

USED GOODIES

A holiday guide for thrifters.

BY JUDITH THURMAN



In my fourteen-year-old son's favorite photograph of me, I am a young woman with a faraway look wearing a black-and-white Ramones T-shirt from the band's 1978 "Rocket to Russia" tour. Last Christmas, he bought an identical shirt from a street vender near St. Mark's

Place and gave it to me wrapped in the Style section of the *Sunday Times*, because, he said, with an irony I suspect was unintended, "newsprint is sterile." I found the fact that he claimed to have haggled on and off for two days with the seller nearly as poignant as his im-

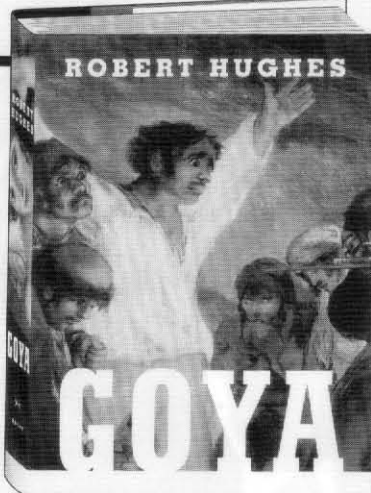
pulse to salvage a Proustian relic of his mother's past. It also pleased me to think that perhaps he hadn't so idly spent his most formative years being wheeled—in a secondhand Pérego stroller and Bonpoint snowsuit, clutching a vintage Steiff tiger—through the clogged aisles of the thrift and resale stores where I do most of my shopping.

To many people (my ex-mothers-in-law come foremost to mind), wearing an item of apparel once owned by a stranger is a form of promiscuity not far removed from unsafe sex on a park bench. There is no point trying to persuade them of the likelihood that the designer cashmeres drastically reduced at Barney's have been sullied by more warm bodies than the nightgowns at the Salvation Army. Resale shopping may not be for the squeamish even at its most exalted: at boutiques like Ina, 101 Thompson Street, where models and stylists consign their loot from Marni and Helmut Lang; or at Kavanagh's, 146 East 49th Street, which specializes in mink and sable from J. Mendel, and Hermès bags in perfect condition (\$3,500-\$4,200). But if you can banish the image of the dirty tissue that every purse—even a vintage Kelly—must once have harbored, you are ready for conversion to, and immersion in, the worn again.

The fertile crescent of the East Eighties is the cradle of secondhand civilization. In a ten-block radius, there are some twenty thrift or resale emporiums that thrive on the caprices, diets, affairs, scandals, social rivalries, reversals of fortune, and—it must be said—deaths of a posh Zip Code. I was interested to learn from a shopowner who requested anonymity that some of the choicest merchandise is apparently consigned by courtesans (a breed far from extinct, who, like the red-tailed hawks on Fifth Avenue, favor love nests near the Park). "Those girls live hand to mouth on a high level," she observed. "Reselling the fun furs or Dolce & Gabbana leather that their lovers buy them is a discreet way to raise cash."

A Hermès scarf is the regimental flag of matrons above reproach. In the Christmas Corner at Michael's, 1041 Madison Avenue, at 80th Street, the classic silk square in the desirable orange box is priced at \$185. (Hermès charges \$295.) Even a mother-in-law might not balk at a nearly new Chanel suit in plum

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Smith's exacting standards. A stack of biscuit-colored bone-china dinner plates, \$4 apiece, might not, because they lacked a hallmark, though the manager plausibly believed them to be "blank Lenox." At the Sloan-Kettering Memorial Thrift Shop, 1440 Third, at 82nd Street, where a friend once paid the extravagant sum of \$4,200 for an American Empire settee only to discover that it was probably by Chippendale, I found an enigmatic Tarantino look-alike named Nick examining a collection of antique Buddhas (\$250-\$2500) with a practiced eye. He wasn't buying, though. "There's a really great Buddha in a thrift shop on DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn that I've had my eye on for years," he explained, "but the owner doesn't want to part with it. I mostly troll for records and comic books, but I'd definitely give used clothes to my girlfriends—they wouldn't mind. My mother would. I once bought her a thrift-shop painting, and she liked it, but I don't think I told her where it came from." No Old Masters were immediately discernible among the framed works for sale in several genres (\$45-\$3,000).

The feral thrill of foraging in the wild, so to speak, for Christmas delicacies rather than ordering them on garnished platters is one of the greater charms of the sport. Out of the Closet, 220 East 81st Street, is a nearly impenetrable jungle of junk and treasure that helps support AIDS service organizations. A number of volunteers are museum docents, so the art and antiques are rather too expertly appraised to be steals. Prices range from \$9 for a poster to \$5,000 for a limited-edition dish of unglazed ceramic by Picasso, dated 1956. But among the more than ten thousand books, some of them quite rare, housed in a barnlike rear annex one can, for a pretty pittance, find a literary gift for any cook, decorator, armchair traveller, amateur historian, bride-to-be, puzzle-doer, bird-watcher, collector, preschooler, or serious reader on one's list. A first edition of Patricia Cornwell's "Cause of Death" might not inspire as much bibliophilic rapture as a galley of "The Wasteland" with Eliot's corrections, but at \$3 it's a nice stocking-stuffer.

When Encore, 1132 Madison Avenue, at 84th Street, the most venerable of the Upper East Side resale shops, opened some fifty years ago, its con-

signers and customers tended to arrive furtively, wearing dark glasses, and leave carrying unmarked shopping bags. Today, of course, twenty-year-old movie stars proudly wear forty-year-old evening gowns to the Oscars. (If a sautoir from Fred Leighton isn't within your budget, you might accessorize a red-carpet ensemble at Elle W Collection, 864 Lexington Avenue, at 64th Street, with a short double strand of gray baroque costume pearls by Miriam Haskell, \$525; a convincing armful of faux-diamond and sapphire Deco bangles, \$400-\$500; or an exquisitely fitted alligator minaudière in mint condition, \$550.) Men who proudly wear evening gowns have, for decades, frequented Allan & Suzi, the "Home of Retro Fashion," 416 Amsterdam Avenue, at 80th Street, where none of the boots were made for walking and one can find stilettos to fit the daintier all-stars of the N.B.A. Madonna and Tommy Hilfiger, Suzi told me, were both customers for the outrageous, "artist-customized," six-inch, vintage platform shoes. The Material Matron bought a pair in mauve leather, with jewelled heels, for one of her tours, and a similar model is available for \$350.

I was somewhat distressed to discover on my own tour of the worn-again outposts in Nolita and the East Village—where the shop décor is often more interesting than the clothes—that one now dates "vintage" backward from 1990. Marmalade, 172 Ludlow Street, is well stocked with cool-again handbags from the eighties in patched lizard or rolled leather, some ornamented kookily with shells, beads, or fringe (\$45-\$60). Considering the decade's fashions to be irredeemably hideous, I imprudently deaccessioned my own stock of them. As my son has discovered on his forays to St. Mark's Place, hip kids tend to overprice iconic funk, and the more studded tongues and oxygen bars in a neighborhood, the higher its prices for pilld velvet, ratty fur, acid-colored polyester, novelty plastic, and frayed denim.

Fortunately, not every downtown shop considers itself a satellite of P.S. 1. At City Opera Thrift Shop, 222 East 23rd Street, one can buy a nice vintage baby-grand piano in need of some tuning for \$1,350. At Angel Street, 118 West 17th Street, where the sales benefit AIDS patients and the mentally ill, I

bouclé or pink tweed (\$800), or a beige serape by Ralph Lauren in six-ply cashmere with suède trim (\$695). Designer handbags from recent seasons abound, some, like a feather-and-calfskin clutch from Bottega Veneta (\$195), still with their tags. A psychoanalyst who buys his corduroys at Paul Stuart could do worse than humbly admit his helplessness to know what his woman wants by giving her a Michael's gift certificate. Three sessions of shrinkage at going rates would finance the highly therapeutic ego massage of a Gucci tuxedo (\$250); a black satin Prada evening purse (\$250); high-heeled Armani T-strap pumps trimmed with a suède rose (\$109); and a never worn La Perla camisole and bikini of embroidered mesh (\$125). What women want is all of the above.

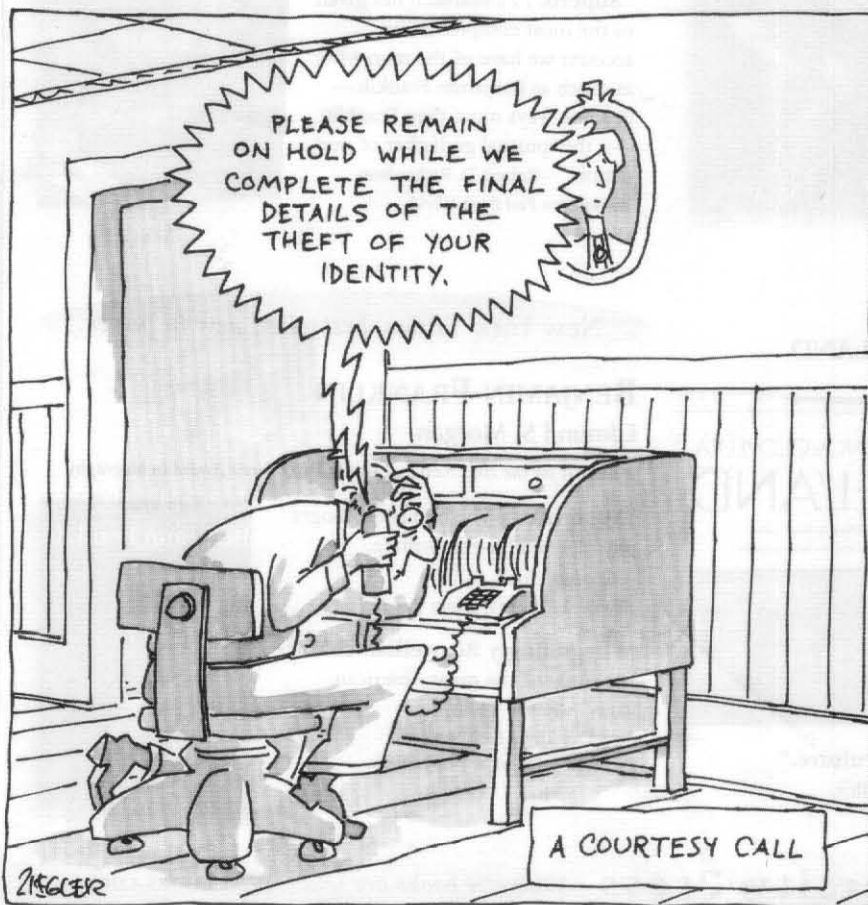
Gavin MacLeod is a man who understands, perhaps better than a therapist, the tides and vagaries of the heart that help to keep the resale business afloat. He is the actor who, for so many years, played the affable captain of "The Love Boat." I met him and his wife, Patti, who were visiting the city from Los Angeles, Christmas shopping for their prolifer-

ating nuclear family (they have seven grown children) at Designer Resale, the flagship of a three-shop fleet (Gentlemen's and Children's Resale are the auxiliary vessels) at 324, 322, and 303 East 81st Street. "When I see a woven-leather tote from Bottega, bells go off," Patti MacLeod said with fervor. "It doesn't matter how many stripes you have," the captain added. "With seven kids, you travel resale class." One could tinkle a few Christmas bells with a new, toast-colored Prada saddlebag (\$375); silver link earrings from Tiffany (\$125); a rhinestone "eye" brooch by Chanel (\$150); or—at the adjacent men's store—Polo suspenders in brown or black alligator (\$95); a selection of Charvet pocket squares (\$20); and a Donna Karan car coat in olive suède, originally priced at \$2,395 (tag still attached) and here \$500.

I realize that the Balzacian provenance of some worn-again gifts (desperate mistresses pawning love tokens; heartless heirs dumping their dead parents' long-cherished possessions) may strike some readers as depressing, if not ghoulish—particularly at the holidays. On the

other hand, the *Gemütlichkeit* of thrifting goes far to dispel any such pall. Tallulah Vintage, 300 East 88th Street, a basement shop with the allure of a storybook attic, sells clothing and accessories "from Prohibition to Camelot." The nostalgic glamour of its wares and the Southern charm of its owner, Sarah Liston—a pixieish Texan—have attracted a devoted clientele. Here I met two chic blondes: Véronique Stoll, a French-born "domestic engineer" formerly in public relations, and her eight-year-old daughter, Emilie, an apprentice thrifter. Emilie was entranced by a glossy furball that she mistook for a headless stuffed animal until her mother explained what a muff was. Fetching examples in black fox, baby seal, and white rabbit ranged in price from \$150 to \$198, and would suit big or little girls who like to play "dress up," particularly if their outfits were accessorized by a pair of black lace gauntlets (\$35) and a slinky clutch of gold mesh (\$125), still in its box from Whiting & Davis. The firm, I learned, was one of America's oldest handbag companies, founded in the nineteenth century and now—like the hard-smoking glamour girls with marcelled hair who haunted El Morocco, and whose cigarette cases find their way to Tallulah—defunct.

A little to the south, along Third Avenue, the not-for-profit shops that benefit worthy charities are strung like the beads of a thrifter's rosary. Caroline McKinnon, the retail director of Cancer Care, at 1480 (84th Street), receives donations, she said, "from C.E.O.s, grandes dames, and twenty-year-olds moving out of fifth-floor walkups." A dandy of either sex might love a supple leather Stetson by Patricia Underwood (\$125); a set of sterling-silver dressing brushes (\$85); or an antique magnifying glass with a carved handle (\$175). Imani Smith, an attractive lawyer from Atlanta who, with her mother, Sarah, was examining the handbags hanging above a rack of cashmere twinsets (all under \$100), would, she said, have no qualms about buying used Christmas presents for her loved ones, but, she added, "I'd concentrate on decorative objects or classy accessories rather than on clothing." A festively glazed Bavarian tea set, twenty-three pieces for \$200 at the Spence-Chapin Thrift Shop, 1473 Third, at 83rd Street, might meet



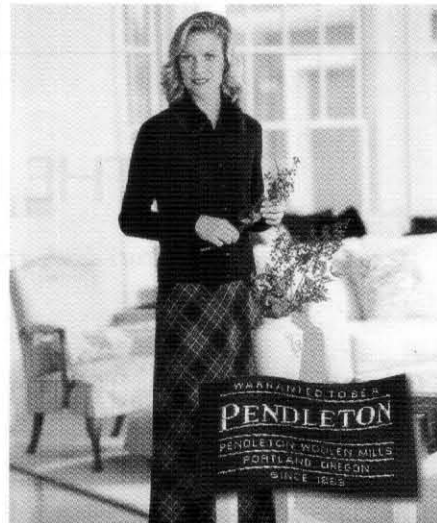


All the Towns Look the Same to the Lion—He's a King, After All, and Has No Need for Names and Names and More Names

found a classic Olivetti portable in pristine condition for \$75. (It's not still there, however, because I bought it. As the manager was ringing up the sale, a little girl noticed it on the counter. "Do you know what that is?" her mother asked. She didn't.) Modest prices for unusual bibelots also drew me back to Acquired Taste, a tiny shop that opened about two months ago at 220 East 10th Street. Here a structured, brown ostrich shoulder bag with brass hardware (\$75) consorted ecumenically with a nineteenth-century Lotto set in a graphic box (\$25); an antique German reticule of silver mesh with a chased frame (\$125); and a tortoiseshell box inlaid with a hand-painted miniature of an eighteenth-century French gentleman identified by a yellowed label on the inside cover as one "M. de Chessimont" (\$75). It just might have come from Versailles.

The politesse of Jae Jarrell, proprietor of the cavernous men's vintage shop that bears her name at 466 Greenwich Street (Watts), is of an old world without being ancien régime. In the nineteen-seventies, Jarrell and her husband, Wadsworth, were, she says, "part of a revolutionary movement" called Africobra: "African Commune of Bad, Relevant Artists." They raised three good, relevant children; both are connoisseurs of jazz; she sells his soulful portraits in pencil

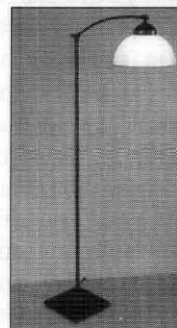
of jazz greats (prints are \$50; originals \$150-\$350). Hats, however (fedoras, berets, bowlers, flap-eared fur muzhik hats, tweed newsboy caps, boaters, and Belle Époque top hats of beaver or collapsible silk), are her "signature" commodity. Jarrell restores them to mint condition on old wooden blocks in a small workshop separated from her selling floor by a demilune wire screen of her own design festooned with eccentric ties. Most of her customers are men who have become friends. "Once guys find a suitable place, they are very loyal," she observes. One could shop here blissfully for any loyal friend deserving of Art Nouveau cufflinks in rose gold (\$95); a Deco grooming set of three boar-bristle brushes in chrome frames inset with embossed leather (\$75); mother-of-pearl tuxedo studs (\$32); a cashmere overcoat from a large selection (\$250-\$500); a Hudson Bay plaid lap or carriage rug (\$95-\$120); or a nest of three Deco casseroles in red enamel with decorative handles (\$150). "It's all stuff from an age of elegance," Jarrell concludes, and, at sixty-seven, she has arrived, elegantly, at "the age of doing what I feel like." That is the point of thrifting: to quit the program and go fishing for an elusive desire or memory that you can't articulate until—embodied in a thing—it speaks to you from the deep. ♦



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