing into cars in a junk yard to cut out the seat belts. He has a huge collection of belts which he matches by make of car into order to get enough of the same color. The first time he used a seatbelt was to fix a broken backpack latch – but that was only the beginning.

Backpack-Related Upcycling Projects

Sew Your Own Backpack – T-shirt drawstring backpacks are a great activity to teach basic machine sewing. There are many tutorials but my favorite involves pounding in grommets or circular metal pieces for the string to pull through [<http://blog.creativebug.com/diy-make-drawstring-backpack/>]. It's a satisfying and easy upcycling skill.

Reuse Backpack Straps - My most recent creative reuse project was to reuse parts of two backpacks from my honeymoon. They were twenty years old and the insides had started to flake. The outside of the bags was in great shape. I removed the straps and hardware. I sewed a bag from upholstery straps to carry my drumsticks because my new ones were too long for my regular backpack. I attached the straps from the old backpacks. Even if you can reuse part of your luggage - that might be an option.

Artists Who Creatively Reuse Luggage

There are a LOT of artists who incorporate luggage in their work. Here are some of my favorites:

- **American artist Gabriel DiShaw** cuts apart Louis Vuitton suitcases and makes them into sculptures – often from Star Wars and Avengers – including Iron Man, Darth Vader, Kylo Ren, C3PO and a Stormtrooper [<https://www.gabrieldishaw.com>].
- **Chinese artist Yin Xiuzhen** [Zi-you-chen] has a series of pieces named “Portable Cities.” She makes second-hand clothing into famous landmarks and then places them in a city-scape inside a suitcase. [<https://www.ignant.com/2014/05/07/portable-cities-by-yin-xiuzhen/>]
- **Polish artist Pawel Althamer** did a sculpture called “Self Portrait in a Suitcase” which shows an open suitcase with a miniature person sitting in it beside a sink and a shelf. This could be a great project for an art class – where students do a self-portrait that is three-dimensional but contained in a suitcase.

- **Cuban artist Yoan Capote** filled a suitcase with bricks. The bricks represented the weight we carry and the barriers we face [<http://www.yoan-capote.com/en/artworks/sculpture-and-installations/nostalgia>].
- **Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota** did a few installations that involved a large number of suitcases – one where they were suspended from red ropes and another where they were stacked high and filled with family photos.

Chiharo says her work is about the memory in absent things. That's an interesting way to view luggage – it's an object that holds items that someone has valued. Someone thought it was worth carrying from one place to another. Increased baggage fees has caused us all to re-evaluate what is necessary to bring with us on a trip. That's related to the mission of Trashmagination – which is to be intentional about what we carry with us in life.

Until next time – may you see trash as a source of art in your life.