

Compassion in Fashion

Written by Carole Audet

Textiles made from various plants are making their way into the hands of talented designers around the world. Portfolios of vegan brands expand with each new innovation, as do choices for consumers. Two Canadian designers are making their marks and helping to fulfill the growing demand for cruelty-free fashion and accessories.



Claire Carreras, Designer & CEO | Photos by Ethan Maddix

Claire Carreras owner of White Rhino Bags is a multi-talented designer and a musician, which she feels has given her a unique perspective on design. "Being a performer and needing to be resourceful in a do-it-yourself scene is what led me to design in the first place," she explains.

While the vegan materials she works with don't affect the aesthetics of her pieces, they shape her business point of view and, at her core, how she operates.

"When I design, I ask myself three main questions:

1. How can I make this without the exploitation of any being?
2. How will this add value to someone's life?
3. How can I make this accessible?"

Producing her designs ethically, in small controlled batches, means many designs are limited edition, but this allows her to be sustainable in her practices.

"We use materials that are recycled, rescued, or derived from plants. Utilizing innovative materials and making them accessible to real everyday people is important to me."

Claire is encouraged by the prevalence of recycled

materials found in fashion today, noting that life cycle and overall efforts to incorporate sustainability into each step of the design process is becoming standard in the industry.

She's also excited about new and innovative vegan materials and alternatives that continue to be developed. White Rhino Bags are made using cork leather, cactus leather, hemsps and organic cotton blends, to name a few. Claire has also been experimenting with Piñatex—a leather fabric made from pineapple leaves, and future collections will hold a few surprises.

Function is a big deal, especially in women's fashion, and Claire is always thinking about things like pockets and the day-to-day value of each piece when designing. "I think that the term 'designer' in this day and age should equate to how well something is designed to work."

At the heart of Claire's operation is animal advocacy. "Finding creative ways to give back to animal welfare and social causes with my designs has been the absolute cherry on top. Raising funds and awareness for groups who dedicate their time to protect animals is the most fulfilling component of what we do."

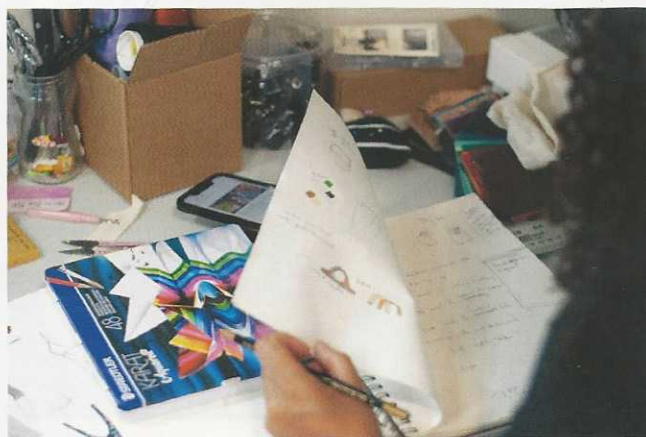




Photo by Ravi Bohgan

Mika Baldwin's love of sewing was inspired by both her grandmothers. As a six-year-old child, she started spending hours in her Nana's sewing room, cutting scraps of fabric to make simple purses and dresses for her dolls. To this day, she sews most of her family's clothing.

"Design is in my blood. During the Second World War in Berlin, my great-grandfather was a concert pianist turned dressmaker. He started a business reusing parachutes from deployed soldiers to make fine ladies wear. Later, my grandmother apprenticed in his shop until she immigrated to Canada in 1956. She passed her knowledge on to me."

Her brand can be described as eco-conscious with fusion flare. "My husband and his family are from India; since I was young, I've been attracted to the vibrant colours and textures of the East Indian culture." In fact, the first evening gown she designed and created—in rich red and gold tones—was the piece that

launched Mika Couture.

Becoming a mother changed Mika's view of fashion. She realized our clothing choices have an impact on the environment. So, she committed to creating high-end pieces that were both beautiful and good for our planet. Additionally, all the fabrics she chooses are made with plant or synthetic dyes and fibres. "I pride myself in designing low-waste pieces reusing all the scraps from every project created with cruelty-free materials."

Mika is aware of the human rights abuses that exist in the fashion industry worldwide. For that reason, she does her research to ensure that the fabrics she purchases are sourced directly from ethical, owner-operated





Photos by Ravi Bohgan



businesses in India. The factory owners have direct contact with the workers, ensuring their well-being in the work environment, and fair wages.

Another problem in the fashion industry is raw material waste. To do her part to combat direct scrap waste, she ensures the companies she buys from use low waste cutting methods.

Mika fuses beautiful fabrics with western construction, and she creates inspired pieces that any woman will enjoy wearing, whether for formal or casual occasions. "My brand is centred around two worlds coming together to celebrate the beauty of every woman."

Mika's hope for 2021 is to expand by providing more custom, one-of-a-kind pieces, and to offer a small line of dresses for retail. "Every piece is handmade by me, from paper to end product." She's on track to make this desire a reality. Since her launch, she hasn't had the need to promote her business; orders have come solely through word of mouth.

Mika lives in Chilliwack, B.C., where she was born and raised, with her vegan family—husband, two children, and two dogs. She designs and creates from her home studio. ●

You can find both these designers on Instagram at:  @whiterhinobags and  @couturebymika.
