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A GUIDE TO THE GREATER FORT MYERS BUSINESS INDUSTRY

Local handbag designer creates wearable art



PHOTO FLORIDA WEEKLY

Entrepreneur Martine Cronin, featured with her one-of-a kind, made to order handbags.

Celebs buy up local creations

BY ELLA NAYOR
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Ahh, handbags.

For most women the word alone inspires visions of sexy satchels, handsome hobos and chic clutches dancing in their heads.

Whether a bag is functional or for appeal - most women must have one dangling off their shoulder or arm.

But for some folks, a handbag is more than just a container to stuff make-up and a wallet - it's a form of self-expression.

Just ask icons Sharon Stone, Lily Tomlin or Joan Rivers. They all own handbags made right here in Fort Myers.

Entrepreneur Martine Cronin, featured in Accessories Magazine earlier this year, makes a good living fashioning wearable art.

Her seven-year-old company, Martine-Fashionable Metal, features one-of-a kind, made to order handbags.

The sleek geometrically designed containers are made with aluminum, silk, stainless steel and Swarovski crystal hardware and adornments. Cronin creates the body of her purses with brushed or shiny silver or uses rich wine-red, Fuchsia and

sunset oranges. The purses stay upright on aluminum balls fastened to the bottom.

The purses seem to have a life of their own. She infuses fuel line material, chains and even barb wire to create her purses.

Just ask icons Sharon Stone, Lily Tomlin or Joan Rivers. They all own handbags made right here in Fort Myers.

One bag made with a plush-like faux leopard fur screams wild safari.

"I've always been on the artsy side," Cronin said. "I've kind of known since I was a child what I was going to do."

She trained with a metal artisan in Gainesville who taught her about the elements of proportion, space and color. Cronin also has a fashion merchandising degree from Florida State University, whose motto is "fashion forward."

Her passion for combining function and fashion has heralded her into the spotlight both locally and worldwide.

Area residents and celebrities alike scoff up her hand signed purses that range in price from \$150 to over \$1,000.

Deniz Burleson, owner of the Silver and Stones shop in Fort Myers, said she has carried Cronin's purses for six years.

"They're so nicely done, very functional," she said.

Burleson said the purses specifically appeal to people who see themselves as chic and like an artsy, eclectic handbag. She said her European customers are particularly drawn to them.

"They're an unusual bag," she said.

The unique, clean cut and funky purses draw the admiration and sales of the Hollywood glitterati as well.

She sells about 1,000 purses a year and because they're growing so popular she's

scouting for a larger place to produce them. India might be that place, she said.

She currently works out of space in the Shell Factory in North Fort Myers that her dad, Tom Cronin, owns.

And as long as people need to carry their belongings with them, stylishly, there will always be a market.

According to the Dow Jones Market Watch sales are strong in handbags and women's accessories.

"I've always been on the artsy side," Cronin said. "I've kind of known since I was a child what I was going to do."

Last year, sales swelled 29% to \$836.4 million.

And when times get lean, handbags seem to be more of a necessity than accessory.

According to research at Wesleyan University, the handbag has been considered an intimate companion since the 1880s bridging women's public and private lives. The contents of women's purses con-

DETAILS

■ **PURCHASE** - To get a purse from Martine - Fashionable Metal, contact her at 239-995-2141 ext. 151. Or check out her Web site at martine@fashionablemetal.com

■ **ON THE WEB** - What does your hand bag say about your personality?

To learn check out this fun Web Site: <http://uk.tickle.com/test/handbag.html>

■ **DID YOU KNOW?** - Facts about the handbag business world:

- Luxury goods produced \$525 billion in sales in the United States last year
- 44% of women aged 13 and over bought a purse for themselves or for someone else
- On average, women bought 3 handbags in 2004
- On average, women own 6 handbags, younger women own fewer than 6. 40% of women over 55 own 7 or more handbags, the highest ownership of all age segments
- Amount spent for a handbag ranges from about \$40 to \$65
- Women spend \$42, on average, for their most recent handbag and \$54, on average, for the bag they carry most often
- Upscale handbag buyers or those willing to spend \$150 or more for a handbag, represent about one in ten of those women who purchased a handbag in the past year

Source: www.stylecareer.com

veyed the functions women are expected to perform, the appearances they are expected to convey, and the crises for which they feel they need to be prepared, according to "Portrait of a Handbag: What the Contents of Women's Handbags Tell Us about

Women's Lives."

Today, women carry everything from baby wipes to a pricey tube of Chanel lipstick.

But whatever unique need, Cronin is

ready to create a bag that fits it.

Along with her purses, Cronin said she is hoping sometime to create a jewelry line.

But whatever she does, it must be done with style and thought.

"I don't want to be an overnight success," she said. "I want to be long term." ■