

Is the time right for Slow Fashion?

A fashion movement asks consumers to think about the origin and materials of their clothes.

By Tim Holt | Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor

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The Slow Fashion/Slow Clothing movement is a patchwork of the old and the new. It borrows heavily from Slow Food ideas of knowing more about what you buy, finding out who produced it, and using that knowledge to buy quality and to make socially and environmentally responsible choices.

You'll find Slow Fashion on the gritty north side of Burlington, Vt., where men and women working on rented sewing machines make customized garments out of discarded clothes and fabrics. And in the fashion design studios of San Francisco, where "green" is the buzzword and high fashion is spun from recycled and organic materials. It also comes to the US from Bolivian villages high in the Andes mountains, where women knit sweaters made from the coats of free-range alpaca herds.

Slow Fashion can be your own customized dress reworked from one bought for \$5 at Goodwill, or one of Miranda Caroligne's \$700 handmade jackets crafted from clothing factory scraps.

Slow Clothing surfaced in 2006 as a spinoff of Slow Food, and has since evolved into a somewhat less homespun Slow Fashion movement embraced by rebellious clothing designers in the US and Europe. The phrase "Slow Clothing" appeared in a December 2006 essay by Sharon Astyk, a writer who lives on a small farm in upstate New York. Her essay, appearing in the online Groovy Green Magazine, outlined in forceful language a program of independence from the multibillion-dollar clothing industry and "its exploitation of poor people ... toxic pesticide use and the inhumane treatment of animals." Ms. Astyk challenged US households "to create a single outfit for every man, woman, and child that is homemade." Harking back to a simpler era, she also urged families to mend their clothes and buy fewer new ones.

"If we can radically reduce our clothing purchases, there will be no reason to buy cheaply made, imported, sweatshop clothing from Wal-Mart," she wrote. "We will be able to afford to purchase high-quality, environmentally sound clothing."

Astyk wasn't calling for anything radically new, but rather for a rebalancing of the old and new toward time-honored stitch-and-mend ways as opposed to a buy-and-throw-away ethic.

In fact, Astyk does knit socks for her family and is teaching her young sons basic sewing skills, but she admits that, up until now, this do-it-yourself approach has been a tough sell.

One intermediate step is to recycle clothing. "The older the better" is the motto at the Bobbin Sew Bar in Burlington, Vt., where you can buy recycled clothes stitched into new ones at reasonable prices, or rework them yourself on one of their vintage sewing machines, which can be rented for \$8.50 an hour.

Another approach is taken by designer Miranda Caroligne, who specializes in "turning garbage into high fashion," as she puts it. She scavenges discarded fabric from clothing factories in the San Francisco Bay Area and transforms them into colorful outfits.

Ms. Caroligne's creations don't come cheap, and much of Slow Fashion can be pricey: An organic cotton dress at the Atomic Garden boutique in Oakland, Calif., runs around \$200. A woman's top made from recycled men's shirts goes for \$345 at Eco-Citizen in San Francisco, and a handmade alpaca sweater from Vermont-based Kusikuy is going to cost about \$185.

But consumers can take comfort from the fact that the sweater was produced in a Bolivian village by a knitter paid three times that country's minimum wage, according to Kusikuy owner Tamara Stenn. She prides herself in paying her knitters a living wage and selling sweaters that last an average of 10 years.

Slow Fashion can be defined by what it is – durable, made from recycled or organic materials, and made by someone paid a "living wage." It is also sometimes defined by what it isn't. It's the opposite of what some refer to as "Fast Fashion" – the churning out of large quantities of clothing under intense time pressure and new fashion lines every two months produced by underpaid overseas laborers.

Not long ago, Ms. Stenn found herself and her knitters veering into the Fast Fashion lane as demand for the sweaters and other alpaca garments soared. She got caught up in a frantic schedule of trade shows and meetings with retailers all over the country. Her company was "losing its heart and soul," she felt, with stepped-up production schedules and stressed-out knitters.

So Stenn made the decision to slow down, to stop going to trade shows, and to cut back production by more than half. Now she feels she's back in touch with the true spirit of her company.

Kathie Sever of Austin, Texas, is another refugee from the world of Fast Fashion. She designed a line of children's clothing and soon found herself embroiled in an endless series of meetings with sales reps and 1,400-mile journeys to a clothing factory in Los Angeles – plus what she describes as an appalling "ton of waste" generated at the end of each clothing cycle.

Ms. Sever decided to walk away from all that, reconnect with her creative side, and indulge in a longtime "fetish" for Western, cowboy-style clothing. She's been comfortably situated in the Slow Fashion lane for 3-1/2 years now as the owner and sole employee of Ramonster, producing handmade, customized shirts and women's dresses. The shirts are definitely pricey, running \$350 to \$500, and featuring hand-embroidered images from the purchaser's life. One movie director proudly wears a Ramonster shirt featuring images from the classic John Wayne Western, "Rio Grande."

Sever offers a high-end alternative to the throwaway ethic: A customized \$500 shirt isn't likely to end up in the landfill anytime soon, and not just because of the price. Sever's shirts have what fashion-industry people refer to as "emotional durability," a personal connection that makes it likely they'll not only remain in one's wardrobe but get passed on to the next generation.

The same can be true, of course, of something you make for yourself, or that a friend or relative makes for you. Homemade clothes may indeed work for some, but the broader goal of Slow Fashion is to get consumers to think more about what they buy.

Should we buy cruelty-free leather belts made from South American farm animals who died of natural causes, and handbags made from recycled candy wrappers by juvenile delinquents in Mexico, or the same items made with less ethical content but shipped a shorter distance? A sweatshirt made of organic cotton or of recycled soda pop bottles?

Slow Fashion says: Let the debate and discussion begin.