

“Leather industry must unite”

Exclusive interview with Tina Fricke, former Head of Design at Hugo Boss and Founder / Creative Director of German leather fashion label Studio Ayasse. By Isabella Griffiths.

ILM: You specialise in leather garments – why did you decide on leather?

Tina Fricke: Leather is a wonderful, natural material and there are almost no limits to what you can do with it. I love the haptic, the smell and all the final products made from leather. As a designer, I am forever inspired by it – for me, leather is the ultimate material to bring my ideas to life.

ILM: Where do you source your leather?

TF: I prefer to work with suppliers directly, as this allows me to specifically develop the type of leathers that I need. For my winter collections I use predominantly lamb or merino/merillino skins – the lightweight and the softness are the most important considerations in my selection. In terms of lambskins, I exclusively source raw materials from Italy and Spain, and our stretch leather comes from France.

ILM: Where do you produce your collections?

TF: My reversible lambskin collection is made in a small European family-run business, while my stretch leather capsule is made in a small German company nearby, which allows me to work closely with them and ensures complete transparency in the production cycle, as well as ultimately giving me flexibility when it comes to individual customer requests and bespoke orders.

ILM: Your brand prides itself on its sustainability approach. Why is this important to you?

TF: Indeed, sustainability is very important to me, although, of course, it is a very broad topic and encompasses so many different aspects. I try to keep my supply and production chain as transparent as possible. Starting from the sourcing of raw materials through the tanning process to the production sites, we can give our customers a detailed outline of how the garments are made. It is my ambition to raise our own ecological standards all the time, which is why I work so closely with our suppliers and producers. Sustainability for me means that you always strive to do better.

ILM: Have you noticed a change in consumer attitudes towards leather in fashion?

TF: Leather is still an attractive proposition. But it's undeniable that consumers increasingly question the sourcing and production methods of brands. The growing vegan trend is definitely changing the perception of leather and having an impact generally. Leather is now often associated with negative images of mass farming and environmental pollution, and our customers are increasingly seeking discussion about those topics. But I welcome this. Discussion and discourse help us to educate our customers accordingly.

ILM: Do you find the consumer press is escalating the debate with increasingly hostile reporting against leather?

TF: I have certainly noticed very negative, one-sided and superficial reporting, especially by the fashion press. This just



serves to unnerve consumers when it comes to their buying choices. There is no balance in the reporting. Of course there will always be leather producers who do not adhere to strict environmental standards, perhaps more so in Asia, where regulations are not as strict as in Europe, but these are exceptions. The vast majority of operators stick to those standards. Tanned properly and sustainably, a leather product can even decompose at the end of its life cycle. In contrast, ‘artificial leather’ made from plastic is problematic both in terms of production and waste disposal. It's the same with the so-called vegan leather; if the fashion press is to be believed, there are no environmental concerns in this regard and they provide a genuinely better alternative to leather – only of course, this is not true, as they, too, have to be preserved with masses of chemicals. You have to look at it in a balanced way; of course not all leathers have a clean environmental bill if they are tanned under poor conditions, but sustainably tanned leathers are, and therefore they will always remain superior to the alternatives.

ILM: What can the leather sector do to change perceptions in the fashion industry?

TF: I wish the leather sector as a whole would seek dialogue with the fashion press more, educate them and contribute to more balanced and favourable reporting. That said, there is no need to be so defensive; we do not need to list every single fact and technical specification of leather production. The dialogue needs to be on an even keel and engaging. We need to appeal particularly to those consumers who may feel a little rattled by the negative reporting and reassure and inspire them.

Personally, my perception is that the leather industry is very passive. There are definitely opportunities to be more pro-active and to take on the criticism in a more open, transparent and constructive way. We must not fear questioning from interested consumers, instead, we must be open to discourse. And we need to unite as one industry – at the moment there are a lot of lone fighters. ■

About Tina Fricke



Tina Fricke studied fashion design and was head of design at Hugo Boss for 12 years before launching her own label, Studio Ayasse, in 2014. The brand specialises in leather garments for the discerning 40-plus customer, with a focus on natural and sustainably sourced and tanned hides, including lambskins or merino/merillino skins, which are selected for their light weight and the softness, which are most suitable for fashion garments.