French fashion school Esmod, the world's oldest fashion academy, will launch in the autumn a course called Meta-Wear, dedicated to digital fashion design. Véronique Beaumont, Esmod's executive director, spoke to AFP explaining why this course is essential for the next generation of designers, who will be able to juggle artisanal skills, fashion expertise and digital technology, creating a new vision for the future of fashion.

Q: Why are you launching the Meta-Wear course on digital fashion design?

A: It was important not only to meet the expectations of new generations of students, but also to adapt to the changes occurring in the fashion industry. We carried out some research on this, and realised that it was crucial to boost our digital software education. This wasn't an entirely new field, since we have partnered with Lectra for courses focused on modelling and product development, including everything to do with manufacturing, and were already testing the Clo3D software that works with digital avatars. We initially decided to develop Clo3D courses,
then the metaverse came into being. One of our lecturers, Fabrice Jonas, founder of MyFashionTech, advised us to go even further and stage fully fledged courses to train students on these new fields. We are truly committed to adapting to the new professional skills required by the metaverse, while still respecting traditional know-how, which is essential in fashion.

Q: Will the course focus on teaching digital fashion design only?

A: The focus will obviously be on product design, but the whole NFT environment and cryptocurrencies will be covered too. However, it will always be a matter of enhancing the physical world. We truly believe that these new virtual worlds will be used by fashion labels primarily to showcase their more classic products. There is an obvious marketing aspect, and this is good because we are always trying to meet the expectations of a new generation of designers with a hybrid mindset. They no longer want to be regarded solely as artisans, but as entrepreneurs too. It’s a generation keen to be able to build their business from very early on.

Q: Who is this new course addressed to?

A: The Meta-Wear course will be aimed at second-year students, because we absolutely want [students] to learn the fundamentals of physical fashion in their first year. It’s a development of our curriculum combining Esmod’s long-established, traditional teaching of technical and design methods, with digital techniques. Starting next September, the new course will cover two second-year modules, but students will of course keep following the standard programme at the same time. And we’ll even go a little further, in order to train them on new professional skills. We want to make them work in other sectors such as videogaming, since this fits with employers’ demand for new profiles, like metaverse and digital costume designers, for example.

Q: Do you have to understand videogaming to become a fashion designer nowadays?

A: No, I don’t think so. It’s simply a way for our industry to diversify. The metaverse is a very real phenomenon but, paradoxically, our students are increasingly asking to be taught artisanal skills and hand-crafting. On the one hand there is tradition, on the other modernity. One will not replace the other, they are complementary. Gaming is a very interesting field, and that’s why we’re going to integrate it into our teaching methods, but designing fashion is synonymous with emotion, physicality, and that is still key. It’s not a question of disavowing Esmod’s DNA, still based on knowing how to make a physical product, but of creating bridges between physical and digital fashion.

Q: In terms of teaching, how does digital fashion differ from physical fashion?

A: Digital fashion is very attractive in terms of communication and perception. Teaching is very difficult today, even simply capturing the students’ attention. We have realised that for them digital design is more versatile, more creative, because it moves much faster than physical fashion. But this is also the reason why the two complement each other, and for us, switching completely to digital fashion is out of the question. Some students are not interested in the Meta-Wear course, and prefer craftsmanship or couture workshops. We are keen on [studying] the metaverse, but as a complement to the standard programme. We will soon stage a short course on the metaverse, in partnership with DressX, for Esmod alumni and industry professionals who wish to acquire digital design skills.

Q: Do you think this kind of training could become a must for aspiring fashion designers?

A: It will all depend on the direction chosen by the student. Digital and physical fashion can by all means co-exist, allowing everyone to do what they prefer. At the end of the 1960s, some people predicted that haute couture would disappear because of the arrival of ready-to-wear, and it’s absolutely clear that this never happened, just as genderless fashion has not replaced either menswear or womenswear. We mustn’t be fooled, this is how fashion works. It doesn’t mean that such phenomena won’t make their mark, but they will not supplant fashion’s DNA. However, they allow designers to be more and more creative.

Q: Some fashion names have started to experiment with the various opportunities afforded by the metaverse, with digital fashion and NFT collections, but aren’t not far ahead of the pack?
A: I think the industry is indeed pushing forward, but this is normal because it is now driven by a new generation. In the last few years, the fashion industry has been living at this generation’s pace, propelled by highly connected, innovative influencers. Everything changes very quickly, but there may indeed be a gap between this innovative, ultra-connected generation and those consumers who do not necessarily resemble it. It often starts this way. You simply have to look at sustainable fashion, which was of no interest to anyone 10 years ago, and is now at the heart of people’s concerns. In fashion, desirability and attractiveness are two very important concepts, so the industry, despite everything, owes it to itself to forge ahead.

Q: Do you see digital fashion as tomorrow’s luxury, or as an environmentally friendly alternative to traditional fashion?

A: This is a tough question. I truly think that digital fashion will simply make it possible to sell more physical products. Everyone is having a go, from leading luxury groups to fast-fashion ones, it’s no random thing. Ultimately, it’s a new way of communicating, one that is much closer to marketing than to design. It’s great to be able to dress an avatar, but we aren’t going to spend all our time in the virtual world. We will always need to buy physical clothes, paying attention to their provenance, their fabrics, and the way they are produced. Digital fashion will instead make it possible to test garments, to see if this or that item is more attractive. As for the luxury industry, it must keep up with the times, of course, but we mustn’t forget that the essential tenet of luxury is high value, a taste for the exceptional, and rarity. This is somewhat the case with the metaverse now, but if it will become more democratic, things might change. In this sense, I don’t think digital fashion is the future of luxury.