

‘Wear your own skin’: Leather is the new fur

Karl Lagerfeld once said that, “In a meat-eating world, wearing leather for shoes and clothes and even handbags, the discussion of fur is childish.” He was defending his use of animal skins, but (sorry Karl) his words nicely sum up a hypocrisy that fashion is finally moving away from.

The war between haute couture and animal rights activists has been well-documented – with fake-blood-stained protestors attending London Fashion Week since time immemorial. We’ve seen a healthy measure of catwalk crashing; Pamela Anderson on a billboard saying she’d rather go naked; and videos of coyotes in steel traps ready for the Canada Goose treatment.

And all worth it, it seems, because last year PETA claimed victory in the war on fur. Most of the major fashion houses, including Prada, Chanel and Burberry, have ditched animal skins; earlier in 2021, designers from Stella McCartney to Selfridges wrote to the UK government urging them to ban the sale of fur – following the example set by the state of California.

But rather than giving the fashion industry cause to rest on its ethical and environmental laurels, the shift away from fur has only prompted further questions. It will need to be the first of many positive steps for a sector that faces increasing scrutiny over emissions, waste, labour rights violations and animal exploitation.

The impact of other materials

Two urgent questions are: 'Why do we frown upon the use of fur, but readily wear leather?' and 'Are synthetic substitutes really that much better?'

We're starting to confront the unpleasant realities of animal agriculture. Accordingly, we're coming to understand that leather is an enabler, rather than a byproduct, of factory farming. 300 million cattle are slaughtered for food every year, but – more often than not – it is the skin not the flesh of the animals that actually generates profit.

"The ethical issues of fur and leather are the same", Matt Oliver, founder of apple leather brand Oliver Co, tells me.

"The animals go through the same level of torture and pain."

"I think the industry is more protected due to its sheer size. The leather industry is worth almost nine times larger than the fur industry. I also think people try and justify leather by simply saying it's just a byproduct of the meat industry. However, leather plays a huge role in supporting the meat industry, and consumers should be thinking more about their purchasing decisions."

Animal hide or plastic?

But customers are increasingly interested in overall environmental impact – on top of animal rights. Searches for 'sustainable fashion' are up 75% year-on-year, according to Lyst. For a while, plastic's sneaky rebrand as 'vegan leather' went under the radar. Now, however, people are becoming vocal about the perceived greenwashing calling polyurethane (PU) or polyvinyl chloride (PVC) the 'sustainable option'.

According to Oliver, leather – like plastic and plastic-based materials – is not biodegradable.

"A natural and unprocessed hide is biodegradable, and therefore requires a considerable amount of chemicals (called tanning) to ensure that it doesn't biodegrade during use."

"Even vegetable tanning, which is considered a more environmentally friendly

process, still requires strong chemicals that change the chemical make-up of the leather so that it is unable to biodegrade.”

More natural, vegan leather

Nevertheless, there are alternatives – including Oliver’s own – for those who want the best of both worlds, and the worst of neither. A burgeoning school of scientists and designers are producing more natural vegan alternatives to leather.

In March, Stella McCartney *launched* the world’s first mushroom leather fashion line. Hermès is making a handbag with a similar mycelium-based material. Dr Carmen Hijosa’s Piñatex is a leather alternative made from pineapple leaf fibre, and other entrepreneurs are working with the bark of the cork tree.

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It’s important to note that all of these still contain a small portion of polyurethane for the sake of durability. However, as technology develops, this reliance will diminish. Likewise, as Oliver says:

“According to the Sustainable Apparel Coalition’s Higg Materials Sustainability Index – which measures impact up to the point of fabrication – leathers have an impact of 176, compared to polyurethane-based fabrics that have a score of 29.9. This is due to leather’s high contribution to global warming, water use and pollution.”

Oliver Co and apple leather

So how is Oliver Co’s apple leather made? First, leftover pomace and peel from the fruit juice and compote industry is recovered and reduced to a powder. This is then combined with polyurethane and coated onto a canvas.

“One of the most unique aspects of using the apple waste is that it is a completely renewable resource,” comments Oliver. “This reduces the CO2 impact significantly compared to other faux leathers made from 100% fossil fuels.”

“What makes apple leather even more special is that the renewable resource is also from a natural waste stream.”

“The special apple pomace produced in the industry is classified as a special waste and in most cases ends up in landfill or in some cases is burned for fuel.”

Oliver, who formerly worked in high-end watch design, knows more than most about the value of good craftsmanship. Which is just as well, because although sustainable fashion is *en vogue*, customers are not keen to make sacrifices on style and quality.

“One of the comments we hear most from our customers is how much they like the softness and feel of our apple leather,” he says.

“In the past vegan leathers like PVC have been rigid and tough. They often feel cheaper and don’t function as well for small accessories.”

Rather than taking on catwalks and clothing lines à la PETA and Pamela, Oliver Co makes a range of accessories – spanning men’s and women’s wallets, cardholders, and passport holders.

“As with many people starting a business, I first designed a product that I personally desperately needed”, concludes Oliver – who has filled a gap in the market for plant-based high-quality accessories.

“I have tried to apply the same level of detail [as when I designed watches] to designing the Oliver Co. accessories and. luckily, having found such a fantastic, talented factory partner, that I have been able to throughout our collection.”