

VÉRONIQUE POUILLARD
CREATION, STYLE AND COUNTER-CULTURE
Fashion in the 1970s

The Belgian fashion sector was undergoing rapid transition during the 1970s. Parisian *haute couture*, which up until then had served as a model for Belgian fashion, and which Belgian fashion had consequently sought to imitate more or less accurately, was in rapid decline. This decline, already evident in the 1950s, but which had gathered pace since the 1960s, overwhelmed a number of Belgian fashion companies who chose, or were forced, to abandon their activities, especially at the top end of the range. Similar changes were also taking place in the distribution sector, with the development of large stores, with “corners” given over to particular brands, and with the emergence of stores linked to the pop, rock and retro cultures.

Consumers, both male and female, were perceived as younger than in the previous decade, and appear to have been seduced both by the new merchandise but also by the active alternatives to it : home-made clothes, second-hand clothes, the rejection of fashion. The (counter-)cultural movements encouraged this process, but also assisted in the emergence of fashion from the streets, thereby overturning the classic model of emulation developed by Thorstein Veblen based around the notion of ostentatious consumption. Nevertheless, these street fashions were integrated into the fashion process, albeit in the reverse direction, by being seized upon by marketing departments with an increasing efficiency, notably as a consequence of the activities of a new category of professionals, the stylists.

The improbable success of the Belgian fashion sector was helped by the fact that it was not held back by the weight of national traditions. Consequently, the 1970s can be characterised as a decade of creative transition, based on the energy of a generation of young creators. Unlike their elders, who for the most part had chosen to devote all or a part of their work to the reproduction of Parisian fashions in Belgium (Hirsch and Company, Wittamer-De Camps, Natan) or had been successfully absorbed by the Parisian industry (Jules-François Crahy), these new creators approached their work with a novel perspective and often forged close links with the artistic world. Thus, even though their success would eventually proved highly variable from case to case, they were distinguished by their independence of mind, which consequently made the 1970s a decade of creative experimentation.