

FASHION

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CLOTHES/OSLO

Northern exposure

Oslo's once-muted fashion houses are stepping out of their comfort zones to put Norwegian labels on the world stage.

By Chiara Rimella
Photography Thomas Ekström

"When I get here each morning I feel such satisfaction," says fashion agency owner-cum-designer Andreas Holzweiler. Oslo's fjord glistens in the sun as he points to the lush mountains and gleaming downtown skyscrapers that are just visible from his office on the city's fringe.

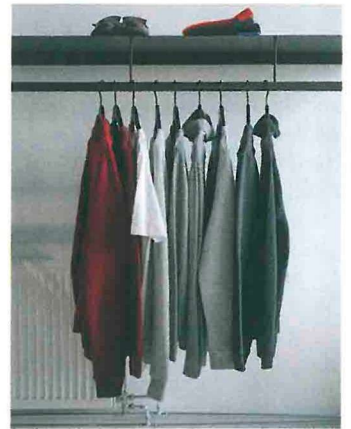
His eponymous fashion agency has been based on the waterfront since 2009 and, on crisp days like these, his contentment is easily explained. Yet until several years ago few would have agreed that this idyllic setting was the place from which

to run a far-reaching fashion label. "The Norwegian fashion scene used to be like a theatre," says Holzweiler. "There simply wasn't room to be commercial." In a nation where the discovery of oil in 1969 swiftly eliminated economic woes, fashion didn't feel like a necessary export: it was something of an extravagant pursuit.

In the past decade, as Norway started questioning its dependence on fossil fuels, creative fields such as music and design found their stride. But the fashion industry lagged, held back by the inferiority complex that had long-defined the country's relationship with Sweden and Denmark. As they churned out high-street heavyweights and claimed the Scandinavian aesthetic, Norway took a back seat. In the past five years, however, a new generation of Oslo-based designers have boldly stepped forward.

For Holzweiler this change owes a lot to the fashion agencies (his own but also the big-hitting Blender) that began bringing international labels into the city's retailers. "Suddenly we had cooler shops than in Sweden or Denmark," he says. Exposed to high-end fashion and invigorated by the prospect of being displayed in excellent local shops, young Norwegians started launching their own brands.

Holzweiler also took the plunge: what began in 2012 as a line of bright woollen scarves evolved into an equally colourful men's and women's line that today hangs across the agency floor. The latest collection may draw from the most Norwegian of references – national icon Edvard Munch's paintings – but the (surprisingly cheerful) orange-tinged pieces will appear in shops from Germany to Japan.



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- (1) Rail at Holzweiler
- (2) Fine tuning at Avenue
- (3) Pacing the loft at Tom Wood
- (4) Meet the Holzweilers (l-r): Andreas, his wife Maria and sister Susanne all work together



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(1) Tom Wood's Morten Isachsen and Mona Jensen
(2) Veronica B Vallenes's colourful designs (3) Team at influential Blender Agency (4) Elisabeth Stray Pedersen's lambswool pocketscarf (5) Customer in her favourite Avenue outfit (6) Shopfloor at F5 (7) Elisabeth Stray Pedersen in one of her coats (8) On the shelves at F5 (9) New denim line by Tom Wood (10) Good fit at Holzweiler

Back in central Oslo, at the top of a stately building on prim Nedre Slottsgate, Morten Isachsen and Mona Jensen's fashion label Tom Wood has an even wider reach. Their bold jewellery and recently launched functional men's and women's clothing have entered markets from Hong Kong to Australia and made it into celebrated retailers, including Dover Street Market, Isetan and Colette. Since starting out with a line of signet rings in 2013, the husband-wife duo's ambition has always been to sell around the world. "I have travelled a lot so my focus has always been looking out," says creative director Jensen.

This ambitious outlook is, in some ways, at odds with the traditional Norwegian mentality. "There's a Norwegian concept called *janteloven*: the idea you shouldn't believe you're better than anybody else," says Jensen. This means Norwegians often resist loud clothes to avoid standing out from the crowd. If designers want to appeal to their home market they must embrace understated outfits – yet breaking the international scene often requires a more colourful look. For Tom Wood it's about finding a balance: minimalist basics with a geometric edge.

Janteloven and the humble thinking it encourages may be one of the reasons why other brands have not managed to sell their clothes beyond Norway's borders; the mindset can hold back a brand's appetite for expansion. Settling for the domestic market isn't a disastrous move anyway: the population, however small, has huge spending power. "It's very Norwegian to be satisfied with our internal comfort zone," says Jensen. "We are a rich nation; we're not used to struggle."

Yet operating a fashion business in such a wealthy country comes with its hurdles. It is costly so brands must be resourceful: bureaucracy and fees can swallow up margins, and high wages mean bigger teams are expensive to run. "Before Tom Wood I worked at an advertising agency, in brand management and as an editor; Mona worked in consulting and in a creative



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Where to shop

YME
Smart casualwear.
ymeuniverse.com

The Juice
Blender's sports shop.
thejuice.no

Ensemble
Women's essentials.
ensemble.as

Shoc Lifestyle
Top-range eyewear.
shoclifestyle.no

Hunting Lodge
Men's outdoor fashion.
huntinglodge.no

Dapper
High-quality basics.
dapper.no



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“The brands that have succeeded are the ones that played it safe design-wise. Once they’ve become a familiar name, they can be more daring”



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agency,” says managing director Isachsen. “We could pretty much do everything ourselves.” Even today, when the label estimates a €4.5m annual turnover, the team comprises just 10 people. And Isachsen is developing a system that streamlines logistics to save time and money on everything from customs to accounting for all the labels he helps as a member of the state-backed Norwegian Fashion Hub.

A moneyed government may now be happy to inject cash into businesses but some of the capital’s successful brands started out by themselves. Brothers Emil, Benjamin and Alex Krystad Marthinsen founded fashion shop F5 without external support: what’s now a two-storey retailer on up-and-coming Prinsens Gate began life as a collective. In its original location (a stone’s throw away on Slottsgate) the trio rented out the shop’s basement to five Norwegian designers, selling their wares upstairs. “We called it F5 to mean Factory Five, because the designers also carried out small-scale production there,” says Alex.

The co-working space eventually disappeared and the siblings launched two brands of their own (Graa and Arct) before merging them into one unisex label that bears the same name as their shop. Their commercial nous was acquired working on other people’s shop floors before their own. “Running our own business would have been much, much harder without this background,” says Alex.

The experience gave the brothers a clear idea of what Norwegian customers want: wearability. “The brands that have succeeded are the ones that played it safe [design-wise],” says Alex. “Once they’ve become a familiar name they can be more daring.” Judging by the bright leather jackets hanging on F5’s prototype rack, the brothers evidently feel the time has come to loosen up their signature sporty style, all navy bomber jackets and lightweight polo shirts. While a distinctive Norwegian aesthetic may still be in the



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making, one thing that unites all brands is a focus on materials. “Fabrics have to be technical if they are worn in the icy north,” says Alex.

When it comes to manufacturing, Norwegian designers still have to rely on factories well south of Oslo, from the Baltic states to Porto. As the nation’s oil wealth buried the need for a manufacturing industry, many factories producing wool and shoes closed. “Made in Norway” is off the cards for most brands but not for Elisabeth Stray Pedersen: the young designer took over heritage brand Lillunn two years ago and, with it, the firm’s factory. She now uses it to manufacture clothes for her own brand: ESP. And while collections have so far been limited to wool, the upcoming season sees her experimenting with textiles such as silk.

Many of her competitors would squirm at the prospect of pricing themselves out of the international market but Pedersen has found customers for her blanket-like coats from New York to the Netherlands. “I saw potential in Norway that was not being fulfilled due to not working with local production,” she says. “The problem is we are comfortable: it’s so easy not to start something. You have to have drive.” With a network of hungry designers that understand how important it is to support each other, Norwegian fashion is poised for a shake-up. — (M)



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Three more designers

1. **Avenue** Gustaf Gyllenhammar and Ingvild Abrahamsen met through Oslo’s music scene: the white T-shirt they launched their label with in 2014 was a rebuke to the poor-quality band T-shirts they bought at gigs. They now experiment with unisex designs. avenuewebsite.com
2. **Cathrine Hammel** This womenswear label was founded in 1998. Knitwear is the focus but there are also tulle tops, chiffon dresses and bold trapeze skirts. cathrinehammel.no
3. **Veronica B Vallenes** The designer made her name in Copenhagen, where she launched her label in 2009. Now in Oslo, her bright designs cross Scandi minimalism with Parisian sophistication. veronicabvallenes.com