

MANUFACTURING / PORTUGAL

MADE IN PORTUGAL

Portugal's textile industry has earned global prestige for its quality, innovation, creativity and responsiveness – and its manufacturers are dominating the market from the high end to the high street. We meet the executives behind the companies that are leading the charge.

WRITER *Trish Lorenz* PHOTOGRAPHER *Pedro Guimarães*

Take a look at the label on the shirt, trousers or jacket you're wearing. There's a good chance that at least one item bears the tag "Made in Portugal". In recent years, the country has emerged as one of Europe's most innovative textile and clothing production hubs, with high-end and high-street brands choosing to make products here.

Portugal has a long history of textile manufacturing but was primarily known as a low-cost producer. But over the past decade manufacturers have invested in R&D, and today the Made in Portugal stamp speaks of quality.

The country's growing influence is also partly attributable to a changing fashion industry. Fast fashion plays to Portugal's strengths. Its network of smaller producers (most of whom are located north of Porto, near the city of Braga) are able to rapidly turn around orders and manufacture smaller volumes. Proximity to key European and US markets means fast delivery times and crucial savings on shipping costs. They have also benefited from higher labour costs in China, where it was once cheaper to produce.

We speak with five of its leading players: the power-brokers who are helping consolidate Made in Portugal's status on the fashion map.

1. Ricardo Mano Chief executive, ATB

Spinning a yarn
Location: Mariz
As the fashion industry looks to respond to criticism on its environmental record (it is the world's second-most polluting industry), some brands are turning to knitwear manufacturer ATB for eco-friendly solutions. "What's catching the attention of our clients is our work in recovered and recycled fabrics. We now knit with 100 per cent recycled yarns," says ATB chief executive Ricardo Mano.

Founded in 1985, the company specialises in knitting, dyeing and finishing and also has digital printing capacity. It produces 20 million metres of fabric a year and makes clothes for clients including high street names Benetton, H&M and Primark, and high-end brands Stella McCartney, Kenzo and Acne Studios. "We knit all kinds of fabrics – we have more than 12,000 different samples in our textile library – so we really don't have any limits in this area," says Mano. "But all our clients, from fast to high fashion, are sensitive and curious about recovered and recycled fabrics. Using recycled fabrics leads to less waste and big savings on water and energy."

The company's recycled fabrics are made from donations – including used clothing – and industrial waste. "We are in a joint venture with a Portuguese company that recovers fabrics," says Mano. "We reuse our own textile waste. We completely deconstruct the fabrics and transform them back to yarn fibres. The recovered fibre is not as strong as the original but if we need to increase the final quality, we can blend it with recycled PET or organic cotton. I genuinely believe this circular economy is the future for the fashion and textile industry."



Clockwise from top: Ricardo Mano at ATB's factory; Petrutex's sewing team; ATB knits with 100 per cent recycled yarns; green ethos means happier workers at ATB; ATB produces 20 million metres of fabric a year; T-shirt samples at ATB



2. José Alexandre Oliveira Chairman, Riopelle

Family affair
Location: Pousada de Saramagos
One of the distinguishing features of the Portuguese textile industry is that many companies, even the bigger ones, are family owned. Riopelle has a staff of 1,066 people, annual turnover of €74m, and a production capacity of more than 700,000 metres of fabric a month. Its customers range from fast fashion giant Inditex (owner of Zara) to luxury heavyweights Burberry, Versace and Giorgio Armani. It is one of the largest and most established manufacturers in Portugal, yet it is still fully owned by the family that founded it.

"The Portuguese relationship to textiles began very early – we first established our know-how in textile production in the late 18th century," says Riopelle chairman José Alexandre Oliveira. "Particularly here in the north of Portugal, the culture of textiles is very strong. Riopelle is 91 years old; it was founded by my grandfather in 1927. I've worked here for 39 years but I've been part of the business since I was born. It's in my blood."

The company has been an internationally focused business since 1958 and today exports much more than 96 per cent of its production. "Five years ago our key markets were Europe and the US. While these are still important, we are now seeing China, Japan and South Korea as growth markets," says Oliveira. "China in particular is a very big market for us. In the past China was seen as a competitor but today we sell our products there – they appreciate our innovation in fabrics." The company's most recent innovations include the Ceramica Clean fabric: along with being breathable, it repels stains by preventing the absorption of liquids such as wine, olive oil and coffee.

Riopelle is a vertically integrated company with the entire manufacturing process managed in-house, from R&D to spinning, dyeing, weaving and finishing. "We do it this way to ensure a high level of production flexibility and quality control," says Oliveira. "[It also enables] a short lead time, which is important because the speed of the market is increasing all the time. Ten years ago, we produced new collections every six to eight months. Now we have to respond much more quickly to trends. If a celebrity or royal wears a dress in an unusual colour, I know that some of the big brands we work with will want me to have a similar fabric almost immediately." Because they control the whole chain and aren't dependent on anyone external, they can turn things around rapidly.

They are looking to take a more proactive role in their dealings with brands. "In the last few years we have started to take a leading creative role – we identify trends and create fabric collections that set the trends," says Oliveira. "We are already working on our fabrics for winter 2019 and our customers are waiting to see what we are bringing out. This is the future: we need to add value by becoming more creative."

3. Tiago Guimarães Managing partner, Shirtgate

Hot under the collar
Location: Porto
Shirtgate is a men's shirt specialist, manufacturing shirts and consulting on trends in the sector. Tiago Guimarães co-founded the company in 2012, when he was managing director of Somelos, another large Portuguese manufacturer. In 2015, he left Somelos to focus on Shirtgate and today the company produces around 180,000 shirts a year for clients from Europe, the US and Asia.

Q: What kinds of clients do you work with?
A: We work with brands that are smaller and more innovative, like Rag & Bone in the US, Folk in the UK and Sand Copenhagen, but also with more traditional shirt brands out of Italy who are looking for new ideas. They come to us for help with modernising their shirt line because they recognise that shirts need to be made cool.
Q: How innovative can a shirt be? How do you modernise it?

The traditional formalwear shirt is not a growth market but we are seeing a lot of opportunity in fashion-led items such as short-sleeved shirts, Hawaiian patterned shirts, shirts with zips and so on. We sell ideas to clients in the form of fabrics and designs for shirts.

Q: So you are designers as well as manufacturers?
A: We're not designers; it's more about product development – we show brands new fabrics, new shirt styles, new ideas. We have a huge fabric collection and a wide variety of shirt styles for clients to choose from. It's about transforming what's sometimes seen as a boring wardrobe item into something fashionable.

Q: What do you think is attracting brands to manufacture in Portugal?

A: Our manufacturing prices are competitive and we are very flexible: we can handle smaller orders. Quality is important too, and politically we are very stable. Being part of the EU, unlike Turkey for example, protects our clients against currency fluctuations.

"Politically we are very stable. Being part of the EU, unlike Turkey for example, protects our clients against currency fluctuations"



4. Sergio Neto CEO, Petrutex

Appliance of science
Location: Paços de Ferreira
When Michael Phelps took to the water in his all-in-one seamless Speedo LZ Racer in Beijing in 2008, taking home eight Olympic gold medals in the process, Sergio Neto was smiling. Petrutex, the textile company that Neto heads, had helped contribute to Phelps' Olympic success. The company's patented NoSew technology, developed in partnership with the Australian Institute of Sport and Nasa, was designed to reduce friction in the water and so cut race times by vital fractions of a second. When used in Phelps' Speedo LZ Racer it created what was then the fastest swimsuit in the world. "We made 100 per cent bonded products a reality," says Neto. "We were the first company to develop this no-sew technology and to create the machines behind the technique."

Founded in 1989, Petrutex is one of Portugal's most influential textile manufacturers, with an annual turnover of €66m. Its 900 machines supply 159 brands worldwide in France, Italy, Germany, the US, England and Japan (although it is reluctant to reveal specific brand names). The company continues to invest in textile technology at its north Portugal HQ.

Its expertise crosses sectors including high fashion, sportswear, lingerie and baby clothing. With luxury maisons it practices advanced techniques such as digital printing, laser cutting and laser engraving. With its sports clients, the focus is on delivering high-performance characteristics such as water tightness and breathability.

"We're a hybrid company that works across fashion, sports and hi-tech segments. We're experiencing particularly strong growth in technical products, haute couture and customised items," says Neto. He credits a focus on service and innovation as key to the Portuguese textile industry's growing success. "Customers look to Portugal today because of the quality, service and drive for development. We have the know-how here to manufacture fashion items and technical products. Portugal is increasingly valued for the types of fabrics it manufactures – not, as in the past, simply because it is the cheapest."



"Portugal has the entire production chain, from spinning and weaving to dyeing and finishing. It's easy for companies to work together and for clients to visit multiple suppliers"

Portuguese textile industry: facts and figures

12,000 manufacturing companies (fourth-largest manufacturer in Europe after Italy, Poland and Czech Republic)

137,000 people employed in manufacturing (fourth-largest in Europe after Italy, Romania and Poland)

€7.6bn annual turnover (sixth-largest in Europe after Italy, Germany, France, UK and Spain)

10 percentage of the country's exports account for textiles and apparel

A-Z of Made in Portugal

Acne Studios
Burberry
Calvin Klein
Drykorn
Esprit
Folk
Giorgio Armani
H&M
Inditex
Jigsaw
Kenzo
Labfresh
Mango
Next
Officine Générale
Primark
Rag & Bone
Stella McCartney
Ted Baker
Versace
Wax of London
Zara

monocle.com
monocle.com/radio

Comment



Dressing as a minimalist by Fumio Sasaki

Four years ago I began my life as a minimalist. My daily uniform was a white shirt, black denim jeans and white trainers; I dressed the same way every day. I had three identical Digawel shirts. When the weather turned cold, I would put on a sweatshirt with a down jacket. I owned around 20 items – including underwear – so there was no need to choose my outfit every day. I simply replaced each piece when it became worn out. I liked fashion but I also liked not having to spend time shopping or think about my clothes when the seasons changed.

Since I moved to the countryside on the outskirts of Kyoto, a few items have changed. I now pick my clothes based on function. My underwear and socks are made of merino wool, a material that doesn't smell and is versatile enough to wear whether it's hot or cold.

My daily outfits are heavy on outdoor brands such as Arc'teryx, Patagonia and Finetrack, which dry



"Being a minimalist allows you to focus on yourself. Maybe it's because once you have sorted your belongings, you can deal with your inner self"

5. Paulo Melo President, ATP

Building bridges
Location: Vila Nova De Famalicão
Associação Têxtil e Vestuário de Portugal (ATP) is the industry body that represents Portugal's textile and apparel sectors. It lobbies on behalf of the industry and also works to promote Made in Portugal abroad. Paulo Melo, who also heads up Somelos, one of Portugal's largest manufacturers, was elected ATP president in 2016.

Q: What factors have contributed to the growth of Portugal's textile industry?

A: Portugal has the entire production chain, from spinning and weaving to dyeing and finishing. We cover a broad spectrum of the industry too: we make shirts, outerwear, knitwear, socks, underwear. Around 85 per cent of Portuguese textile companies are in a small region just half an hour north of Porto. That makes it easy for companies to work together and for clients to visit multiple suppliers. And we have geographic and cultural proximity to our main customers: Europe and the US.

Q: How has the industry changed in the past decade?

A: We are increasing the volume as well as the value of business. There has been a move away from competing on price to competing on adding value through design, service and technological innovation. We are moving away from being order takers to selling solutions.

Q: How has the trend for fast fashion impacted the Portuguese textile industry?

It suits us. Fast fashion necessitates short lead times, responsiveness to trends and being customer oriented. Historically our textile industry has been composed of family-owned businesses and our strongest competencies have always been in the service we offer and in being adaptable. Portuguese manufacturers are not huge, so we have flexibility in meeting customer requirements and fast turnaround times. We can also add value through elements such as design – for example, there's a trend to create more technical textiles.

Q: Why do you think Made in Portugal has seen its international standing grow?

A: The entire sector is focused on export and in the past five years we've been committed to promoting Made in Portugal and highlighting the quality of what we produce. Competitors are changing too. Italy no longer has the whole chain of industry and is focused more on design and fashion. There are more young people within the textile industry here, which I think bodes well for our future.

About the writer: Fumio Sasaki is the author of 'Goodbye, Things: The New Japanese Minimalism'.