The challenges with creating alternative materials to animal fur

By Olivier Guyot - March 26, 2022

The use of animal fur has been a source of controversy in the fashion and luxury world for years. Campaigns and actions against fur have gained momentum in recent decades and the issue of animal welfare has captured the interest of not only activists but more and more consumers as well.

As for the fur industry, it intends to respond to their concerns by creating labels, such as Welfur, regarding the treatment of animals, but this issue has helped boost the fake fur market. In mid-March, a conference bringing together the Kering group, the Peta association, the Chardon-Savard Institute and the company Ecopel (organizer Géraldine Vallejo from Kering, Iris Douzet from Peta, Barbara Curto from Atelier Chardon-Savard and Arnaud Brunois from Ecopel - Fnw)

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together the Kering group, the Peta association, the Chardon-Savard Institute and the company Ecopel (organizer of the event) aimed to highlight the progress and challenges of this sector.

“The ‘No fur’ movement, which has developed considerably and has managed to involve players in the fashion and luxury sector, has been an accelerator,” explained Christopher Serfati, CEO of Ecopel, which aims to have a turnover of nearly €100 million by 2021.

“Thanks to progress in the industry and new technologies, we aim to offer a premium type of faux fur. This will require new developments to create the fur of the future with materials sourced from natural fibers,” he added.

The increase in luxury brands distancing themselves from the use of animal fur represents the key trump card for faux fur manufacturers. Kering, for instance, began this strategy in 2017, with its brands offering fewer fur products.

“Times change, society changes and so does the definition of what luxury,” said Géraldine Vallejo, sustainability program director at Kering.

“The younger generation has very strong opinions on these issues. Mr. Pinault has started a dialogue around this issue, but not all brands have moved at the same pace. During the pandemic, mink culling was at the center of attention and that accelerated things. Of course, art directors need to preserve their creative freedom, but it is easier to convince when there are high-quality alternatives available. The advantage is that some houses are replacing fur with materials that resemble it and others will work the materials differently. This opens up a world of possibilities,” he continued.

“The creative possibilities are endless and go far beyond animal derived materials. In terms of performance, studies have shown that protection against the cold can be equivalent to animal fur. In terms of life expectancy, faux fur can last for up to 10 years compared to a well-kept mink coat that can last about 30 years. This means that in order to protect the fur, it must be kept in cold storage, something not everyone can afford," he insisted.

Like Kering, many high-end brands are disassociating themselves from the use of animal fur. “We believe fur is in a negative spiral and will not recover," said Iris Douzet of the animal rights organization Peta.

"Investigations on farms have raised people's awareness tremendously. The legislation on animal abuse is moving forward and so are the laws against breeding wild animals for their fur. But there are still orylag and angora farms. So we continue to lobby against the use of fur because it's not glamorous. And also, they're not just in luxury products, they can be used for pompoms in hats or small products that are sold for five euros made with fur that comes mainly from China, sometimes from cats and dogs," she said.

For this reason, training courses are increasingly taking into account these questions on the origin of materials, not only educating designers but various professionals working in fashion houses as well.

“These issues are obvious for our students, and most of them don't want to work with a brand that doesn't take animal welfare issues into account," said Barbara Curto, director of Atelier Chardon Savard.

"But managers and product managers need to be trained more specifically in ethics. We teach textile technology to our students. We decipher the composition and origin of materials," she added.

Developing alternatives to oil

Sourcing materials ethically is becoming an essential component in the fashion and luxury industries where consumers are increasingly demanding transparency. Kering no longer works with animal skins. However, it is extremely vigilant about the composition of alternative materials.

"We have goals for 2025... Opting to stop using fur is an ethical decision, but each material has its advantages and disadvantages. There are concerns with synthetic materials, the dyes used, the different environmental criteria.... Acrylic and modacrylic pose problems because there is no possibility of recycling these garments and the materials release toxins at the end of their life span. The idea is not to stop using fur and make it 100% synthetic.
Materials release toxins at the end of their life span. The idea is not to stop using fur and make it 100% synthetic. We are educating fashion houses on opportunities and we are working with different players in order to make progress on producing alternatives," explained Vallejo.

While the fur industry faces the full force of anti-fur campaigns, the challenge for players in the faux fur industry will be to offer more responsibly sourced products, such as materials unlinked to the oil industry.

"Our goal since the inception of the company was to create a strategy to offer an alternative to animal fur," stated Brunois.

"Sometimes we are criticized for solving one problem but creating another. Synthetic leather still exists and for the moment we cannot do without it. The way out of it is to move forward in recycling, biofabrication, and creating materials from plant waste such as corn or sugar cane. We are very interested in manufacturing monomers and polymers from plant waste. At the moment, these textiles, manufactured for example with Dupont, are a blend of materials. But in two or three years' time, we hope to be able to offer generations of bio-manufactured products. We work with hemp, with our French Peltex unit, as well as with nettle, plastic recovered from oceans. We are in a transition phase. 30% of our products are made from more environmentally friendly materials, compared to 0% a few years ago," he said.

Driven by the expectations of a market looking for alternatives to certain animal materials or criticized for their impact on the environment, fashion and luxury players are closely following the development of new solutions. Ecopel is displaying confidence in the matter: its CEO said it was preparing to open production units in Spain and Italy.