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China and Russia lead global fightback for a return of fur to fashion

Suzy Jagger, New York | January 05, 2008

AT the Copenhagen fur auction two weeks ago, Danish was hardly spoken.

Although the auctions are conducted in English, Mandarin and Russian are the dominant languages among the 300 or so fur traders, brokers and manufacturers bidding for mink pelts, sable and chinchilla.

Surging demand from China and Russia has pushed the mink price to record levels over the past two years.

Most sought-after are American and Scandinavian pelts, perceived to be the best in the world.

According to statistics compiled by the US Department of Agriculture, the US mink price has more than doubled since the late 90s and the average cost of an American pelt has risen by 27 per cent over the past three years.

In Copenhagen, brown male minks fetched as much as \$US60 (\$68) each, a shade off the record \$US60.90 set last year.

Mink is back in vogue after high-profile campaigns against wearing fur in the early 90s, when sales stagnated.

But in the past decade the industry fought back.

Connecticut Furs co-owner Harry Sitalides said clothes designers had tried to use fur differently, compared with the traditional mink coats.

"Fashion has changed," he said.

"We now see fur as any other fabric. It's just another piece of cloth. We use fur for trimmings, but also weave it with other materials and dye it. The average age of a woman who now buys a fur coat has fallen dramatically. Twenty years ago my main customers would have been the older woman."

Mr Sitalides explained that demand for fur had been buoyed by Chinese manufacturers, who buy American pelts to stitch themselves and sell back to the US.

Fur trade groups claim the stigma associated with wearing fur no longer exists and some furriers claim the apparent success of the fur sales is because fur is a green commodity.

"Fur is the grand-daddy of green," Keith Kaplan, of the Fur Information Council of America, said.

"It comes from a renewable, sustainable resource. There is very little pollution involved in the production of it and it is biodegradable."

Retail analysts are less optimistic about the short and medium-term outlook for such luxury items.

The slowing of the US economy and the fallout from the northern summer's credit crisis are expected to bring a fall in sales of aspirational, luxury items such as a mink coat.

Partner at retail consultancy Alix Partners Fred Crawford said he expected the luxury end of the high street to slow in 2008.

"When a slowdown hits, aspirational shoppers trade down," Mr Crawford said.

Equally bearish and sceptical about the long-term success of the US's fur industry is a spokesman for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Matt Rice, who said there were a number of designers who had already publicly boycotted the use of fur in their designs. They included Calvin Klein, Polo Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger.

"There is an even greater stigma to wearing fur now," Mr Rice said.

"There are no federal laws in the US protecting animals who are used in the fur trade. Animals such as minks sometimes face an excruciating death: they are electrocuted internally to leave their pelts intact."

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