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When Used Is Fashionable in New York City

Scores of dealers keep stores supplied with out-of-town stock



Clothing dealer Sandra Skeffington, left, with Morphew co-owners Bridgette Morphew and Jason Lyon. PHOTO: BESS ADLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By ANNE KADET
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One morning last week, vintage clothing dealer Sandra Skeffington lugged a suitcase to Morphew, a retail showroom in Manhattan’s Garment District. Like a magician pulling rabbits from a hat, she produced one eye-catching dress after another. Morphew co-owner Jason Lyon didn’t hold back.

“Pretty, but too fairy princess!” he said of a beaded cocktail gown. The gold lamé? “Cool technique, but too much bulk.” Mr. Lyon is a tough judge, and he has to be. The shop he runs with his partner, Bridgette Morphew, is to vintage what Barneys is to the latest looks—the top of the fashion food chain. Here, a 1980s Yves Saint Laurent suit runs \$8,500, while a 1950s wool crepe Dior jacket costs \$10,088. Even the vintage Levi’s run \$500 or more. Ms. Skeffington, who co-owns Antique Wardrobe in Southbridge, Mass., didn’t mind the sharp comments.

Morphew is a steady customer, reliably buying dozens of garments skimmed from private estates across New England. Every month, she drives to New York with her haul, charging a hefty markup for her trouble. “We’re happy if we can double our money,” she said. She is one of scores of dealers who supply New York City’s vintage retailers with out-of-town stock.

There aren’t many New York attics brimming with vintage Chanel, but in other cities, you can still find a deal. Over their frequent long-distance shopping trips, Mr. Lyon and Ms. Morphew have found that Boston is great for old lace, Los Angeles for 1960s fashion, and Paris for the 1970s. Thanks to the decade’s oil boom, Dallas and Houston are best for 1980s haute couture.

After a round of haggling, Mr. Lyon and Ms. Morphew bought 11 pieces from Ms. Skeffington. Ms. Morphew was particularly enamored with a 1930s embroidered jacket. Two hundred dollars is a lot for a top with no designer label, but she thought it could resell for \$650: “It’s so on-trend and wearable,” she said. Many folks steer clear of vintage. It is hard to find the right size and easy to look like you just raided the community theater for a costume. But the die-hard collectors who frequent Morphew make a strong case for retro.



Laura Drossman like flashier designs. PHOTO: LAURA DROSSMAN

Laura Drossman, a lawyer who lives in the East Village and San Francisco, said the vintage fashions she favors from Issey Miyake, Courrèges and Gucci are superior in quality and style to what she can buy for comparable prices at Bloomingdale's.

"You know that you're the only person wearing it," she said. "It makes you feel special."

Ms. Drossman is particularly fond of flashier designs, like a velvet jacket from the 1890s. "I put it on, I feel like I'm headlining an Elton John concert," she said.

Emily Berger, a SoHo mathematician and collector of lingerie, isn't a fan of current fashion, finding it busy and loud. She prefers the symmetry and subtlety of designs from the 1930s, which, she said, "allow for a ton of detail while still feeling really quiet."

Vintage prices have climbed as more shoppers compete for a finite pool of garments. In New York, demand is so high, it is possible to pay retail at a vintage store and resell the items at your own showroom for triple the price. At Angela's Vintage Boutique in the East Village, that is exactly what Mr. Lyon and Ms. Morphew aimed to do. Mr. Lyon sorted through the racks under the watchful eye of owner Angela Nechay, who buys from sources in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

"In the country, no one is interested in clothes," she said. "They call me. I go buy beautiful pieces."

Comparing herself to a hunter, Ms. Nechay added: "I can drive 15 hours, 20 hours. I don't care. The people who do this business, everyone is a little crazy." Mr. Lyon set aside several dresses and suits. Anything white and unstained would fetch a high price, he said, "but black is the kiss of death." Vintage aficionados like to stand out. Dresses are better than separates because they display better on the rack and fetch higher prices. And Mr. Lyon and Ms. Morphew are always looking for chic pieces in larger sizes.

"People today are bigger, and vintage is smaller. So the bigger the size, the bigger the price tag," said Mr. Lyon.

They agreed to buy a dozen pieces. Ms. Nechay threw in a Ralph Lauren rugby shirt that Mr. Lyon wanted for himself.

"I'll give you a hug," he said. "You want a hug or not?"

"Yeah," said Ms. Nechay. "Why not?"

While they are both vintage retailers, they aren't competitors, Mr. Lyon said later. After all, they cater to different crowds, and as far as customers go, he is easy.

"We don't have to try everything on and ask, 'Does my butt look big?'" he said. "They love us."



Ms. Morphew in a 1930s embroidered jacket. PHOTO: BESS ADLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL