

Eco-Friendly Fashion and the Green Consumer

By James Mendolia, of Parsons The New School for Design, New York

In the not so distant past, many consumers thought that eco-friendly fashion simply meant the designer or manufacturer was using natural instead of man-made raw materials. Recently, a wide range of environmental organizations have created public awareness by addressing issues such as climate change and the depletion of natural and human resources. As a result, this has led to consumer advocacy, which enables customers to purchase fashion with more than just the garment's price points on their minds.

Through a variety of information sources

and new-social media venues, such as Facebook, consumers are being educated in regard to global fashion brands and the brand's mission related to sustainability. As a result, consumers are starting to apply pressure to produce better products that address environmental and social issues. In many cases consumers are ready to change their buying decision based on the willingness of the newly selected brand to help save the environment and adhere to social compliance rules.

Proof of this was easily found in this year's *Première Vision* exhibition. In September I

attended the textile-trade show in Paris. With 700 exhibitors from 28 different countries, this is, without a doubt, the world-leading textile event. The exhibition showcased industry experts and a wide-range of textiles that also included innovative eco-friendly options.

Some of the eco-friendly textile options available for fashion designers and merchandisers to source for their brand included:

- *Milkofil*, fabrics and yarns, which are innovative, organic and healthy yarns derived from milk

Recycling was a major theme at the latest *Première Vision*



- *Ingeo fabrics*, which is a corn-based fabric; it is actually the world's first man-made fibre from 100% annually renewable resources
- *Flax (linen)*, which is very ecological, flax cultivation is among all textile plants the most environmentally friendly
- *Crabylon*, fabrics that are derivatives of crab pulp

In addition to the above, this year's *Première Vision* had a dedicated trail titled: *The Recycled Trail*, which enabled designers and merchandisers to easily source eco-friendly fabrics with a social conscience. The trail was intended to identify several of Europe's most innovative textile mills that integrate recycled products into their textile collections.

After speaking with representatives from several of the Italian textile mills in the *Recycled Trail*, the consensus is that each year American designers and merchandisers are dedicating a larger percentage of their product line to include eco-friendly textiles. The reason, consumers are starting to demand that the clothes they buy use eco-friendly textiles and that the brand is recognized as 'green'. One of the textile mills' representatives advised me that he is impressed that American customers are starting to invest in fashion that offers ecological alternatives. He continued to say that consumers are now reading the garment labels carefully, therefore, it is important that the brand clearly state exactly what makes the garment 'green'. Unfortunately, if the eco-label is unclear it will confuse the consumer. I am confident that consumer demand will force the fashion industry to continue to provide product transparency to eliminate uncertainty about green products.

A textile mill on the *Recycled Trail* at *Première Vision* that I found to be of particular interest was Lanificio Nello Gori. I met with Giovanni Carlesi and Lorraine Matovina from Francesco DeVito, Inc (Lanificio Nello Gori's US agent). The mill is



located in the Prato region of Italy. Lanificio Nello Gori produces fabrics that are Cardato Regenerated.

According to Giovanni: "Cardato Regenerated is an ecological product based on the concept of reuse. These fabrics are CO₂ neutral and have zero impact on the environment."

To bear the mark 'Cardato Regenerated CO₂ neutral', fabrics must:

- be produced within the district of Prato, Italy.
- be made with at least 70% recycled material (clothing or scrap material)
- have their CO₂ emissions accounted for, their producers having purchased, from the Chamber of Commerce, emission credits corresponding to the volume of production concerned.

Both Lorraine and Giovanni appear confident that the environment, as well as the American brands, will benefit from using the eco-friendly textiles manufactured in Italy.

This year, in addition to *Première Vision*, *Interstoff Asia Essential*, which took place at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre from October 7 through 9, was offering designers and merchandisers a wide-range of eco-textiles. This is yet another example of a textile trade fair with a large focus on eco-friendly textiles. As consumer

demand for green fashion increases I am confident that so will the options from the textile mills. The mills all realise that it is important to develop innovative textile options for designers and merchandisers. It is evident that we will soon have eco-friendly textile options from around the world.

As a Professor at Parsons the New School for Design it is my responsibility to motivate emerging designers to use their intellectual capacity to rethink the fashion-design process. The emerging designers can lead the crusade in transforming the way consumers think about eco-friendly fashion. My goal is to convince the students to use eco-friendly raw materials as their first choice in their sourcing decisions.

This December, Parsons the New School for Design will host an exhibition that highlights Fashion Design students' innovative solutions to eco-friendly fashion design. It is our philosophy that the design, merchandising and marketing of eco-friendly brands must start with the emerging designers that create these brands. The exhibition will give fashion-design students a unique opportunity to showcase their creative talents and introduce innovative, green fashion-design options to consumers.

The exhibition provides a unique forum for students to question and challenge the current methods of the textile manufacturing processes that are used in the fashion industry. Students will create garments using eco-friendly raw materials and explore design solutions at all levels, ie. couture, boutique, and mass production. The objective is to enable emerging designers to set forth a Green Plan of Action for leaders of the fashion industry and consumers. For additional information contact mendolij@newschool.edu

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The Monthly Web Magazine on Environment and Ethics in Textile Sourcing

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IMPACT is published by WORLD TEXTILE PUBLICATIONS LTD
Perkin House, 1 Longlands Street • Bradford • West Yorkshire • BD1 2TP
Tel: +44 (0)1274 378800 • Fax: +44 (0)1274 378811 • E-mail: info@world-textile.net • www.inteletex.com