

MAY | 1

"GREEN" HAUTE COUTURE

Photograph courtesy of [RVDK Ronald Van Der Kemp](#)



FEATURING DESIGNERS RONALD VAN DER KEMP, DURAN LANTINK, AND MORE

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TIME LINE

HAUTE COUTURE'S HISTORICAL IMPACT ON GREEN CONSUMERISM AND PERFORMANCE ACTIVISM

The sudden shift to green marketing by fashion houses marks the recognition of a change in consumers' perception of luxury. The theory of consumption values identifies five values: functional, conditional, social, emotional, and epistemic, that influence a consumer's choice and allow the luxury industry to predict consumer behavior⁹. Designers like Stella McCartney, Katharine Hammet, and Ronald van der Kemp have used the concept of sustainable sourcing, ethical materials, and upcycling as some of their main selling points to the few consumers of luxury goods for whom the ethos of a product is central to their purchase decision. Their investment and marketing of this idea mark the gradual beginning of an influx of consumer attention towards ideas like "slow-fashion" and ethical considerations.

1858: CHARLES FREDERICK WORTH
ESTABLISHES THE FIRST HAUTE
COUTURE HOUSE IN PARIS



1990S: KATHARINE HAMNET
AND STELLA MCCARTNEY
BECOME AMONG THE FIRST
DESIGNERS TO USE
ENVIRONMENTAL AND
POLITICAL MESSAGING IN THEIR
WORK TO CHALLENGE
INDUSTRY NORMS

19TH CENTURY

**EARLY TO MID-20TH
CENTURY (POST-WAR)**

LATE 20TH CENTURY

EARLY 21ST CENTURY

1895-1927: DESIGNERS
SUCH AS CHRISTIAN DIOR,
CRISTOBAL BALENCIAGA,
PIERRE BALMAIN, HUBERT
DE GIVENCHY, AND COCO
CHANEL BRING PARISIAN
HAUTE COUTURE BACK TO
INTERNATIONAL
RELEVANCE AFTER THE
BELLE EPOQUE



1998: STELLA MCCARTNEY BECOMES
CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF CHLOE,
ADVOCATES FOR LEATHER-FREE AND
FUR-FREE LUXURY FASHION



Exclusivity was once defined by loud luxury, provided by logos and identifiable pieces that others recognized and defined as having social capital. Now, exclusivity is derived from the ability to purchase a couture item that is not only handcrafted but sourced more ethically and safely than other brands. The ability of a couture garment to carry emotional capital before an identity has been created between it and the consumer has allowed fashion houses to integrate a narrative of sustainability into their brand and present themselves as “environmentally conscious”. However, this shift in corporate perspective does not necessarily correspond to a shift in consumer habits.

This era of consumption-awareness, fueled by a broad cultural awareness of sustainability concepts, may have been furthered by consumer efforts to resist conformity and stay ahead of trends by ditching loud luxury for what they perceive as ethical goods². Brands identified an increase in consumer demand for the appearance of sustainability in their products and promptly marketed their products as such. This cycle is well-documented and often identifiable in places where we least expect it, such as resale websites that are subsidiaries of the parent brand, like Coachtopia, that market their items as eco-friendly new styles.

2014: DUTCH DESIGNER RONALD VAN DER KEMP LAUNCHES THE FIRST SUSTAINABLE COUTURE LABEL



2000S

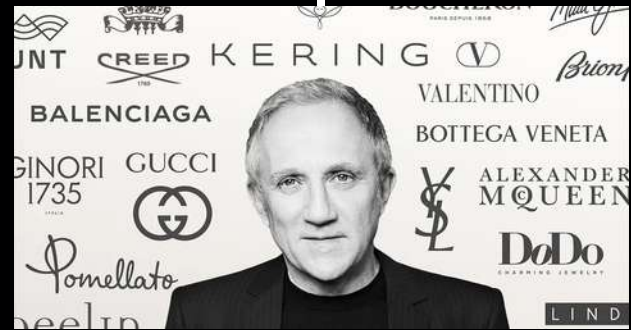
2010S



2009: LIVIA FIRTH FOUNDS ECO-AGE, A FASHION HOUSE CONSULTANCY FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

That phrase is completely counterintuitive because the creation of more products creates more waste, yet it appeals to consumers' knowledge of ethical purchasing principles that are dictated by their knowledge of sustainability. This effectively empowers the consumer to purchase more and encourages the brand to develop more sustainability terminology to set itself apart from its competitors.

Although Coach is not a member of the haute couture sphere, it is a derivative of the collective actions that fashion houses, such as Chanel, have done to lay the foundation for the fashion industry. In 2021, Chanel released Mission 1.5, a robust plan to reduce their carbon footprint and establish a commitment to climate justice initiatives and research. They planned to accomplish this



2017: KERING, LEADING FASHION CONGLOMERATE, RELEASED ITS FIRST PROFIT LOSS REPORT AS A STEP TOWARDS TRANSPARENCY IN LUXURY FASHION

through a transition to 100% renewable energy for each scope of their operations by 2025, as of the document's release in 2021¹. There were many plans for donations to initiatives important to the fashion industry and supporting communities that support Chanel operations. These goals were influenced by the Fashion Pact at the G7 summit 2019 where brands agreed to decarbonize their operations by purchasing energy from renewable sources³. This summit resulted in 150 brands joining an agreement to set goals and take steps to reduce carbon emissions, reflecting the Paris agreement's impact on other global industries.

**2021: CHANEL UNVEILS THEIR
"MISSION 1.5°" ACTION PLAN
IN RESPONSE TO NEW PARIS
AGREEMENT GOALS**



2020S



**2019: FASHION PACT BETWEEN 30
MAJOR FASHION COMPANIES IS
CREATED AT THE G7 SUMMIT**

Chanel's Mission 1.5 reflected similar progress updates as the fashion pact, in which a significant amount of unnecessary waste was eliminated; however, there were inconsistencies in reporting, and some of the emissions were described as unavoidable for undisclosed reasons. The non-binding language of mission statements and decarbonization agreements prevents a standard from being established within the fashion industry and prevents the high emitters from being held accountable and effectively making these publicly touted agreements another form of greenwashing.



**2023: THE FRENCH FEDERATION DE LA
HAUTE COUTURE ET DE LA MODE
UPDATES HAUTE COUTURE
SUSTAINABILITY GUIDELINES,
EMPHASIZING STRICTER ECO-
RESPONSIBILITY REQUIREMENTS**

Haute couture plays an important role in setting the standards for the rest of the fashion industry, but with no commitment to tracking the progress on commitments, nor the progress on research outcomes for which they have dedicated funding, they are dedicated to concepts, but not results, which is the root of the greenwashing of consumption issue in the couture industry.

Reports like these are what allow inconspicuous consumption to continue to occur through greenwashing. They continue to take advantage of not reporting hidden activities that play an essential role in understanding the entirety of the couture industry's ecological footprint.



CONSPICUOUS ?

DEFINING THE IMPACTS OF COUTURE MIGHT SEEM SIMPLE, BUT HOW MUCH DOES THE CONSUMER REALLY KNOW?



Ronald van der Kemp SS 2023



Ronald van der Kemp SS 2023

Conspicuous externalities refer to the publicly known and easily measurable impacts of haute couture, which are often the most likely to catch the attention of activists or lawmakers. This can occur on multiple different levels of the industry, including in the sourced materials, fashion shows, logistics, and product campaigns whose environmental impacts escape the notice of its consumers. This begs the question: where is the line between art and over-consumption in the name of art?

The origin of many consumptive practices began in the Worth House, where craftsmanship and bespoke pieces were valued above all else, resulting in a significant amount of excess, unusable textiles. This externality was not of central importance to their operations because the clients were the most elite members in Paris, where the ability to pay for foreign textiles and innovative designs was not a concern, and haute couture had not yet been recognized as an international industry.



Ronald van der Kemp SS 2023



Ronald Van Der Kemp SS 2020

The nature of the process was small-scale, and the environmental footprint was negligible. Unfortunately, the industrialization of fashion led to a dramatic increase in exotic and synthetic material sourcing, high-profile fashion shows, increasingly complex logistics, and extravagant campaigns to increase the visibility of their designs.

This increasing scale of consumer demand has inevitably led to a detrimental increase in the environmental impact of haute couture operations. However, but this is only in the ways that are visible through reporting and tracking, done at the discretion of the fashion houses. One dimension of this is pre-consumer waste in the form of textile cutting sections, which account for about 25%-40% of the total fabric used during production⁴. Of these fabrics, 87% is discarded into landfills, even though 90% is still able to be reused or recycled⁴.

The nature of pre-consumer waste allows for 100% of textiles to be recycled and repurposed, eliminating the need for virgin textiles to be used in many cases where the same designs are reproduced for ready-to-wear collections. Designer Ronald van der Kemp adopted these deadstock, discard textiles from fashion houses and uses his own recycling methods to create new fabrics for each season's collections¹⁰. This directly addresses the externalities created by fashion houses' overconsumption of virgin textiles and prevents an increase in demand that would traditionally create more waste.

Normally, excessive post-production waste is attributed to the consumer's initial overconsumption of products; however, some aspects are well within the control of fashion houses and supply chains. Since the 1980s, retailers like Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel have destroyed unsold items to create artificial scarcity and justify high market prices⁸.



These practices are also driven by consumer activities, which demand constant production of new designs to replace seasonal trends. These luxury brands claim that the burning and destruction of merchandise to prevent counterfeits; however, there are often miscalculations of consumer habits, which result in overproduction of goods and further increase in destruction of goods⁸. This may appear less pronounced in high fashion as garments are made one of a kind, but there are many instances where these practices are unreported to protect against negative media attention and awareness from climate NGOs.

The most appropriate solution for these inconspicuous externalities is an emphasis on a small-scale circular economy within fashion houses and the creation of a framework within a fashion coalition like the Federation de la Haute Couture et de la Mode to implement mandatory reporting of performance indicators related to environmental externalities.

This could be accomplished through collaboration between fashion houses and firms like Livia Firth's Eco-Age, which was created to streamline circular economy practices and lessen a brand's overall footprint⁶. As new designers enter the couture sphere, explicit guidelines must be in place to minimize further overproduction of goods and ensure that a circular, closed-loop life cycle of a product is prioritized to set the industry standard. Guidelines should include a protocol for tracing supplies and ensuring that they are disposed of in a way that aligns with the implemented framework⁴. This is essential for breaking the trend of "fast fashion" in the greater fashion industry and reimagining the expectations for haute couture.



Duran Lantink SS2024

ANALYSIS: CHANGING GREEN CONSUMERISM

As a new generation of adults breaks into the climate activism sphere, it is important to recognize that young people are working at the intersection of high fashion and climate activism to create visibility of the still-invisible effects of consumption. By demonstrating that individuals can make change, it is possible to use the growth of technology and unparalleled access to communication across the globe to disseminate the information that comes from shifting perspectives in the haute couture industry.



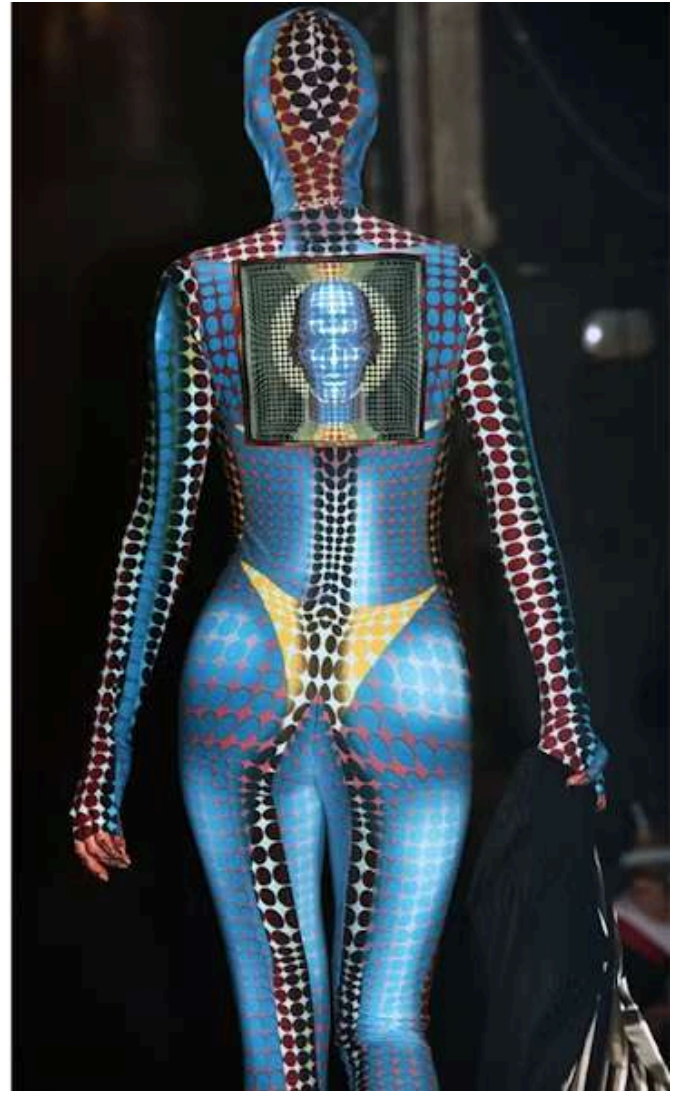
Duran Lantink FW2025

An example of this is Duran Lantink, who has approached overconsumption in couture head-on through his exploratory use of deadstock couture and upcycled scrap textiles for his collections. However, this is something that he had been doing since he was a child, which developed the foundation for his collaborations with homeless transgender sex workers in Cape Town, South Africa, who helped him develop his avant-garde designs. Since he was a child, he had torn up his mother's couture pieces and reassembled them to create his garments, which inspired his current methodology⁵. His use of overproduced couture goods became so successful that he was named successor to the house of Jean Paul Gaultier this month. Gaultier never spoke about principles of consumption from a sustainability

standpoint, but he felt strongly about the importance of identity and ownership of a piece of clothing. He reflected on this concept in reference to a pair of Levi's, saying, "when it gets older, it becomes even more beautiful. I think we should also see life like that"⁷. The recognition of permanence in clothing and fashion set the stage for designers like Lantink to take the idea one step further and integrate the growing needs of consumers for fresh and interesting clothing with the values of a new generation.



Jean Paul Gaultier SS1993 and FW1995



This generation is faced with a broad spectrum of issues that all stem from consumption and the only way to subvert this culture of consumption is through defiance of society norms. The luxury consumption literature has demonstrated that consumers value status first and foremost, followed by utility, then meaningful experience in the purchase of a product⁹. It may be difficult to change the mindset of an entire group of consumers, but increasing the transparency of couture brands could have a positive effect on consumer trends of sustainably sourced garments. It has been observed that consumers have little trust in claims of sustainability because of the lack of transparency from brands, which impacts the belief that purchasing garments like those created by Duran Lantink does not equate to environmentally responsible practices¹¹.

Consumer education provided by brands on the topic of consumption is necessary to inform consumers about how the purchasing of garments with upcycled textiles can be a suitable alternative to traditional consumption¹¹. Additionally, it will be necessary to reform over-consumptive practices that are outdated and no longer serve the reality of our situation through reduced consumption of all products and reduced demand for products whose components negatively impact consumer values. Creating and enforcing policies that reflect true transparency over persuasive greenwashing tactics to improve the trustworthiness of couture brands and create a ripple effect on consumers within the wider fashion industry.

TREND WATCH:

THE FUTURE OF GREEN CONSUMERISM

Backstage at Duran Lantink SS2025

Many up-and-coming designers have taken part in larger collaborations, started new trends, and integrated technologies into the design process that are making great strides in haute couture, but what happens when these individuals start to scale up? What happens when they start to contribute to many of the negative externalities associated with couture, and deem them unavoidable? Fashion houses have demonstrated an evolution in environmental awareness, but there are several future realities that policymakers, designers, and consumers should keep in mind.



Chanel SS2025

Decreasing the risk of inconspicuous greenwashing

Creating a standard for a framework that requires accountability and reporting that has indicators for transparency built in will be invaluable during the shift of trends in the next decade. This will encourage haute couture culture to transition from a culture of excess to a culture of awareness and responsibility for the realities of the industry. This should include not only commitments to carbon neutrality, such as Gabriela Hearst and Chanel in The Fashion Pact, but also to encourage art and designs that reflect timelessness and encourage consumers to embrace art with a lower environmental impact and consume fashion consciously.



Gabriela Hearst SS2025



Addressing the impacts of technology

As the process of creation and production moves to the digital realm, designers must consider the footprint of technology in this process, especially as the use of AI gains traction. It may appear as creating less waste, but a single query in ChatGPT uses “100 times more energy than a Google search”². Balancing the impact created by increased energy usage through opportunities for sustainable choices, such as the option for fashion houses to purchase renewable energy credits through the Fashion Pact. Options like these will be essential as technology begins to have an increasing environmental impact on design practices.

Consumer power as a safety mechanism

The consumer trends of different generations have demanded a constant evolution of couture culture through innovation in design and expansion of enterprises. Now, social media and communication platforms play a role in which brands gain a following and what new trends catch their attention. By bringing awareness to the image that fashion houses portray and analyzing the data and commitments that they make, the average consumer can make informed choices that align with their values. Using consumer-driven analysis will likely be the most reliable, nonpartisan source of information until policies are created to eliminate ambiguity in couture production processes.