

Ready for a touch of the exotic with fur and python?

More is more on the autumn runways as designers pile on the skins with fur, python and stingray. Has the last taboo in fashion lost the power to shock?

BY LUCIE GREENE | 02 MARCH 2011



We're not even finished with the round of autumn runway shows, but already it's apparent: fur and exotic skins are here to stay. Milan, New York and London catwalks this season have been packed with pythons, furs, minks and foxes, used in ever more inventive ways.

Prada's line-up included python trompe l'oeil high heels and python coats with fur lapels. "I wanted to make sexy materials look different," said Miuccia Prada of the collection. "I have this obsession with materials like sequins, fur and python, and how women feel about the materials clothes are made from." Elsewhere, Gucci ran with a Forties/Seventies vibe with piled-on fox, goat and Mongolian lamb pieces. At Fendi, designer Karl Lagerfeld introduced coats patched from mink, Persian lamb and fox, and croc with fox. In London - a bastion of Peta activism and animal rights - there was an increased presence of fur and exotic skins on the runway. Giles Deacon, Burberry Prorsum, Julien Macdonald and Pringle of Scotland all included fur pieces.

"Fur used to be specialised, but now it's a normal fashion material," says Thomas Salomon, managing director of Yves Salomon, supplier of furs for Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Dior, Sonya Rykiel and Jean Paul Gaultier. "Before, it was only for the elite. Now everyone wants to wear and use fur." Exotic lizard, croc and snakeskin are also in growing demand. Luxury brands including Mulberry, Anya Hindmarch, Nancy Gonzalez, Victoria Beckham and Jimmy Choo have been upping the luxe factor on accessories collections with python, stingray and crocodile. Meanwhile, more designers are incorporating it into full garments - up-and-coming designer Holly Fulton included python dresses in her autumn collection at London Fashion Week.

According to Tim Everest, board member of the International Fur Trade Federation, the global market for fur was worth \$15.6 million last year. This year, he expects a 10-15 per cent increase.

Part of the appeal in exotics is that they continue to be associated with investment. "There's an intrinsic value to fur and exotics," says Erin Mullaney, consultant and former buying director of Browns. "You'll have pieces for 20 years and hand them down, so it's not seen as fast fashion."

But are exotics any less controversial now? "The attitude towards wearing fur has changed. There was a time where one would be frightened of being accosted on the street for wearing fur," said Suzanne Timmins, fashion director at the Hudson's Bay Company, a luxury Canadian department store. "I think the trend towards maximalist styling à la Lady Gaga, as well as fashion editors and stylists photographed wearing fur has definitely swayed consumer attitudes."

However, Mullaney adds that "people still have an issue with it in London". According to Peta, 95 per cent of Britons refuse to wear fur. In London, Harrods and net-a-porter.com are the only major retailers to stock pieces. The view of exotic snake and lizard skins is more tempered. As one buyer puts it: "People couldn't care less about snakes or crocodiles. There's a different take."

The embrace of fur is partly down to a concerted effort on behalf of the industry. Saga Furs, a body that represents breeders in Finland and Norway, has worked with young fashion designers, including Zac Posen, Alexander

Wang and Haider Ackermann, to promote a fashion edge and access younger audiences, often sponsoring shows or supplying free samples.

"Fur used to be associated with people in their late forties and fifties, but now that young designers are involved, there's a younger audience," says Everest. "Designers have taken away the big, heavy coats of yesteryear. They've come up with new techniques for lightening garments, particularly fox fur. They're being more adventurous."

"It's become easier to wear," agrees Erin Mullaney. "There are different shapes. It's coming as trims on accessories."

Gold said the fur industry has been working hard to shake off controversy, raising awareness of farming practices and also working closely with government conservation groups.

Origin Assured, a global initiative of governments dedicated to regulating the trade, was launched in 2007. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora has also introduced a global programme monitoring the sustainable farming and trade of exotic skins.

Peta, however, is sceptical. "The fur industry has tried to convince consumers it's cleaning up its act, but it's really to make them feel better. It's still an inhumane industry," says Mimi Bekhechi of Peta, citing footage of several farms in Sweden and China of cruelty and neglect to live stock.

Gold argues that it was not in the interests of producers to mistreat animals as they produce poorer skins. "It's imperative to maintain the health of the animals or you don't get good skins. Minks, for example, are very sensitive. If they are not cared for, they will not breed."

Still confused? There's always faux. Alongside the bounty of fur and exotics on offer, we are seeing the emergence of ever more sophisticated faux-fur items - Chanel's collection of shaggy faux furs last winter has single-handedly transformed it from style faux pas to chic. "We had a programme of faux-fur accessories this winter and it's been one of our top sellers," says Ed Burstell, managing director at Liberty. "Stella McCartney is also selling well. People are buying faux fur because it doesn't look like junk any more. It looks really great."