



Coveted wizards of Oz

Europe is firmly entranced with the rugged elegance and sunlit beauty that shines strongly in Australian fashion, CAYLA

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Europe is in love. This stylish continent, home of the world's most influential fashion houses and equally important buyers, flirts with trends from time to time.

While it once fell for the Orient, has been romanced by the Renaissance and momentarily entwined itself with the dizzying world of punk, Europe's new lover is here to stay.

Australia, with its rugged elegance and sunlit beauty, is all over Europe. In recent weeks, Australian merino wool was the star of the stylish Fleece to Fashion exhibition, an Aussie designer has opened a Playboy concept store filled with his Playboy Icon evening wear and London nightclub Madame JoJo's has reinvented herself with Australian wallpaper by Florence Broadhurst.

Australia's senior trade commissioner in London, Kylie Hargreaves, has watched on excitedly as Europe slowly became infatuated with Australia's style.

"Australian fashion has gone from the unknown to the well known. From the undesired and unsophisticated, to the

highly desired and fashion-forward, and in the next wave, we are seeing Australian design dominating not only catwalks but all walks of life," she said.

Walking through the Australian Wool Innovation *Fleece to Fashion* exhibition, everyone from Christian Dior and Giorgio Armani to Australian Collette Dinnigan proudly display designer garments made from Australian merino wool.

One of the exhibition standouts is a vintage 1950s Christian Dior day dress, woven from Australian wool some 50 years ago.

"It's funny to think that 200 years ago, the first bale of high-quality merino wool was shipped to Europe, and now, they're shipping back the same materials transformed into fancy suits and garments," Australian Trade Commission chief economist Tim Harcourt said. "All the top European designers use fabrics made from Australian wools because they're the best quality, they breathe easier as well."

From sheep to bunnies, Melbourne-born designer Christopher Chronis has not only designed the new range of stylish Playboy evening wear, he's fronting the exclusive Oxford Street shop in London.

From flirty purple playsuits teamed with golden boob-tube bikinis to long,

delicate gowns, the collection is a true combination of Europe's timeless class and Australia's vibrant, relaxed culture.

Harcourt said it is this flamboyant flair that has enchanted Europe. "Like Florence Broadhurst's wallpaper designs, Australians are often seen as being larger than life. You see that vibrancy in the 2000 Olympic uniforms and brands like Mambo. It is part of our optimistic outlook on life and I think Europe likes the surf culture, they get caught up in the lifestyle. In France, Billabong and Quicksilver is very popular – Billabong earns more overseas than Westpac bank."

While a trip to Australia is every Londoner's dream, the flip trip from Sydney to London seems like a rite of passage for Australians in creative industries.

"If you look at the number of Australian companies and also individuals in Europe, they tend to congregate in London. It's just like Kylie Minogue or Natalie Imbruglia – they start there then slowly build their way over the channel.

"London is a real hub for Australian designers but also, outside of London, Europeans think very highly of our designers, their only complaint is there aren't enough."

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Part of Melbourne-born designer Christopher Chronis' Playboy Icon evening wear range, above, and one of the featured designer garment displays in the Australian Wool Innovation *Fleece to Fashion* exhibition.

