

Fur Fashion Brand Kaminsky Hitting New Heights

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A model demonstrating a creation by the Kaminsky fashion house during the Aurora Fashion Week in St. Pete.

A former bomb technician and an ex-taxi driver are now running Kaminsky, an avant-garde fur fashion brand that is arguably Russia's most eccentric.

The history of Kaminsky is a truly original start-up story. Back in the 1960s, when Marina Kaminskaya was choosing which university to go to, she decided on the Military Mechanical Institute for the most trivial reasons: "It was very close to home, and I knew for a fact there would be many guys there so I could be sure studying would be fun," she said.

"As for the degree, well, that degree would be as good as any," she says, talking in her office, a cluttered room that is a peculiar hybrid of an office and a showroom, with fur hats filling high shelves, awards stacked in a glass cupboard and the most artful designs displayed on mannequins.

In the early 1970s, Kaminskaya met a friend who was starting up a private furrier's shop. As their conversation progressed, she became excited. "I suddenly remembered that my grandfather was in fact a furrier; he had run his own shop back in the 1920s, during the years of Lenin's New Economic Policy."

And so she started helping out, and little by little the fur shop grew busier.

"Sometimes our apartment would resemble an improvised warehouse, with some 500 hats piled up in various places," she said. "Every surface in the flat was covered with fur ornaments and half-finished hats."

Today Kaminsky produces elaborate, state-of-the-art items that grace the haute couture collections of the maestro of Russian fashion, Vyacheslav Zaitsev.

"How did we do it? We just tried various new and unusual things ...we were the first company to create colored fur hats — red, green, orange," Kaminskaya recalls. "At first, these sold with difficulty: The Russian market is very conservative. Everyone was convinced that fur must have its natural color — and I personally think this is utterly boring — so it took a couple of years for us to break this stereotype."

When the Kaminskys first went to see Zaitsev in 2006, the couturier threw the couple a challenge. "Make me a fur hat and mantle," he said. The resulting items were soon gracing the pages of fashion magazines. Then Zaitsev presented the Kaminskys with a real test: design an entire collection of fur hats.

The Kaminskys passed the test with flying colors. "Some guests at the show couldn't believe how we had done what we had — they thought that we had painted the hats with dots and ornaments, but the colored elements on the hats were actually inserts of different fur," Kaminskaya explained.

One of the most eye-catching items in the showroom is a peach skullcap made of French lace and decorated with embroidered elements and beads with large Arctic fur pendants on both sides.

During a guided tour of the improvised showroom, the door bursts open and an athletic man enters the room, throwing a couple of new brightly colored books on the table. The title of the top book is "Sewing Patterns for Dog Coats."

The man with the books is Kaminskaya's husband, Sergei, whom she met in a taxi while he was working as a driver. The couple did not wait long to get married, and Kaminsky soon joined his new wife in the fur business.

"Oh, let's introduce Timmy to her," says Kaminskaya. Timmy is a two-year-old Maltese dog, and the only pet in the world to benefit exclusively from the Kaminskys' creations. Timmy's wardrobe includes winter coats decorated with Arctic fox, mink and even sable.

The newest coat, made from a Pavlovo-Posad shawl — one of Russia's trademark handicraft traditions — was inspired by the fashion house's most recent collection, which was shown in October at the Aurora Fashion Week in St. Petersburg and marked the brand's 25th anniversary.

Jolly, playful and eccentric, the collection brings together the bold floral fabrics of Pavlovo-Posad shawls and regal fur welting. The show made a splash in the fashion industry, guaranteeing more showbiz and high-profile engagements for the Kaminskys, who dress Svetlana Medvedeva, the wife of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, as well as opera diva Yelena Obraztsova.

"Many people are sick and tired of Western brands, and they want to wear fashion items that are distinctly Russian, that have a particular Russian flavor to them," Kaminsky said.

"Here is our answer to Chanel," he smiles, pointing out a small square evening bag made of luxurious white mink.

"Gucci is finished," Kaminsky continues, opening a cupboard and taking out an opulent pair of eccentric high soft-top boots made from Pavlovo-Posad shawl fabric and decorated with red Arctic fox fur.

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