

The Buzz

Eco Fashion - Designing an Environmentally Friendly Future

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If you're interested in fashion design and the environment, you may consider combining those interests into a career in eco fashion.

These days, being green has never looked so good. Eco fashion -- also known as green or sustainable fashion -- is a movement toward more environmentally friendly fashion alternatives. That includes clothing made from recycled materials, and renewable, organic materials like organic cotton, organic wool, bamboo and hemp.

Eco fashion offers a new interpretation of fashion, says Susan Taber Avila. She's associate professor in the design program at the University of California in Davis, California. Besides using environmentally friendly products, eco fashion creates less waste during the manufacturing process and discourages excessive consumerism.

It's intended to communicate the "statement" that the wearer is committed to preserving the environment, says Fred Ledley. He's a professor and chair of the department of natural and applied sciences at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts.

"Today, it is a statement that the wearer is concerned about issues of global warming and sustainability, is environmentally conscious and committed to responding in an affirmative manner," he says. "Students today understand how much their future depends on society responding to environmental threats."

Students who have taken sustainability courses rethink the design process, says Avila. "Fashion designers can choose materials that are better for the environment and also make a conscious effort to waste less during their design process," she says. "They also can think about better designs that have longevity built into them -- for example -- clothes that won't go out of style or that have a transformative ability to change when the wearer wants something different."

Working in eco fashion also means designing beautiful garments that a majority of people want to wear, says Tina Hofer. She's managing director of Lela Designs, a company that creates, manufactures and sells eco-friendly clothing.

"The more people that love our clothing, the smaller the environmental footprint will be," she says. "This type of fashion is becoming more popular because people are starting to notice that our bad habits are affecting the environment. Anyone with a conscience will want to change that."

Is Eco Fashion Just a Trend?

Fashion experts say eco fashion is here to stay, but without the hype that currently surrounds it. They also agree that it's part of a bigger, long-term trend.

"While the specific look and feel of the fashion may change, it is part of a much larger movement toward environmental consciousness in everything we do," Ledley says.

Within the current retail trend for "green" products, people are talking about "green fatigue," says Lynda Grose. She's a designer and assistant professor at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. "Customers are tired of green claims and green marketing," she says.

"Long-term trends and cultural shifts demand completely new approaches to product design, including fashion," Grose says. "It's clear that we are in an ecological crisis. With this increased awareness comes a need for all of us -- the public, industry, designers and consumers -- to participate and engage in real solutions," she says. "This long-term trend favors ecologically and socially advanced processes, products and systems. It is here to stay, and it will transform society."

Jenny Hwa is the founder of *loyale* Clothing in New York City. During the past few years, she has witnessed first-hand the shift toward green fashion.

"The shift to sustainability is something all businesses will eventually need to make to preserve resources and their profit margins," Hwa says. "With what people all over the world are witnessing with weather and fuel prices, in addition to movies such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, people's awareness and concerns for the future are vastly more prominent than in the past.

"People want to make a positive difference in any way they can. Eco fashion is an easy step towards a lighter footprint on the planet."

Parents Go Green Too

Another part of this trend is the popularity of eco fashion for children. Parents want the best for their families, and they can provide some of that by purchasing eco-friendly garments, says Jennifer Murphy. She's the president and founder of Chapter One Organics Inc. in Chicago, Illinois. Her company produces eco-friendly clothing for babies and toddlers.

"[Parents] want them to look extra cute and to put something safe to their skin that hasn't harmed the earth," she says. "I love working with babies and toddlers. They are fun and free-spirited. Designing for them is a lot of fun, and we are making a difference."

Social responsibility is a large part of eco fashion as well. At Chapter One Organics, Murphy's manufacturer hires underprivileged women and uses sustainable materials.

Working in Green Fashion

To work successfully in green fashion, Murphy says you need to consider the three P's - people, planet and profit. Look at the fashion that already exists and make it better, she suggests. Real eco-friendly companies are looking for young people with passion. And they want designers who are creative and passionate, she says.

"A potential fashion designer could take advantage of this movement by using fabrics that are eco-friendly or certified organic," Hofer says. "The blend of the fabric does not have to be 100 percent eco-friendly if the designer cannot afford it, but even using a percentage of it will help."

The concept of eco-friendly products is still relatively new to the world. "By getting involved at this stage and researching your options, you will still be ahead of the game," she says.

To get started in this field, you can choose to work with environmentally friendly fabrics and create clothing that everyone likes to wear, Hofer says. And be honest about the materials you're using, she advises. "Do your research by looking at what other eco-friendly companies are doing and model yourselves after them," she says. "Apply for a position at one of these companies to learn the ins and outs."

An internship at an eco company, whether in fashion or not, is the best way to get a foot in the door, Hwa says. "Eco-fashion companies aren't always based where you live or go to school, so think outside the box," she says. "Even if you're sincerely interested in working solely for a sustainable clothing line, working within other eco categories will greatly add to your experience and resume."

Other options include working at a recycling center, an organic soap company or an organic food business, Hwa says. "All of these jobs show your commitment to the environment and give you necessary skills for the future."

"At school students should first seek out fashion courses and classes which integrate sustainability," says Grose. "Since this is a new field for fashion, whilst colleges are transitioning, seek out courses on ecological impacts, sustainable design and environmental science to supplement regular fashion design classes." Students can also attend conferences on sustainable development and design.

Links

Lela Designs

Learn more about this eco-fashion company

<http://www.leladesigns.ca>