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Back in Style: The Fur Trade

By KATE GALBRAITH

TOM DeLISLE, sporting thigh-high waders, squishes through mud and cattails surrounding a pond near Albany, looking for wayward beavers that might have wandered into one of his underwater traps. Alas, his instant-kill traps, baited with Backbreaker castor oil, are empty. But Mr. DeLisle plans to keep trapping all winter, knowing that the pelts of beavers and other animals will grow thicker — and may fetch a better price when he sells them — as the months wear on.

“Come trapping season, it’s hard to wait,” Mr. DeLisle said of his pursuit. “It’s like a kid on Christmas morning.”

At his warehouse in northern Greece, Sotiris Vogiatzis, a fur wholesaler, eagerly waits for pelts from trappers like Mr. DeLisle because beaver is a hot fashion item in places like Russia and Turkey. Five years ago, Mr. Vogiatzis was buying 5,000 beaver pelts a year; now he buys about 30,000 annually, at prices that have climbed to \$30 to \$35 each, from about \$26 to \$28. After he gets the pelts — known in the trade as skins — he ships them to plants where they are sheared, tanned, plucked and dyed.

Once treated, the beaver skins make their way into the hands of fashion designers around the world, like Zuki Balaila in Montreal. Mr. Balaila has been working with beaver since the 1970s (when he was known as “Kooky Zuki,” because he dyed beaver in vivid reds and blues for American fashionistas). Today, he serves markets far beyond North America.

“Now we export to China and Korea, which is unheard of,” he said, taking special note of surging demand in Russia. “Moscow is like New York City.”

As humble beaver skins circle the world at steadily rising prices, so goes the fur market as a whole. Buoyed by the globalization of trade and the broader reach of the fashion industry, sales of fur garments, trim and accessories amounted to about \$13 billion for the fiscal year ended August 2005, the most recent for which data is available — up 9 percent from the previous year and up 40 percent from five years earlier, according to the International Fur Trade Federation. The organization predicts that fiscal 2006 will show a further climb in sales.

A variety of styles and colors — and for beaver, a new lightness and reversibility owing to improved shearing — has also helped fur fly off the rack worldwide. The price of mink, the gold standard of the fashion industry because of its softness and lightness, is at an all-time high (about \$57 a pelt for Danish mink, for example). Even lesser-known furs have caught fire. The show-stealer has been muskrat, the “poor man’s mink,” which tripled in price during the last year, to roughly \$8 a pelt. Lynx and western coyote skins are also selling well, while red fox and ubiquitous raccoon pelts have lagged. American consumers spent about \$1.8 billion on fur

last year, a 50 percent increase since 1998.

Looming over the entire industry, of course, are animal-rights activists such as [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#), more commonly known as PETA. Activists have earned both enmity and fear in the fashion world for their in-your-face tactics, like the moment in 1996 when an unidentified protester tossed a dead raccoon onto the plate of Anna Wintour, Vogue's fur-wearing editor, as she dined at the Four Seasons.

While some designers, [Ralph Lauren](#) most recently, have abandoned fur after pressure from the animal-rights movement, the industry says that many more have taken it up. "The last five to six years, more than 400 international designers have included fur in their collections," said Tina Jagros, executive director of the North American Fur Association, a trade group. She estimates that this is double the number of designers who included it 15 years ago.

WITH sales soaring, the fur trade has become bolder about taking on activists — even securing [Osama bin Laden](#)-like status for antifur marauders. Last month, the industry claimed a victory when President Bush signed the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, which gives federal authorities enhanced powers to prosecute animal-rights activists for certain offenses. (The act defines "animal enterprise" as any "commercial or academic enterprise that uses or sells animals or animal products for profit, food or fiber production, agriculture, research or testing.")

The main reason for the fur boom, however, may simply be that pricey pelts are now within the reach of a broader and younger population, particularly in developing countries like Russia and China. Innovations like knitted fur, laser-cutting, and precision dyeing techniques have also made fur more appealing. In another shift from decades past, fur is no longer considered intimidatingly formal.

"People are wearing their mink coats with their jeans," said Melisa Smart of the Alaskan Fur Company, a clothier based in Overland Park, Kan. A few years ago, she even made fur jersey-jackets emblazoned with the numbers of the Kansas City Chiefs football players. "You could order a red sheared-beaver jersey with the number 88 on it," she said.

Within the chain that delivers fur from the wild or from farms to wholesalers, designers and retailers stand the trappers, who occupy the most basic and brutal rung in the hierarchy. Fur farms provide about 85 percent of the world's skins, according to the trade federation, with wild fur remaining largely a North American commodity.

Although eight states have severely restricted trapping, some 150,000 trappers ply their trade each winter in the United States, and at least 70,000 in Canada. Increasingly, trappers focus on nuisance animals like beavers, muskrats or raccoons that suburbanites want removed. For his part, Mr. DeLisle arranges his trapping spots with homeowners and, like most trappers, pursues animals only part time.

Mr. DeLisle, a native New Yorker, began trapping when he was 13; his first catch was a muskrat. He recalls bicycling home with animals he had trapped, telling his mother about the catches, then skinning them in the basement, as he does at his own home today. Now his 17-year-old son enjoys trapping, too.

"It's either in your blood or it's not," Mr. DeLisle said of his hobby. A self-employed chimney sweep who traps

for love of the outdoors, Mr. DeLisle caught 30 beavers last year. The \$900 he earned selling those skins accounted for roughly a quarter of his yearly earnings from trapping, most of which he plows directly back into the purchase of expensive traps. Mr. DeLisle stores and stretches his pelts to dry them out and then sends them off for sale, generally to an auction.

For trappers, the most important auctions are held in Canada. There are three: the North American Fur Auctions in Toronto, which handles 5.5 million pelts a year; the Fur Harvesters Auction in North Bay, several hundred miles north of Toronto, with more than a million pelts annually (Mr. DeLisle sends his catches there); and a small one for western pelts in Vancouver.

Luxury skins like mink — which analysts say accounts for more than 70 percent of the fur sold in the United States — are mostly farmed. The largest mink producers are Denmark, with more than 12 million pelts annually, followed by China, the Netherlands, Russia and the United States. The other heavily farmed animal, fox, is concentrated mostly in Finland.

There are more than 300 mink farms in the United States, producing 2.9 million pelts. Utah has the most farms, owing to a large feeding cooperative in the state, but Wisconsin has the most animals, according to Teresa Platt, executive director of Fur Commission USA, an association of mink farms. Fur is so pivotal in Wisconsin that one House member from the state, Representative Tom Petri, was the leading sponsor of the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act when it was originally introduced.

For decades, farm-raised animals like mink have been getting larger, and the pelts more profitable, because of careful breeding and feeding. Russia used to be a leader in mink farming. But annual mink production has dropped — to about 2.5 million pelts today from 15 million to 16 million before the collapse of the Soviet Union, according to Torben Nielsen, the chief executive of Copenhagen Fur, the world's largest fur auctioneer.

China's burgeoning mink farms have come under special fire from animal-rights groups, which have sought to outlaw trapping and farming worldwide. PETA has posted a video on a Web site, furisdead.com, that it says was made in China and shows animals being skinned alive. The organization recently opened an office in Hong Kong.

People in the industry acknowledge problems. "Some of the farms we have visited are a very good standard. They use full European standards," said Thomas Wong, chairman of the Hong Kong International Fur Fair, where retailers buy garments for their stores. "But some of the farms they might take time to improve."

When the world's fur buyers gather at auctions, the atmosphere can be tumultuous. Mr. Vogiatzis, the Greek wholesaler, deals in most types of skins but buys particularly large quantities of raccoons at auctions. He describes the scene as a "madhouse."

During auction season in Toronto, truckloads of fur flood into the 150,000-square-foot warehouse of the North American Fur Auctions. As the items are sorted and displayed, the warehouse's concrete floor becomes slick with fur and oil.

Experienced graders in white coats categorize the skins by type and quality. The pelts — still stiff because

they are raw and untanned — are then strung together into carefully labeled lots of varying sizes, some lots numbering in the hundreds. As the season progresses, the warehouse becomes a forest of dangling pelts, and the air within develops an intense odor.

In the refrigerated section — which resembles a closet packed with pelts, rather than dresses — raccoon skins are hung inside out (the better to expose blemishes), with their striped tails protruding below. They are hung in the cooler amid other skins, which on a recent visit included silver foxes with white-tipped tails, red foxes, coyotes, river otters and even a few dozen bears.

Several days before the auction, buyers and designers arrive to inspect the pelts before bidding. “When you have to stand up and check the skins for 14, 16 hours a day,” Mr. Vogiatzis said, “it’s not the easiest job in the world.”

Mr. Vogiatzis, who joined his family’s fur business 22 years ago, is one of the largest fur buyers in Greece and says his company has annual revenue of \$8 million to \$10 million. He started as a fur manufacturer in Kastoria, the center of the Greek fur industry, where he and his father employed 300 workers who made coats from minks, foxes and raccoons. But 15 years ago, Mr. Vogiatzis decided to shed the manufacturing side of his business and to deal exclusively in skins.

“It’s like a small auction house here,” he said of his operation. “Going around the world, selling skins — maybe it suits me better than production.”

Mr. Vogiatzis has witnessed the advent of new fur markets, and the accompanying geographic shifts. When he joined his father’s business, he sent furs mostly to Italy. Now most of his furs end up in Russia.

The No. 1 factor affecting his business, he said, is the weather. “When the weather is cold, everything is good for us — we can sell,” he said. This season, however, he is worried about a warm spell in Russia. “We depend on God sometimes,” he said.

THE fur boom marks a turnaround from 15 years ago, when retail sales in the United States were barely half their current level. Fur’s earlier peak came during the early to mid-1980s, when many women, newly ensconced in better-paying jobs, were using their spending power. Mr. DeLisle remembers those years as a time when “you would never see a road-kill raccoon, because somebody would pick it up and sell it.”

But mink farms overproduced, prices fell for luxury furs and then all other categories of fur. The stock market crash of 1987, and the sour economy that followed, also hurt the luxury-goods market. At the same time, fur opponents were gaining strength. PETA was founded in 1980 and now has 1.2 million members. It quickly gained a following among celebrities and a reputation for attention-getting stunts.

Although Europe — where an appetite for beaver top hats helped push North American settlers west two centuries ago — remains a fashion leader, it is Russia and China that are driving demand.

At the Copenhagen Fur Auction, about 70 percent of the fur sold is sent to China, according to Mr. Nielsen. Much of that is made into clothing there and then exported. China, particularly its Guangdong Province, has supplanted Manhattan as the world’s leading manufacturing hub for fur.

An increasing amount of fur also stays in China, snapped up by ever-wealthier consumers. “In China and Russia, a fur coat is a symbol of success,” said Mr. Nielsen, who noted that the same was true in Spain in the 1990s and Italy in the 1980s.

Russia’s growing appetite for fur is not solely attributable to frigid winters. Some segments of the economy are flourishing on the back of high oil and gas prices. “Russians have a lot more money now,” said Mark Downey, chief executive of Fur Harvesters. “They can afford more fashion design-type things.”

People in the fur trade, meanwhile, say consumers are buying fur apparel earlier in life, with the average customer being 10 years younger than the buyers of 20 years ago, according to Mr. Nielsen. Another demographic coup also seems to be brewing. “Men are wearing it now,” said Mr. Balaila, the Montreal designer.

BORN in Beirut and raised in Israel, Mr. Balaila never saw fur garments up close until he arrived in Canada in 1973 to join his wife-to-be. She greeted him at the airport wearing a fur hat and a fur coat. He soon joined his father-in-law’s fur manufacturing business, which focused largely on mink. He started out sweeping the floors, but as the 24-year-old passed by the coats, he became inspired.

Mr. Balaila, who as a teenager enjoyed sketching clothes, quickly developed his own ideas for revamping his father-in-law’s business. To his eye, the garments seemed dull — browns, blacks, whites — and “looked too old, too heavy, too massive” to appeal to the younger generation.

He resumed his sketching and soon had his own label. In 1986, he opened his own design shop, using unusual colors and lighter styles. Mr. Balaila manufactures his own garments, which is rare for a designer.

Despite producing only a few thousand expensive garments a year, designers like Mr. Balaila feed the global craving for fur. If fashion shows in Milan, Paris, New York and London are presenting more fur, or a new type or style, ordinary consumers start clamoring for cheaper look-alike items. Wholesale prices rise in tandem.

In the 1990s, when Mr. Balaila offered his apparel in Japan, his beaver garments were mistaken for a type of lamb. Now that beaver is a more popular fur, he plans to exhibit 40 items in mink, beaver and chinchilla at the Hong Kong International Fur Fair in February. “Those countries that don’t have the weather to wear fur, they’re looking for something new and something different,” he said.

About 10 to 13 beaver pelts are used to make a knee-length coat. With pelt prices rising, Mr. Balaila charges more for his work. A sheared-beaver jacket that he might have sold wholesale to Saks Fifth Avenue or Macy’s for \$2,000 several years ago would probably go for about \$4,000 today.

In Paris, Milan and New York, mink and fox — both farmed — have the largest presence among furs on the runways, and consumers are paying more for their mink coats and beaver hats. During the last five years, “we’ve seen a 5 to 10 percent increase each year in the price at the retail level across the board, regardless of whether it’s mink or it’s beaver or it’s fox,” said Angelo Papaevangelidis of Four Seasons Fur in Toronto, a manufacturer and retailer that sells up to 1,000 garments a year.

Despite strong demand, the fur industry remains on guard. As a luxury item, fur is extremely vulnerable to shifts in global economic winds. The animal-rights movement is still a chief concern. There is a widespread feeling among furriers that while the influence of the movement has declined in recent years, it remains potent.

For its part, PETA says serious problems remain underexamined. "We get calls from the public all the time who find that their dogs or cats get caught in leghold traps," said Dan Mathews, a PETA vice president who worries about drownings linked to underwater traps.

Trappers like Mr. DeLisle acknowledge that accidents do happen, but they say that trapping is done as humanely as possible, and that new techniques are constantly assessed.

The animal-rights movement has its own legislative priorities. The [Humane Society of the United States](#) is seeking better labeling of fur. Currently, according to the group, only fur priced over \$150 must alert consumers to what type of animal it is from, and where it was produced.

Retailers, always on edge about the animal-rights arguments, are often loath to discuss fur. For example, Harrods of London provided its fur policy for this article, but in an e-mail message declined further comment, "due to the sensitive nature of this particular subject." Harrods closed its fur salon in 1990, but still sells fur-trimmed coats and accessories.

A HOT topic in Europe has been cat and dog fur. In November, the [European Commission](#) proposed a ban on the import, export and sale of such fur in the [European Union](#), after acknowledging that some had slipped in unlabeled from China. The United States enacted a similar ban in 2000.

As is true of many industries these days, all eyes in the fur trade are likely to remain on China. The country's mink production is revving up, and its designers are gaining reputations overseas for style and quality.

So for beavers and other furry creatures, the world tour is likely to continue. A beaver snared by Mr. DeLisle on an icy New York morning next month could find its way to Mr. Vogiatzis and a pressing plant in Poland or Greece. Then it might be shipped to Siberia as a warm black hat with ear flaps. Another beaver could become a light blue sleeve in a soft and stylish reversible coat by Mr. Balaila, sold in a Korean department store for thousands of dollars.

"Nobody wants to wear what her grandmother or her mother was wearing," Mr. Balaila said. "You have to excite the people."

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