

Below: The new Core Precision Undershirt, a shape-enhancing garment for men that's coming on the market in both Europe and the US next month.
 PHOTOS BY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

First there were 'murses,' then 'guyliner.' Now come 'mirdles,' body-sculpting, flab-corralling undergarments for men

BY SHELLEY EMLING
 NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, LONDON



'Mirdles': man's new weapon in the battle of the bulge



In the fickle world of fashion, one thing's for certain: any trend that catches on with women sooner or later will grab men as well.

Guys clutching "man bags," or "murses," are a common sight in hip urban centers. Even eyeliner for men — "guyliner" — has found a following.

And now popping up in men's clothing departments are body-sculpting, flab-corralling undergarments known as men's girdles, or even "mirdles."

Starting next month, Australia-based Equmen will sell a body-slimming Core Precision Undershirt designed to squeeze a few centimeters off a man's beer belly and improve his posture. It will be available in the US and Europe via www.equmen.com.

"This is a garment designed to physiologically and visibly improve men's bodies," said Corie Chung, one of the company's founders. "Men these days are concerned about their appearance, and they also want to feel healthy and supported."

Atlanta-based Spanx, whose nylon and spandex undergarments for women are worn by the likes of Oprah Winfrey, plans a collection for men next year.

"We have had a tonne of requests for Spanx for men," said spokesperson Misty Elliott. "After seeing our success with firming women's butts, men are asking Spanx to help them flatten their guts."

"Today's men are more style- and image-conscious, and they're ready to take advantage of the same style tricks that women have," Elliott said.

In general, retailers say that a younger generation of men is paying more attention than their fathers to fashion necessities like underwear. Market researcher

NPD Group reported that sales of men's underwear in the US jumped 7.8 percent between 2005 and last year to reach 1.1 billion units, while sales of women's underwear climbed by just 2.3 percent to reach 1.5 billion units.

For men, a growing number of businesses are peddling shape-enhancing undergarments.

Underworks.com, for example, sells a wide range of shapewear for men, including the Ultimate Chest Binder that sells for US\$36.99. A Male Support Vest from Enell.com, which also flattens the chest, costs US\$75. Compression shorts from Legluxe.com, designed to tone muscles, cost US\$39.95.

John Pearce, who set up Brazilian Shapewear to import the leading brands into the UK, said he started selling slimming garments for men just in the past year.

"People were calling us and asking us for these," he said. "There's been a real buzz about men's corsets in particular."

Pearce emphasized that these products not only flatten the stomach, but also help with posture and even improve one's golf swing by keeping a player in the right position.

"It's a lot more complex than just looking good," he said.

Not everyone in the industry is convinced there's a broad market for men's slimming garments.

Atlanta-based www.luxelegwear.com, a Web site offering European brands to buyers in America, carries 13 styles of hosiery specifically for men.

"Men who make these purchases are looking for styles that help them with circulation problems or they simply like the look and feel of the shiny pantyhose," said managing director Deborah Ashley. "But I have not heard too many concerns about sucking the gut in or smoothing out the thighs."

David Wolfe, creative director at Doneger Group, a New York fashion industry consultant, said he thinks shapewear for men is destined to appeal only to a small niche market.

"Men are just not so vain or concerned about their physicality," he said. "And if they are, they are likely to be in a gym and not in a girdle."

One of the men's slimming garments marketed in the UK by Brazilian Shapewear.

PHOTO BY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



'Kansei' design takes center stage

The 10-day Kansei Japan Design show in Paris promotes the country's ethos of blending sensitivity and oneness with nature

BY CLAIRE ROSEMBERG
 AFP, PARIS



Left: A woman visits the Kansei Japan Design show last Thursday at the Arts Decoratifs museum in Paris. Organized by METI, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the exhibition ends this Sunday and will then be shown in New York.
 PHOTO: AFP

abroad, officials said.

Products from China, Korea and Singapore are providing increasingly stiff competition for Japan, Kimihiko Inaba, trade fair director at the Japan External Trade Organization, said.

"We can maintain our lead over the next five or 10 years but unless we take action we will lose our edge."

Over the last 50 years, he said, "our products remained competitive for three reasons; they were functional, reliable and economic. Now we have realized we need to develop a fourth value — sensitivity, or *kansei*."

There was no exact translation of the term, said curator Kanji Kawasaki. "*Kansei* is a philosophy," he said in an interview. "I think there is a specificity of design in Japan and that this has a strong relationship with our identity, our tradition."

To explain *kansei* to the rest of the world, Kawasaki designed a show eight months in the making that brings together traditional crafts, high-tech innovations and 3D installations harking back 1,000 years in Japanese history.

Japan's relationship to nature and to crafts, he said, could be traced to a 1008 tale backgrounding the show — the *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, the Japanese novelist and lady-in-waiting behind one of the earliest novels in human history.

To further hammer home the point, the 104 designer



objects on view are grouped according to their *kansei*, which can be part of their inner being, or sensed in the way they were made, or the way they are used.

Touching, feeling and enjoying the aesthetics of an object all come into play. A wooden computer keyboard feels good while a minimalist flat-screen TV on a one-legged stand looks good and saves space.

"These are products among the millions made each year in Japan that have *kansei*," Kawasaki said.

An illuminated bathroom basin has inner *kansei* because like Japanese theater it plays with light, as does a robot dummy that twists and turns to window-shoppers, because it corresponds to the nation's taste for things that stand upright, said the organizers.

A bamboo umbrella, a fold-up lamp and a stark four-chord guitar illustrate the makers' *kansei* because they save space and can be folded, thereby creating harmony. As for the animal-shaped rubberbands, they are blessed with *kansei* of the heart because the user will never have the heart to throw them away. A pair of robot cuddly toys for seniors that make people happy likewise are obvious bearers of the concept as they correspond to the tradition of hospitality.

But with the world in financial meltdown and the yen rising on world currency markets, can Japan's plan to revamp its industrial design arm yield results?

"During the years of economic growth everyone was after material wealth, now I think people are seeking richness of the heart," Inaba said. "And the *kansei* movement is not purely export-driven, we must concentrate our efforts to go this extra mile."

Above left: Japanese dyer Yusai Okuda poses while attending the Kansei Japan Design show in Paris.
 Left: A man snaps a photo at the Paris *kansei* exhibition.
 PHOTOS: AFP