

Giving Clothes an Afterlife: The Art of Upcycling

What happens when fashion starts over?

The relationship between time and fashion has been quite complicated.

Fashion thrives on the new: New drops, new seasons, new silhouettes, new trends. Hence, the industry moves fast, often faster than the garments themselves. And with the advent of fast fashion, that relationship has become even more toxic.

It's almost like fashion is trying to beat time itself, pouring out pieces and trends to match people's dwindling attention span. The statistics confirm this.

An estimated 100 billion clothing items are produced each year to meet global consumption, which has grown by 400% over the past two decades. If that sounds wild, it's more shocking to know that the world now generates 92 million tonnes of textile waste annually. What this means is that fast fashion is equally creating fast waste, and that has become one of the industry's biggest undoings.

Recycling established itself as one of the world's responses to the growing waste problem. Materials were broken down, processed, and reintroduced into production to reduce what was ultimately thrown out.

But what if fashion did not need to begin again to become something new? Upcycling answers that question.

Creating Garments that Carry Memories

While recycling established its identity, upcycling introduced a new way of approaching the waste problem.

Instead of breaking materials down, upcycling transforms them. The fabric remains, and its history stays. The life already lived is not erased; it becomes part of the design itself.

Unlike recycling, which reduces the quality of the material by breaking it down, upcycling does the opposite. It transforms fashion items without breaking them down. The result is an item of higher value. So while recycling is an industrial process, upcycling is creative.

Interestingly, this creative process is not entirely new to Africa.

Before It Had a Name, We Were Already Doing It

Long before sustainability became a global fashion conversation, many African communities had already built cultures around preservation, reuse, and transformation. Clothing was altered, repaired, handed down, and re-tailored. Materials found a new purpose as fabrics were rarely treated as disposable.

In many ways, necessity gave rise to creativity.

A garment could become another garment. A wrapper could become memory. A piece did not lose value simply because it had lived once before.

There were grandma wrappers that became cover cloths. Old school uniforms resized for younger siblings. Ankara fabric reappearing years later as pillowcases or head ties. Denim cut into house shorts after the knees had worn out. Rice and cement bags turned into shopping bags in markets.

Then there was my own brief phase of being a designer—making doll clothes from old fabrics and eventually sewing for my neighbors' dolls, too.

The language was different then, of course. Nobody called it “upcycling.” But the instinct already existed.

Perhaps that is why the concept feels so natural today. Because for many Africans, reinvention has always been part of survival.

Yet upcycling in modern fashion has moved beyond function. It is no longer only about saving fabric or reducing waste. It has become an artistic practice.

The challenge is no longer *how do we preserve this?*

It is:

What else can this become?

That shift in thought pattern is where creativity begins.

An old garment stops being an ending and becomes raw material. A discarded piece becomes a possibility. And maybe the most interesting thing about upcycling is that it refuses perfection.

The Beauty of One-of-One

In upcycling, no two pieces are exactly alike, and no formula guarantees repetition.

And for Lormami, this unpredictability is part of the appeal.

“Upcycling is an interesting process, in that no one piece can ever be remade the exact same way,” the founder explains. “So it gives exclusivity to the things you wear.”

In a fashion culture increasingly plagued by mass production and endless duplication, exclusivity has become one of the most valuable currencies.

People want pieces that feel personal, limited, slightly impossible to repeat. Upcycling creates that naturally. The garment becomes one-of-a-kind because the process itself makes exact repetition impossible.

And in streetwear culture, where individuality often sits at the center of expression, that uniqueness is crucial.

But exclusivity is only one part of the story.

Creativity is the other.

Turning This Into That

Upcycling is an art because bringing something new out of the old is no small feat.

“We like to use the medium to create exclusive one-of-one pieces and also broaden our creativity,” the founder says. “It takes a lot of creativity to turn this into that, in a unique and exclusive way.”

That sentence sits at the heart of upcycling.

Transformation sounds simple until you actually have to do it. It requires vision. You have to see beyond what already exists. You have to imagine another version of the garment before it exists in the physical world.

In many ways, it feels less like manufacturing and more like art.

The designer is not merely producing. They are interpreting, and there is something quietly rebellious about that.

Fashion often rewards speed, while upcycling rewards attention. Fashion celebrates volume; upcycling values uniqueness.

And while fashion constantly asks, *What is next?* Upcycling asks, *What is still possible?* And to be honest, that question feels more interesting.

What Fashion Still Needs to Learn

Of course, neither recycling nor upcycling has fully solved fashion's waste problem. The industry still moves at a pace that sustainability alone cannot easily slow.

But perhaps the real value of upcycling is not that it completely fixes fashion. Instead, it changes what fashion values in the first place.

Instead of endless volume, it teaches appreciation for uniqueness. Instead of constant replacement, it shows how something can be reinvented without losing meaning. Hence, creativity becomes more important than consumption.

And honestly, that mindset shift may be one of the most important things fashion needs right now. Because the future of fashion may not only depend on innovation. It may depend on imagination; the ability to see value where others see endings. And perhaps that is the real appeal of upcycling; It gives fashion an afterlife.

The garment returns differently, but its first story remains, while another begins beside it.

In a world suffering from overproduction, there is something beautiful about that: the idea that fashion does not always need more. Sometimes it only needs a second look.

Sometimes it only needs someone willing to ask:

What else can this become?