



Fair fashion

Ethical fashion is hard to define, hard to prove and even harder to find

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The first time Calgary's CUSO office held a fair trade fashion show, back in August 2004, organizers were happy to call the clothes "ethical."

This time, they're not so sure.

"It is really a tough one. It was a challenge, because to use words like 'fair trade' and 'ethical,' there are expectations," says Daniel Martinez, one of the show's organizers.

He sighs a little bit.

"My work with fair trade coffee was easier because it was clearer," says Martinez, who is a researcher at the University of Calgary's Centre for Public Interest Accounting and a Canada member of council for CUSO. "With the apparel industry, I opened a Pandora's Box."

Increasingly, the idea of ethical fashion -- clothing whose manufacture does not harm the environment or exploit the people who make it -- is becoming, well, fashionable.

Big name designers such as Giorgio Armani, Oscar de la Renta and Diane von Furstenburg have incorporated ethical fabrics and practices in their collections; popular labels like Nike and American Apparel have made organic cotton trendy among the mall set.

Although it is a small part of the retail pie in North



CREDIT: Tim Fraser, Calgary Herald (Embroidered cotton tote bag from Guatemala, \$44), and silver Tuareg necklace from Niger, \$295, both from Ten Thousand Villages.

America, the concept of ethical fashion is big business in Europe, especially in the U.K., which offers labels such as Katharine Hamnett, People Tree and Edun, the fashion line owned by rock star Bono and his wife Ali Hewson.

The problem is not just defining ethical fashion, but proving it. Thanks to globalization, the apparel industry has become so complex that even the experts don't really understand it.

Take a simple cotton polo shirt. The fabric may be organic cotton, but the buttons could be made of plastic by a known polluter. The shirt may have been assembled by unionized workers, but the fabric may have been woven in a sweatshop.

Just the environmental conundrums are enough to make nudity seem appealing.

The production of synthetic fabrics uses non-renewable resources and emits harmful chemicals. But some natural fibres aren't all that green either.

Cotton, for instance, is cheap, comfortable and stylish. It's also, Martinez says, "one of the largest crops in the world, one of the most chemical-dependent crops and the crop that's most dependent on water."

Worldwide, 25 per cent of all insecticides and 12 per cent of pesticides are used in cotton production. In addition, it takes 22,000 litres of water to produce one kilogram of cotton. Then there are the toxic dyes and other harmful chemicals.

Organic cotton, however, is so labour-intensive that it can add as much as 20 per cent to the cost of a garment.

This became an issue for Martinez when he decided to start Just Shirts, a line of imported T-shirts made by a co-operative of single mothers in El Salvador. He knew the women were being paid fairly and weren't being exploited. But he also knew they couldn't afford organic cotton.

That said, the bigger issue in recent years has been the proliferation of sweatshops, especially in the developing world.

A clothing factory becomes a sweatshop when environmental, social and human rights are violated.

Workers in a sweatshop will work as much as 15 to 20 hours a day, sometimes sleeping in front of their



CREDIT: Tim Fraser, Calgary Herald
Embroidered cotton tote bag from Guatemala, \$44, and (silver Tuareg necklace from Niger, \$295), both from Ten Thousand Villages.

looms. They earn only pennies per garment -- and there is no overtime paid. There are no breaks, no holidays, no days off. Children are sometimes put to work. Unions are forbidden. Workers are abused verbally and physically.

All this misery is inflicted so retailers can get a steady supply of clothing at the cheapest price possible. And if factory managers fail to meet expectations, they will lose their business to countries like China, where people will work for even less.

"They've got it down to seconds per garment," Martinez says. "If we reduce it to those numbers, people don't ask themselves, 'At the expense of what?' "

We, of course, never see the pain and sweat and humiliation, let alone the polluted rivers and sterile soil, when we buy our \$9.99 T-shirts.

"There are consequences to everything you do . . . but most of it is hidden somewhere you don't see it," Martinez says.

"The person who absorbs the costs is the person who cannot speak about it. The consumer is sacred."

So what can consumers do about it?

First of all, we can demand transparency, insisting companies reveal where they source their products. Then we can look for the alternatives listed in our dos and don'ts sidebar.

"Those who have money can afford those ethical alternatives. Change comes from those who can afford it," Martinez says.

"There are alternatives out there and we have to encourage that. It's messy, yes, but that's how it starts."

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Earth Day 2006

In the five days leading up to Earth Day on Saturday, we bring you a special series on things you can do -- right now -- to make a difference to our planet's beleaguered ecosystem.

Monday: Start at home

Today: Buy wisely

Wednesday: Eat locally

Thursday: Ride your bike

Friday: Follow a greenie

This story features a factbox "Earth Day 2006".

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