



BEAUTY, CRAFTSMANSHIP, AND COMMUNITY

Baba Tree, founded and led by Gregory MacCarthy, is a project that embodies the meticulous artistry of skilled craftspeople, the preservation of ancient traditions, and a commitment to fair trade. Furthermore, it exudes an authentic, true African character, resulting in final products of extraordinary originality and allure. From elephant grass and artisan talent to dedication, Baba Tree creates baskets, bags, hats, and more—from Gurunsi in eastern Ghana to the rest of the world.

By Írigo de Amescua

Photography courtesy of Baba Tree

Gregory, what does Baba Tree mean to you?

For me, it's a dream—a gateway to the finest design, art, and decoration, created and produced under the guiding principles of fair trade and in collaboration with master weavers from Bolgatanga, Ghana. For over 20 years, Baba Tree has preserved the local basket-weaving culture, among other pieces, of the Gurunsi community in this region. Baba Tree is a purpose-driven social enterprise, committed to supporting local communities and fostering social regeneration, where everyone involved is considered a partner in an ongoing global transformation.

Our mission is simple: to make the world a better place. We want to meet and exceed the needs of our people, fostering peace and, where possible, generating sustainable incomes.

How does Baba Tree embrace the principles of slow design?

We're not entirely sure what the exact principles of so-called slow design are. For us, we design products and make them knot by knot... slowly.

Every decision is guided by a simple question: What do we value? This means honouring the hands that create each piece, supporting communities through fair trade, and protecting the planet.

What steps do you take to minimise your environmental impact?

At our property, the future home of Baba Tree, we've revitalised the soil using the method described by renowned Zimbabwean farmer Zephaniah Phiri Maseko as "planting the rain before planting the seed or the tree." This approach has helped us create tonnes of biomass and transform the land into a sponge capable of retaining millions of litres of water in reservoirs built by the Baba Tree team. This transformation was achieved by applying large amounts of organic matter to land that had suffered significant degradation. We also produce tonnes of compost, including from human waste, which we use to enrich the soil, saving an estimated 4 to 5 million litres of water.

This fertile land is then used to grow trees, fruits, and vegetables, which are shared among the Baba Tree team and the weavers. However, there's still work to be done to reduce our ecological footprint. For instance, we currently use firewood to heat our dyeing pots, but we're mitigating this by planting hundreds of trees. Our immediate goal is to plant 1,500 trees, with a long-term target of 50,000. In

the future, we aim to power the dyeing process with solar energy, which will benefit both the planet and the local community that lives and works in this region.

What does your creative process look like?

While I contribute to many of the designs, our design team collaborates closely with master weavers. Together, they blend fresh ideas with the artisans' suggestions to ensure each piece is as authentic and high-quality as possible. I would also like to highlight that the weavers themselves have developed exceptional designs.

How do your products reflect the rich cultural heritage of the local community?

Nature is our muse. It inspires our designs, and the colours we use in our baskets, bags, and décor reflect the landscapes, seasons, and vibrant culture of Bolgatanga. For example, our artistic Tua Tia basket draws inspiration from the iconic Baobab tree, locally known as the "mother tree" or "father tree." Other designs, such as models Dugla, Kenkansia, Woman, and Man, also share this inspirational connection. Some traditional patterns even represent sounds, like a hen laying an egg, or the stars visible in the night sky. Our designs also incorporate symbolic elements, such as leather amulets for spiritual protection.

How does Baba Tree contribute to the local community in Bolgatanga?

We provide comprehensive support to our weavers and their families, covering at least 50%—and often 100%—of medical expenses, and fully funding the education of children in the community. Additionally, we practise regenerative farming, maintain cleaning services, supply water, and improve roads for the benefit of society at large.

Our artisans receive fair wages for their work, including the costs of materials and preparation. As I've mentioned, we cover some of their expenses and offer commissions for every basket sold on our website, all within a safe and positive working environment.

What is the Material Futures Project?

This project marries our rich basketry tradition with recycled textile waste sourced from local markets, creating luxury baskets with innovative colour schemes and textures. The project is a creative endeavour led by Bettina McIlwraith and Zion, a member of the Baba Tree team.

What challenges and opportunities do you face?

A significant challenge is combating the illegal imitation of

our designs, which are often mass-produced without regard for quality, the people involved, or the environment. Despite these issues, we remain steadfast in our mission of authenticity and excellence. Looking ahead, we plan to construct an efficient and sustainable new home for our business, using materials like mud and other technologies that are environmentally friendly.*

