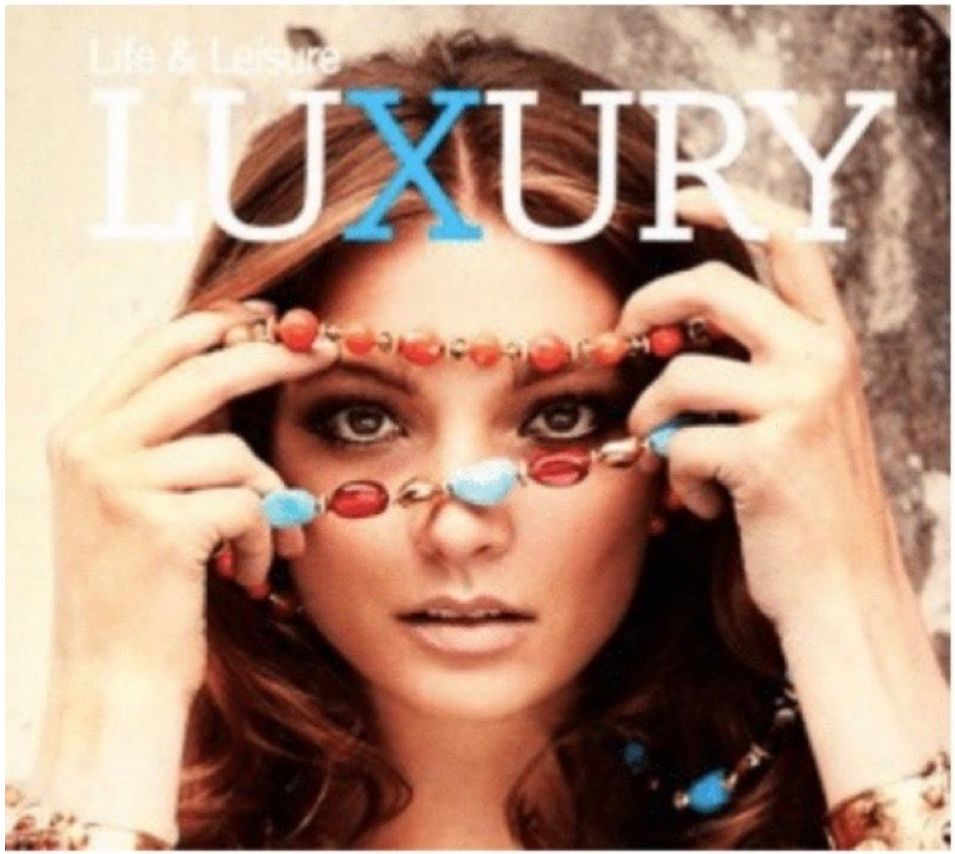
THE AUSTRALIAN
FINANCIAL REVIEW



Lifestyle

Print article

Patient and particular in provenance

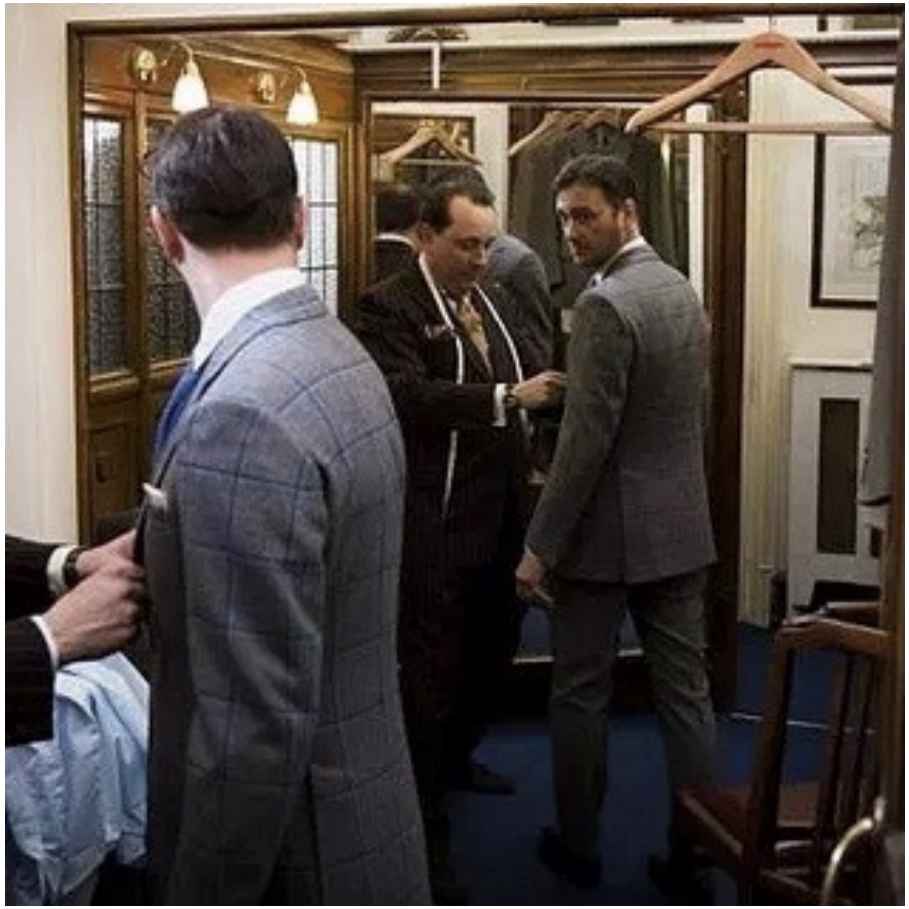
Applying an ethical approach to fashion is the essence of the Slow Luxury phenomenon.

By **Hannah Tattersall**

Updated Sep 12, 2014 — 6.01am, first published at 12.05am

Save Share

In a scene from hipster comedy *Portlandia*, two characters order chicken from a local restaurant, but not before questioning where the chicken came from, what sort of life it led and what it ate before it was killed. They learn that "Colin" was woodland-raised and fed a diet of sheep's milk, soy and hazelnuts.



The scene pokes fun at the slow food movement – a development that in recent years has become more a norm than a trend. Today, restaurants on every street corner spruik farm-to-table ideals; at the very least they offer artisanal sourdough with organically whipped butter.

Slow fashion, in particular slow luxury, is based on much the same principles. It follows the idea that consumers aren't interested in simply buying a leather bag any more: they want to know which cow was killed to make it, how that cow was treated when alive and whether it ate organic grass. They're also willing to wait months and sometimes years for a better-quality, more exclusive item, giving rise to the belief that the longer you wait for something the more you appreciate it once it's yours. It's not a new idea. Savile Row tailors and companies with British royal warrants built businesses on the values of supplying the best-quality products through the most sustainable means.

Savile Row master tailor Steven Hitchcock says he often makes garments for customers willing to wait years for their creation. "A client fell in love with a cloth, then when I went to order it from the mill it was out of stock and they had to reproduce it. The procedure of weaving the cloth was about five months. So by the time I managed to cut it and fit it to the customer in New York, it amassed to nearly two years." He says the customer was enamoured. "If someone is looking for something unique and has a certain image they want, then the wait is worth it."

Britt Allanson Bivens, a trend forecaster and lecturer at The New School in New York agrees. "What the customer is getting is complete and utter exclusivity, and they're part of the design process – that's desirable," she says . "We have had the whole, 'fast fashion is evil' pushed down our throats now and there's definitely a much higher awareness than there ever was about the price to pay for fast fashion. Second, luxury companies – because they wanted to justify the price of their products – started putting all those marketing videos out there detailing things such as the 51 steps involved in making a Chanel 2.5 bag."

360-degree consideration in a product

American Jade Dressler and Scottish-born Fiona Fraser co-founded Slow Luxury two years ago, to teach brands and consumers about ethical manufacturing and alert them to where their products are originating. "It's really about all the things that Slow Food is similarly about – taking care of community, making sure people's families are taken care of, so that it's a 360-degree consideration in making a product," Dressler says.

Prior to forming Slow Luxury, Fraser had developed her own bag label, Fraser Balgowan. Deer were often killed for their prized venison but their hide went to waste – so she found a way to put it to use. Customers interested in the bags could visit the estate in Inverness-shire, where the deer were raised and killed by a single deer hunter. Buyers from Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, the Middle East and Russia travelled to Scotland to enjoy a highland experience with tailored local food and whisky – and place an order for a £400 to £1700 ($700 to $3000) bag. Fraser says it was important to draw attention not only to the provenance of the bag but the history and traditions of the families of the Scottish highlands. (For personal reasons she is no longer able to produce the bags but is working on a new project.)

Luxury brands are also doing their part. Louis Vuitton allows customers to order custom-made pieces including handbags and shoes in exotic leathers such as alligator, ostrich or python that can take 12 to 18 months to produce. The main reason for the wait is that these skins are hard to come by. To ensure a steady flow of sustainably produced, untarnished leather, LVMH last year bought an Australian crocodile farm for $US2.5 million ($2.7 million). Competitor Kering followed suit, acquiring a majority stake in French tannery France Coco, which specialises in sourcing and processing crocodile skins. Last year one brand in its stable, Gucci, released new eco and ethical versions of its famous Jackie, Hobo and Tote bags. The bag now comes with a "passport" detailing "the precise history" of the cow it was made from, from birth to the final product.

Others have the long wait without guarantee of best-practice. A Hermès International Birkin bag, a staple of the wealthy, sells for about $10,000 in leather; a crocodile version could set you back $50,000 – with a five-year wait. Dressler says they are not as transparent as they should be about the materials used. "We talk so much about sustainable cloth and no one wants to wear fur, but there is conversation around that. There's no conversation around leather," she says.

"An amazing Hermès bag is made of factory-farmed leather. We're having this consciousness around our food, but it's not necessarily extending full-fledged into what we put on our bodies – what we wear, and the impact on the environment, whether it's factory-farmed animals or whatnot. Of course Hermès is going to pick a really high-end leather, but that animal suffered just the same."

She believes luxury consumers are far more educated than they used to be and that will drive a change. "It's not a niche discussion any more. I know couture designers may not be all open to considering it, but I think within the next five years, it's going to happen."

Certainly, as with the slow food movement, the idea of slow fashion is starting to enter the mainstream. Even fast fashion retailer H&M has a Conscious Collection of clothing made from organic cotton, Tencel and recycled polyester – God forbid that the consumer feel shame at buying a $5 factory-made maxi dress.

Dressler says "there's a growing number of people who want that connection with their purchase and it's absolutely about some kind of emotional connection with a product that means something to them".

Read the original article: 'Patient and Particular in Provenance' (by Hannah Tattersall)