Luxury fashion blends with outdoor performance wear in new cross-sector trend

By Olivier Guyot - March 3, 2020

From the peaks to the catwalks: last Thursday, Virgil Abloh signed off his Off-White show with Gigi Hadid wearing a lavish white bridal dress, juxtaposing a cascade of pleated, embroidered petticoats with a glacier blue Arc’teryx ski jacket. A few weeks before, Abloh heralded the end of streetwear without batting an eyelid. Was this look the official proclamation of his new-found love of outdoor apparel? Indeed, Abloh, the creative director of Louis Vuitton’s menswear, greeted the audience of the luxury label’s show at the Paris Fashion Week Men wearing an ultra-technical jacket by Canadian sportswear brand Arc’teryx.
More than a star creative director’s whim, this is confirmation of a major trend: the links between urban style and outdoor functionality are increasingly robust, and the business potential is whetting the fashion industry’s appetite. At the most recent ISPO sport apparel and equipment trade show in Munich, Armani featured a huge stand for its EA7 line, while insulation specialist Goretex set up a showroom at the latest Paris Fashion Week Men. Proof that the trend is appealing to both luxury ready-to-wear labels and sportswear brands.

Several powerful elements stand out within this varied mix. On the luxury side, high-end Alpine skiing brands like Bogner, Lacroix and Colmar have always brought a certain kind of chic to the pistes. But it was eventually via parkas and down jackets that outdoor apparel found its way into urban wear, and from there on to the catwalks. Moncler, under Remo Ruffini, has spearheaded the trend.
Ruffini took Moncler upmarket and was able to transform down jackets into fully fledged luxury items. In 2018, he launched the Moncler Genius project, giving down jackets an artistic dimension by asking renowned designers like Richard Quinn, Matthew M. Williams and Pierpaolo Piccioli to reinterpret Moncler products. Rick Owens outfitted some of his catwalk Valkyries in gigantic down jacket-like capes at his latest show, inspired by his recent collaboration with Moncler. Moncler skilfully drew media attention on sportswear, and awakened competition from luxury labels. At the London Fashion Week, MM6 by Martin Margiela unveiled a creative capsule collection featuring a new twist on fleeces and the Nuptse jacket by US outdoor apparel brand The North Face.

The North Face is relying on fashion as a key growth driver, as was made abundantly clear by the high-calibre presentation it staged at the opening of the Paris Fashion Week, last Monday and Tuesday. The North Face’s fashion breakthrough will inevitably be driven by the brand’s main asset, garment technology.
“When it rains, whether in London or Paris, urban consumers want their outfits to be as waterproof and breathable as outdoor apparel,” said Tim Hamilton, who has been in charge of all creative departments at The North Face for the last two years.

High-tech apparel at the heart of the trend

This led The North Face to present its high-end Black Series line under the nave of the Decorative Arts Museum in Paris. The first Black Series collection, designed by the team led by Pelagia Kolotouros, creative director of The North Face, is targeted to directional concept stores the world over, like Dover Street Market. The North Face has been a pioneer in connecting with urban consumers, attracting streetwear aficionados via a network of stores located in the world's major cities, and via its high-tech approach.

“All Black Series products are technical garments,” said Hamilton, adding that “we incorporate our new waterproof and breathable-fabric technology, Futurelight, in the majority of our clothes. It’s a precondition.”

The North Face’s outdoor appeal gives the brand an opportunity to win over new customers, male but especially female ones. In recent years, the quality, suppleness and feel of high-tech materials have greatly improved, allowing these fabrics to be used in a much more varied range of products, from ponchos to anoraks, from urban overcoats to skirts.
This style and creativity-driven approach has been adopted also by emerging names, like Italian ski brand Templa, designed by creative director Roberto Maniscalco. Templa utilises sustainable, high-tech materials and is big on layering and on items never used before in the world of Alpine apparel. A premium new brand, Templa caught the eye with its Fall/Winter 2019-20 collaboration with Raf Simons. In early January, Templa exhibited at the ISPO show in Munich, presenting its uber-directional, made-in-Italy Fall/Winter 2020-21 collection, and launching a second, more affordable but still fashion-driven line. Though not ubiquitously or disruptively so, fashion-inspired apparel was clearly a feature among the stands of Europe’s leading sport apparel and equipment trade show.

**Sport/lifestyle giants vie for leading role**

British heritage sailing apparel brand Musto presented a sophisticated, gentleman driver-style collaboration with Land Rover, and New Zealand merino-based brand Icebreaker unveiled a collaboration with US artist-photographer Justin Brice Guariglia. Whether minting new looks or tapping design archives, the leitmotif is always the same: style mustn’t be to the detriment of tech wear.

“We have several decades worth of products [in our archives] in Portland,” said Barry Smith, in charge of design at US outdoor apparel brand Columbia. “We’re going for a 2000s style. We are reinterpreting our signature items using present-day technologies and materials. Functionality is increasingly a must. And I believe we can establish ourselves in the lifestyle/high-tech segment,” he added. Columbia is working to make its apparel lines more suited to urban consumers, and has hired a new design team for its footwear range, in order to create models that are more in synch with the sneaker boom.

Yet, for many traditional outdoor apparel brands, especially European ones, the question is whether it isn’t already too late. It took some time for outdoor apparel brands to cotton on to the potential of the fashion-driven products that are currently booming, and meanwhile, players from other market segments are gaining ascendancy.
In the mid-range segment, international sport/lifestyle giants have led the way in tapping the interest for clothes inspired by mountain life and the great outdoors. Nike’s ACG collection tinkered with the design codes of mountain footwear, exploiting the brand’s sneakers savvy, and injected a lifestyle vibe into its fleeces and jackets. Adidas in particular spotted the burgeoning appetite of urban consumers and, with the Terrex line, managed to create items big on both performance and style.

At ISPO last year, Adidas Terrex showcased pared-down urban parkas whose tech features weren’t too distant from those of the chic, high-tech mountain apparel developed by Japanese brands Descente and Goldwin. In 2020, Terrex is going even further with the Futurecraft.loop jacket. This lightweight, snow-white item, akin to a kimono, is creatively and sustainably designed and produced, being made with recyclable materials.

**Eco-sustainable products gain traction**

Developing a sustainable product range is the other major trend. Outdoor and mountain apparel brands have used nature-inspired images for a long time. Yet many of them never really engaged with environmental and social responsibility issues, issues that now clearly rank among the prime preoccupations of consumers, urban ones in particular.

In recent years, several leading outdoor apparel players have been gaining traction away from their natural environment, and there are now enough ways for them to try to win over new consumer segments. A growing interest for the great outdoors seems to be linked to a strong yearning to reconnect with nature, mostly felt by urban dwellers in developed countries, who are genuinely searching for meaning in life, as they dream of nature, adventure and uncharted horizons. And some outdoor apparel brands already have a sizeable lead in this race.
A concrete example of this can be currently seen at Parisian concept store Merci, whose ‘Baroudeurs’ (Wanderers) section is devoted to trekking, climbing and camping chic, with Patagonia in the driving seat. In the last few seasons, the Californian brand founded by sustainable entrepreneurship guru Yvon Chouinard has firmly established itself within the planet’s most directional concept stores. In Patagonia’s wake, other outdoor apparel brands started to win over the ranks of dynamic young executives mimicking Silicon Valley’s digital giants’ head honchos, who have adopted fleeces and sleeveless down jackets are the new look of successful businesspersons. Last January’s ISPO show marked a radical change in mood. A few seasons ago, water-resistance and lightness were the name of the game, but now few premium brands can do without an environmentally friendly approach. According to a recent survey of central European consumers by consultancy firm Deloitte, half of interviewees were willing to pay a premium of between €8 and €20 for comparable products that are eco-sustainable.

Eco-sustainability lies at the heart of the success of French brand Picture Organic Clothing and of Canadian apparel brand TenTree, which promises to plant 10 trees for every item purchased. Outdoor specialists like these have gained entry into multibrand metropolitan fashion retailers.

**Urban labels join in the fray**

The increasing success of outdoor wear has fired up not just luxury labels, but also urban ones usually found in the denim section at multibrand stores, as well as fashion chains targeting younger consumers. At ISPO, Superdry presented its latest skiing and snowboarding collections, as did Fila and Ellesse. 1980s sportswear brands, which tapped the retro sports trend extensively in recent seasons to relaunch themselves, are now looking for new growth drivers.

“Ellesse is fully credible in skiing, which is part of the brand’s tradition,” said Antoine Tinel, who distributes Ellesse in France with The Lifestyle Company. “There is room for us to win market share in cities of course, and also at multibrand retailers in mountain resorts, which will be able to offer a recognised brand and high-tech products to their customers,” he added. Ellesse is joining the fray in the mid-market segment, and will be able to hold its own against mid-level skiing apparel brands, little known away from mountain resorts.
The solidity of the connection between luxury labels and performance wear still needs to be tested, but product democratisation and high-tech materials can clearly open new horizons for luxury labels and ready-to-wear brands alike. The question is whether outdoor brands, expert in tech fabrics and well aware of the expectations of urban sport practitioners who love the great outdoors, will also be able to benefit from this market trend. Brands that have been expanding for years within a sector at once dynamic and conservative, will surely have to take risks to fight a new kind of competition. However, thanks to an influx of contemporary design and environmental sustainability, this market, which is worth nearly €6 billion in Europe, is likely to be able to tap a major source of growth.

In the end, the stunning look seen at Off-White’s latest catwalk show, blending ski and bridal wear, encapsulates aptly the outdoor apparel sector’s current predicament: codes are changing, shifting cheerfully from high-tech to fashion, producing a surprisingly creative, energising cocktail.

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Translated by Nicola Mira