

RUMOUR HAS IT

STELLA MCCARTNEY
SHOPS THERE

SEVEN | CULTURE

Grace Timothy takes us through the best - and most fashionable - of the ethical companies

In the past year the idea of fair trade and ecologically friendly clothing seemed to go up a notch in the estimation of the masses. However, all too often second-hand or 'environmentally responsible' clothing does not necessarily have a lot in common with fashion. It is often a case of sifting through a whole load of rubbish before one finds a real diamond in the rough, but there are a few brands that are as worthy in the fashion stakes as they are ethically sound.

First up, is TRAIID. Since 1999, TRAIID has transformed the image of second-hand clothing. Its clothes are edgy and original enough to stand up against their fashion set competitors. While the clientele is cool, the sales assistants are cooler, but without a hint of the pretension or cold exclusivity that can sometimes be found in vintage stores.

Designer and consultant Wayne Hemingway recently called TRAIID, "the coolest recycling charity". The season's trends are reflected by the TRAIID designers' remade collection and there are some fantastic pieces of vintage clothing. All this is combined with the knowledge that with every purchase you are doing something worthwhile.

Kelly Kay, the acting chief executive officer of TRAIID, explains the ethos behind TRAIID's success. "We're looking at reducing world poverty through our profits in the shops, as well as addressing the problems caused by landfills," she explains. "It's the waste of the west that is impacting the developing worlds and putting livelihoods in danger."

The practicalities of TRAIID's scheme are surprisingly simple. People donate their unwanted clothes and shoes to the one of the 800 banks or over-the-shop counters and these items are then either sold or remodelled by designers for the Remade label. The stores receive more than 2,500 tonnes worth of clothes each year and as such are significantly reducing the amount of waste going to landfills. The company uses the money to fund various projects, which, in the past, have included clearing mines in Angola and rehabilitating street children in Brazil. On average, TRAIID donates around £150,000 to projects each year.

What sets TRAIID apart from other organisations is a strong and ubiquitous attitude that stretches right from the sorting and designing at the warehouse to the people selling on the shop floor. However, despite proven success, the firm is planning to improve the system.

Under a recent restructure in its design department, TRAIID's head of design, Tracey Cliffe, will oversee the output of the designers as well as experimenting with new ideas. "She is also interested in giving fashion students a helping hand," says Kay.

TRAIID is already involved in the fashion industry through its collaboration with fashion heavyweights such as the London College of Fashion, Urban Outfitters and Topman, but they want to get more involved. "We're looking at changing the guidelines for funding charitable projects, so as to offer organisations a more open brief: show us what you have and what you need and we'll help," says Kay.

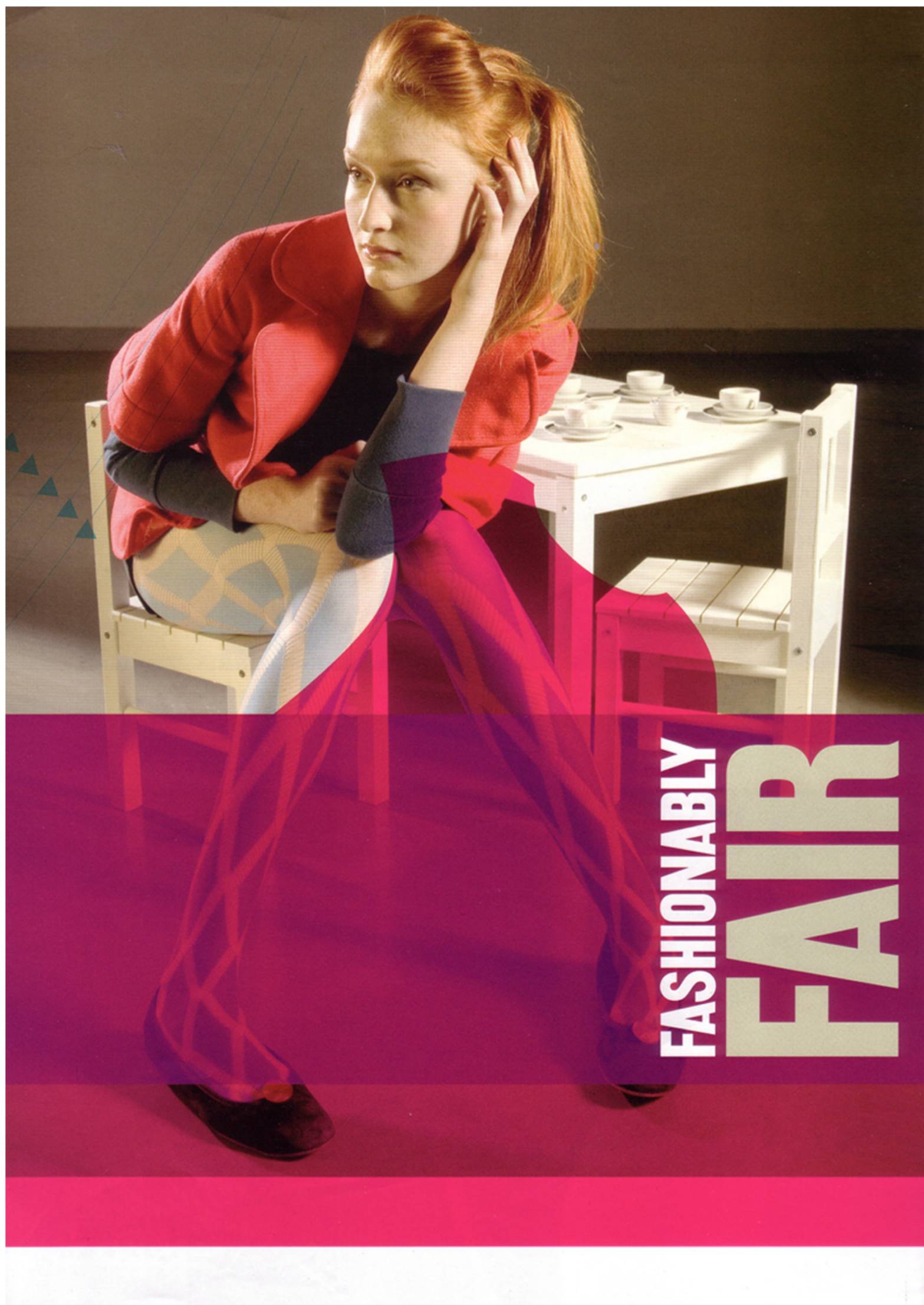
One thing is for sure: TRAIID already helps immensely. It is not just a worthy cause, but also offers every shopper the chance to have something unique that does not smell of old ladies. And rumour has it Stella McCartney shops there.

Second on the list is People Tree, which is another fashion brand en vogue with celebrities. Since it began, its garments have moved from a niche market to international fashion magazines. Flagship stores of Topshop and Timberland as well as 100 Oxfam stores nationwide also carry its merchandise.

People Tree's founder, Safia Minney, says there is more to come: "A flagship store in London, more and more fashion boutiques selling People Tree Fair Trade fashion," she explains. "People Tree will be working internationally with designers to do some really interesting and directional stuff over the next year."

Its clothes and accessories are produced in partnership with small-scale producers in some of the world's poorest communities. Its success is not purely measured by the £1 million UK annual turnover, but by the differences made to the 20 countries it works with. In five years, People Tree has doubled the amount of land growing organic cotton and has increased the number of people benefiting from Fair Trade by 5,000.

Minney says that the inspiration behind the company was the farmers themselves. "Talking to cotton farmers, garment workers and village-based artisans showed me a different way was possible and that this type of Fair Trade would make a big difference to their lives," Minney explains. "Our ethos was always to pioneer a change in the fashion industry and help marginalised people in the developing world to escape from poverty and to work for sustainability." ▽



**FASHIONABLY
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Next up is HUG, which started with a simple t-shirt proposition and evolved into a popular fashion brand. It has two strands: denim and jersey pieces for women and Little Green Radicals, a children's range. Not only does the organic pima cotton ensure garments feel much softer against the skin, but HUG is also committed to fair trade.

The generous fixed price for cotton paid to Peruvian peasant farmers improves their livelihoods while not using pesticides is beneficial to the health of the farmers and their families. HUG is one of the first companies to advocate both the use of organic cotton and fair trade.

"We're motivated by giving people a fair deal," says HUG's director Nick Pecorelli. "We wonder when there's so much coverage of the world's problems, why aren't more people doing something about it?"

The company's success, according to Pecorelli, is down to the quality of the design as much as the ethical standards they uphold. "It's important to make fair trade fashion and make fair trade fashionable," he explains. "If a product isn't desirable, we don't sell it. That way we avoid falling into the old perception of fair trade and set a standard for the fashion world to gradually move towards."

Fourth up is Cristina Cisilino's MADE. Cisilino took a common route through the world of fashion from London College of Fashion into companies like Harrods and Benetton. But after 23 years Cisilino renounced the industry to set up a scheme that would both utilise her skills and contacts as well as aid the poverty-stricken artisans in Africa.

"I fell in love with Africa," she says, "but the poverty is overwhelming. Now we feed [the Africans] with orders for jewellery, train them and give them tools. Then they have a way of improving their lives and those of their families."

Yet despite her urge to help, MADE is still a business for Cisilino and she makes this clear to her workers. "I invest in these people, but I tell them whatever I buy them eventually they can buy back. The aim is that they can own the company themselves one day," she says.

MADE's designs come from the UK's most prominent designers, including Sam Ubhi and Beatrix Ong, as well as celebrity contributors like Peaches Geldoff. The pieces are hand-made by producer groups in developing countries and use local materials that are familiar to the craftsmen.

Cisilino visits the workers regularly to deliver the new designs, which come flooding in from a multitude of celebrities each week. "We're keen to keep things fresh and to meet the demands of our concession in Oxford Street's Topshop," she says. "In the end, I have to feed the workers, so we're always looking for new ideas to work on."

Last, but by no means least is Bourgeois Boheme, which was set up by Alicia Lai and her husband Van as an Internet fashion company under the credo 'Fashion with Compassion'.

Inspired by the work of people like PETA's Ingrid Newkirk, the Lais wanted to contribute to the fight against animal cruelty and also help the environment and fellow vegans along the way.

"We really struggled finding nice things to wear as a vegan," Alicia explains, "so we wanted to set up a company that would supply ethical and fashionable shoes and accessories without harming animals or the environment in the process."

The couple have selected labels from around the world and created a website where customers place orders for everything from shoes and belts to bags and mini iPod pouches. All items are free from animal ingredients and the Lais are constantly on the lookout for organic and ethical additions for their online boutique. With the addition of hair and skincare products, Bourgeois Boheme would seem to be the rising stars of ethical fashion.

IF A PRODUCT

ISN'T DESIRABLE WE DON'T SELL IT

www.traid.org.uk
www.peopletree.co.uk
www.hug.co.uk
www.thenaturalstore.co.uk
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cutting line