

HANDS, SPIRIT, HEART

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Images Aurelyen



WHEN FRENCH DESIGNER AURELYEN MOVED TO AN IMPOVERISHED PERUVIAN SHANTY-TOWN, HE SAW NOT HOPELESSNESS BUT POSSIBILITY AND POTENTIAL. PROVING THAT A DESIRE TO GROW INHABITS ALL OF US, NO MATTER OUR CIRCUMSTANCES, HIS BRAND IS HELPING THE PEOPLE HE MET NOT JUST SURVIVE THE GLOBAL ECONOMY, BUT THRIVE

Fashion has truly come of age. No longer content simply to create looks that open people's eyes, there is a growing tribe of socially aware designers who are seeking to stretch people's minds. While ethically focused businesses have made confident strides in the past several years, there are pioneering designers who have gone well beyond the organic or fair-trade sourcing policies of high-street brands. By eliminating the production line and integrating the overall well-being of workers into a more holistic approach to making clothes, even at the expense of profit and growth, they are shaping what they create and how they create it into something that is both fundamentally collective in spirit and deeply personal.

Parisian-born artist and designer Aurelyen arrived with a friend in the impoverished hillside slum settlements outside of Lima, Peru nearly ten years ago on a vague mission to help people in the developing world. At that moment he had no idea that what he was embarking on would evolve into a model of ethical business, let alone that he would become founder, director and head designer of the wildly successful cult fashion label Misericordia (Spanish for 'compassion').



EACH ITEM IN THE COLLECTION IS ENTIRELY PRODUCED BY ONE OR TWO SEWERS, ALLOWING THEM TO WORK ON DIFFERENT MACHINES AND LEARN AND PERFECT A RANGE OF SKILLS

KNOWN TODAY IN FASHION CIRCLES SIMPLY BY HIS FIRST NAME, AURELYEN IS A former art teacher and graduate of the prestigious École des Beaux Arts in Paris. He was hardly an authority in the world of couture when he stepped into the Nuestra Señora de Misericordia Sewing School, that he happened across during his first few days in Zapallal, the Peruvian shanty-town 40km from the centre of Lima. Here, flimsy, ramshackle homes scatter the battered landscape. 'The truth is I hadn't seen a sewing machine in over 20 years, and the last one I saw belonged to my mother, so I really wasn't familiar at all with sewing,' says the designer, 37.

Perhaps it was gut instinct, perhaps it was the stoicism of the students he met, who had very little aside from hope and the universal desire to better the lives of their children, that struck his heart and captured his imagination. He was inspired to stay on, to attempt to understand both the people and their predicament. After spending a month wandering the streets of Zapallal, taking photos and videos and integrating himself into his new home, Aurelyen designed a simple logo for the sewing school and, with the help of the teachers, had the students produce a handful of t-shirts and jackets.

A business plan still lay on a far distant horizon for this future entrepreneur, yet the team he would lead to help realise this life-changing project was already in the making. The teacher of the school would eventually open and later expand her own home to house the first design studio.

'It was never very hard to motivate the team. We were in a place where there were no opportunities – no one had anything to lose. I just said to them, "Let's try." I really wanted to do something with them, and so I tried to convey my passion to them and they felt it. From the beginning there was this mood of joy, and pride, and surprise.'

FOR AN ARTIST BORN IN THE WESTERN WORLD, ADJUSTING TO LIFE IN PERU involved hardships that weren't easy to cope with. A radically new lifestyle, which included cold showers, long bus rides to Lima, scarce food and disease would take its toll and leave him weakened and exhausted. While most would have given up much sooner, Aurelyen's philosophical nature and astute understanding that things could be worse might have been what gave him the vigour to continue.

'The problem [in the world] is us. The problem is the disparities, the fact that everyone wants to defend their privileges, but no one realises that their privileges depend on others. Change is difficult, sacrifice is difficult. Not everyone is prepared to make sacrifices.'

Just as fashion was, until then, a great unknown for the uninitiated designer, equally unknown was the concept of sustainable, or ethical, fashion. 'When I started Misericordia, I never said to myself: "I'm going to start an ethical fashion label". I mean, I didn't understand how you could not produce in an ethical way. It just seemed obvious to me that you have to respect the laws of the country, the economic rules, not use sweatshop labour or production lines and treat the workers well. You have to explain to workers the value of their work. For me, this was always very important.

'There wasn't any ethical fashion when we started. We were really precursors to all that. What we were interested in was working with a team and trying to give their work meaning. The rest was beyond me. I was really surprised that producing in a socially conscious and fair way was something new.'

The brand's mantra, 'Manos, espíritu y corazón' ('Hands, spirit and heart'), prominent in the company's ad campaign, is testament to what they have turned their back on, the ethos that is central to so much of Western capitalism – that human labour is a commodity that can be exploited to maximise production. Here, by contrast, each item in the collection is entirely produced by one or two sewers, allowing them to work on different machines and learn and perfect a range of skills, a process that results in a much slower and costlier pace of production, but one that allows its workers to put their heart and soul into a garment.



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Misericordia's staff



Summer Collection Campaign 2012

WHEN FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES IN FRANCE SHOWED SUPPORT AND ENTHUSIASM after seeing the t-shirts, photos and videos Aurelyen had brought back from Zapallal in the months following the first trip to Peru, the thought of starting a fashion-based project began to cross Aurelyen's mind. With Peru as inspiration for his designs, a collection was born during that first year, earning acclaim in France and a following across Europe after a promotional van trek to shops throughout the Continent saw the collection sell out in no time.

As Aurelyen pushed his expanding team of cutters, sewers, embroiderers and pattern-makers to improve, the quality and nature of the collections followed suit. Within two years they had already collaborated with seasoned menswear and womenswear designers Bernhard Willhelm and Stephan Schneider. Then came the opening of several workshops: first embroidery, then weaving and screen-printing, introducing an educational element to the job and gradually raising the bar in terms of the skills the team could offer.

'It was an artistic endeavour from the beginning,' says Aurelyen of his move towards fashion. 'For me, fabric was like paper, and the forms were my designs. I turned all of my skills towards fashion and I started to design the collection. What I really liked about it is that fashion is a collective project. A designer is nothing without a team who can bring the project to life.'

Misericordia offers a men's and a women's collection, both modern with playful Latin touches. The former is sporty, simple, masculine and unmistakably urban, with edgier attributes such as special washes, graphics and slogans, and the 'M' logo prominent on some pieces. The women's collection, logo-free and more sensual in inspiration, features breezy and feminine wrap-around tunics, airy blouses and sexy, asymmetric dresses. Colours are subdued, with blues, black, greys, white, rock tones and light pastels dominating both collections.

'I want to inspire people because people inspire me,' Aurelyen tells me of his brand and their message. 'The idea is to invite people to discover Latin America, a new place, a new culture – to embark on a personal journey, one that reaches towards other people and cultures.'

In 2006, the brand would move from provincial Zapallal to a much larger design studio in the bustling capital, Lima, a move that would end the gruelling, four-hour bus rides to fetch fabric and supplies, as well as simplify logistics for the fledgling clothing company. Even from the capital, Peru would still be a challenging environment in which to work, to say the least. But Aurelyen's newfound desire to create fashionable clothing that would have universal appeal did not blind him from his original goal: to better the lives of those he had met and befriended.

AURELYEN NEVER PRETENDS HE'S TRYING TO OFFER WESTERN-WORLD STANDARDS to workers in the developing world. He is above all a realist, who can appreciate the need to adapt to local conditions. 'What people have to understand is that every project is different, that Peru is another country with its own history, rules, structure, people, and so you have to be very local. It's important to be conscious of the world around you, but action has to be based in context.'

Aurelyen is also committed to doing things right. Misericordia, with a design studio employing 40 people in Peru plus a skeleton staff of six in Paris, operates in a country where over 60% of the population is employed in the informal economy, with few if any rights or social services, and where over half of all workers earn less than two dollars a day.

'Peru is not an anarchic country. Peruvian labour law is actually quite sound. If you respect it, it offers workers real protection. But the problem is that very few businesses respect it. So for us, the real starting point was respecting the law.'

All Misericordia workers in Peru, some of whom have been with the company for six years, receive health cover and four weeks' paid holiday, as mandated by Peruvian law. This is in addition to a non-productivity-based salary that averages nearly 50% more than the average Peruvian factory wage, along with a bonus worth two



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months' salary per year and a month's salary added to a retirement fund annually. But aside from the physical, on-the-job conditions and monetary benefits, Aurelyen seems more acutely concerned with his employees' emotional and psychological state of mind.

'Many of the people I've met have lived tragic and difficult lives, and have sacrificed a lot for their children. We're trying to get people out of that informal environment and, above all, help them understand that their work matters.'

2009 was another milestone year for the brand, with the opening of the online shop and the start of a new working relationship with Kris Van Assche, designer for Dior, for whom Misericordia now produces a single annual collection. Fabrics used in production are sourced entirely in Peru, including the organic cotton used in many of the pieces. Currently lacking the economies of scale to go 100% organic, the company also envisions working with recycled polyester in the future, but are impeded at the moment from doing so by prohibitive importing costs.

Misericordia is already selling in over 100 high-end shops and department stores in 15 countries across Europe, the Middle East and Far East and the Americas, although Aurelyen speaks of his unease at being at the helm of a growing company, doling out salaries and being an occasionally demanding boss. 'This was never my dream,' he admits. He also expresses his unabashed ambition for the company.

'We want to be the number-one ready-to-wear design studio in Peru, the top Peruvian brand on the international fashion scene and to be in the top 50 to 100 export companies in the country,' he says.

But when asked about the future of the brand, he offers up a gem of inspiration that reveals more *corazón* than business acumen: 'Our evolution is constant, but the goal is always the same: to develop our know-how and to show the world that a small group of people in Peru can create incredible things.' ■

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