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6 October 2015 By Kam Dhillon  
Modalisboa Spring/Summer 2016

NJAL reports from the front line of Portugal's eminent fashion event, Modalisboa, which is one of Europe's longest standing fashion weeks. The country is also one of Europe's fastest growing emerging markets, and 'Made in Portugal' is swiftly on the rise, with a leather manufacturing heritage on par to that of France and Italy. NJAL spotlights the best of its Portuguese creative class, and investigates how and why Portugal is gaining such momentum in the fashion industry, and what it means for emerging Portuguese fashion talent.

"Portugal has its own aesthetic identity when it comes to visually communicating contemporary fashion," says Carla Matos, the only Portuguese jewellery designer to sell pieces in major museums and international institutions such as MoMA in New York, and the Museum of Modern Art Chicago. "There's a lot of diversity. Modalisboa showcases that, and there are visible material trends this season, like Cork—it's no longer tacky to use," observes Joanna Barrios, one of Lisbon's cultural icons who is best known for her fashion blog Trashédia, as well as a slew of nightlife and acting projects.



Welcome to Lisbon, where the city has just closed its Spring/Summer 2016 fashion week. Modalisboa is an institution amongst European fashion



Designer  
wellington  
[Ann Li](#)  
With a focus on textile design and manipulation, Li's work is intricate yet minimal. Her approach to design is highly influenced by her travels and experiences.



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Designer new delhi  
[Lacquer Embassy](#)  
Lacquer Embassy was born out of Nikhil Sharma's desire to realise the aesthetics he cultivated throughout his travels, life experiences and his own experiments in style.

weeks, harking all the way back to 1991. Across its three days, NJAL enjoyed an intimate view of the country's biggest design stars, and its Sangue Novo (that means new blood) of emerging talent flying the flag for the country's modern manifesto for fashion reinvention.

Yes, Portugal is still suffering the hangover of a world economic crisis, and while fashion might seem a frivolous and decadent affair for a country languishing in austerity, but it's an industry that's quickly becoming an economic crutch for the country. Portugal's textile and clothing industry provides around 11% of the economy's GVA (Gross Value Added), it employs around 19% of the country's manufacturing industry, and accounts for 10% of Portugal's total exports.

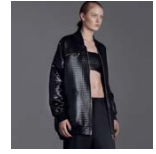
Yet, fashion isn't just essential business for Portugal, it's also a tool to reposition Lisbon on both the fashion and cultural axis of Europe.

ModaLisboa's mission statement this season, was to quite literally "change the city's image and to add value" to the fashion world.

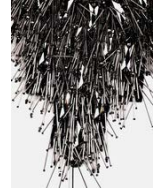
It's a lofty mission, but with so much of the official schedule dedicated to showcasing the country's younger cadre of fashion pioneers, it was a sartorially successful approach to demonstrating progression in Portuguese fashion. ModaLisboa doesn't charge its design talent to showcase, and that's a rare feat amongst the beastly businesses that fashion weeks have become. Long gone are the days of fashion weeks as key-industry events for designers to communicate their collection's narrative vision. Today, the business of fashion week is a tangled maze of oddly matched sponsorship deals, with perhaps less and less industry relevance. While some of ModaLisboa is open to the public, its strategy to maintain key domestic and industry traction has been through an unrelenting pursuit of newness. By simply extending it to designers based on quality and not an ability to buy their way in, with affluence and influence is admirable today.



Particular highlights of the three-day schedule were NJAL's own [Olga Norohna](#), a jewellery designer whose sensory-stimulating presentation was probably the most Instagrammed event of Lisboa fashion week. Joanna Barrios tells us that's another thing morphing Portugal's fashion footprint; "Portuguese brands still have a lot to learn, especially when it comes to using social media." While Lisbon's front-line of fashion are as flamboyant as any other fashion week city, with abstract headpieces and conceptual, street-style ready uniforms dotting front rows and peacocking outside venues. There was also much less of a "hashtagged" frenzy at ModaLisboa, and while the younger crowd were as hyper-connected as any of their global mellienue counterparts, most people actually watched the shows directly through their globular organs and not an illuminated interface. NJAL's Online Editor Kam Dhillon was also invited to join ModaLisboa's Fast Talks—an informal space for key industry players to reflect and debate thematic issues in fashion with a curious audience. NJAL talked about the changing dynamics of fashion, and recounted tales of its community of designers harnessing the potential of social media to not just build their brands, but also activate change when it comes to critical issues—like the global refugee crisis, which NJAL recently discussed [here](#). Attendees were genuinely inquisitive, and eager to understand fashion as a multiplex, global system in the digital age.



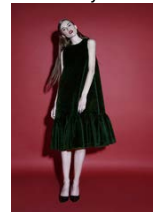
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A subtle graphic treatment inspired by contemporary music



Elsewhere at ModaLisboa, the quality of menswear edged out womenswear with its clear-cut, contemporary conviction and commercial appeal. NIAL's [Ricardo Andrez](#)'s key menswear pieces resonated in a full day of back-to-back shows. Superbly styled transparent outerwear, paired with boxy silhouettes, abstract zipper detailing and some perfectly perforated tactile treatment. There was a lot of "normcore" references amongst designers at ModaLisboa, and though the terms actual dissemination into Portugal's fashion circle has taken on a new meaning entirely (and probably lost in translation), it was easy to understand why these designers claim a notion of normal. These look like the clothes these young designers and their friends would want to wear. Andrez managed the delicate task of melting luxury and contemporary streetwear without treating the sportswear element as a throwaway, secondary detail.

With a leather manufacturing heritage equal to that of luxury production powerhouses such as France and Italy, and offering comparable quality at a significantly lower cost, there were plenty of examples of Portuguese designers using sumptuous leather in both statement wear pieces, as well as footwear and accessories. Nevertheless, Carla Matos is quick to tell us that while Portugal has become synonymous with producing luxury leather goods, access to raw materials and the small-scale factories is increasingly inaccessible. "Order minimums are rising and there are less craftsmen offering small runs, and this all alienates home-grown Portuguese design talent."

A more innovative trend in Portugal's material history that's permeated design and interiors in the last few years has finally cross-pollinated into fashion, and that is cork. Joanna Barrios already mentioned the "tacky" connotations of the material that's becoming increasingly more desirable season after season. It's also a material with a strictly Portuguese national identity. Portugal still controls about 70% of the world's cork production, but with a drop in demand, young Portuguese designers are vying to save one of their country's biggest export industries, and it's quickly finding its place in fashion. In a Financial Times article, Beatriz Vidal of the Centro Português de Design emphasises cork's myriad uses. As you can extract cork without damaging trees, "it is natural, recyclable and environmentally friendly"; and given the fact trees must be stripped of their bark every nine years to survive, it's a firm favourite amongst environmentally conscious designers.

Where austerity punished the younger generation in Portugal during the worst of Europe's recent economic decline, Portugal was a tough place to be young. However, the creative resilience of bodies like ModaLisboa, and their democratic approach to spotlighting Portugal's fashion talent has manifested a platform for raw creativity to thrive, and its fashion week communicates an atmosphere where young designers are resourceful, eager to learn and open to inventing new possibilities.

Further Reading

[ModaLisboa Spring/Summer 2016](#)