

BAG FOR LIFE

The biography of a bag

Chinese laundry checks, candy striped shopping bags and Tesco single-use carriers have become an unlikely source of inspiration for recent fashion collections. From Ashish to Celine, fashion has appropriated the colours, shapes and materials of our everyday accessories and put them centre stage. What is it that has led these items to be immortalised in luxury fabrics with a £2,000 price tag?

AdWeek recently called a particularly ingenious moment of Ikea marketing, when they revealed that the latest Balenciaga handbag was in fact a replica of Ikea's Frakta bag. The vibrant leather handbag mirrors Ikea's reusable shopper in size, shape and iconic 'Ikea Blue'. In response to this imposter, Swedish agency Acne released a campaign on how to identify a genuine Ikea Frakta from the \$2,145 copycat, revealing a somewhat impressive selling point that the original can even carry water, all for just \$0.99. Both bags are the result of design from two different schools of thought; function or fashion, yet we are left wanting both in equal measure.

The red-white-blue laundry bags (or bak lam doi) have become an increasingly iconic design, celebrated by brands from Celine to Louis Vuitton. Originally created in Hong Kong in the 1960s by tailor Lee Wah, the bags are made to transport goods out of an accessible waterproofing canvas. Originally the woven nylon was blue and white before red was added to represent luck and good fortune. In 2014, Ashish transformed one iconic carrier bag into another,

when he created a high-end counterfeit Tesco bag with the playful logo – 'DISCO'. These designs, printed logos and blue and white stripes are the patterns of our daily lives. They are as relevant to our visual language as historic tartans or Burberry checks. Although it may not be something that we have consciously absorbed, we could certainly pick out our own local newsagent's carrier bag out of a landfill.

This play between high and low culture has always been a favourite game of fashion houses and it continues to develop and distil. In 2014 Karl Lagerfeld didn't stop at the shopping bag when he recreated an entire supermarket for the Chanel Autumn/Winter show, stocking the shelves with branded groceries and plastic packaging. The simple pleasures of mainstream culture recreated as luxury items creates a trompe l'oeil effect that we continue to find appealing. This trend continues into the nuanced world of colour, where designers are finding new inspiration in the clashing synthetic tones of utility packaging most likely found under the kitchen sink. The utility colours of rubber glove yellows, 'Ikea blues' or 'pepto bismol pinks' subconsciously take on a fresh appeal and become desirable.

There is a more serious explanation to why these colours now feel 'relevant'. The brash combinations of coloured plastics remind us of recycled materials or the brightly coloured shards that glitter our landfills. Perhaps this is the true reason why the humble carrier bag has been

dressed up in sequins and pushed into the limelight. It has become an icon for consumer culture and represents the downsfalls of our disposable lifestyle and the impact on the environment. Since the 1960s plastic bags have been our essential daily accessories, but our overuse of the once cherished invention has created a nuisance and a pest. Although it is important to note that plastic bags contribute a relatively low percentage of our landfill waste, their addition to our increasing battle with ocean plastics remains of extreme concern. Polyethylene tangled in our landscape has become a global enemy. It blocks drainage systems, traps wildlife and last for over 1,000 years.

BBC News highlights Bangladesh as the first country to ban disposable bags altogether in 2002, after they posed an immediate threat by clogging drains and causing major flooding. Other countries including South Africa, Rwanda, Kenya, China and Italy have followed suite. The UK were relatively late to join the battle, with England being the last country to join in 2015. Luckily the impact has been significant. The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs released figures that the number of single use plastic bags had plummeted from 7 billion to just over 500 million from 2015 to 2016, following the introduction of the 5p carrier bag charge. Some supermarkets have taken the next step with trialling the removal of single-use bags all together but this remains a work in progress.

The last decade has seen the rise in new 'eco

friendly' replacements such as *Bags for Life* or cotton totes printed with environmental slogans. British designer, Anya Hindmarch, created a limited edition design that proudly stated 'I am not a plastic bag', which marked an early moment of sustainability becoming fashionable as it sold out immediately. Another brand, Baggu, takes the traditional plastic bag and recreates it in bright, washable nylon with an inspired selection of prints that reference traditional grocery stripes, as though you've been shopping at a designer fishmongers. Vintage fashion in Germany has led to a revival of Omas Einkaufsnetz or the 'Grandma's shopping net'. Despite having been considered old fashioned, these colourful nets are now the reusable bag of choice for environmentally-aware shoppers.

It appears the lightweight plastic bag is becoming a rare breed. Environmental journalist for the Guardian, Lucy Siegle, flips the situation on its head: 'Plastic bags are undeniably useful – they can carry 2,500 times their own weight – so reuse each one extensively. Hand them down to future generations, turning the fact that a plastic bag might take 1,000 years to degrade into a virtue. Give them as presents. The world's remaining plastic bags should become family heirlooms.' Originally plastic bags were seen as a somewhat remarkable invention by Swedish engineer Sten Gustaf Thulin, who created the entire bag from cutting and welding a single piece of plastic tube. Through excessive distribution and irresponsible disposal, the plastic bag has become a reminder of ▶





consumer culture at its peak and will continue to haunt us in our oceans and landfills.

The concern is that our efforts to reduce the flow of plastic into our environment should have begun earlier. It is too late to simply divert the flow of waste when we are faced with the damage of what's already been done. A study from Science Magazine in 2015 estimated that over 8 million tonnes of plastic go into the sea each year, forming huge plastic islands, birds and marine mammals. For the next step in our relationship with plastic bags, we turn to these floating piles of waste for inspiration.

Material engineers, scientists, technologists and textile designers work together to redirect the fashion world to a sustainable future. Groups like Parley for the Oceans or Bionic Yarn work with brands to develop new conscious lines. 'We have to redesign the material,' says Parley for Oceans founder Cyrill Gutsch, 'and question some of the product categories. We want to invent our way out of this.' For their last collaboration with Adidas, they designed a trainer made from reclaimed ocean plastic. In a thoughtful twist, the only way you can buy a pair is by joining an Instagram campaign publicising their reuse of plastic. This kind of innovation is a necessity for mainstream brands as sustainability becomes the new 'must-have' for both corporations and consumers. As sustainability leads fashion like never before, it seems the plastic bag will continue to inspire us for years to come. *** **Sophie Vent**