

Fashion



This file photo shows French designer Thomas Jacob (right) posing with inmates before the presentation of creations made in the framework of his social project 'Pieta' at the San Pedro prison in Lima. — AFP photos



French designer Thomas Jacob (left) walking before the presentation of creations made in the framework of his social project 'Pieta'.



French designer Thomas Jacob (center) stamping his fingerprints upon arriving at the San Pedro prison.

Peru prisoners launch fashion label behind bars



Inmates sewing as part of the social project 'Pieta'.

Santos Arce Ramos is doing 18 years for aggravated robbery, but today he is carefully cutting organic cotton cloth in a workshop at San Pedro, a notorious prison in Peru's capital Lima. With the help of a French designer who cut his teeth at Chanel, inmates at two Peruvian prisons have launched their own clothing label, seeking to bring their urban style to the world and find redemption in fashion. "It's like putting together a puzzle," said Arce, 46, as he maneuvered pieces of cloth into place on a beat-up work bench.

Arce is one of 30 inmates at San Pedro and a women's prison across town, Santa Monica, who make the clothes sold by Pieta, a label that describes itself as socially conscious and was set up by 29-year-old French fashionista Thomas Jacob. The label specializes in a gritty urban look: T-shirts, hoodies and jackets in black, white and army green, stamped with stark black designs. Jacob, a graduate of French business school INSEEC, got the idea for Pieta in 2012, when a friend who taught French lessons to inmates at San Pedro invited him to tag along with her.

Galvanized by the visit, he plunged head-first into an ambitious new project. He asked prison officials for permission to set up a tailoring workshop for inmates, and then quit his job at revered fashion house Chanel to dedicate himself to his new label. "Prison inspires me—the dark side of humankind," he said. It was slow going at first, but within a year the inmates were making "high-quality, competitive" products, he told AFP, speaking nearly perfect Spanish.

Pieta takes its name from a sculpture by Renaissance master Michelangelo in which the Virgin Mary cradles the lifeless body of Jesus. The name "represents the final step before resurrection, the rebirth of a man who never gives up. That's the hope of these inmates," Jacob said.

Designs from the dark side

Jacob designs the clothes and the inmates make them. "The idea is to do everything within the prison walls," he said as a group of inmates modeled the 2016 collection, which will be sold online. His designs recall the work of Alexander Rodchenko, the Russian artist whose angular lines and stark colors epitomized the 20th-century movement known as constructivism. In one T-shirt, the outline of a black padlock is barely perceptible against a black background. In another, the jagged shape of an industrial building bears the inscription "Factory of Tears."

The brand's logo is four bars with a diagonal slash through them, evoking hash marks carved into a prison wall to tally the days of lost freedom. "It's an authentic concept, with different designs. There's nothing false. We use organic cotton and natural materials," said Jacob. Pieta produces some 100 T-shirts a week and has sold more than 12,000 items in just over three years. The T-shirts go for \$35 online. At San Pedro, the inmates' small workshop sits in a recreation area that was the scene of one of the worst prison massacres in history 30 years ago, when inmates from the Shining Path, a leftist guerrilla group, staged a mutiny that left more than 100 people dead.

The crowded space is packed with sewing machines the inmates use to turn the materials Jacob brings twice a week



An inmate sewing as part of the social project "Pieta". Carlos Uribe, who is serving 15 years for drug dealing, said the money helps the inmates care for their families on the outside. "We need people like Thomas, people who believe in us," said Uribe, 67. "We're a potential labor force. Working helps redeem us, provides money for our families and makes us feel productive. We're not useless." — AFP



French designer Thomas Jacob arriving at the San Pedro prison to work in his social project 'Pieta'.



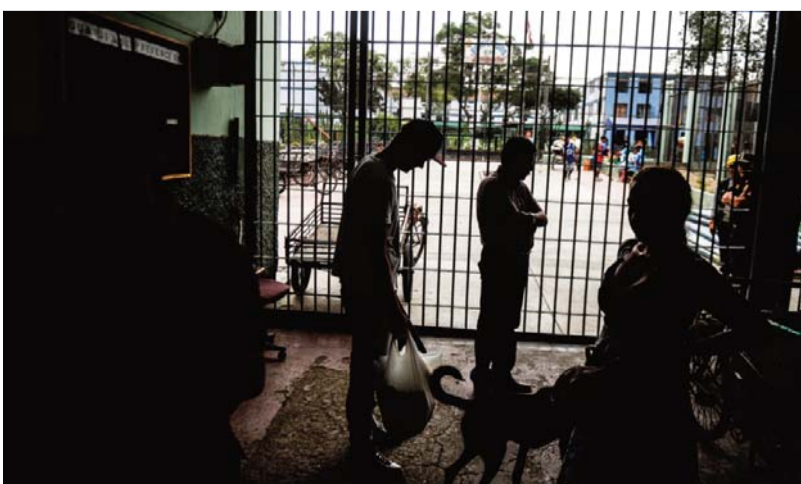
A T-shirt in the foreground as inmates sew as part of the social project "Pieta".



An inmate presenting creations made in the framework of the social project 'Pieta'.



French designer Thomas Jacob showing a T-shirt.



French designer Thomas Jacob (left) arriving at the San Pedro prison to work with inmates.



French designer Thomas Jacob waiting before the presentation of creations made in the framework of his social project 'Pieta'.



French designer Thomas Jacob (right) working with inmates participating in his social project 'Pieta'.