

The Steadfast

Stella McCartney

Stella McCartney is not just one of Britain's brightest shining talents of fashion – she is, without comparison, the most successful and critically acclaimed designer of eco-friendly luxury in the world. Never compromising on design, nor ideals, seems to be the secret to her sustainable success. Now, how might the rest of the industry learn?

"I was brought up as a vegetarian on an organic farm in the countryside, so it kind of came very naturally to me," Stella McCartney explains logically, 'it' being of course environmental sustainability. The daughter of an ex-Beatle and an environmental activist, eco-awareness for the masses seemed to have been written in the cards. Still, it was the fashion industry that attracted her as a young teenager and, in the nineties, she was schooled at prestigious colleges Ravensbourne and Central Saint Martins in London, closely watched by the media. Only two years after her graduation she replaced Karl Lagerfeld at the Parisian house Chloé to much initial controversy as well as commercial success. However, it was only after passing the litmus test of the international fashion circuit as a creative

director that she, with the founding of her namesake brand in 2001, made eco-awareness a part of her professional and creative oeuvre.

Ahead of the pack

As much high street fashion is currently exemplary of, sustainability has the risk of becoming a posture, a preliminary marketing strategy that far from fully addresses the real issue in the capacity that is currently needed. Many brands are seen doing eco capsule collections for the sake of publicity, while non-critically remaining reliant on processes detrimental to nature and its factory workers in the rest of its ranges. "Many people claim that leather is okay to use because it is a byproduct of the meat industry. However livestock production is one of the major causes of the world's most pressing environmental problems, including global warming, land degradation, air and water pollution, and loss of biodiversity," McCartney reminds us gently. And to be sure, Stella is not joking: As she proudly testifies, her ecological awareness goes from diverting 24 metric tons of waste from landfills to clothing recycling, and running all her UK stores on wind energy to flooring her stores with sustainably forested wood and completely banning animal testing

and leather in any of her production. In fact, even the company taxi journeys are stringently booked and conducted with hybrid cars! Where there's room for improvement, Stella acts, even when it entails losing money or sacrificing revenue. Refusing animal testing, for example, automatically excluded McCartney's perfumes and skin care from the booming Chinese market, as it is required there by law. "That isn't good enough for us," McCartney comments "and we are willing to wait until the law catches up with science."

Outlining but a fragment of her brand's many sustainable initiatives, it might seem that eco-friendly consumerism as a lifestyle requires several degrees in biology, or at least a vegetarian childhood in the British countryside. Indeed, totalitarian eco-fashion still suffers from a bad rap, bringing to mind oatmeal-coloured, badly fitted home-wear in hemp, light years away from the catwalks of Paris. While in reality, technology already provides a range of eco-friendly alternatives for even the most luxurious fashion production, consumers are still looking towards non-eco high fashion and its vanguards for the newest inspiration. Sure, we'll buy our veggies organic, but when it comes to





“It seems to me that fashion is the last industry on the planet to address ethics.”

our precious garments, design trumps ecology anyway. Unfortunately, fashion is about dreams and desires, and rarely about saving the world. The design aspect cannot be compromised, dictates the selective fashion consumer, who might appreciate ethical production, but will still put her money elsewhere if the dress smells too much of homegrown hemp.

Here, the Savile Row-trained Stella McCartney distinguishes herself from other eco-brands, as she commits to making beautiful and modern clothing while respecting the Earth. “I’m first and foremost a fashion designer. I studied to be a fashion designer, and I believe in luxury, I believe in beauty,” she told Andrew Morgan in the fashion documentary *True Cost* in 2014, a film that, in the wake of the Rana Plaza Bangladesh clothing factory disaster, caused the mainstream media to talk about ecological and social sustainability with a new urgency and passion. “I think there’s this thought process with sustainable fashion that you’re sacrificing these things in order to be more responsible in your purchases, and the product itself will be compromised. I completely challenge that. I really believe that I can make as beautiful, if not more beautiful products, but in a way that is not harmful to the planet.”

A self-improving process

The growing global success of Stella McCartney is indisputable, overseeing 23 stores worldwide

with an annual revenue of over £25 million. She is living proof that sustainability can be lucrative, perhaps because her organic aspirations never compromised the design, but always remained a close consideration and part of an ongoing process of improvement. As Stella admits, she didn’t start out on all ethically sourced organic cotton and wind energy on day one, but rather experimented with different solutions and gradual advancements on models guided by personal instinct. And the brand remains far from perfect in their current production cycle: They ‘only’ outlawed the harmful plastic PVC from their products in 2010, for example, and they are still searching for a way to produce 100% cruelty-free silk. Still, fabrics are replaced almost seasonally by better and more sustainable alternatives, and the brand strategically targets particular areas for innovation and advancement. “We will probably never be perfect, but you can rest assured that we are always trying,” McCartney explains. “We will continue to consider the impact we have on the planet as we design clothing, open stores and manufacture our products.” McCartney exemplifies that sustainability isn’t all-or-nothing ultimatums, but continuous self-examination and innovation.

As McCartney explains, “sustainability isn’t just one thing. It isn’t just organic cotton – it’s organic cotton, plus wind energy, plus not using PVC, plus thousands of other little steps that eventually

make a more sustainable company.” That is not to mention social sustainability, which entails transparent supply chains and the ensuring of fair and safe labour rights for all fashion workers, including the often neglected factory workers in places such as Bangladesh and the Philippines. Most recently, they were the first luxury brand to join the Ethical Trading Initiative and the Natural Resources Defence Council’s Clean by Design program, ensuring a simultaneous improvement of the brand’s environmental and social profile. Far from attempting to monopolize fashion’s green wave, the charismatic McCartney continues to be an outspoken activist for sustainability, and has even gone to great lengths to encourage the rest of the fashion world to keep up with her groundbreaking business model of sustainable luxury with the development of a go-to list of ‘sustainability commitments’ (strategies include how to recycle cashmere and how to manage water more responsibly). “Why doesn’t every other house do it? Why don’t they push themselves?” she asks. “It seems to me that fashion is the last industry on the planet to address ethics. That’s something I hate about my industry. I think every industry has to be pushed, it has to be answerable to how it’s producing a product. And the fashion industry is no different from others.” A pioneer of her time, Stella certainly is different, revolutionizing luxury fashion step by step from within. Marketable or not.

Officer's Plead

Words Thomas Mondemé and Camille Anaïs

L'Oréal is leading big beauty on the path to sustainability. This change is only going to happen if we all work together.

"As a young student, I couldn't have imagined this would be my career path, but there is definitely a logic to it".

The thought comes with refreshing honesty, concluding an informative conversation. A lawyer by training, having worked for several NGOs after specializing in human rights, Alexandra Palt is now L'Oréal's Chief Sustainability Officer, but she has kept the same passion, one that can be felt in her voice and tone, as she continues to plead for a better world.

As we chat with her just after Paris COP21, she tells us how impressed she was by the awareness she witnessed there, especially on the business side: "There were of course the Bourget negotiations, with all the government officials, but there were other initiatives on the side, at The Grand Palais for instance, and one could feel a very sincere ambition from the corporate world to be part of the solution, a will to find a binding agreement, an ambitious agreement. Companies are not the 'bad enemies' who want to pollute us: Something has profoundly changed, and civil society is becoming aware of that."

One goal in mind

When asked when L'Oréal and others took notice of environmental issues, Alexandra Palt reminds us that awareness is "progressive": you don't "wake up one day and suddenly realize that there is a problem". She also insists on the fact that L'Oréal had already made a first commitment in 2009: a 50% reduction of its industrial footprint when it comes to CO₂, waste, and water. In 2013, CEO Jean-Paul Agon, who Palt describes as "a visionary", set a more "profound transformation" into motion, one that involves both a change of mentality and of method, with one goal in mind: sustainability.

She points out that unlike some purely "greenwashing" initiatives from others, L'Oréal's recent commitments have led to a complete transformation of the business model. This shift is both global and specific: "There are some basic guidelines which are valid for the whole L'Oréal group: We have to transform 100%

of our products, which means that they all need to have an improved environmental or social profile by 2020. Also at the group level, and through its industrial activity, we have to reduce our environmental footprint by 60% (carbon, water, waste)". The second axis of this mobilisation is focused on engaging customers in a more "sustainable lifestyle". "This is really a brand-related commitment, in alignment with the brand's equity and sense of purpose. It can be around sustainable sourcing, around recycling, or around social impact like skin cancer prevention for La Roche Posay."

But what does it mean concretely, and how does one evaluate it? The answer comes easily for Alexandra Palt: "In 2014, 67% of our new products had shown an improved environmental footprint, meaning they had done three things: Either they had reduced their water footprint (a lot of our impact can be on the water quality when rinsed-off products get into it), or had improved their biodegradability, or had used raw materials from fair trade or sustainable ingredients, like The Body Shop for instance. And we are monitoring these numbers every year."

And when it comes to results, the little things can make a big difference: "We've been able to replace the plastic by recycled plastic in the packaging, to redesign and lighten the packaging, and fit more bottles into a box, or more boxes in one pallet for instance, hence saving space, reducing transport cost, and CO₂ emissions."

Along with this kind of initiative, which she refers to as the "sustainable innovation" process, come the various actions from the brands. La Roche Posay has launched the "Become a skin checker" campaign to raise awareness about the dangers of the sun in Brazil and many other countries; Armani has launched "Acqua for Life" with UNICEF to make clean water accessible to populations in impoverished or remote areas, and Garnier has worked with TerraCycle on recycling used packaging from beauty products. "It is a complete transformation, at every level, and it is completely integrated in what we do in our daily work," she says.

Thinking the box outside

Any such commitment comes with a fair amount of obstacles. Though people agree that it is important to have eco-conscious companies, not everyone acts accordingly. "Sometimes

a more sustainable or lighter packaging may appear less attractive to some people, and that is of course a challenge for us; so we have to be very innovative and creative to rethink the whole thing: to make packaging as inspirational as possible and as sustainable as possible".

But Alexandra Palt remains greatly optimistic about the future. According to her, things are going to change very fast because the danger is now clearer than ever. She sees corporations playing a leading role in finding various solutions: "For the private sector, sustainability is also a source of innovation and efficiency. More and more people are going to look at it that way, and not as an obstacle or a problem. It is an opportunity and not a constraint." Personifying that synergy through her career, she insists that the actions have to be common and global: "This change is only going to happen if we all work together, and if we all understand that solutions rely on shared efforts and collaboration. So consumers have a role to play, and NGOs have a role to play – they have to push further all the time, and I am positive that they will. Civil society, corporations, governments, local governments, and city governments... Everybody has a role to play."