

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Maison Atia brings traditional furrier craft to faux-fur fashions

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Maison Atia's fall/winter 2019 campaign. Image courtesy of Maison Atia

By SARAH JONES

New York-based label Maison Atia is giving faux fur a more craftsmanship-driven makeover by turning to ateliers who traditionally have worked with luxury brands to create real fur fashions.

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Chloe Mendel and Gustave Maisonrouge founded **Maison Atia** in 2017 to cater to the growing demand for cruelty-free fur, as consumers heightened their appeal to brands to drop the use of animal-derived products. The label, which has previously focused more on see-now, buy-now collections, held its first solo presentation during New York Fashion Week on Feb. 13 for its 70s-inspired fall/winter 2019 collection.

Both cofounders come from luxury backgrounds.

Ms. Mendel is the daughter of Gilles Mendel, the current creative director for his family's fashion house J. Mendel, and collaborated with her father on J. Mendel's first couture collection in 2016. Meanwhile, Mr. Maisonrouge previously worked at Hermès and is the son of Ketty Maisonrouge, who founded a luxury consultancy that has worked with clients including Chaumet and Christofle and is a former J. Mendel board member.

Since launching, Maison Atia has taken a primarily direct-to-consumer approach to retail, partnering only with select boutiques for wholesale. Taking a luxury approach to pricing, the company does not mark down its merchandise.

"We are a modern luxury brand," Mr. Maisonrouge said. "That means that our customers want real value for their purchases, and therefore we aim to have a direct-to-consumer pricing strategy."

"This position actually works well with our overall selective approach to retail since we are limited in our ability to be flexible with our pricing," he said. "We look for partners who share our vision, approach and values, and want to be true partners with us in building a modern luxury brand, and are willing to share concretely what we stand for, even through our pricing."



Gustave Maisonrouge and Chloe Mendel. Image courtesy of Maison Atia

In this Q&A, Ms. Mendel and Mr. Maisonrouge discuss the vision for their brand, their retail strategy and plans for the future. Here is the dialogue:

What led you to found Maison Atia? What opportunity did you see in the market for this type of fashion label?

CM: I had for a long time the idea of taking the luxury craftsmanship approach of my family furrier heritage into the faux-fur medium that had historically been associated with poor quality and little design.

I felt that more women like me wanted to experiment with animal cruelty-free luxury faux-fur creations. Being a creative person, I knew that I needed someone who shared my vision so that together we could turn it into a business.

Gustave and I have been friends for a long time through our families; he was brought up hearing about the luxury field at the dinner table through his mother. He believed in my vision and had experience at the world's most iconic luxury brand, Hermès.

So together we decided to transform this concept into a reality.

From your perspective, what is the outlook for faux fur?

GM: When Chloe approached me with her idea, I knew that we first needed to understand the industry trends, and make sure there was a space that this concept could fill. So, in early 2017, we embarked by doing rigorous market research on the faux-fur market as well as luxury industry trends, mystery shopping visits and interviews of women we felt represented us.

Besides Stella McCartney, there was little offering in luxury end. We could sense that timing would be crucial so we decided at the end of the spring to do a real tour de force' and launch our first capsule collection in the later part of fall 2017.

Chloe, you come from a long line of furriers. How has that background transitioned into Maison Atia?

CM: Following my father's footsteps, I had done numerous internships at the J. Mendel Atelier, learning all the various aspects of the creative process, from ideation to design, pattern-making, sampling and production. I learned the luxury furrier approach, honed my design and craftsmanship skills, and developed relationships with various suppliers and ateliers.

These on-hands experience and contacts became essential for us to bring my idea into a reality even more so when we decided to embrace the challenge of launching our first capsule collection in less than six months.

Why was it important to you that your faux fur still feel real? How does Maison Atia craft believable synthetics?

GM: Our aim is not necessarily for our creations to feel real. We actually don't mind if some of our coats look fun and faux.

What we want is for our collections to feel luxurious and as elevated as our craftsmanship. We pride ourselves in sourcing the best materials.

I actually visited a number of mills in France, Italy and Germany to ensure the process and quality met our

standards, and we ended up working with a number of them. As far as production, we work with shearling ateliers that luxury brands use for their real furs, and were willing to experiment with us on how to take the high-end crafted approach into this different medium.

It was a learning process for everyone as it was not that obvious how to transform these furrier techniques into fabric. But we did it just in time actually barely in time for our first collection and are proud of the results.

Maison Atia's atelier

Who is the Maison Atia customer?

CM: She is confident, dynamic, engaged and open. She is intuitive and trusts her instincts, but doesn't take herself too seriously.

She's grounded and thoughtful, but also romantic. She lives with intention, but also allows herself to dream.

She dresses for herself, she's comfortable with her expressions, but prefers to listen to the stories of others. She is not a woman of great excess or pretense, but she does not shy away from luxury if a piece speaks to her.

No matter her age, she is vibrant and youthful. Others are attracted to her energy, even though she never seeks to be the center of attention.

Her range of interests and infinite curiosity make her a complex, engaging and intriguing person to be around. She infuses every facet of her life with purpose and meaning. She's constantly looking for inspiration outside of herself.

What has been Maison Atia's retail strategy? What plans do you have for future retail expansion?

GM: We are a modern luxury brand. That means that our customers want real value for their purchases, and therefore we aim to have a direct-to-consumer pricing strategy.

This position actually works well with our overall selective approach to retail since we are limited in our ability to be flexible with our pricing. We look for partners who share our vision, approach and values, and want to be true partners with us in building a modern luxury brand, and are willing to share concretely what we stand for, even through our pricing.

What is the importance of corporate social responsibility for Maison Atia?

CM: Both Gustave and I consider ourselves socially responsible and engaged individuals. We want to minimize waste, have been using all fabric leftover from our coats to create small accessories, and for what can't be used into a creation, we work with FabScrap to recycle any other leftovers.

We also both are animal lovers. I live between New York and Chicago and have been involved for a few years with PAWS Chicago, a leading no-kill animal shelter. I adopted over time four cats and two dogs. So it was totally natural to me to work with them.

We both wanted to contribute from day one and launched our Buy a Coat, Save a Puppy' campaign with our first capsule collection in fall 2017. In February 2018, to celebrate the Lunar New Year of the Dog, we worked with the organization to have a chihuahua for adoption the day of Chinese new year at our Selima Optique pop-up.

Given his poor health and not the most sunny disposition, we couldn't find any home for him after a month, so Gustave adopted Clef, who has since become the Maison Atia mascot. We continue to collaborate closely with PAWS and did a pop-up in their facility last October.

How are consumers' values shaping their purchase decisions?

GM: Our clients appreciate our authenticity, transparency and commitment to quality and craftsmanship. They appreciate our modern yet timeless approach to our creations.

We believe in the lean closet' approach, and hope that they'll only purchase pieces that they will enjoy and cherish for a long time.

Today's consumerism is actually one of the most important single elements on environmental impact.

According to a 2016 U.K.-based Forge Waste & Recycling report, the average Briton only wears 70 percent of their wardrobe and produces on average 70 kg of textiles waste per year. If everyone stopped discarding textiles at that pace, this could be one of the most important factors to reducing the depletion of non-renewable resources.



Maison Atia campaign image. Image courtesy of Maison Atia

Could you see the brand branching out beyond faux fur in the future?

CM: Every designer dreams of creating everything, from ready-to-wear, home to, why not, the interior of a car. At the moment, we want to stay focused on what we see as our unique expertise: crafting the first truly luxury faux-fur brand.

We believe that our expertise stands out and will continue to differentiate us from either other faux fur brands, or luxury brands such as Givenchy or Chanel for whom this product offering is not truly their focus. But who knows ? Ask me the question in a few years, you may get a different answer.

What is next for the brand? Where do you want Maison Atia to be in five years?

GM: This past fall, using the same approach as two years ago to determine if there was space for our concept, we embarked on a preliminary research on the Asian luxury faux market. We know that fur is still very popular there, but are excited and hopeful about new opportunities as the younger generation starts embracing animal cruelty-free fashion, there are some signs that a luxury faux-fur brand could be successful.

So hopefully Maison Atia will be present not only in New York, Chicago or London but also in Shanghai, Seoul and Tokyo.