



Fashion



Butter Consignment in Brooklyn

In With the Old

As luxury prices soar, fashion lovers flock to consignment shops.

When Janet Clarke, a successful businesswoman with a formidable retail habit, purchased a \$3,000 Escada jacket in Schiaparelli pink leather last year, she did so not with the flush of excitement that certain expensive luxury purchases elicit, but with a cool, calculated eye toward the piece's potential resale value. "I wore it once," Clarke says on a recent winter afternoon, gesturing toward the item in question hanging on a rack—an \$895 price tag dangling from one butter-soft arm—at Michael's, a women's consignment shop on Manhattan's Upper East Side where Clarke is a regular. "If somebody goes for it, I'll get about \$450," she adds, smiling proudly. "I can afford to shop anywhere, but consignment has the best bargains these days, and the stuff is so good now. I shop and I consign. It's great to know that if you make a mistake, you won't lose all your money."





The shoe display at Ina on Thompson Street, in Manhattan

What the ladies who lunch have known for years—that a trim bouclé Chanel suit or an eye-popping Pucci caftan can each fetch hundreds of dollars at the neighborhood resale store, where that Yves Saint Laurent Mombasa bag you coveted a few years back can be nabbed for a quarter of its original price—has trickled down to the fashion-forward masses. Consignment shopping is not only a red-hot shopping option, but now blatantly out in the open as wealthy and cash-strapped fashionistas alike descend unabashed on resale boutiques from Aspen to L.A. with armfuls of near mint-condition clothes. They're eager to purge closets of gently used designer duds and keen to pick up a check for later purchases. As Laura Fluhr, the longtime owner of Michael's, puts it, "We're not the dirty little store on the side street anymore."

Store owners who consider themselves voyeurs—observing people's often quirky, deeply personal shopping habits—suggest that the ever increasing prices of luxury goods, particularly in the handbag and high-heel departments, have sparked a surge in consignment shopping. Environmentalism, owners say, may also be a factor. While \$110 organic cotton T-shirts help reduce fashion's carbon footprint, so, too, can recycling preworn Prada cardigans.

According to Christos Garkinos, co-owner, with Cameron Silver, of Decadestwo, a designer consignment store on L.A.'s Melrose Avenue, the game of shopping, consignment style, has two players: those wealthy enough to buy anything yet eager for the thrill of a great find, and those desperate for a trend item but unable to afford it at full price. "Of the women with money, there are three types of consignment shoppers," explains Garkinos. "There's the one who will totally wear anything, who lives for the latest It thing in fashion. There's the...folks who treat fashion as art and collect. They may overshop, but they overshop for a reason. They're really into Marni, for instance, as a way to amass a collection. And then there are the people who will buy the same pair of shoes...in three different colors, and will never wear them. And that's some sort of OCD going on there." Garkinos pauses. "We tend to be a healthy outlet for some addictive personalities."

In fact, at the Little Bird boutique in Aspen, which opened last summer, owner Keele Loyd often finds herself assisting the same clients over and over, from the high school girl consigning (or in search of) a Marc Jacobs dress to the well-preserved local matron eyeing a J. Mendel fur. "I can't believe the range of clients I have, and how often they come in," says Loyd. "It's much more acceptable nowadays to get rid of stuff." The well-heeled regulars at these stores, obsessive sellers and buyers whom Garkinos affectionately refers to as "Norms" ("Remember Norm from Cheers?" he asks. "Always coming in?"), may find consigning both more frugal and, ultimately, more adventurous than the average trip to Neiman Marcus. "I like the hunt," says L.A. jewelry designer Linda Hodges, a Decadestwo regular. "There are pieces you might not have seen in the big stores, or samples celebrities may have gotten. It makes it more interesting."

Differentiating themselves from vintage boutiques, consignment stores typically stock merchandise from the past two seasons, although they will sell decades-old items from certain labels, such as Hermès and Chanel. "People can't get enough Birkin bags and Chanel jackets," says Fluhr of Michael's. But what of those trend-seeking clients, many of whom work in the entertainment and fashion industries, where starting salaries can barely snag a decent one-bedroom rental let alone a quilted Chanel? "For the girls who [want to] keep up fashionwise, consignment has become very useful," contends Ina Bernstein, the co-owner of five Manhattan consignment shops bearing her forename. At one of her stores, a new Marni patent-leather tote, which currently retails for \$1,620, is \$1,250, which a manager estimates would get the consignor about \$575; a beat-up Balenciaga motorcycle bag, possibly lugged around for years, will go for \$250 and net a seller about \$120. "There are more women involved in what's happening, and to get the money to buy the new things, they consign the big labels. They bring in one Marc Jacobs bag [to sell], get the check, and go use the cash to buy the next It bag. Then we have a lot of customers who don't get checks. They just get a credit...they reshop here. It's all quite practical."





A rack of dresses at Butter Consignment, in Brooklyn

Motivated by a desire to stay current, these fashion followers' strategy is stealthy but not exactly simple: A woman will buy, for instance, a 3.1 Phillip Lim tunic for around \$595 at retail and wear it a few times. Then, realizing it may have a short shelf life, trendwise, she consigns it at a store like Ina, where it can be sold for about \$375, leaving her with about \$175. The dress is priced high because it is current season, and Ina earns more than 50 percent of the sale.

A store owner, of course, can determine the amount he or she will earn from each item, with pricing dependent on its quality and season. These boutiques typically take 50 to 60 percent of a sale; consignors, obviously, are best served when the store splits the sale with them. With regard to the Phillip Lim tunic, the original owner has justified her purchase with a few wearings and managed to recoup enough dough for half the cost of, say, a new pair of Marc by Marc Jacobs flats. "Consigning gave me the sense of getting a little compensation for my mistakes," says one former fashion magazine staffer, who recently earned back a third of the cost of a pair of Paul Smith motorcycle boots she had worn only once.

At Butter Consignment in Brooklyn, owner Eva Dayton, whose designer boutique down the street, Butter, carries Dries Van Noten, Martin Margiela and Rick Owens, routinely receives bags of clothes from women across the country, many of whom Dayton believes are relieved to find an outlet for purchases gone awry. A spanking-new Valentino cardigan, delivered to the store after Christmas "with a \$3,800 price tag still on it," she says, will go for \$1,500. "The key is that we get merchandise every day, and a lot of it is brand-new, or was a limited edition," adds Dayton, who opened the store in late 2006 with 20 consignors and now has around 150. "It appeals to the fashion customer who is always looking for the new thing, obviously, but it's really becoming a smarter way to shop." With its wood floors and elegant West Elm light fixtures, the boutique passes for any other high-end shop in the neighborhood, thereby adhering to the industry's No. 1 commandment: Thou shalt not look shabby. "People spend hours and hours in a consignment store, because you never know what you're going to find. Aesthetically, the store needs to be really clean," explains Dayton.

As Decadestwo's Garkinos, who currently works with more than 2,000 consignors worldwide, says, "It's aspirational. Girls who don't want to go to H&M, who don't want to get the knockoffs, they are discovering consignment. They want the real thing, and we've got it."

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