



## Can feathers ever be ethical? Stella McCartney is betting on it



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On Tuesday night, Stella McCartney staged her Spring/Summer 2026 show in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It opened with a dramatic reading of the lyrics of Beatles song 'Come Together' by Dame Helen Mirren. And it closed with three dramatic feathered dresses, which were made using the world's first ethical alternative to feathers, from startup Fevvers.

For centuries, feathers have been adored by fashion. But behind the glamour, they have long carried ethical questions. Many birds are killed for their feathers, while ostrich plumes, among the most prized, are typically live plucked every few months. Add to this the fact that synthetic feather tend to be plastic, and the absence of a credible alternative has left fashion caught between consumer demand and conscience.

Fevvers, a new UK startup, aims to break that deadlock. Founded by textile artist Nicola Woollon and creative industry strategist James West, the company is developing what it calls the world's first ethical alternative to feathers: a plant-based structure that just made its debut with Stella McCartney at Paris Fashion Week.

"Every season, we're told that [birds'] suffering is the price of fashion. I refuse to believe that. That's why I am beyond excited to be working with Fevvers," McCartney says. "The innovation is just insanely beautiful, and we have created some of the most striking couture pieces I have ever seen. It's not only the world's first plant-based feather alternative, but it's also proof that brands who continue to use feathers are choosing cruelty over creativity."





The timing is critical. Over the past decade, fashion has moved decisively away from fur, exotic skins and increasingly leather, pushed by regulatory pressure and shifting consumer sentiment. Feathers, however, have largely slipped through the cracks — until recently. Last season, animal welfare organisation Peta stormed London Fashion Week to protest the cruelty involved in harvesting feathers. “People don’t realise that [ostriches] have to be live plucked,” West notes. “They assume feathers are molted and collected off the ground. It’s a blind spot.”

The environmental costs amplify the urgency. Bird farming requires land, water and feed, while harvested feathers undergo sterilisation and chemical treatment. Yet, feathers remain commercially irresistible. “They’re fun, luxurious, decadent and they just look great,” Woollon says. “Brands tell me some of their bestsellers were feather covered, but have stopped producing them due to the ethical concerns. A credible alternative will be transformative.”

For Woollon, the partnership with Stella McCartney felt natural. “Stella has a wonderful



record of working with textile innovators and is very public about vegan preferences,” she explains. “[Stella] also has the infrastructure to support young businesses like ours, and the network as well — so it just felt like an obvious connection.”

McCartney, a lifelong vegetarian, has built her brand on rejecting leather, fur, feathers and skins, pioneering luxury’s shift towards alternative materials. Her house has consistently led with firsts — from garments crafted in Mylo mycelium leather and Air Slides from recycled industrial waste, to Falabella bags made with recycled hardware, regenerative cotton collections, Mirum plant-based bags, Uppeal apple-waste alternatives and Sequinova plant-based sequins.

What began as a tentative inclusion of Fevvers in one or two looks for SS26 quickly grew to five. However, questions remain around the durability of this innovation. The material is too fragile to pass quality-control standards for mass-produced fashion. West and Woollon are focusing now on how to stabilise it for commercial use, while preserving its natural properties.

“We tried to buy a bit of time by convincing Stella to use it in the winter collection,” Woollon laughs. “But she said, ‘No, I love it so much I want to use it now.’ So here we are.”

“They are vegan, plant-based and natural,” West explains. “Because of that, each feather has a uniqueness, like a fingerprint. It hasn’t come out of a uniform manufacturing line. That natural irregularity gives it beauty.” This is where Fevvers positions its competitive edge. “Other imitations create the idea of a feather, but not the reality,” West says. “This material passes the second-glance test — you look at it and assume it’s real. That’s the distinction.”

#### **From a London warehouse to a Paris runway**

Fevvers was conceived when Woollon — trained in embroidery and with years of experience working with Indian textile house Chanakya International — encountered a plant with feather-like properties, which was being used in a visual installation for an event. It wasn’t initially planned as a feather replacement, but its “lightness, delicacy and sculptural qualities” suggested parallels, she says. “I was surprised to find out it wasn’t actually a real feather,” Woollon recalls. When applied with the same embroidery techniques used for ostrich feathers, it produced the same movement, softness and volume but without such intense ethical and environmental costs. (The co-founders decline to disclose the exact plant while it’s still in development.)

For Woollon, the discovery resolved a long-standing frustration that the fashion industry at large has been trying to solve. Alternatives such as shredded organza, layered chiffon or digital prints had never convincingly replicated the delicacy or motion of natural feathers. “You can layer fine silks, stitch down the centre, cut the shape, then fray it,” explains Woollon. “But the labour makes each feather prohibitively expensive. Digital printing hasn’t been convincing either.”





She teamed up with West, a neighbour who had built a career advising creative businesses on growth and strategy. His first instinct was to test the material. “We got it into universities to test viability as a minimum viable product,” West says. “The verdict was clear: not yet robust enough for industrial-scale production, but strong enough to take to market.”

#### **What’s next**

Paris was not an endpoint for Fevvers, but a launchpad. The company, self-funded until now, is preparing its first pre-revenue seed round to finance research and accelerate product development. “It’s very much about proof of concept and seeing what happens live,” West says. “Can we demonstrate market appetite strongly enough to unlock the investment we need for science?”

