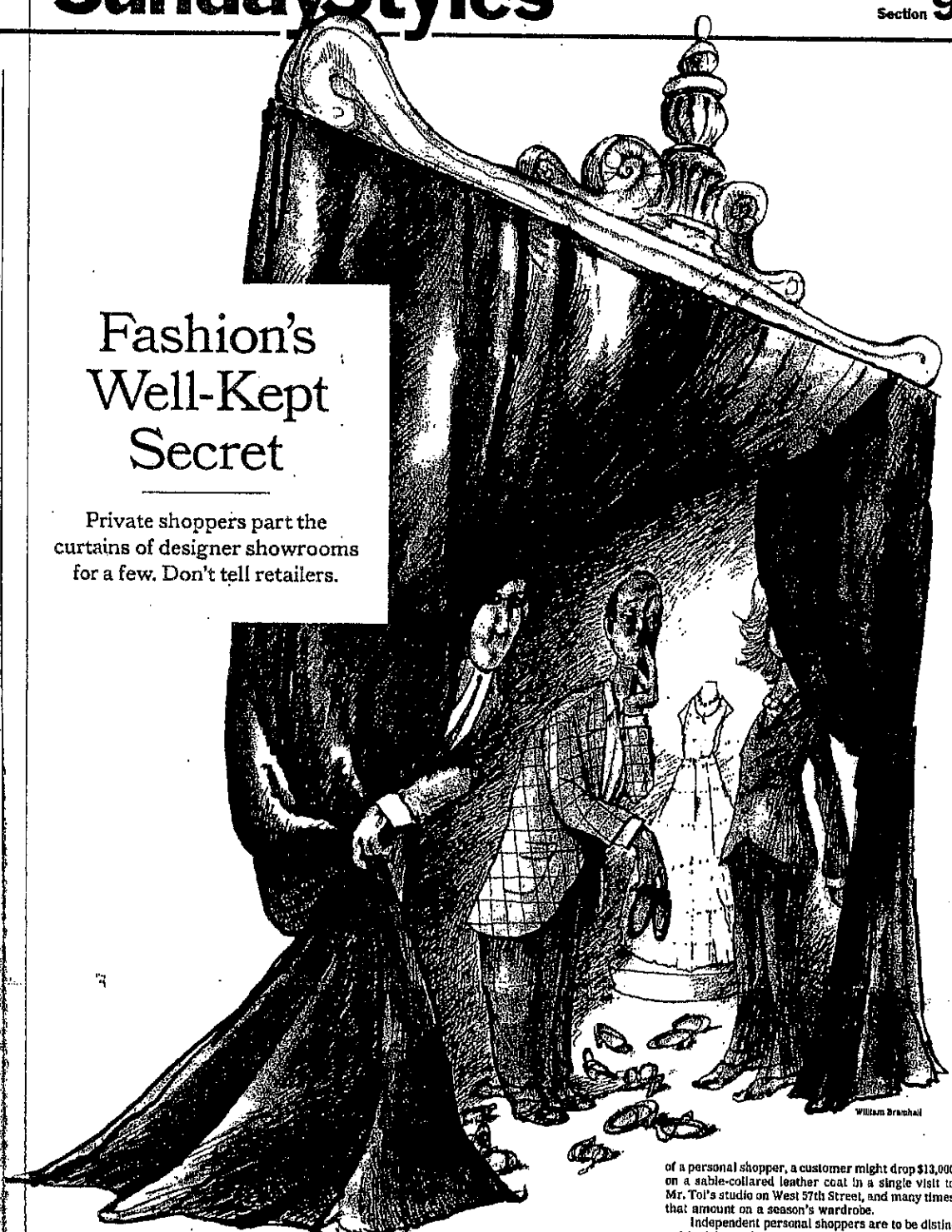


# SundayStyles

Section 9

## Fashion's Well-Kept Secret

Private shoppers part the curtains of designer showrooms for a few. Don't tell retailers.



By RUTH LA FERLA

**E**LIZABETH HOWARD can dress a room like a master, adjusting a picture or moving an urn to match her ideal of perfection. Dressing herself? Well, that might be a challenge. "It's like painting by numbers," said Ms. Howard, a New York decorator. "I like being told what to do."

When her fashion sense deserts her, she calls Richard Smith, her friend and style guru — the man she counts on to instruct her in the difference between a spool and a spindle heel, and who, when she invites him, will take her on a cyclone tour of designers' showrooms to unearth the perfect dress and sandals to wear to a summer lawn party.

A spruce man whose work uniform is a crisp oxford shirt and rep tie, Mr. Smith is an independent

personal shopper, one of a select coterie of New York fashion insiders whose business it is to guide the weary, the stressed and the style-perplexed over fashion's rocky shoals.

Freelance professionals — their numbers are estimated to range from a meager half-dozen to 20 or more — personal shoppers are the favorite hidden resource of many of the chicest, most prominent and most visible New Yorkers. Nina Griscom, Julia Koch, the decorator Charlotte Moss and Peggy Felgen, the wife of the art dealer Richard Felgen, have all relied on a private shopper's expertise.

"These are the ladies who lunch — they have money and they will spend it," said Zang Tol, a fashion designer and longtime collaborator with Mr. Smith. Clients also typically include women at the top of their professions, who lack either the time or the confidence to shop for themselves. On the advice

of a personal shopper, a customer might drop \$13,000 on a sable-collared leather coat in a single visit to Mr. Tol's studio on West 57th Street, and many times that amount on a season's wardrobe.

Independent personal shoppers are to be distinguished from the shopping services that are available in department stores, which limit customers to the merchandise in stock, and for which they pay retail prices. Private shoppers are a breed apart; they flit from store to store and from manufacturer to manufacturer, often getting clients wholesale prices. They are different, too, from celebrity stylists, who tend to be as limelight-seeking as the stars; private shoppers work behind the scenes, drumming up business by word of mouth and performing a service largely cloaked in secrecy.

Because they often compete with retailers and incur their wrath, many private shoppers were reluctant to be named. "It's not really good for a shopper to have a high profile," one said. "You don't want the stores to have your name."

Their clients are equally light-lipped. Many would no sooner see their names in print than contract a case of hives. "They won't talk to you,"

Continued on Page 2

# Fashion's Well-Kept Secret

Continued From Page 1

warned Phyllis Finkel, a personal shopper with a mostly uptown clientele. "They want people to think they pick out their own clothes at the Paris couture."

Other women demur from sheer force of habit. Mrs. Howard, the decorator, was typical. "Don't use my maiden name," she pleaded, only half in jest. "My family would die."

At one time, women like Mrs. Howard might have plowed through store racks with a friend. These days they are more likely to be accompanied by a shopper. Such consultants "are impartial," said Jackie Rogers, who bans personal shoppers from her ready-to-wear showroom on West 40th Street, but admits a vetted few to her couture salon on Madison Avenue. "These people have no egos, but they do have taste."

Better yet, they have access, by-passing the stores and steering their clients directly to some of Seventh Avenue's top designer showrooms to buy their suits and evening dresses, usually for a fraction of the retail price. Few designers who work with independent shoppers will discuss this practice, for fear of alienating retailers likely to object that affluent customers are being diverted from their aisles. Barbara Oliver, a personal shopper with a Park Avenue clientele, lists Carolina Herrera and Bill Blass as among her pet resources. Calls to the showrooms of the two companies seeking comment were not returned.

At one time, Mrs. Oliver's resource list was more extensive. But lately, the "landscape of the business has changed a great deal," she said. "Donna Karan, Calvin Klein — these were our bread and butter, great to shop for at wholesale level," she said. "But once they opened their

## Knowing a woman's taste better than her husband.

stores uptown, that killed the business for all of us. These people don't want to compete with themselves."

What personal shoppers can't provide in fancy labels they make up in personal pampering. Billing themselves as fashion consultants, a handful work on retainer. The majority, however, charge a 20 percent commission on the price paid for merchandise. This fee covers a gamut of services, from buying garments off the rack to supervising fittings to introducing customers to little-known designers who work on a cut-to-order basis. A few like Mr. Smith will toss grooming tips into the bargain, sharing knowledge of jewelry, shoes and even underwear.

Timothy Lloyd Pope, a former top sales executive with companies including Saks Fifth Avenue, Geoffrey Beene and Carolyne Roehm, takes such cosseting to fantastic extremes. He accompanies his clients, whom he declined to name, to the Paris couture shows in January and July. He has designed entire weddings, including the leasing of a private jet for the wedding party, he said. He also collaborates with designers to create jewelry and furs for clients, and works with architects to redesign their closets. "In my case, this



Barbara Alpor for The New York Times

Put together: Phyllis Finkel, right, a personal shopper, with her client Sherry Fabrikant, center, and Randi Rahm, a designer, at Ms. Rahm's studio on the ground floor of an East Side town house.

business is not about people trying to get a better price," Mr. Pope said. "Price isn't the issue; service is."

Such hyperattentive service and maintenance is balm for fragile egos, as kind to a woman's vanity as it is to her purse. That fact is not lost on the canniest consultants, who strive to establish a close bond with clients. "A shopper gets to know your personality," said Mrs. Feigen, who shops with Mr. Smith. "He can assess your lifestyle. Richard knows my taste as well as my husband does — I would say better. But that's his job."

He also adjusts to your aesthetic wavelength. "My style is pretty definitive," said Jane Harpel, a semi-tired decorator and a client of Mrs. Finkel. "When a shopper understands that style, she can work with you very efficiently."

A pair of Chanel oversize pearl buttons clamped to her ears, Mrs. Finkel is just as solicitous, cultivating a warm, unflappable persona designed as much to reassure her clients as to see her through fashion emergencies. "When you realize you're dressing the first wife and the second wife for the same affair, that's a no-win situation," Mrs. Finkel said. "But once I find out a thing like that, I'm totally honest with both of my clients." Not that it helps. "Inevitably one woman thinks the other looks better, and of course, it's all my fault," she sighed.

The need for aesthetic fine-tuning isn't limited to uptown plutocrats. Joe Lupo, a partner in Visual Therapy, a shopping and styling service that works exclusively with retailers, remembers one young client imploring, "I'm a rocker chick. Can't you make me look like a sophisticated rocker chick?" He sheathed her in Marc Jacobs leather pants and a form-fitting sweater from Club Monaco, a polished but hip combination that meshed with her self-image.

Personal shoppers gained cachet in the mid-1980's, at a time when many stores had cut back on their wide range of designers and services. "The fashion edge and leadership that department stores used to provide has gone to a great extent, because large brands have become so dominant in stores," said Walter Loeb, a New York retail analyst. "But customers' need for personal guidance is as important as ever."

Because they vie with stores for well-heeled customers, shoppers inevitably incur the anger of retailers. Especially steamed are those small and mid-size upscale fashion boutiques, which feel that personal shoppers are usurping their role as style arbiters. "We give our customers our pick of the best," said Mary Jane Denzer, whose self-named store in White Plains, N.Y., carries Ungaro, Valentino and a handful of Seventh Avenue's elite. "And we give her a beautiful environment to shop in."

Speaking for many of her retailing peers, she added: "We don't like shoppers. Any designer that I buy from who deals directly with the customer is not invited to our store."

But if shoppers are a bane to retailers, they are a boon to some designers, who court them in the hope of fattening profits. "I try to protect my stores," said Mr. Tol, who sells to retailers like Ms. Denzer and Jimmy's on the Upper East Side, as well as national stores like Jacobson's and Nordstrom. "But nobody likes to turn away business."

Mr. Tol says he does about eight percent of his business with personal shoppers. That figure soars to 70 percent in the showrooms of other fashion makers, generally small scale, who find retailers' demands excessive. "It's financially impossible to do business with a store like Saks," said Frank Composto, who made his name in the 80's as a cos-

tumer for "Dynasty" and at one time sold to Neiman Marcus and other specialty retailers, but no longer. (A Saks spokeswoman said no one was available on Friday to respond to Mr. Composto.) "The stores are asking now for 30 percent in rent money," the designer said, referring to the fee, a percent of the wholesale order, for occupying floor space. "Not to

## They have no egos, but they do have taste.

mention markdowns and returns." A single shopper might bring him \$40,000 or \$50,000 a year in sales, the same as what he might expect from a store that bought his line.

Those small fashion houses that sometimes work on a cut-to-order basis stand to benefit most from personal shoppers, and some designers are almost entirely dependent on them. "They are my lifeline to people who have the taste and can afford to do this type of thing," said Randi Rahm, who runs a thriving couture business from a ground floor salon in a town house on East 30th Street.

Jayne Bentzen, a client of Mr. Smith's, often reaches reflexively for one of her favorite Calvin Klein suits. Mr. Smith's job is to coax her into something more adventurous. "I want to look good, I care about that," said Ms. Bentzen, who is married to Benedict Silverman, a Manhattan businessman and art collector. "But we have two homes. I have a 6-year-old, and I'm the president of the parents' association at her school. We have a social life and some charity projects we're involved in. I'm all over the map. I need my Palm Pilot. I'm just too busy to walk into my closet and reinvent myself each day."