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\$4.50 May 2007 flare.com





## MISSION: POSSIBLE

The fashion world is trying to save the planet one stiletto at a time. *Shirine Saad* explores the vogue of eco chic

Models display eco awareness at Hussein Chalayan's February show in Paris

**FASHION IS NOTHING** if not a swing of the pendulum, so we might have the '70s to thank for the latest eco trend. While that decade was characterized by revolutionary (and, no doubt, polluting) synthetic fabrics, it's safe to say that all things green will define this one—with no small thanks to Al Gore, of course. From the tornadoes that whirled through Hussein Chalayan's climate-conscious February show in Paris, right down to the enviro-friendly fashion options on offer at H&M, you can't even contemplate being fashionable now without wondering what materials and labour practices went into making that simple T-shirt you're standing in line to buy.

"It's the zeitgeist," says Danish designer Peter Ingwersen, whose sexy eco brand, Noir, will be sold at Holt Renfrew starting this summer. "Consumers are [becoming] more aware of the way they're spending their money on clothes." Ingwersen

Wear the right thing: H&M brings organic fabrics to the masses

The Al Gore tote, available only at Marc Jacobs boutiques

is one of a new flock of designers who call themselves "ethical," generally promoting sustainability and environmental awareness, whether they're working with organic and recycled materials, reducing pesticide use, supporting fair conditions in factories or contributing to charities.

"Fashion is just one of many areas beginning to reflect on itself and trying to make efforts to do things in a better, newer way that causes less harm," says Julie Gilhart, fashion director at Barneys New York, who has been involved in several eco-fashion projects such as the Barneys-sponsored Earth Pledge FutureFashion Initiative in 2005 that featured eco-friendly fashion from the likes of Diane von Furstenberg and Oscar de la Renta. The good news is, eco fashion in 2007 is light-years away from the dreaded hairy hemp sweaters and itchy Peruvian wool mittens that characterized the marginalized industry that it once was. Now you can flaunt vegan stilettos, sexy organic leggings and clothes made from gorgeous eco-friendly materials such as Lenpur and bamboo. From luxury conglomerates such as PPR and LVMH to high-end stores including Holt Renfrew and Barneys that carry ethical lines (which also happen to be sourced at cool trade events such as the annual Ethical Fashion Show in Paris, an event that marked its third year last October) to major brands such as Nike, Patagonia, H&M, Topshop and Levi's, which sell eco-friendly wear, the environment is decidedly on everybody's mind.

Still not convinced? Diesel's summer shock campaign, "Global Warming Ready," shows New York skyscrapers submerged in water and the Eiffel Tower surrounded by palm trees. According to the company, it's a campaign that's designed to provoke discussion of global warming (in cheeky Diesel fashion, of course). There is additional material posted online as well, including a link to Diesel's partner, [www.stopglobalwarming.org](http://www.stopglobalwarming.org).

Diesel's taken it a step further, too, by announcing that its new headquarters in Italy will follow eco-friendly parameters set by the Kyoto accords. "We have a responsibility," says Joelle Berdugo Adler, president of ▶▶



Diesel Canada, "and it has nothing to do with the fact that we have to sell our products."

Responsibility with regard to the environment is certainly the order of the day. Not unlike other industries, fashion is known to produce a lot of waste: the dyes, pesticides and other chemicals widely used in the business of clothes manufacturing contribute to the deterioration of the ozone layer, leading to some of the consequences described by Al Gore in the Academy Award-winning *An Inconvenient Truth*. What hurts the earth also hurts us, ecologists say. Ever wonder, for example, where your skin allergies come from? Some argue that such sensitivities are triggered by the pesticides and synthetic fertilizers widely used in the production of a conventional cotton T-shirt—chemicals that may also cause cancer, say advocates of organic cotton.

Conventional cotton production accounts for more than 10 percent of worldwide pesticide use (and 25 percent of the world's insecticide use) while using only 2.5 percent of the total cultivated land in the world. "Cotton production has devastating effects on the environment," says Chantal Havard, spokesperson for TransFair Canada, a national nonprofit organization that certifies fair-trade products sold in Canada. That's why, in the past few years, countless companies, such as Patagonia, Gap, Nike and H&M, have chosen to produce cotton crops traditionally by using biopesticides and natural techniques.

Such initiatives have certainly encouraged consumers to think more about the repercussions of the shopping spree. "I think the fashion industry can play a very strong role with this [cause] because strong consumer movements can happen and fashion leads [the way]," says Barbara Atkin, Holt Renfrew's fashion director, who has been touring the world looking for "amazingly designed" ethically conscious brands, such as Noir and Stella McCartney.

Like Atkin, most supporters of ethical fashion insist that design doesn't need to be sacrificed. And there are more chic choices now than ever. Consider these items from the upcoming summer collection of Stella McCartney—who's proved that non-leather shoes and bags can be as stylish as Hermès—electric-blue satin pumps and a metallic tote.

Ingwersen also insists style and substance can



Diesel's take on the globally warmed future



Rogan Gregory's enviro-friendly Loomstate line for Barneys Green



Stella McCartney delivers more eco-chic for summer: the metallic tote



"Cotton Couture" (organic, of course) from Danish brand Noir

go hand in hand. "The fashion industry is a contributor to polluting the world," he says, "so we thought about creating a collection that is as sexy as it is ethical." A triumph at spring's London Fashion Week, Noir's "Cotton Couture" collection explored the many possibilities of organic cotton, featuring latex-covered cotton riding jackets and skinny pants, white satin goddess dresses and perfectly tailored suits.

Rogan Gregory, a New York designer, was one of the first to make ethically conscious fashion cool. After learning of the polluting effects of cotton production, he chose to go organic, then he convinced Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson, to join him in launching Edun ("nude," in reverse), a socially conscious fashion line that uses local resources, avoids using pollutants and works within ethical labour policies. The line's soft, nature-inspired rocker T-shirts and jeans, available across Canada at Holt Renfrew, attracted the attention of fickle fashion editors from around the globe. Later, Barneys commissioned Gregory to design a special collection for spring (called Loomstate for Barneys Green), featuring organic cotton, denim summer dresses, mini-shorts and embroidered T-shirts.

Through Edun and his (Red) campaign, Bono's had a major role in spreading the eco message as well, proving that fashion can be a major channel for fundraising and raising awareness. (Red), an initiative to fundraise in support of delivering HIV/AIDS treatments to African nations, has attracted support from American Express, Emporio Armani, Gap and Converse, to name a few. The line's organic T-shirts and shoes, mainly produced in Africa, have garnered enormous media visibility and have raised awareness on par with Gore's film.

Then there's up-and-coming Brit designer Giles Deacon, who created Converse (Product) Red Mudcloth shoes with neon pink or yellow details last fall (available online and in the U.K. or the U.S.). Like other partners with Bono's (Red) initiative, a percentage of net retail sales will go to fund aid to Africa. ▶▶



The Brits are indeed some of those leading the enviro-pack: one of the coolest eco designers, London-based Katharine Hamnett, who crafted political messages on T-shirts in the '80s, made a comeback last year with clothes made of organic cotton, organic dyes and fair-trade materials, not to mention conflict-free diamonds. Another Brit favourite, Beyond Skin, offers handmade vegetarian stilettoes in colourful satins, as well as killer slouchy boots. (Phoebe Philo and Sadie Frost are said to be regular customers.)

But don't think ethical fashion is reserved for the gold-card set: many designers are making gorgeous, and affordable, pieces for the masses, too. Chains such as Urban Outfitters and H&M offer organic options as well. If you buy a pair of H&M's dark denim mini-shorts and a printed T-shirt this summer, you'll not only look chic but you'll be eco-friendly; then there's La Senza's bamboo and organic-cotton line, which doesn't scrimp on sexy; and for denim lovers, check out Levi's Eco, made of 100-percent-organic cotton and recycled buttons, or Lululemon Athletica's Oqoqo line, which is made from fibres that are

at least 75 percent natural, organic or sustainable.

And Oqoqo is just one line from Canada: Harricana's Mariouche Gagné, a Montreal-based designer who reached international recognition with her recycled fur accessories, offers a selection of bright little tops and wraps made of recycled silk scarves. And Toronto-based designer Julia Grieve recycled 20,000 sweaters, 12,000 tees, 10,000 sweatshirts, 8,000 pairs of jeans and 6,000 trench coats to make colourful clothes last year for her Preloved line.

Many environmentally conscious designers are also working with interesting eco materials and dyes. Most of us probably won't buy a One Ton CO<sub>2</sub> T-shirt (which offsets carbon emissions), solar-powered jackets or self-cleaning clothes, but what about taffeta made from corn, silk blended with hemp and organic wool? (Conventional wool is culled from sheep that are plunged into a pool of pesticides to kill lice.) For example, Los Angeles-based Linda Loudermilk, a ▶▶



Buy a T-shirt, save the world: Products for Bono's (RED) initiative are earth-friendly, too

celebrity favourite, uses "herbal woven" organic fabrics—recycled bottles, wood pulp and sasawashi, a linen-like fabric made from a Japanese leaf that's said to have antibacterial and antiallergenic properties—for her haute couture and luxury eco clothing.

"Ethical fashion is probably one of the larger global trends that is going to impact our consumption within the next 50 years," says Atkin. "Big corporations that don't have this consciousness will start to see it on their bottom line."

It doesn't hurt, either, that celebrities—from Sienna Miller to Scarlett Johansson—are supporting causes and showcasing the latest ethical wear now more than ever. During New York Fashion Week in February, with its heated whirl of party-hopping, celebrity and social frenzy, Diesel's Renzo Rosso and Jade Jagger hosted "Limited Edition New York," a three-day benefit sale for Al Gore's Climate Project. Items sold to help the fight against global warming included Diane von Furstenberg's "Love the Planet" wrap dress



Eco-powered: Jade Jagger and Renzo Rosso introduced the Limited Edition New York (LENY) line in support of Al Gore's Climate Project

and Margherita Missoni's pink tee printed with green leaves. "The stars are exploiting [the trend] because they're trying to appeal to a younger sensibility," says Marcia Mogelonsky, senior analyst at Mintel International, a marketing research company based in Chicago, "and younger people tend to be more passionate about the environment."

Mogelonsky, for one, thinks this is just another passing fad.

Passing fad or not, this could be the first fashion trend to have lasting benefits. Those who remain optimistic about the enviro-spirit and fashion's involvement say that buying green actually does make a difference. "In the fashion industry," says Atkin, "we aspire to status. So if we make [socially responsible] consumerism the new status, then that's great!"

Fashion will always be both a barometer and a catalyst for society's great changes—consider how the miniskirt helped to usher in the sexual revolution. Now consider a fashion industry that's pesticide- and sweatshop-free. No one's going to argue with that. ■

