



ECOSTYLE

Delia Montgomery

LOOKING at 2005/2006 coat trends from the famed haute couture design houses of Versace, Chanel, Lacroix and like-minded comrades, I wondered how such fashion could be applied to the green market. To my surprise, I discovered very few designers were focused on eco outerwear niches.

What is eco outerwear? Answers definitely differ, leaving most environmental consumers literally in the cold. No doubt folks living in freezing temperature environments suffer the most!

What's the identity problem? The answer lies in one's moral perspective on what constitutes a sustainably made garment. Think coat material and first thought is typically fake fur. Well, Fur Commissions USA and Fur Institute of Canada have research to prove natural is more earth friendly than synthetics. And retailers can't afford to forget that a chunk of animal rights activists frown on wool, just about as much as new fur, because they consider shearing cruel.

There is practical and vogue eco outerwear in America, but filling the demand is definitely a challenge. Many retailers wisely choose to sell vintage while they decipher what works best for their customers. It's a safe entry into the green market and an opportunity for management to develop their own eco image for warmth. One step further than offering

vintage is recycled and redesigned.

Designer Mariouche Gagné pampers the rage in four collections, with *Harricana Sport* featuring coats. She's most admired in Québec, Montreal where her boutique and headquarters are located. There is much competition amongst fur designers in Canada, but Mariouche stands out as an eco designer because she recycles at least 7,000 fur coats a year for her collections and custom orders.

For some time, Mariouche has catered to ski resorts, which proves her designs to be sporty and functional for both genders. She describes her better-priced wholesale collection as "eco luxury products." *Harricana* coats aren't cheap, but are a fraction of the price of traditional offerings. That aspect attracts conventional retailers too.

Young Mariouche exhibits in Paris and Milan, with a showroom in Munich.



Designer Mariouche Gagne mixes two or three types of recycled furs into one coat (left), while Karen Knierims' Wildrose Farm creates ecocoats (right) from organic cotton.

She says she avoids trends for her own designs, but acknowledges them as she travels. Belts are big this coming season and her favorite women's coat offering has one. Mariouche also loves mixing two or three types

of recycled furs into one coat. She says her objective is to flatter one's figure. Her practicality and style make a winning combination for fashion retailers with an ecological image.

A bit further south is designer Karen Knierim in Minnesota. She says creating eco coats and jackets from organic cotton is her "true calling." Karen's family-owned business, *Wildrose Farm*, sets between rolling hills and pine forests. Their property is a tree farm, also home to her studio which employs talented artists and sewers.

DARE TO WEAR ECOWARMTH

Karen's wholesale outerwear collection for women consists of two coats and one jacket, with variations of those patterns. Private labeling queries and custom requests are welcome. Her favorite for cold weather is the *Swing Coat*, which has an A-line shape that can be easily worn over sweaters and jackets. Because the fit is in the shoulders, it can also serve as a maternity coat. Side inset pockets and handmade ceramic buttons are attractive details.

Each style Karen designs is tested for interest and fit at environmental expos and art fairs where she exhibits. She reconstructs from public input, (incorporating trends), confirms organic fabric options, and determines Procion™ fiber reactive dyes for safe noncolor-grown choices.

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Retailer buyers place fall and winter coat orders as much as seven months before delivery. Time pressure gets intense for famed designers before the consumer feels the same rush at the store. You know the phrase, "the early bird gets the worm?" So advanced purchasing is necessary for the best merchandise, and that's why cold weather marketing is often presented during the midst of summer.

Definitely, observations reveal there is little competition for earth-friendly outerwear in the upcoming 2005/2006 season. Those who dare to share their perspective on what constitutes a sustainably made garment for warmth are ahead of the game. □

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