Kering and Bestseller invest in Vitrolabs and its stem cell-based leather

By Matthieu Guinebault - 6 May 2022

Vitrolabs, the San Francisco-based stem cell-grown leather company, announced on May 4 that it raised $46 million (43.6 million euros) in funding. Danish company Bestseller, French luxury conglomerate Kering, and actor Leonardo Di Caprio were among the participants of this funding round led by Agronomics.

Vitrolabs was founded in 2016 with the objective to develop and mass produce lab-grown leather made from animal stem cells.

The startup aims to offer a leather alternative made from animal DNA without actually being made of one, as opposed to vegan leather made from plants or plastic. Riding on its success and Kering's support in its production process, Vitrolabs moved into new 4,200-square-foot headquarters in Milpitas, California, last fall.

"At a time when environmental stewardship is more important than ever, biotech companies have the opportunity to lead the way in changing the way we produce materials and build supply chains," said Vitrolabs co-founder Ingvar Helgason. "By launching the first production of cultured leather, we'll hit a major milestone in fulfilling our mission to lead the shift towards a more sustainable future."

Stem cell-based leather has long captured the interest of luxury groups. In 2017, Vitrolabs was one of the highlights of the Fashion Tech Labs event in Paris that saw the attendance of Antoine Arnault, CEO of LVMH-owned brand Berluti, and François-Henri Pinault, CEO of the Kering group, among others.

The head of Kering explained to FashionNetwork.com the strategic importance of leather and fur alternatives in the face of changing consumer demands. "It is clear that some of the materials we use today could disappear or be banned: our role is to find smart alternatives," said the luxury group’s CEO, who has since developed ties with Vitrolabs.
Cultivated leather is closely monitored by the international leather industry, which, faced with the number of vegan alternatives, regularly points out that leather is first and foremost a material made from animals.

A lab-grown alternative to leather could offer several advantages, such as better consistency and preservation of hides, which will never have been subjected to the vicious treatment that animals endure. In a leather industry where most hides are by-products of the food industry, this cultivated substitute could eliminate the need to breed and slaughter animals such as crocodiles and snakes for the sole purpose of producing leather.

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