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Can shopping be a *FORCE FOR GOOD*? It can if you *buy ethical fashion*, says Simone Cipriani, head of a UN-backed INITIATIVE that's *making a difference*.

WORDS: CLARE PRESS

I am not a fashionable man," says Simone Cipriani, a 49-year-old Tuscan powerhouse with a bushy beard and a penchant for beautiful suits. "But I appreciate fashion. What can I say? I'm Italian! When I was young I saw fashion and beauty all around me, and these ideas were always linked to humanity. A luxury item, like a piece of art, meant something made by human hands."

Cipriani, who studied political science, international economics and development management, began his career in the Italian leather goods and shoemaking game before he set out to improve working conditions in the developing world. In 2004, he moved to Ethiopia, working with the United Nations (UN) to find markets for local micro-producers. An early project, Taytu (dubbed Africa's first luxury leather brand), was handcrafted in Addis Ababa and stocked in Barneys and Fred Segal. "I believe that understanding how something is made adds to its beauty," says Cipriani. "For me, beauty is always linked to responsibility." Responsible fashion? Now there's a phrase you don't hear every day. Or didn't.

"That's changing," says Cipriani. "Fashion has a heart, and power, too. Fashion has huge potential to bring about change in society because the supply chain involves so many people – [across] textiles and garment-making, in printing, embroidery, beading – and mostly in poorer countries. Yes, the superficial side of the industry exists, but I see the same irresponsible behaviour towards people and the environment in other industries too; it's everywhere!"

Six years ago Cipriani persuaded the UN to trial his Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI) idea, with a view to matching up some of the poorest artisans in the world with serious fashion labels in the West. From the get-go, they focused on women, because, as Cipriani puts it, "women are the backbone of society, and we wanted to recognise their importance both in earning



Sass & Bide's Sarah-Jane Clarke (right) and Heidi Middleton with Simone Cipriani.

TAHIR KARIMALI/GETTY IMAGES

and in holding families together. The initiative now operates in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali in Africa, and in Haiti in the Caribbean, connecting previously marginalised workers with [companies such as] Vivienne Westwood, Stella McCartney, Marni and AltaRoma [which runs Rome fashion week]."

Westwood was one of the first designers to get involved, launching an entire Ethical Fashion Africa Collection, now in its third season. Her tote bags and rucksacks, handmade in Kenyan capital Nairobi using recycled canvas and leather offcuts, are sold through Asos.

Says Cipriani: "Development aid is one aspect [of the UN's work], but the idea of intervening in Africa *only* in the formalised economy doesn't make sense to me, because the reality is, the majority of workers are not part of the regulated economy. They work at home, either on their own or in small groups." The hardware on Westwood's bags, for example, is created from melted-down scrap metal from Nairobi's Kibera slums, while Sass & Bide's Made in Africa clutch bags are hand-embroidered by tribal women in that same "city within a city", giving, as Cipriani says, "these artisans a proper reward for their work".

"The EFI is about building fair trade, giving workers opportunities, skills and safe working conditions and giving brands well-made unique products. And it is about the environment, too. The textiles industry is a highly polluting one. How can we reduce this impact? How can we redress the destruction of natural habitats? Where this is not possible, we need to compensate. We need to plant trees. We need to look at offsetting our carbon footprint, and we need to do more."

Changing the world is a daunting prospect, and Cipriani admits to waking up at 5am worrying about it all. What keeps him going? "The real change I see in communities. Of course, this is big stuff, and we are only talking about relatively small numbers of producers at this point, perhaps 7,000 people in total. But you can't look at it as one giant mountain to climb, you have to think in terms of lots of small goals. That way you can achieve real results. We have the statistics to prove it: when working conditions improve and



Vivienne Westwood at the GoDown Arts Centre in Nairobi, Kenya.

"FOR ME, BEAUTY IS ALWAYS LINKED TO RESPONSIBILITY... FASHION HAS A HEART"



A woman in Nairobi working on Stella McCartney's line.

stabilise, the most common diseases decrease and housing conditions improve. Ethical fashion is about changing mind-sets, and every day we are making progress."

In the noisy world of high fashion, the message *is* cutting through. Last year Nigerian-born, London-based designer Duro Olowu travelled to Burkina Faso to visit local weavers and dyers, and used their textiles in his spring/summer '14 collection. In New York, everybody's talking about Maiyet, which launched in 2011. The label appeals to switched-on fashion fans who want both their apparel and accessories with a conscience, produced by "the next generation of master craftsmen" in places such as Mongolia, India and Peru. Closer to home, Kiwi designer Karen Walker is the latest to collaborate with the EFI. Her new Visible eyewear campaign features not professional models, but Kenyan artisans as stars.

Young designers are searching for sustainable approaches. Storied houses, many of which have a long history of *fait à la main* practices, are explaining more

clearly how their goods are crafted, hence why we should value them. At the Green Carpet Challenge, founder and creative director Livia Firth is working with brands such as Chopard and Gucci to shake up the way the luxury world views sustainable style.

Even fast-fashion giants are rethinking. Asos, for example, produces its own collection in collaboration with communities in Kenya. In 2012, after pressure from Greenpeace, Zara announced it would eliminate hazardous chemicals from its supply chain by 2020, while H&M is pushing the use of organic cotton and recycled polyester. After the Savar tragedy last year, in which more than 1,100 people died when factory buildings collapsed, H&M, Primark and Zara's owners Inditex signed a contract with the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety.

There's a long way to go, but, says Cipriani: "In the past five years I have seen a marked change in attitudes." He points to PPR (parent company of Gucci, Balenciaga and Alexander McQueen, among others) changing its name to Kering, a Breton word for "home", which is pronounced like the English word "caring". Announcing the change last year, chairman François-Henri Pinault said it reflects the company's commitment to "taking care of our brands, people, stakeholders and the environment". Says Cipriani: "You might say: 'Oh it's just a name!' But words are important. The language that we use shows what direction we are headed."

So, what can we do to help? "Consumers are the most important driving factor in all this," says Cipriani. "Every time you shop, ask for the story behind what you buy. Online is a great way to ask these questions. Social media can put the right kind of pressure on the fashion industry. Big change comes from small steps.

"I was in Nairobi last week meeting with 200 people involved in our programs. I asked: 'Are you proud of what you have done?' People jumped up screaming! They were so pleased with how far they'd come. To have pride in your work is to live a dignified life."

Simone Cipriani is one of the speakers at the Virgin Australia Melbourne Fashion Festival's Business Seminar on March 20. Go to www.vamff.com.au.