

STYLE

REYKJAVIK CHIC

You might be hard-pressed to name
even one brand in Icelandic fashion,
but that's changing.

TEXT

GEMMA PRICE

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MAGNEA

The designs for this year's Reykjavik Fashion Festival comprised a mix of knits, lustrous fabrics and midi-length dresses.

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ow in its ninth year, the Reykjavik Fashion Festival (RFF) is channelling Iceland's creative ambitions and providing a platform for fledgling designers to launch Icelandic fashion on the world stage. Iceland's chilly climate and dramatic landscapes heavily informed designs shown by the six brands participating in RFF (*rff.is*) in March.

Technical outerwear brand Cintamani's (*www.cintamani.is*) autumn/winter 2017/18 collection, Iceland From Below, combined head designer Aolalheior Birgisdottir's experience in making snowboarding gear for women and the colours of deep glacial interiors and geothermal rock formations. Magnea's (*www.magneaeinarsdottir.com*) collection by designer Magnea Einarsdottir featured fuchsia and moss-green silk satin styles with knitted wool details, teamed with woollen coats.

Channelling Norse mythological shaman and seductress figure Volva, Myrka (*myrkaiceland.com*) designer Harpa Einarsdottir used a mixture of leather, wool and fur, adding obsidian black silk cashmere as a nod to Iceland's inky black beaches, and metallic embellishments to evoke the country's lava fields and glaciers.

"The impact of nature on the design is prominent – it's easy to imagine wind and gushing water against moss and stone – and our print this season is inspired by the old Icelandic ghost story, *The Deacon from Dark River*," explains Harpa, shortly after the show.



“OUR PRINT IS
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HARPA EINARSDOTTIR



CINTAMANI AND MAGNEA

Cintamani's emphasis is on producing high-quality outerwear (above left), while Magnea is known for its use of wool throughout its collections.

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MYRKA

Workmanship and attention to detail are key elements in the autumn/winter 2017 collection.

But while these heavy materials and muted, earthy colours are part of Icelandic fashion’s DNA and work well here, it’s hard to imagine customers in warmer climates wearing this clothing. Iceland’s up-and-coming designers – all of whom have said they are looking to target the UK, wider Europe and US markets – will have to make choices around whether to stay faithful to their Icelandic aesthetic and traditional materials, or design more for international buyers.

On the plus side, start-up agility is something they have in spades. Many of Iceland’s newly emerging brands were founded in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008, when, relative to the size of its economy, Iceland’s systemic banking collapse was the largest experienced by any country in economic history. Faced with a lack of opportunities, Iceland’s creatives decided to forge their own path, aided by a devalued – and therefore more competitive – currency. “It’s a known factor in world history that an economic crisis works as fuel for the creative world. It pushes people to think in new ways, making use of what is already accessible. This is exactly what happened in Iceland, post-crisis,” says Kolfinna Von Arnardottir, the new CEO of RFF.

But as Iceland’s post-crises economy continues to grow, the uptick in the value of the Icelandic krona, coupled with the fact that everything has to be imported, is making it tougher for designers to manufacture and sell in sustainable quantities in Iceland.

“I recently showcased the AW17 collection at Woman in Paris. We are planning to return for SS18 and keep on with this development. Belonging to such a small market it only makes sense to expand to bigger ones,” says Magnea.

RFF 2017 was the first time Harpa had made and shown a Myrka collection, but her sights are already firmly set on international buyers, specifically those for larger retailers such as Collette in Paris, Liberties in New York and DK Company in Denmark. “The brand image of these leading multi-brand stores is very strong in the fashion industry and other buyers around the world follow the buying strategies of these stores,” she says.

Harpa says she plans to leverage e-commerce and analytic-driven approaches like SEO and paid search, in addition to capitalising on user-generated content on social channels, to grow Myrka into a full lifestyle brand offering accessories, footwear and furniture within five years. For now, she has fewer than 800 followers on Instagram, and it seems that most of the Icelandic designers that showed during RFF aren’t fully leveraging the power of social media. Anita Hirlekar – named one to watch among international designers by *Elle DK* and *Vogue Italia* – has 1,143 followers. Magnea has fewer than 2000; Another Creation, slightly more. Cintamani is more social savvy, with almost 12,500 followers.

By contrast, Inklaw (www.inklawclothing.com) is entirely a product of social media.

School friends Guojon Geir Geirsson and Robert Omar Elmarsson, both 23, founded the brand in 2013 as the stores in their hometown Hafnarfjörður didn’t offer the style of hip hop-influenced streetwear they were seeing in American shows and wanted to wear. Geirsson studied sewing videos on YouTube, making patterns from old clothes and adapting them into t-shirts, leather tank tops

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and hoodies. Elmarsson posted ideas on Facebook and Instagram to gauge interest from their friends, but soon started receiving enquiries from would-be customers in Australia and the US.

Since social media magnate Oliver Lockett invested, Inklaw – which now includes Elmarsson’s uncle Anton Sigfusson as CEO and manufacturing staffer Christopher Cannon – has amassed 60,000 followers on Instagram and counts Justin Bieber, Coco Rocha and European football players among its fans.

Inklaw has produced capsule collections of made-to-order minimalistic, functional and hip hop-influenced designs, focusing on hoodies and tanks. It created and launched its biggest collection to date for the RFF runway, The Statement, featuring more than 30 looks by Bjork’s stylist Edda Gudmun and worn by models, social media influencers such as Swopes and British celebrity Lady Victoria Hervey, who Snapchatted as they walked the runway.

For now, Geirsson and Cannon sew 90 per cent of their pieces themselves, making 2,000 pieces from their 20sqm workshop in downtown Reykjavik last year, but acknowledge that they’ll have to move manufacture to factories in other countries to fulfill their ambitions for the brand. “We want to keep the feeling of exclusivity and to establish Inklaw as a household streetwear brand. We’ll divide the collection, offering designs produced on a large scale and limited pieces made to order,” says Sigfusson.

If designers can successfully scale up, Iceland’s fashion scene has some solid USPs on which to trade. Designers are focusing on timeless investment pieces over transient fast fashion, emphasising natural fabrics and skills of local artisans. Most produce their own textiles, a tradition that Arnardottir says can be traced back to the Vikings.

And under her guidance, RFF aims to not only promote the Icelandic fashion scene, but shape it into something more globally relevant – a key criterion for brands applying to show

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ANTON SIGFUSSON



this year included a focus on sustainability. “My biggest dream for RFF is that it becomes the leading fashion festival of sustainable causes,” says Kolfinna. “We have a loud voice in the Icelandic fashion industry, so when we decide to be conscious thinkers and encourage sustainability, it is a big statement and affects the development (of the fashion industry here) in a positive way.”

As Iceland’s crop of designers continue to figure things out, most see the fact that they are the vanguard for Icelandic fashion as a positive.

“We have an unwritten storyboard in front of us that we can do anything with and it is packed with opportunities,” says Arnardottir. “Our greatest obstacle is being from a small country, but at the same time it can be our biggest advantage. We help and support each other. Each voice of the Icelandic designers is strong and equally as important.”

INKLAW

The brand’s clothing is minimalist and simple while still obviously hip hop-inspired.

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INKLAW
The palette of the autumn/winter 2017 collection is mostly black and dark tones, contrasted by white and bright orange.