



The fine art of hanging around: haute couture dress designed and assembled by Anne Theresia Wanders. The dress can be folded and stored in a handbag, letting the wearer slip it on last minute after hanging around in the city during the day. Price available on request.

EMIGRATE TO INNOVATE

Switzerland has a tradition of immigration over the last century. A strong economy built on international institutions and banking has led to a population that today comprises 20.7 per cent foreign nationals.¹ As **Ursula Anastasia Dinnis** discovers, a new wave of outside talent is now attracted to an unlikely sector – the country's fashion scene.

For a country whose name is not associated with fashion, Switzerland is proving an attractive springboard for some of fashion's freshest faces. Its design schools are attracting foreign talent, and its strong economy means there's a lucrative retail market for fashion entrepreneurs to tap into.

Anne Wanders, a German fashion design student studying at the Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weissensee in Germany, chose to spend a semester at Basel's Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz over London or Paris. She says, "Switzerland was the clear choice for me, as I wanted to try out a more structured approach. Furthermore, here is a country that can afford to pay its design talent a living, which is definitely a pull for many international students, and a reason for them to stay here after graduation." Wanders adds that now would be a good time for Basel to introduce a Masters programme in fashion design, "It's something that is really needed – and with a little more confidence, Switzerland's design schools could start to compete at an international level."

Confidence at a national level is something Surya Hill is watching carefully. Founder of Geneva-based communication and PR agency, Sparkle, Hill has recently turned her attention to promoting Swiss luxury brands – previously only internationally known – within Switzerland. "Swiss brands such as Akris are trendsetters internationally, but not nationally," says the Swiss South-African, "but this is set to change with a growing trend-conscious clientele in Zurich and the arrival of brands such as Atelier F&B."

Describing Zurich as a multifold economy, Hill is eagerly watching the development of the city's retail scene. Sparkle launched Atelier F&B at high-end department store Bürger on the city's Bahnhofstrasse in June this year, with a pan-Switzerland rollout now underway. A Swiss company that handcrafts silk and cashmere ties, Atelier F&B is over 100 years old, employs 150 people and sells its ties in 25 countries. Asked why it has taken so long for the company to enter its home market, Hill explains, "This is perhaps the typical Swiss contradiction," she says, "we excel in skill, craftsmanship and quality, yet many of us are reticent to try new things or brands. However, this is now changing fast."

At the other end of the scale, Anu Schmidt, fashion designer and owner of Fasana boutique in Kilchberg, is redefining the traditional small fashion design business model that is common to Switzerland. With an established contact network in her native India,

Schmidt is following in the footsteps of the global players by looking into setting up a production centre in her native Delhi. She explains, "The textiles and production market in Switzerland and Western Europe don't cater to the needs or budget of a small business. One of the major challenges I faced was buying the right textiles in small quantities, which was near impossible. India is a developing economy and therefore offers textiles and garment assembly at an affordable price, regardless of whether you are a global player or a small business."

So how will the Swiss fashion scene fair with so many external influences shaping its future? For Swiss-Vietnamese designer Lan Tschirky, the answer is simple. "Everyone learns from each other – the Swiss from the foreign nationals and vice versa," says the fashion graduate from the Mode Design Schule Zurich, "it's clear that we're standing on the edge of great change. But this can only be expected as, ultimately, immigration breeds innovation."

¹ Figures for 2005 from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, Berne