



Trashmagination Podcast #47 – Handmade Gifts from Recycled Materials

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

This week's episode is about one of my ongoing creative reuse projects. You might have heard about projects that motivate you to make items and share the results, such as:

- the 100 Day Challenge [<https://www.100daychallenge.com/>],
- the Creative Sprint where you make something for 30 days in a row [<http://www.creativesprint.co/>]
- "Me-Made-May" where people post a photo on Instagram of themselves wearing something they made each day [<http://sozowhatdoyouknow.blogspot.com/p/about-me-made-may.html>].

My project involves making one gift per month for my grandmother. I'll share the project logistics, and tell you about some of the items I made for her from recycled materials. Maybe you'll get inspiration to make a homemade gift for National Teacher Appreciation Day on May 8 or for Mother's Day on May 13.

In many ways, this project is more realistic than challenges where you have to do something every day. There are some weeks I can hardly work on the gift and sometimes I get to work on a gift all day. So it's a very forgiving way to build creative discipline. This project has been very motivating because it provides a deadline and an appreciative audience. So listen up and see if a similar project might fit into your artistic journey.

The project started because I was trying to come up with a Christmas present for my grandmother. I always donate to a charity on her behalf, but beyond that, she doesn't want many items because she doesn't have that much space. One thing I know is that she loves to receive mail. She lives in Nova Scotia and I live in Virginia, so I only see her once a year. I want her to know that I think about her every day. I tried to write letters but I struggled to do that consistently. Meanwhile I have this long list of creative reuse ideas that I want to make, and it's hard to prioritize making those items because life is busy. Making a monthly gift for my grandmother is a win-win – she gets mail and I prioritize making stuff.

Monthly Homemade Gift Project Logistics

Now I'll share project logistics that you might consider if you undertake a similar project. First – let's talk postage. As I mentioned, my grandmother lives in Canada and I live in the United States. It's important to learn postage requirements to save money on postage – especially on international postage. Sometimes these requirements do not seem logical – like if you add an inch in length, the postage costs might double! Most months, I spent \$10 on postage. There is a flat rate for anything larger than a letter but under 8 ounces. This is a very common type of situation for international postage – so check it out for your situation.

Another factor in choosing what to make is knowing what my grandmother will do with my gift. She is not going to get out a hammer and hang something on her wall. Her walls are already full. She displays my gifts on a shelf by her front door. She changes them out as they arrive, so it's great if my gifts represent the season. I have also made items that she hangs in her windows or on her front door.

I have two ways to keep track of gift ideas. I use Trello, a free online project management system, as well as Instagram. I follow lots of artists, and when I see a piece of art that inspires me to make something for my grandmother, I save it to a collection called “gift ideas.” You could do a similar thing on Pinterest.

You might wonder how I find time to work on the gifts. I have a bag that holds the gift as I’m working on it. I take it whenever I am attending an event where I need to listen or wait. I tend to make items that involve hand sewing, weaving or rug hooking.

The Homemade Gifts I Made So Far

Now I’ll describe the gifts that I made so far. You can see photos on my Instagram feed. All the materials were secondhand including fabric scraps and yarn that people gave me.

Machine Sewing Projects

- Fish ornament from men’s ties - About 10 years ago, I taught classes in crazy quilting with men’s ties and I still have a big collection of ties that I took apart and cleaned.
- Fabric butterfly sewn from recycled men’s ties – I studied how to fold a butterfly using origami techniques and replicated it with fabric.
- Poppy quilt – For Remembrance Day, I sewed red flowers on a green background. This design was inspired by quilts made by Jen Manuell from Fish Eye Sisters [<https://fisheyesisters.ca/>].

Rug Hooking Projects

- Rug hooked swirl on a recycled rice burlap bag – You can see a super-fast video of me hooking this on my Instagram. This was inspired by the artist Jess Wrobel [<http://www.jwrobel.com/>]

Weaving Projects

- Woven pink cushion with a heart, made this on a little hand loom

Hand Sewing and Embroidery Projects

- Paper-pieced hexagon quilt from fabric scraps
- Embroidered squirrel with colorful swirls on its tail, inspired by the artist Hawthorn Handmade [<https://www.hawthornhandmade.com/>]
- Embroidered mitten – The mitten was modeled from an actual mitten that my great-grandmother knit
- Felt ornament of a bagpiper – My grandmother loves bagpipe music. To make the ornament, I made a pattern based on a photo of my nephew, who plays the bagpipe.
- Felt fruit salad mandala – To cheer up my grandmother in the middle of winter, I took very bright lime green felt and arranged little felt fruit in a mandala or symmetrical circular pattern.
- Beaded heart broach – I sewed recycled t-shirts in heart shapes and filled in the spaces with beads.
- Felt owl ornament – I was making owl ornaments for my neighbors to thank them for buying Boy Scout mulch from my son, and I made one for my grandmother too, but added more detail to hers.
- Dandelion puff embroidery – I stretched a scrap of fine mesh fabric over a wooden frame and then a dandelion puff with a few seeds starting to float away. It can sit in the window and the light will shine through. This was inspired by the artist Velvet Meadow [<https://www.etsy.com/shop/velvetmeadow>]
- Rainbow ornament – I took strips of recycled t-shirts and sewed them in a rainbow swirl pattern – that’s her June gift – she hasn’t received it yet!

Project Benefits

The biggest benefit of this project has been my grandmother’s joy. My family sends me photos of her holding up my gifts and she looks delighted.

Another benefit is that this project helped me to get out of my head and start on projects before they were 100% fully formed. I tend to over-think ideas for months or years. There were so many times where people asked me, "What will you make with that?" and I said, "I don't know but it always gets figured out." I don't have to know before I start whether it's going to be a wall-hanging, an ornament, a bag, a cushion or whatever. It's actually more fun if I just start making it and see what happens. Some projects started as a gift, but evolved into something bigger. So working on this project caused me to make a bunch of other art as well. I would love to hear about how you motivate yourself to make your ideas into reality. How do you get started? How do you keep going? Let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com.

Until next time – I hope you can create systems that inspire you to move from idea to action. Thanks for listening!