

Words: Britt Collins



## Refashion

Organic, retro, stripped-down and punky, the vibrant clash of sustainable fashion is creating an eclectic mix of the most sensual and sassy looks around. Here, its leading lights give an insight on this growing movement...

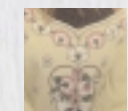
The international couture shows evoke instant glamour. A starry crowd. Exquisite clothes. Languid girls with smoky eyes and fine limbs streaming down the runway like greyhounds. This year's London Fashion Week was a dazzling affair.

The industry, worth £14 billion in exports, has never been known for its political correctness. At last year's Paris and New York shows, houses such as Givenchy and Missoni sent models down the runway dressed in... dead creatures, with heads or feet still attached. Dolce & Gabbana flaunted a micro-mini skirt made entirely out of "Chinese cat", creating an uproar when PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) disclosed that this was, in fact, made from real domestic moggie – dozens of them. Less headline grabbing but equally disturbing, are the mountains of waste, pesticides, synthetic chemicals, fuel, and low wages that go into creating our favourite outfits.

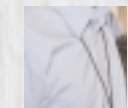
But fashion, with some die-hard exceptions, is slowly turning over a new leaf. You could say green is the new black. Amid the surface frills and fantasy, the catwalks are starting to show a more beautiful underbelly – sumptuous organic fabrics, beautiful vintage cast-offs, and designers taking a stand against fur.

Actually the demand for all-things-green started some years ago. Giorgio Armani has been pedaling hemp (a more durable, less resource- and pesticide-hungry alternative to cotton), recycled jeans and organic cotton shirts as part of the Armani Jeans collection since 1995. Woody Harrelson turned up at the Oscars in one of Armani's hemp suits. Vera Wang and Betsey Johnson are dabbling with green clothing and incorporating bits and pieces into their collections. London-based Jessica Ogden has been creating gorgeous vintage fashions out of recycled clothes for years and selling them in stores such as Harrods and Harvey Nics. Stella McCartney and Todd Oldman regularly question the party line and the ridiculousness of

### Fashion insiders



**Nicola Evans**  
Fashion editor of *Sleazenation*  
on the rise of eco-chic



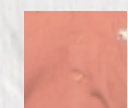
**Danny Seo**  
Designer  
on sensual, responsible design



**Katherine Hamnett**  
Designer  
on manufacturers



**Maria Chenoweth**  
TRAID  
on recycled clothing



**Simon Ferrigno**  
Pesticide Action Network  
on organic cotton



**Safia Minney**  
Founder of People Tree  
on fair trade and fashion

fashion: Stella with her gorgeous non-animal fabric clothes and vegan shoes in satins and velvets; and Oldman with his men's line, favoured by Michael Stipe and Moby. Even fur-using designer Calvin Klein, the consummate trend-spotter and opportunist, has slipped a bit of organic material into his collections.

Still, most people think fair trade and ethical fashion is more worthy than wearable. Aside from the rare, covetable vintage finds or luxurious old cashmere, this is to some extent true, much of green fashion looks like it came, at best, out of an old M&S catalogue, sensible and unimaginative. But eco-chic, now made from desirable organic and recycled fabrics, has become glamorous. While many big names are nodding to fashion with substance, the current shift towards green fashion has created a new breed of designer, the ethical sensualist who wants style and substance.

#### Breathing new life into old clothes

The greenest clothes of all are recycled and vintage, but you don't need to root through Oxfam bins; many high-fashion labels are reusing and recycling vintage fabrics, mixing a wide variety of garments into original collections. Denim skirts that used to be jeans; T-shirts that have been re-styled and re-printed; sweaters, re-cut, cropped or transformed into hip-skimming minis.

Before she became the most-sought-after green designer in America, Koi Swannagate was one of Hollywood's best-kept secrets – creating

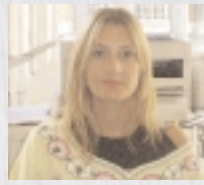
bespoke commissions for celebrities from her small LA apartment. Jennifer Beals used to knock on her door to buy samples and Demi Moore scoured the Melrose boutiques for Koi's handmade clothes. Her exquisitely feminine designs of recycled cashmere and sculpted cotton have become covetable items. Many fashion insiders credit her for starting the reconstruction trend or at least popularising it. Koi's clingy halter-tops, skimpy skirts and low-slung hotpants are heart-stoppingly sexy. If you glimpse through *Vogue* or *Elle*, you're likely to spot Koi's creations: Nicole Kidman in a striking wrap-around sweater or Christina Ricci wearing one of Koi's vivid cashmere dresses to the Golden Globes.

Koi, 34, comes from Thailand, where she made a small name for herself before moving to California. She waited tables and worked 15-hour days to keep the LA boutiques stocked with her designs, building a word-of-mouth following among the stars. Since then, her ascent has been fast and furious, making her a reluctant superstar. "I'm scared," she says, "It's happening so fast. But I can't complain, all these movie stars give me great exposure and show people that you can get beautiful clothes without hurting animals or the earth."

Charlie Lapson, who uses mostly organic cotton and reconstructed fabrics in silks and satins, has been called "one of the

"The public would go for it. They want organic. They want Fairtrade. Maybe other designers will follow"

Katherine Hamnett



#### Nicola Evans fashion editor of Sleazenation

Things have changed radically with eco- and animal-friendly clothing, which has previously been considered boring. Now, designers across the board are looking to infuse 'eco-friendly fabrics' into their collections. Street label Komodo, for example, have long been using hemp and their 'Free Tibet' collections support fair trade. I think that with greater public awareness and the right guidance from high-end fashion it will definitely catch on. But, as with fur, there is every reason it shouldn't be used, yet models are one minute seen to be against it, then if the fee is big enough, will happily strut their stuff in it head to toe. Green fashion needs to be endorsed by the mainstream couture designers and the style press a bit more, in order for it to really catch on fire and become trendy. And I think that is slowly happening now."



#### Danny Seo Designer

"There seems to be a misunderstanding that socially-responsible fashion is ugly. I'm trying to prove otherwise, and show that eco-friendly clothing can be really sensuous and beautiful.

This September, I launched a men's fashion line called Veteran. I was exposed to the horrific waste in fashion when I accidentally discovered warehouses in Los Angeles called rag houses, full of mountains of old clothes. It was so overwhelming that I started thinking how wasteful it would be to launch a fashion line using new material that would eventually only add to the rag houses. Veteran is made almost entirely from recycled materials. Whenever I need to use new material, organic and biodegradable is the only way to go. Organically-grown cotton, hemp and tencel, in bright colours, mixed with vintage materials feels unexpected to me."



#### Katherine Hamnett Designer

People are starting to wake up to the trade issues behind what we buy. It would be great to do some girly stuff, hip-hop for boys, and something for women with a slight curtsy to fashion. The public would go for it. They want organic. They want fair trade. Who knows, maybe other designers will follow.

I'm trying my best to do it and get it made in a sustainable way, but I've got to survive. I was shocked to learn about the 10,000 deaths a year from pesticide poisoning in cotton agriculture. I have been struggling to use organic natural fibres ever since. But the industry does not give a damn. Research shows that consumers would prefer organic textiles if sold at the same price, which is possible now. And especially crucial since GM cotton has invaded the market. But no one buys sustainably produced clothes because they are worthy, they have to be desirable.

When I talk to manufacturers about using Fairtrade cotton, they tell me I'm the only designer asking for it. I find that extraordinary. Where is everybody? I try to get my manufacturers to go along with organic clothing and they hate it so much, you have no idea. At one point, we were having an argument about the colouring of denim; I was telling them that they couldn't use chlorine and they said, "If you persist, you can take your collection and get the hell out of here." But in the meantime, I try to make my collection as fair as is realistically possible. Most of it is made in Italy, where at least its supporting traditional skills."

Imitation of Christ perform miracles with unwanted clothes (previous); while Stella McCartney's Vegan boot gets to the meat of the matter (this page)



**Maria Chenoweth  
TRAID**

Taking your clothes along with bottles and papers to your nearest recycling banks helps take the pressure off landfill sites. Some charities and commercial recyclers raise money through clothing being sold either unsorted or graded into categories, which are sold overseas – to Africa, Pakistan and Eastern Europe – regardless of the item, make, fabric or vintage value. While this raises funds for charities and keeps the commercial rag dealers in business, I feel it neglects those who should benefit from Britain's recycling – the nation's second-hand clothing consumer. There may come a point when there are no 60s and 70s fabrics and clothing within the UK's recycling chain."



**Simon Ferrigno  
Pesticide Action Network**

Cotton is literally the most toxic crop on the planet. While only 2% of the world's farming acreage is cotton, these crops are sprayed with up to 25% of the world's pesticides and herbicides. These pesticides tend to be some of the most damaging of all, and are often banned in the West, such as the pesticide Endosulfan. Much of this cotton is grown by small farmers in poor countries (China, India, West and East Africa), who are suffering as prices are undercut by the huge subsidies received by a few tens of thousands of rich farmers in the developed world. Organic cotton, however, reduces pesticide damage to the environment, and helps companies move into greener, socially-responsible production. Small-scale farmers in developing countries benefit from stable income, reduced spending on pesticides, and better health."



Suits you sir: Charlie Lapson's designs cut-a-dash in organic cotton (right); Imitation of Christ's recycled outfits make an impact (below); Phat turns its back on the wasteful side of fashion (far right)

Rex features



Associated Press



Chris Moore

hippest green designers in Los Angeles" by *Time* magazine. Specialising in eveningwear, his shimmery, sensuous gowns and halter dresses with plunging necks are worn by Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon and can be found at, amongst others, Bloomingdales and Harvey Nics.

Anne Fontaine, a Parisian designer best known for her exquisitely made shirts, sells crisp-white cotton blouses made of fairly traded, non-GM cotton in her SoHo and Madison Avenue boutiques. Standard cotton, she says, is too environmentally-destructive, causing water pollution, devastating wildlife and poisoning farmers as it's drowned with pesticides. She lives by the philosophy "construire sans detruire" (build without destroying), weaving this ideology into the manufacturing process, with all her shirts stitched by manually-operated machines to conserve energy.

The former Def Jam Records hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons' vegan Phat label, the fashion equivalent of Beauty-Without-Cruelty, has become a sought-after green clothing label since he creates appealing street clothes that people actually want to wear.

And on the couture end, Imitation of Christ, an hip NY indie label that makes couture creations from thrift-store clothing, and its hip French co-producer Links, created the biggest buzz at last year's New York Fashion Week. "What we're doing is very much in the

spirit of couture," says IOC's co-creator, designer Tara Subkoff. "Haute couture was born in the Depression when people took their old clothes and remade them to stay in fashion. We take discarded, unwanted clothes and hand-stitch the new ideas together ourselves."

"I'm trying to prove that eco-friendly clothing can be really sensuous and beautiful"

**Danny Seo**

Denim Doctors, another popular green company, takes vintage Levi's and cords, army-navy reconstructs, rock 'n' roll T-shirts from the 60s and 70s and recreates them into bespoke creations. They will take your favourite pair of knackered Levi's and turn them into a super-sexy denim skirt, you can have custom details added, such as pop-culture patches, decals, or diamanté.

A little over a decade after he began flogging T-shirts from his college dorm room, Dov Charney has redefined ethical fashion with his company American Apparel, which has become the largest garment factory in America. He runs the business, design and production all in LA, where he pays his factory workers well above minimum wage. AA recycle all of their cutting and fibre scraps – about 30,000 pounds a week of cotton leftovers that would have otherwise ended up in a landfill. They're also switching to solar power and in 2001, when AA was profiled in *Time*, Charney announced "We're going organic... next year. Organic cotton! It's going to be huge!"

*For further information: see Directory on page 52*



**Safia Minney  
founder of People Tree**

It's shocking that when we're thinking about what to wear, others go hungry. By paying producers a fair price, fair trade organisations provide marginalised producers a chance to escape from the poverty trap. People Tree currently trades with 70 producers in 20 countries to develop a range of clothing and accessories. But we do much more than trade, providing producers with a fair price, technical assistance, capacity building, credit, design, marketing support and regular orders. We also work with producers to design products that revive traditional skills and use local natural material. This way, we can be sure that maximum benefit is given to the producer and the environment is protected. People Tree supports schools in Nepal and Bangladesh, the Permaculture Schools Programme in Zimbabwe, tree nurseries in Kenya and has initiated the Organic Cotton Project in India.