

Fashion Conscious

Los Angeles, New York

In 1899, economist Thomas Veblen introduced the world to the concept of "conspicuous consumption," in which he described the buying habits of the leisure class. Many companies used the concept to peddle goods throughout the 20th century, until its zenith in the decadent and logo-crazed '80s and '90s. But now, more than 100 years after its introduction, Veblen's concept of consumerism is becoming a thing of the past, as a growing number of brands are encouraging their customers to place environmental and social sustainability at the top of their minds when purchasing products. A more socially responsible supply-and-demand exchange, known as "conscious consumption," is what many marketers consider the new frontier of both the fashion and luxury industries.

Since her eponymous label debuted in 2001, [Stella McCartney](#) has been a pioneer of this movement. As [PETA](#)'s loyal torchbearer, McCartney rid leather-free clothing and accessories of their granola stigma, making them must-haves for chic urbanites. [Levi's](#), the largest denim label in the world, released 100% percent organic jeans, the Levi's Eco, and this s/s '07, expect an expansion of styles to roll out. [\(RED\)](#), co-founded by rock star/humanitarian Bono and Bobby Shriver, launched at last year's [World Economic Forum](#) in Davos, Switzerland. Despite having no products of its own, (RED) has managed to create a lifestyle by courting [Gap](#), [Converse](#), [Armani](#), [American Express](#), and more recently, [Motorola](#) and [Apple, Inc.](#), to create and sell products to first-world consumers, from which a percentage of profits is used to purchase anti-retroviral medicine for people dying of AIDS in Africa. As Gap proudly claims, "This isn't charity, it's a new way of doing business."

Clearly, this is not just a humanitarian project to cultivate ethical corporate practices, as smaller labels in Los Angeles and New York have been echoing the same sentiment and recognizing that altruism can be commercially viable.

For the first time [WSA](#) (World, Shoes Accessories show) is hosting an upcoming ecoETHICS conference, a forum for exchanging profitable environmental solutions. Brands such as [Brown Shoes](#), [Dr. Scholl's](#), [Dan Post Boots](#), [Teva](#), and [Etonic](#) will showcase their non-leather innovations. Los Angeles native Blake Mycoskie donates a pair of shoes to underprivileged people in the Argentine countryside for every pair of canvas-and rubber-soled [Toms](#) (similar in appearance to the black flats available in Chinatown) that he sells. This March, Mycoskie expands his business, and will debut a line of shoes for kids at [Bubble](#), the premiere trade show for babywear, accessories, childrenswear, and furniture. Another Los Angeleno, [Linda Loudermilk](#), established her name by creating feminine, polished looks, embodied in her full-line day-dresses and draped evening ensembles made from sustainable materials that abide by what the [Oxford University](#) alum dubbed "a luxury eco" lifestyle. Also on the left coast, balancing social equity with carefully sourced fabrics is Portland-based [FIT](#) graduate Anna Cohen. Drawing from her Max Mara experience, her line's signature is its razor-sharp, tailored trousers and jackets, which are usually

underpinned by languid and draped camisoles.

In New York, [Edun](#) — the label with Bono, his wife Ali Hewson, and Rogan's Rogan Gregory behind it — has been on a mission to foster sustainable employment in Africa since 2005, and a purchase of the label's special-edition ONE t-shirt will result in a \$10 donation to the [Apparel Lesotho Alliance to Fight AIDS](#) (ALAFAs) in Lesotho. Meanwhile, its sister label, [Loomstate](#), takes up an eco-friendly cause by turning out purposely disheveled collections for men and women from 100% organic cotton — the farming method for which puts much less strain on the environment than traditional farming. The Gilded Age also produces a yummy selection of rich organic cotton denim shirts and other eco-luxe basics.

John Patrick, the man behind [Organic](#), frequently embarks on global sojourns in search of the most eco-friendly and natural materials for his appropriately named menswear and womenswear collections. "It's not enough to incorporate ten percent of organic cotton into a t-shirt. What we need to begin and continue to do is work with the land and the farmers in rediscovering the agricultural past and begin land and earth healing. Micro action in local communities is beginning and we are seeing exciting new ideas in concepts," says the designer. "I am starting to grow flax (trials) in Columbia County, NY this spring and hope to have many people embrace cultivating flax/linen on a small scale organically." The company has a clear "fashion with a conscience," message — Organic also adheres to Fair Trade guidelines — and Patrick infuses an easy kind of chic into his muted clothes, required wearing for a smooth transition from country to city weekend jaunts. For s/s '07 there are sweet cotton eyelets, linen trousers, knitted chunky cardigans, tanks, and dresses for women, and supple chinos, sweatshirts, jackets, and indigo jeans for men.

On the Lower East Side, a number of independent retailers have cropped up selling eco-conscious and cow-friendly fashions: [Kaight](#) on Orchard Street, [Organic Avenue](#) on Stanton Street, and [Moo Shoes](#) on Allen Street. In the West Village, [NY Artificial](#) sells faux-leather goods. Also in the neighborhood, Mark Seliger, the famous fashion and celebrity lensman, has opened a multi-functional space (gallery, meeting space, workshop) called [401 projects](#) that can also be used to promote charitable causes. The latest exhibition will be of James Nachtwey's photographs documenting the recovery phase of many wounded soldiers from Iraq, and will benefit [Homes for Our Troops](#) and [Operation Comfort](#).

Ninette Murk, founder and director of [Designers against AIDS](#), succinctly says of the conscious consumption movement, "It just makes sense! What are fashion and luxury worth if there are no people left to enjoy them?"

-Robert Cordero and Emily Basenberg

Photos:

Levi's Eco Jean s/s '07

American Express with (RED)

Toms shoes

Linda Loudermilk s/s '07

Anna Cohen s/s '07

Edun s/s '07

Organic s/s '07

