

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Is fur-free the new standard of fashion?

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Real animal fur may be a trend of the past, as retailers and brands continue eliminating the material from their product offerings. Image credit: Getty

By NORA HOWE

As sustainability remains a top concern among global luxury consumers, increasing numbers of fashion brands and retailers are ceasing the production and distribution of animal materials.

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The newest member of the fur-free club, U.S. department store Neiman Marcus, has committed to eliminating animal fur from its assortment by 2023 through its Animal Welfare Policy ([see story](#)), further emphasizing the new standard for fashion and retail. While bans on fur and exotic leather materials have been scorned by some luxury players, consumer values and demands are rapidly changing, and fur-free is transforming from a movement into a pillar of fashion.

Fur-free racks

Although a few notoriously conscious fashion houses such as Britain's Stella McCartney have long touted vegan materials, it is luxury retailers that seem to be driving the transformation.

British department store Selfridges is frequently ahead of the curve on ethical sourcing.

In 2005, the luxury retailer banned the sale of real fur in its stores. Then, in early 2019, Selfridges began phasing out materials such as crocodile, alligator, lizard and python, and pledged to only sell agricultural leather by February 2020 ([see story](#)).

Neiman Marcus will also be closing its fur salons, which offer services such as storage and cleaning

Similarly ahead of the trend, Yoox Net-A-Porter Group ceased the sale of all merchandise containing animal fur on its multi-brand sites in 2017. Its policy, which impacts Net-A-Porter, Mr Porter, Yoox and The Outnet, also includes partnerships with The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Humane Society International (HSI) and Lega Anti Vivisezione (LAV) ([see story](#)).

Although Neiman Marcus is the latest to join the fur-free pledge, Nordstrom was the first U.S. retailer to ban sales of fur and exotic animal skins in its physical and online stores last year. In partnership with the Humane Society of the United States, the decision impacted several luxury brands selling fur coats and bags and footwear made with such materials ([see story](#)).

Following suit in North America, Saks Fifth Avenue announced in April 2021 that it would stop selling products made using animal fur through a phased approach by the end of fiscal year 2022.

While it is eliminating the sale of products made from animals that were raised for the use of their fur, such as mink, fox, chinchilla and sable or those made with fur from wild animals, such as coyote and beaver, the retailer will continue to sell shearling, goatskin, cattle hide, down, feathers, leather and faux fur products ([see story](#)).

Despite being under tremendous pressure from conscious consumers and activist groups, fur remains a lucrative facet within the global fashion landscape, and not everyone wants to see it go. Luxury brands including Bottega Veneta, Oscar de la Renta and Michael Kors are among those still selling furs through Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue as the retailers phase out the products.

Just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Fur Federation challenged San Francisco's ban on the sale of new fur and fur-trimmed coats, claiming that the ordinance, driven by the city health department, was unconstitutional and did not serve a legitimate local interest, such as health or safety.



Activists gathered at 10 Downing Street in April, calling for the U.K. to ban the sale of cruel animal fur. Image credit: Humane Society International

The Fur Information Council of American claimed the ordinance was too far-reaching to ban fur products regulated by the fish and wildlife agencies and certified under FurMark, a global, science-based program that verifies sustainability and animal welfare in fur production ([see story](#)).

Nevertheless, fur may be on its last legs.

Animal alternatives

Luxury brands including Alexander McQueen, Balenciaga, Valentino and Burberry have recently committed to the fur-free movement, as the fashion industry continues investing in and developing sustainable materials that are alternatives to animal skin.

Italian fashion house Gucci has been eschewing fur since 2017, after it sold all of its remaining fur items in an auction benefiting Italian animal rights group LAV and the Humane Society ([see story](#)), and more recently introduced a new animal-free, plant-based material, Demetra.



The Rhyton sneakers are among the first Gucci products made with Demetra. Image courtesy of Gucci

Made in Italy, Demetra is the result of two years of research and development by Gucci technicians and artisans. By

using the same processes as leather tanning, the material has similar characteristics despite its more eco-friendly origins.

It is described as a new luxury material that is soft, durable, pliable and supple. Three sneaker models are the first Gucci pieces made with Demetra, but it is versatile enough to be used for several product categories.

According to Gucci, Demetra is up to 77 percent plant-based with renewable and bio-based raw materials including viscose, from sustainably-managed forest sources, wood pulp compound and bio-based polyurethane from renewable sources, such as 100 percent GMO-free wheat or corn from Europe ([see story](#)).

In March, French fashion house Hermès reimagined its Victoria travel bag in collaboration with California-based biomaterial startup [MycoWorks](#).

The new design reworked the bag in canvas, calfskin and Sylvania material, an alternative hybrid textile made from mycoWorks' fine mycelium. The patented cultivation process uses fungi's capacity to bind itself and other materials, making it a viable substitute for traditional animal leather ([see story](#)).

While this was a massive step forward for sustainability, the leather goods brand also recently opened its 18th leather workshop in Montereau, in continuation of its recruitment and training strategy ([see story](#)).

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