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Special haute couture story by
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CHRISTINE DE PANAFIEU

Merging art with sustainable development

Christine de Panafieu is a French sociologist who has been actively involved in the promotion of food trees and their role in sustainable agriculture. Her interest in this area comes from her passion for the environment and her belief that food trees have the potential to address many of the pressing environmental and social issues of our time, such as climate change, food security, and biodiversity loss. Through her writing and advocacy work, Christine has raised awareness, supported local communities, and enhanced ecosystems.

De Panafieu talks about how promoting art globally is supporting her humanitarian associations DDD - Don pour un développement durable (donation for a sustainable development), and the project 2000 Fruit Trees in the Dogon country.

AM: Christine, please tell us about your background

I'm German and I have a vast career in philosophy and sociology. I was always interested in art and worked with galleries. I came to France when I was 33 years-old, I didn't speak any French. I fell in love with France and it took me eight years to quit my university back home, though I had a strong passion to educate. My husband is an artist and architect so I was always surrounded by art and social sciences. Then I became a consultant in a company that works in social change before creating my own company 22 years ago. It's a small firm that consulted Renault, Procter and Gamble and many big names. I use curiosity about the future of business and I tell them what they need to hear and not what they want to hear.

AM: And what about your humanitarian projects in Mali?

I worked with hospitals in Mali that care for kids when their parents couldn't. Helping the elderly, women on the streets and creating houses for women who were raped. I've been working for years in Mali where we have a house, we built a hospital, provided education for women, and offered micro-loans. I started the project 2000 Fruit Trees in the Dogon country; it was a shared idea with my husband as we have children there who we adopted in a non-official way and my husband wanted to support them by planting trees. I had the idea of selling his arts and investing in planting trees. So, I created a new association, DDD - Don pour un développement durable, for transforming art to tree planting, which in French translates to "de l'art à l'arbre." One of my sons suggested fruit trees because people have nothing to eat and it's always the same diet; sugar in the morning then something with fish and sauce. It's not good for their health. What I learned is that we can't do a project without an educational part and we needed a sustainable plan. 90 percent are farmers, and they use chemical products which isn't good for the planet. They also don't have an optimal water supply. To improve their farming techniques, we invited one person per family and trained them to plant sustainably and make a profit out of it for a stable income. We taught them to grow lemon, pineapple, guava, mango trees and so many more.

AM: Why are trees so important to you?

A tree brings shadow and people sitting around it develop social cohesion. It's a family meeting point. It's aesthetically beautiful. Trees are symbolic; the tree of life, the leaves, the roots. There's a lot of iconographies around the tree that are very emotional, the forbidden tree of Adam and Eve for instance.

AM: And how do you connect art with your philanthropic work there?

For the people there it's quite abstract to understand that the money supporting the local projects stems from the sale of art from other parts of the world. We want to create little videos to show the artists of how the trees were and how they flourished. And then show the Malians videos of the artists. It's relationships beyond transactions.

AM: And how can the artists participate?

It is clear that artists who have established names make the process easier because the art needs to be sellable. But we have a mix of artists that aren't so expensive. It's also by word of mouth and networking. It started with our friends whom I've asked to contribute. Now we enlarged this and we received more than 100 donations. We are considering going international because we've been getting art from Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. We work with top-tier galleries and auctioneers. One of my criteria is that the pieces need to be artistic and they need to be professionally made. What astonishes me is that people's tastes are very different. We need to have something for everyone

AM: How do you sell the art pieces?

We have exhibitions, I also sold on my late husband's website during COVID. Now we are looking for events to create auctions that help and promote the artists. We want to spread the idea of food trees that could be planted in other countries.

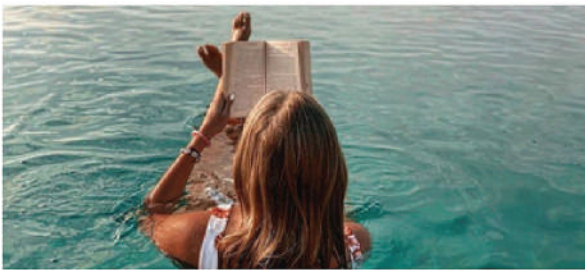
AM: What is your take about the future of sustainable development?

I'm optimistic by mindset. I do everything for a sustainable way of life which means we need to transform the way we consume and produce. After all these years of using and abusing nature it's now our responsibly to nourish it. It will come but with the next generations. My generation was after the World War so it was all about process and development. Then came the 80's and the development of technology and the internet. Currently, we are living an enormous transformation to search for a new life on this earth. The new generation is ready to consume less. This generation asks itself why should I work so much? I want to live with less and do things I enjoy more.



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