



CALIFORNIA FASHION ASSOCIATION

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Vegan Fashion Grows More Fashionable as Textile Technology Improves

By Shan Li

They called it "pleather" when Michael Jackson donned plasticky, synthetic leather in his early moon-walking days. Famous for clothing rock stars and club kids in the 1980s and '90s, the fabric is now a hit with a new generation.

With the help of science, new faux animal hides have arrived with an appropriately hip name: vegan leather.

Luxe brands such as Stella McCartney and Joseph Altuzarra have sent vegan leather jackets and bags with sky-high prices down the runway. Major department stores are increasing their offerings. And in Southern California, where animal lovers in West Hollywood helped spur one of the first citywide bans on fur sales, independent designers cater to shoppers who want guilt-free fashions.

"Vegan is a new phrase that has now become a catchword for entrepreneurs to start new businesses," said **Ilse Metchek**, president of the **California Fashion Assn.** "It's so acceptable even in fashion magazines."

Macy's has increased its assortment of vegan leather products, said Caprice Willard, regional vice president of women's apparel. Sales have grown in recent years, especially among fashion-forward Californians who can wear leather year-round and are drawn to new formulations that are supple and soft, she said.

"We had very few options maybe five years ago," Willard said. "The appetite has always been there. We are just doing a much better job of meeting it."

Demand is especially strong among millennial shoppers. They are more eco-conscious but also have been raised on fast fashion in which style trumps durability, analysts said. The popularity of real leather leggings and trims has spurred interest in affordable mimics.

Fake leather is still usually made by coating plastic on fabric. But as textile technology has evolved, mills can churn out materials that look and feel like close kin of the real thing but with a greater array of colors and patterns.

At the same time, more Americans are turning to veganism or vegetarianism — about 30 million adults, or one-eighth of the population over age 18, according to the Humane Research Council. Two-thirds of vegans or vegetarians say protecting animals is a big motivator for their diets — a stance that is seeping beyond the supermarket.

"People are seeing themselves more as conscientious," said Leanne Hilgart, founder of Vaute Couture. "After food is fashion."

Hilgart made headlines in 2013 as the first all-vegan fashion designer to show at New York Fashion Week. Vaute (a mash-up of "vegan" and "haute") specializes in stylish outerwear free of leather, wool and all other animal products. One coat, which boasts recycled fibers and "arctic explorer" insulation, costs \$580.

The target customer is any trendy woman who would drop serious cash on a coat at Bloomingdale's, Hilgart said. Sales grew 60% last year compared with 2013, and plans are underway to open stores in Manhattan



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and Toronto this year.

The wealth of new options is a relief to Sarah Robles, 23, a "pescetarian" who eats seafood but not meat. Robles said she tries to avoid leather out of concern for animal welfare. Plus, faux leather options tend to be cheaper and require less maintenance, the West Hollywood actress said.

"Fake leather stuff is getting better and better," she said. "It used to be just ugly knockoffs, but now I have so many cute shoes and bags, and they last longer than my real leather stuff."

Retailers say it still takes work to lure shoppers who associate faux leather with the poor quality and pleather eyesores of decades past.

"We have all had the mind-set that it looks fake and shiny and doesn't feel good," said Ana Hartl, managing director of creative at Free People, part of Urban Outfitters Inc. "I remember the days of '90s plasticky polyurethane pleathers."

A few years back, Hartl said, she began noticing that some high-quality faux fabrics were virtually indistinguishable from the real thing.

Free People has more than doubled its vegan offerings since debuting its first collection in 2011. In the last two years it has launched vegan shoes and handbags. Vegan sales have surpassed leather in some categories, including jackets and vests.

"People are genuinely shocked that it's vegan," Hartl said.

Vegan leather has been a hit for Sole Society, a Los Angeles retailer known for affordable fashions. Sole Society introduced vegan leather handbags a year ago, which proved popular with shoppers, Chief Executive Andy Solomon said. Now about half of its handbags are made of vegan leather. Sole Society hopes to increase that to 65% this year and is also looking into vegan shoes.

"It's a nice selling feature," Solomon said. "It gets folks over the hump to press the buy button."

With the term "vegan leather," manufacturers and retailers have tried to piggyback off the image of well-heeled shoppers who browse farmer's markets and Whole Foods.

Christina Sewell, a fashion coordinator at the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said consumers tend to "identify vegans with a little bit higher class of people who really care about the environment and animals."

"We want to show that being cruelty free doesn't mean wearing a hemp bag over your head," Sewell said. "What better term to use than vegan? Unlike faux leather, which sounds kinds of cheap."

PETA hosted a pop-up event with 20 vegan designers in August at its Echo Park offices. It drew hundreds of shoppers, and Sewell says the organization is hoping to turn it in to an annual shopping event.

Working with vegan fabrics is not without pitfalls.

Sarah Brannon, co-founder of Los Angeles brand James Payne, said producing the company's pricey vegan apparel is more labor intensive and complex than working with real leather.

"Vinyls tend to stick in a way leather doesn't," she said. Workers at the downtown L.A. facility where the company's clothing is made have to layer waxed paper over fabric before sewing seams, something that real leather doesn't require, she said. The material costs are also comparable to leather.

Brannon, who founded the business with her ex-husband Mikey Brannon, said they started the James Payne brand in 2011 to fulfill a void in the luxury market, which often resorts to animal hides and furs for a decadent touch. Their motorcycle jackets are priced up to \$880. They plan to roll out faux suede versions and also customizable jackets that could sell for as much as \$3,000.



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"When we first launched, people were really confused. They were like, 'Why don't you use leather?'" Mikey Brannon said. "But when you feel and see it, it looks and feels like leather."