

# Inner beauty

Using salvaged automotive inner tubes, Katja Aga Sachse Thom turns industrial junk into sculptural objets d'art. Her eco-chic line of sophisticated bags blends architectural and craft sensibilities

By Susan Nerberg  
Photography by Anna Sulikowska  
Hair and makeup by Minna Lopenen  
Styling by Emily Cheng  
Model, Nathalie Beaulieu/NEXT



Clothing, this page: vintage Ungaro leather skirt, vintage blouse. Clothing, opposite page: dress by the Royal Court Goes Hunting; tank top by Fruit of the Loom. Shot at the Eric Arthur Gallery at the University of Toronto's faculty of architecture, landscape and design. Architectural posters from the Robert G. Hill collection (opposite) are showing at the gallery until December 8.



While sustainability has finally landed on the public's radar, the idea of transforming trash into treasure isn't new to creative types. Katja Aga Sachse Thom is no exception. The Toronto designer wields a utility knife and upholstery tools to conjure her own recycled bag of tricks. Using discarded inner tubes from car, truck and tractor tires, she creates surprisingly elegant carryalls – handbags, shoulder bags, saddlebags and backpacks – that would look equally at home in a museum or on a runway.

The magic started back in 1999, on a drive to the desert outside Los Angeles. Sachse Thom and her husband, Adam Thom, were studying architecture at SCI-Arc at the time. "We came across a bunker full of old vehicles and inner tubes," says Sachse Thom. "I pulled out a tube that was easily more than 50 years old. It was still intact, and that night I made some cuts in it and found a rich and beautiful

geometry. I immediately saw the concept for the bags." She also realized that the tube would determine the form. "I'm not trying to make the material something it doesn't want to be, so I leave the curvature alone. It's an interesting limitation," she says. That first experiment yielded an amphora shape.

Sachse Thom, who's trained as a textile and jewellery designer, sculptor and architect, makes the bags herself and sells them through Agathom Co., the Toronto firm she runs with her husband. Each one takes a full day to make, from scrubbing off oil and grime to cutting the tube and determining the form. She hand-stitches the totes using upholstery techniques from her parents' textile mill in Denmark. The vessel-shaped bags (a car inner tube yields one or two, a tractor tire a handful) feature a thick felt bottom, while the backpack

incorporates seat belts and bungee cords for straps. Over time, the rubber acquires a glossy patina. "It ages gracefully, just like a natural material," says the designer. "I'm amazed at how an industrially made product becomes like a hide, with its own marks of time."

Sachse Thom's most reliable sources are old body shops and junkyards. "I enjoy using something that would otherwise be taking up landfill," she says. After that initial discovery outside L.A., she often returned to the desert to look for suitable raw materials. "Now we drive around the Ontario countryside, always keeping our eyes open for shops that might have old tires," she says. "You have to enjoy the search to make it worthwhile. The whole endeavour becomes more than just making the bag. Each item is a little adventure in itself." **AZ**  
**For sources see page 121**



**Different inner tubes** yield different-shaped bags. To make a saddlebag (top) or a backpack (middle), both of which involve ample flat surface, Sachse Thom uses a tractor tire inner tube. For an amphora-shaped one (bottom) – like the first prototype for her KASTd line – she employs a car tire inner tube. Whatever the source, the rubber acquires a glossy patina over time.