

CLEAN LINES

As consumers become ever-more ethically minded, haute couture houses are finally catching up, with sustainable measures to boost their eco-conscious credentials and create a greener fashion future

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Renowned for exquisite craftsmanship, lavish materials and time-honoured techniques, the prestige of many luxury fashion houses is forged from years of tradition — but in today's woke, socially conscious world, heritage is no longer an excuse for sidestepping hot-topic issues, such as sustainability.

It's no secret that labels have been disastrously slow on the uptake with eco-friendly practices, meaning that fashion remains the second-most polluting industry in the world after oil. Top brands often hit the headlines for non-ethical trading or harmful production methods such as water wastage — issues that are steadily losing favour with consumers, especially ethically minded millennials. Yet the tide appears to be turning, as even the most hallowed of fashion houses feel the pressure to clean up their act.

With veganism on the rise and scrutiny of livestock conditions increasing, awareness of animal cruelty has never been higher. Anti-fur sentiment may be nothing new — there was a time when protestors touting flour bombs and

red paint almost became a staple at fashion week, after all — but it is only in recent seasons that labels have started to move away from the problematic pelts en masse. The recent Spring/Summer 2019 shows marked the first installation of London Fashion Week — indeed, the first of any major fashion capital — to eschew the use of real fur on its catwalks. From Burberry to Belstaff, the city's leading designers signalled that luxury fashion could be created with a conscience — Riccardo Tisci's debut range for Burberry was also made without angora.

As one of London Fashion Week's biggest names, Stella McCartney has been the most outspoken champion of sustainable fashion practices since the launch of her label in 2001. A PETA supporter and lifelong vegetarian, McCartney shuns the use of fur and leather in her collections — although interestingly, after “much debate” at the label, September saw the launch of a luxury “fur-free fur” range, using faux vegan pelts. While the furs look and feel like the real thing, made without cruelty to animals by carefully chosen mills that use environmentally sound methods, the designs aren't 100 per cent green. The brand admits



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Far left and below: Stella McCartney has introduced Bolt Threads' revolutionary textures Microsilk and Mylo into her collections.

Left: Oliver Spencer is increasing his quota of organic and ecological fabrics each season, as well as improving packaging by cutting out unnecessary card, paper or plastic

pieces are not biodegradable; faux fur is primarily made up of plastic, which can take up to 1,000 years to fully break down.

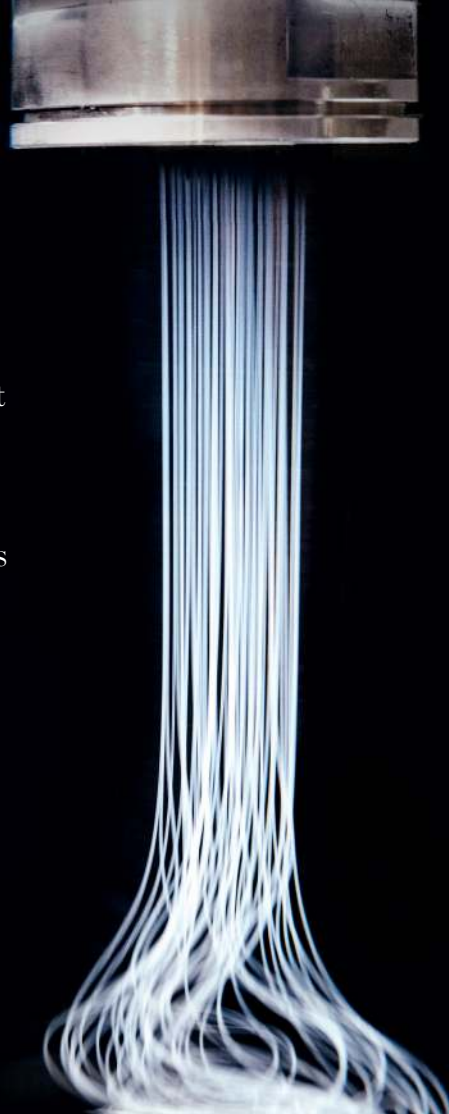
British menswear designer Oliver Spencer is another label head keen to implement change. He and his team take pains to use an increasing quota of organic and ecological fabrics each season to up the company's sustainable product offering, and work is also underway to improve packaging by cutting out unnecessary card, paper or plastic. “For most [fashion brands] it's about getting on a critical path and preparing your business sustainably for the future. It isn't an easy task, but we owe it to the customer to be better. It is time we took responsibility and made it our mission to sort it out for the future,” he says.

Spencer admits that sustainably produced materials “are the biggest challenge” when it comes to retaining the standard of quality in collections, as “mills are behind the curve when it comes making fabric with a more organic stance — ecological wool is also difficult to find at the moment”.

Outside the UK, prominent labels such as Versace, Armani, Hugo Boss and Diane von Furstenberg have announced that real fur will not be used in future collections, as well as Gucci, whose CEO Marco Bizzarri was quoted as saying: “I don't think it's still modern.”

Other materials falling out of favour include leather, exotic skins, silk, cashmere, mohair, feathers and wool, amid concern for the animals involved. Additionally, teeth, down,

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Left: Bolt Threads harnesses proteins found in nature to produce its revolutionary textures.

Below: online boutique Rêve En Vert exclusively stocks high-end sustainable styles

shearling and bone are becoming more contentious, as well as mother-of-pearl.

Of course, many of these once-desirable textures historically formed a bedrock for the success of luxury fashion collections, meaning designer brands are now scrabbling to catch up with premium eco-conscious alternatives — many of which come with their own set of obstacles to modern business models. For instance, while Ahimsa silk (or “peace silk”) is made without the killing of silkworms, it comes at almost double the cost.

However, technological innovation signals hope for sustainable solutions within the apparel industry; just look to California-based biotech firm Bolt Threads, which harnesses proteins found in nature to produce revolutionary textures Microsilks, a synthetic spider silk, and Mylo, a supple surface almost identical to leather made from the root structure of mushrooms. Stella McCartney has already adapted both materials into her products.

Collaborating with creatives in an effort to protect the ocean — the world’s “life-sustaining ecosystem” — Parley for the Oceans has worked with leading brands including Adidas and G-Star. As founder Cyrill Gutsch comments: “There’s a lot of talk of recycling and a circular economy, but it won’t be enough to adopt sustainability into business practices.

We need to reinvent and redesign materials, products, methods and thinking.”

In an effort to combat the widespread issue of marine plastic pollution — horrifyingly shown in David Attenborough’s recent *Blue Planet II* — the company has created a new material called Ocean Plastic®, made using recycled plastics that have been retrieved from the waters. “It’s not just about weeding out unnecessary plastics and recycling more — it’s thinking into the future of materials that can replace plastic,” says Gutsch, terming this approach a “material revolution”.

Elsewhere, a growing number of e-commerce sites are catching on to the cause. For example, Farfetch has a section solely dedicated to ethical brands. There, the likes of Pomelatto, Chopard and Chinti & Parker shine bright for their eco-conscious credentials, whether that involves sustainable materials or fairer trade. Going one step further, online boutique Rêve En Vert exclusively stocks high-end sustainable styles.

“There is still quite a bit of ‘green-washing’ within luxury fashion, where brands make big proclamations, but aren’t doing quite as much as they should be,” says co-founder Cora Hilt. “At Rêve En Vert, we encourage total transparency to avoid confusing consumers when it comes to the tricky term of ‘sustainability’. We are starting to see the rise of vintage buys, which is the most sustainable way to shop. A lot of luxury brands still over-produce and burn what they don’t sell,



which is an insane waste of resource and puts more carbon in the air from the fuelling process.”

Among the many brands found on the site, Hilt’s favourites include Mara Hoffman — “she is committed to sustainable production, even making recycled materials luxurious” — as well as Kohza Numbers for vegetable-tanned leather bags and White Briefs for organic cotton basics. “The growth of sustainable luxury fashion is inevitable,” she says. “Anyone not making swift changes risks being left behind as consumers become aware of fashion’s negative contribution to climate change and human rights.”

Although change has been slow coming, positive measures signal hope for a greener future in fashion. As Gutsch asserts: “With the influence of its major players, the industry is the best placed to set new trends. You can’t just create or wear a product — you have to stand for something. Purpose is the new luxury — it’s now fashionable to care.”