



Working in her home studio, Ruby Silvius, a graphics designer and owner of Design+ in New York, uses watercolor to paint on used tea bags.

THE ART OF A TEA BAG

Take a reimagined look at a familiar paper.

by Jen W. O'Deay

What were you doing January 3, 2015?

Perhaps you know, but, more likely, the day passed as any and many others. Your exact whereabouts and actions may be hard to recall.

But this is not so for graphics designer Ruby Silvius, owner of Design+ in Hudson Valley, New York, who knows precisely what took place that day. That's because it marked the beginning of an artistic endeavor that has earned Silvius global renown.

While having tea at a sandwich shop, Silvius, like many at the start of a new year, was contemplating goals. Specifically, she was soul-searching potential artistic avenues.

"I had resolved to paint something," Silvius says. "Having tea, I thought 'Oh, why not tea?'"

She declared a personal goal of painting, something related to enjoying tea every day, and posting her artwork on social media. Yet, the artist quickly became captivated by the composite fiber material accompanying her muse: tea bags.

"[My goal] evolved to painting on tea bags," Silvius says. "It's a small canvas, do-able daily."



Silvius's tea bag art has captured global attention, and her book, *363 Days of Tea*, is due out this September.

True to her resolve, Silvius hand-painted a watercolor image each day thereafter of 2015, some whimsical and light, others evocative and profound, upon tea bags—used tea bags.

An implausible project? Over 4,000 followers on Instagram might disagree, attracted to Silvius's art and her ultimate goal as an artist: to inspire people to look again, to reimagine the familiar.

For an artist such as Silvius, what better “canvas” from which to turn old into new and inspire a second thought? What's more familiar—and more overlooked—than a tea bag, the soggy remains discarded by hands happily wrapped around warm tea mugs?

Tea bags as art? Preposterous! Perhaps, but the conclusion would depend on the way most people look at tea bags, or, more likely, the way most *don't*. As Kai Wulff, general sales manager of food and beverage for Glatfelter's Composite Fibers Business Unit, headquartered in Gernsbach, Germany, says, “The composition of a tea bag is much more of a phenomenon than many may think.”

“After all,” Wulff says, “this paper must do two things that are deemed to be at complete opposite sides of the spectrum. The flavors of the tea must perfectly infuse the water. Therefore, the paper must be porous enough to let this happen. On the other hand, the tea, and even more trying, the fine tea particles, is not allowed to slip through the paper. Through the composition of numerous raw fibers, this criterion is fulfilled.”

Sips of tea are likely savored without any thought of the dual-natured requirements tea bags must meet, or of the “super fiber” present in the tea bag paper that helps to ensure its abilities: abaca fiber, also known as Manila hemp, derived from the species of banana native to the Philippines.

“The long and strong fibers of abaca are responsible for the paper's porosity and the strength of the lightweight material,” Wulff says, “and also give the tea bag its folding and crimping properties. Abaca's perfect combination of strength and porosity, simultaneously, adds desired characteristics to specialty paper, including excellent infusion and neutral taste.”

“Our key ingredient in tea filter paper is possibly the most sustainable fiber in the industry. The plant grows quickly and under warm tropical conditions,” Wulff says, “Responsible harvesting is also important to us.”

With two out of every three tea bags in the world made from Glatfelter composite fiber materials, it's probable that Silvius's upcoming book, *363 Days of Tea*, due out September 2017, contains images of watercolor-painted tea bags made by Glatfelter, although this fact could be easily overlooked—much like the art of tea bags itself.