



The upcycled Bottletop bag

# Catwalk with a conscience

With London Fashion Week coming up this month, ethical fashion has never been hotter. Kelly Rose Bradford discovers the companies who are making sure our clothes do not cost the earth.



Bottletop workers based in Africa



When Emma Watson walked the red carpet at the Met Gala Ball in May this year, all eyes were on her outfit. And while the design of Emma's get-up was nothing short of amazing – trousers with a skirt over and a flowing train – there was a lot more to it than just the quirky look and the designer label. The form-fitting, bustier-topped creation boasted eco-credentials longer than its cascading train, having been made from recycled plastic bottles, organic cottons and silks.

The look was created by Calvin Klein as part of the Green Carpet Challenge, an initiative to put sustainable fashion in the spotlight at high-profile events. And while eco-friendly clothes might not be anything new (hemp harem pants, anyone?), many brands are now taking their ethical ethos much further than just producing wearable collections in sustainable fabrics.

## Partnerships with communities

Indeed, for many companies, the true definition of sustainable clothing is a product which enhances not only the life of the end user, but all those involved in its production and manufacture, from garment stitchers to entire communities. One such brand is Bottletop, which began life in 2002 as the Bottletop Foundation, the brainchild of Cameron Saul and his father Roger, founder of the luxe British fashion brand Mulberry. Bottletop products were first rolled out as a design collaboration with Mulberry, and featured bags made from recycled bottle tops and lined with Mulberry leather. These were produced after Cameron became inspired on a trip to Uganda where he discovered locals making accessories from the otherwise worthless lids.

These bags not only provided local employment, but proceeds from their sales went towards supporting grassroots education projects in Africa. The success of this collaboration eventually led to Cameron starting the Bottletop Fashion Company with his business partner Oliver Wayman in 2012. The company now funds the Bottletop Foundation, enabling it to educate young people across the world on health issues such as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy.

Their current range is described as 'art for the craftsman and the consumer', and comprises high-end bags, purses and belts, produced by artisans in Brazil using upcycled materials. 'Our approach has always been a design-led product,' Cameron says. 'It has always been about creating beautiful items that people covet and want to own and be proud of, irrespective of the mission behind it, and the way in which it is made, and who it is helping.'

## Not-so-frivolous fashion

There is, Cameron says, a rising tide of consumer consciousness around the fashion industry, and its impact on people and the planet. 'I've been really excited by customer reaction to the boards in our store on London's Regent Street which tell the stories of the lives and communities the Bottletop Foundation touches,' he says. 'And it's that that turns a customer from loving a one-off design to actually really falling in love with the mission and what something stands for.'

Cameron says there is now 'overwhelming evidence' to suggest that if there are two almost identical products side by side and one of them has ethical and environmental



Leah Rodrigues, Holi Studios

credentials, the consumer will choose that product. 'They then have a story they can share,' he says. 'And if someone says to them, wow, that's a cool bag, they are then proud to tell them where it actually comes from.'

Going forward, Cameron says that education is the key to ensuring future generations are encouraged to 'choose carefully' when it comes to fashion, not only in terms of what the product is made from but also how and where it is produced. 'It is depressing that in recent years consumers have been led to believe that it is fine to have throwaway fashion. Research shows product costs have actually gone up, yet high street prices have gone down - so who is paying for that? Generally, the garment workers.'

### Putting people first

Indeed, garment workers in Cambodia in particular are renowned for working in unsafe and exploitative conditions - so much so, violence erupted in some industrial areas in 2014 when employees protested against their appalling conditions. But for Holi, a British luxury brand producing women's coats and jackets in 100 per cent natural, biodegradable fabrics, a safe, non-exploitative workplace is at the heart of their Cambodian production plant.

Founded by Leah Rodrigues in 2014, Holi Studios is the company's training and manufacturing centre in Siem Reap, where local people are employed in an environment very far removed from the country's notorious sweatshops. Leah says Holi Studios has the potential to change lives, and believes that all companies should be working to the same ethical levels they do - and those who do not should be named and



shamed. Her focus, she says, is on having 'a high-end brand that just happens to be made in a nice environment, where we know who our staff are'.

'I have relationships with a few sewing charities, and we recruit directly from them,' she says, explaining that most of the women who go into the sewing programmes are ex-rice farmers who have come to the city to train. 'We are based in a town that is primarily focused on tourism, so we have lots of traffic coming through but not much industry,' she says. 'So if you do not speak English, there is not a lot available to you. The whole idea behind setting up Holi Studios was to provide opportunity and to fill that gap, so that people were not having to travel down to the main factories in Phnom Penh, which can be an eight-hour bus journey.'

And far from just employing staff to cut and stitch, Leah's local workforce are the backbone of her Cambodian operation. 'They run the bushiness. My operations manager is 37. I took her on when she was 35 and was told she wouldn't be able to run

the place because she was too old, but she is amazing and much better placed than I am to be connecting with the team on a day-to-day basis.'

And this, Leah says, is what ethical fashion is really about - producing quality, biodegradable products while giving communities safe workplaces and stable incomes - and making that judgement on the ground, not from an HQ in an affluent city thousands of miles away. 'It's all about going out there and seeing what the local environment and expectation is,' she says. 'Because sometimes it can be very far removed from how you think somewhere should be doing things.'

● Find out more at [www.bottletop.org](http://www.bottletop.org) and [www.holi.org.uk](http://www.holi.org.uk). London Fashion Week runs 16-20 September.

Turn the page for some of our favourite sustainable fashion companies >>



## Po-Zu

Stylish, sustainable and ethical London-based footwear brand who pledge 3% of their sales income to charity, and are currently ranked the UK's number one ethical shoe brand by The Ethical Company Organisation. Men's and women's boots, sandals and sneakers from around £125.

[www.po-zu.com](http://www.po-zu.com)



## Sundried

Premium ethical sportswear made from responsibly sourced materials with low environmental impact and respect for people in the supply chain. Every item has a code that can be entered online to give a donation to Water for Kids. Men's and women's clothing from £40.

[www.sundried.com](http://www.sundried.com)



## Elvis and Kresse

Quirky accessories, with the core range made from decommissioned British fire hoses - 50% of the sales of which are donated to the Fire Fighters Charity. Pictured: Weekender bag £299.99.

[www.elvisandkresse.com](http://www.elvisandkresse.com)



## Howies

Laid-back leisurewear with a conscience from this Wales-based eco-friendly company, who use organic cottons and recycled and recyclable fabrics across their men's and women's ranges. Vest tops from £29; jeans £75.

[www.howies.co.uk](http://www.howies.co.uk)

Get the sustainable look from head to toe



## Eighteen Rabbit

Fairly traded jewellery made from bomb casings and bullets salvaged after the war in Cambodia, crafted by people affected by landmines or living with HIV. Pictured: Bomb casing flower earrings £15.

[www.eighteenrabbit.co.uk](http://www.eighteenrabbit.co.uk)



## Eileen Fisher

Luxe, contemporary and sustainable women's fashion crafted from eco-friendly fabrics, utilising organic linen, Bluesign certified silks and responsibly dyed, organic cotton. Four stores across the UK; prices from around £42.

[www.eileenfisher.com](http://www.eileenfisher.com)



## Bourgeois Boheme

An independent London-based footwear brand, Bourgeois Boheme makes men's and women's state-of-the-art luxury shoes completely free from animal-derived materials. The British-inspired styles are all artisan-made in Portugal from the finest eco-friendly vegan 'leathers', redefining the perception of leather-free footwear. Prices start from £130.

[www.bboheme.com](http://www.bboheme.com)