



THE ART OF SOUTACHE WITH *Sofia Urbina*

story by Amber Demien

Art and science do not often go hand in hand, but the creative journey of Sofia Urbina has been a collaboration between the right and left sides of her brain. While growing up in Spain, art made an impression early in her life, exhibited by her mother's love of patchwork and packaging, her brother's gift for music, and her seamstress grandmother and aunt. Like many little girls, she enjoyed playing with dolls, but Sofia's dolls were dressed in clothing of her own making design, which was the result of her early love for textiles. Her creative side was even evident while baking with her mother and grandmother, as she remembers, "I used to bake with them the most irregular and strange shapes of cookies. They just let my imagination fly!"

When Sofia when about 11 years old, she stumbled upon jewelry-making. Using what she had around her — random pearls, copper wire, and the pliers her father used for electrician work — she created her very first pieces, which consisted of colorful spring-like rings. "I managed to craft six of them before Christmas Eve dinner, and my cousins liked them and bought five of the six pieces. I was over the moon ... That was the beginning of everything," she recalls. This early entrepreneurial moment blossomed into an ever-present passion that she would carry with her through the years.

As a young adult faced with having to choose a career path, Sofia pursued a very different passion: space and the universe. She moved to Madrid to study aerospace engineering. After earning a Master of Science degree, her love of learning propelled her on toward a PhD in aerospace and control systems engineering, which she obtained in 2017. While immersing herself in science, Sofia didn't neglect her creativity. As she explains, "During all these studies, I needed the artistic side in my life to really keep my body and mind balanced, allowing me a little time away from screens. And that's how I got to know new disciplines such as dancing, yoga, painting, photography, sewing, and all kind of DIYs" — and, of course, jewelry-making. ✦



The turning point occurred in 2015 when Sofia discovered soutache on Instagram. A popular technique shared mainly by Russian artists, the “soutache” is a flat decorative braid initially used in passementerie (decorative trimming) on textiles and clothing. As Sofia explains, “When the soutache is used within jewelry, the final pieces have a high-end, finished look, almost like haute couture. And that flawless look captivated me.”

She dove in headfirst to learn the technique but it proved rather difficult, as every tutorial she found was in Russian. Without written instructions to follow, she once again relied on her engineering experience, explaining, “I had to watch the movements and the whole technique, and adapt them to what felt comfortable for me. My first soutache pieces took me ages to craft, but the final result was beautiful.”



Prior to 2015, Sofia explored making jewelry by trying anything and everything. “I used (literally) everything that arrived to my hands: paper, buttons, glue, watercolors, etc.,” she shares. All of her experimentations were self-taught, aided in large part by her engineering background, which had honed her ability to visualize things in three dimensions. Other endeavors were guided by YouTube video tutorials as well as magazines.



When Sofia began wearing her own work, she discovered a huge advantage of this type of jewelry: the pieces were incredibly light, even the large designs. Another discovery was the outpouring of compliments and questions about her work, which was all the encouragement she needed to continue making jewelry. ♦



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After years of refining her approach, Sofia has perfected her own soutache technique. She personally hand-sews each piece, focusing on strength, durability, lightness, and elegance. As opposed to the bold colors and flashy braiding that are often found in soutache jewelry, she prefers a more elegant, airy, and timeless style. "My jewelry now has a French influence from haute couture. I use muted and neutral colors, pearls, and Czech (Swarovski) crystals that enhance the natural elegance within each woman without making them feel disguised," she shares. ♦♦



She creates her pieces in her home office that doubles as an atelier. Her most important tool is a thin needle, which she uses to sew the braids altogether; as Sofia explains, “the thinner the needle, the more flawless the finished jewelry.” Pliers and scissors finish off her simple toolbox, while the materials she is naturally drawn to are glass beads and pearls, which provide that elegant air she always strives to create. Keeping her company in her atelier is a photo of her grandmother, who she admires “to the moon and back.” About her grandmother, Sofia also shares, “She was an incredible woman, and she always told me to be patient and calm. So when I stress or don’t feel OK, just by looking at her photo I can almost hear her voice saying to breathe and just keep going serenely.”



Sofia wakes up early each day to make time for her jewelry, as her engineering work is her full-time job. She prepares a cappuccino before going to her atelier. Normally, she starts with the activities that do not require a lot of thinking, which were usually prepared the night before, such as sewing on the back of the jewelry. Once her coffee kicks in she moves on to big decisions and creative thinking, which is when she explores and plays with colors, crystals, beads, and more. Every day she constantly observes her surroundings, especially nature, looking for inspiration and writing down the ideas that form. “It’s really when I look away from screens that I find the unexpected ideas. Having a ride on the bike, looking at the colors of the seasons in the trees, looking up at the sky, or seeing beautiful clothes on other people inspires me. Everyday life is full of inspiration!” ♦



When Sofia's creations leave her atelier, they find new homes with women who enjoy wearing unique jewelry. Regarding her clients, she shares, "These women know what they want and are self-confident and are eager to show who they are by wearing that special accessory that boosts their look." Brides and bridal parties are also frequent customers, requesting custom pieces that perfectly pair with their gowns.

For Sofia, the best part of her journey so far has been knowing that others enjoy her work. "My biggest accomplishment is the feedback of my clients when they get to see their orders finished. Each time a client writes me to tell me about their jewelry creation, or tags me on their social media posts, I feel blessed — it's the most beautiful feeling in the world."

Sofia Urbina is a Spanish engineer and jewelry artist currently living in the south of France. To see more of her work, visit her Etsy shop at [soutachebysofia.etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com/shop/soutachebysofia) and follow her on Instagram (@soutache.by.sofia), Facebook (Soutache By Sofia), and Pinterest (Soutache By Sofia). She welcomes email at soutache.by.sofia@gmail.com.

Photography by Sofia Urbina.