



Trashmagination Podcast #43 – Teabags

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

Today our topic is the creative reuse of teabags – or “tea-cycling?” I don't drink much tea but I was born in Newfoundland where people drink lots of tea. When I moved to the United States, I noticed that more people drink iced tea. Tea is the most popular drink in the world other than water¹. It is consumed in almost 80 percent of US households. In 2015, the worldwide tea production was 5.2 million metric tons². Imagine how many teabags that creates?

I always tossed used teabags in my compost bin, but I recently learned that many teabags contain plastic that will not break down. This plastic is polypropylene which helps teabags to hold their shape. I found a video made by the BBC which shows how teabags are produced, and there is a part of the video where the plastic is stirred into the mix. The plastic looks like the cotton batting that you put into a cushion.

In England, a grocery chain called Co-op Food announced in January that they are removing polypropylene from their teabags³. This decision will save 9 tons of plastic per year⁴. In February, a company called PG Tips which is the most popular type of tea in England announced they will remove plastic as well⁵.

The easiest way to avoid creating plastic trash is to buy loose tea and one of those metal tea balls. If you like teabags, you can research which companies do not put plastic in their bags. You can also avoid teabags with the little string and staple. Any bag still creates trash and contains wood pulp – which seems like an unnecessary use of a tree.

How to Creatively Reuse Teabags at Home

For the rest of this podcast, I'll share ideas of how to creatively reuse teabags. First I'll share ways to reuse teabags in your home, and then I'll share ways people reuse teabags in arts and crafts.

Garden

- Remove tea leaves from the teabags (which we learned contain plastic) and put it directly in your garden.
- Teabags can be transformed into little seed starter pots if you line them up in a dish and open up the tops.
- Wipe the dust off house plants with wet teabags.

Cleaning

- The tannins in used teabags will cut the grease on pans without using harsh chemicals. You can soak greasy dishes with used teabags.
- Tea leaves can reduce odors. Some people sprinkle tea leaves in kitty litter. You can put dried out used teabags at the bottom of your trash can. You can dry out a used teabag and put it inside smelly shoes to absorb odors.

¹ <http://www.teausa.com/14655/tea-fact-sheet>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/507950/global-per-capita-tea-consumption-by-country/>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jan/28/teabags-plastic-free-co-op-eco-friendly>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/EcoWatch/videos/10155129035506479/>

⁵ <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/remove-plastics-from-tea-bags>

Health

- Reduce dark circles under your eyes with wet teabags. The caffeine shrinks the blood vessels around eyes, reducing the appearance of dark circles.
- A wet teabag can reduce the sting of insect bites or sunburn.

Making Art from Used Teabags

The first time I saw artists creatively reusing teabags was at the Green America Green Festival in 2004. A company called T-Bag Designs [<https://www.tbagdesigns.co.za/>] was showing their beautiful bags and greeting cards. This company is located in South Africa and if you live there, you can mail your used teabags to them. They have photos on their website where they show you how to empty the teabags correctly so they can use them.

P.O. Box 26227, Hout Bay 7806, South Africa

Now let's talk about other art made from used teabags. They tend to fall into three categories:

- Paintings
- Assemblage or sculptures
- Handicrafts

Teabag Paintings

For paintings, you must check out the work by

- Ruby Silvius [<http://www.rubysilvius.com/>]. She wrote a book called 363 Days of Tea which features her teabag paintings over the course of a year. Each teabag painting is quite different from the other, influenced by the shape of the teabag.
- Another painter who specializes in teabag paintings is Suzanne LeLoup-West [<https://www.facebook.com/pg/SuzannesArtStudio>]. She paints mostly flowers, insects and angels.
- Rather than painting on teabags, Miss Johns incorporates used teabags into her paintings [<http://www.missjohns.com>]. They look like farmer's fields or little houses.
- Libby Williamson's tea bag art combines painting and machine-stitching [<https://www.instagram.com/libbyzwilliamson/>]. She hangs teabags on ribbons to make garlands, or she binds them into little books called "Teabag Tales."

If you are interested in painting on teabags, I will share a video in the show notes where the artist demonstrates how she prepares her painting surface. It involves emptying the leaves out of teabags and then gluing them to a board.

Teabag Sculptures

Another way artists creatively reuse teabags is through sculptures or assemblage. Teabags come in all shades of brown, which makes them a great material if you want to create a gradient or shading. Artists who incorporate teabags into their sculptures include:

- Andy Brown made a portrait of Queen Elizabeth from tea bags [<http://andybrownisanartist.com/index.php/kings-queens/>].
- Barbara Bartlett is an artist who removes the leaves and sews the bags together into many objects – including clothing. <http://www.barbarabartlettart.com/tea.html>.
- Ruth Tabancay hand-stitched a whole bed quilt from tea bags. She left the little strings and tags on the teabags [<http://www.ruthtabancay.com/105366/selected-early-work/>].

Some artists connect hundreds or thousands of teabags into abstract shapes. I will link to these artists in the show notes.

- Paper Girls Studio [<http://papergirlsstudio.wixsite.com/papergirlsstudio>].

- Armen Rotch [<http://www.armenrotch.com/>] and
- Valeria Burgoa [<http://www.artisaway.com/blog/valeria-burgoa/>].

All of these artists are playing with pattern and the natural color variation between teabags. I love a piece by Valeria Burgoa where she rolls up the teabags like little roses and then attaches them into a big circle. It's like a giant bouquet of tea roses.

Ann Laser has a website called the Tea Bag Project where she asks people to mail her dried teabags with the tea leaves inside them [<http://theteabagproject.com/>]. Then she encourages people to follow her on social media to see what she will make with their teabags. She made a huge piece in the rotunda of the capital building of the State of New Mexico with more than 2,000 teabags. It took two years to make. She says, "My biggest vision would be that I could in some way influence about the importance of connecting to one another and a sense of contentment and peace." That's such a lovely sentiment, that art made from tea bags can remind us of the people we love and feeling peaceful.

Mail tea bags to Ann Laser Teabag Project, PO Box 2769, Santa Fe, NM 87504-2769

Teabag Crafts

Teabags can be a great source of craft materials. Many crafters use tea to dye fabric or cloth. Here are some teabag crafts that I want to try:

- Julia from Vintage with Laces cuts her teabags into leaf shapes and embroiders the veins of the leaves [<http://vintagewithlaces.blogspot.com/2017/08/upcycled-tea-bag-fall-leaves.html>].
- Renea Harrison makes delicate flowers where the petals are dried teabags.
- Brenda Quintana takes the paper packaging found on the outside of teabags and folds them into beautiful origami ornaments [<http://qbeesquest.blogspot.com/2012/12/tea-bag-folded-ornaments-tutorial.html>].
- Michelle White makes textured art paper and journal pages from dried teabags.
- Jeanne McLaughlin combines teabags with little pieces of art and lace to make collages [<https://www.instagram.com/jamamakitty/>].
- Daniella Woolf and Wendy Aikin teach a workshop where they put stencils down on paper and then dab through the stencils with teabags to make cool designs.

Finally, if you like to sew and you love tea, here's a fun craft idea. You can sew reusable teabags from muslin fabric. Then you don't have to find any artistic uses for teabags [<https://www.littlehouseliving.com/make-your-own-tea-bags.html>].

If you have creatively reused teabags, please let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com.

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