

Ottawa's second hand secrets: Diplomats' wives and mandarins trade their designer dresses and shoes for their peers' Gucci bags and Prada tops. But just don't ask who.

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Illustration: Color Photo: Jean Levac, CanWest News Service / Clients of Monique Dugas, who owns consignment store Clothes Encounters of a Second Time in Ottawa, have been asking about Martha Stewart's Hermes bag.

Color Photo: Chris Wattie, National Post / A Burberry wrinkled jacket with Escada sport pants and a Gucci purse were for sale at Clothes Encounters of a Second Time in Ottawa last week.

Color Photo: For men, there was a Hugo Boss suit, a Hugo Boss shirt and an Armani tie.

OTTAWA - At private dinners and fancy balls in Ottawa, foreign ambassadors' wives swan around in beautiful designer labels: Prada, Escada, Gucci. Not only are they expected to host and be hosted on a regular basis, but they must look good all the time.

It is a demanding life that requires closets full of expensive dresses -- being caught in the same outfit too many times can be as embarrassing for these women as serving overcooked filet mignon.

So they share a dirty little secret: Their dresses, handbags and shoes are often second-hand. Clothes that appear to have come straight from the runways of Paris, New York and London may even, in fact, have once belonged to another diplomat's wife.

For years, these women have been stacking their wardrobes with brand names from a consignment shop called Clothes Encounters of a Second Time, an unassuming store in the city's New Edinburgh neighbourhood, near many of the ambassadors' homes that line the streets of Ottawa's tony Rockcliffe district.

Some come here as often as once a week. They flog their Fendi and pick up someone else's used Gucci at discount prices. A few of their husbands buy and sell their Hugo Boss suits.

"They all do [it]. They bring things in and they shop here," says Monique Dugas, the shop's fashionably dressed 36-year-old owner, who used to work as a manager and make-up artist at MAC Cosmetics. Dugas, a bubbly francophone with a shock of red hair, is suitably well put-together in clothes she has cherry-picked from the bags of brand names brought in by her clients: Axara pants that cost her \$75 and a second-hand Mexx jacket she got for \$25.

The store was started more than 20 years ago by three women who met while playing tennis. They got talking at their club and decided there would be a

market for sharing high-end clothes. Dugas bought the store from the previous owners when they retired two years ago.

The clients who come here, particularly those in diplomatic circles, insist on discretion. They sign a contract with the store stipulating their identity will not be disclosed to the new owners of their recycled designer items or to anyone else. When they come in to drop off clothes, purses and shoes -- many of which have only been worn once or twice -- they often slip in the back door to avoid being spotted. They call ahead and meet Dugas in private in her office at the back of the store.

The ambassadors' wives from Britain and Australia are rumoured to be among the regulars in the store, but Dugas says she will not reveal her client list. The spouse of another diplomat, who used to live in Ottawa but relocated to the United States when her husband's job changed, still shops here when she is in town. "She buys and buys," Dugas says.

"But I can't name names," she repeats during our interview. "That's why they shop here. It's discreet."

(While foreign diplomats are shopping second-hand, Canadian diplomats living abroad have often been more spendthrift. As ambassador in Washington, Raymond Chretien, nephew of the former prime minister, charged the government for half of the cost of a \$2,850 Saks-Jandel evening gown and a \$1,311 Louis Feraud pantsuit, as part of his government-approved clothing budget, according to Access to Information documents obtained by the Ottawa Citizen a couple years ago. Michael Kergin, the current ambassador to the United States, filed claims for half the cost of 18 new suits, eight jackets, seven dresses for his wife, Margarita, two winter coats, a tuxedo and two pairs of pants.)

The Ottawa consignment shop sells everything from gowns, handbags and silk scarves to luggage, coats

and costume jewellery. Some women even bring in their unused pantyhose to be resold.

The store prices most designer items at one-third the original retail cost. A brown leather Prada bag sells for \$395 (it was \$1,000 new) and a Louis Vuitton suitcase goes for \$495 (more than \$1,000 originally). Italian-made Bruno Magli and Tod's shoes that normally cost \$300 sell for less than \$100, a black lacy Prada top is marked at \$75, and a black Valentino dress that was worn twice but was bought a while ago sells for only \$175. An original Galliano jacket with appliques is marked to sell at the cheap price of \$500 because it is unusual enough that it will only appeal to a limited clientele.

Furs are popular in the sub-zero Ottawa winters: A black mink once sold for \$3,000; a fox sold for \$2,000.

There are also casual clothes: tennis and golf outfits and brand new bathing suits. Armani glasses that cost \$450 go for \$20 (someone bought them for the frames and changed the prescription lenses). Gucci sunglasses sell for \$55.

Diplomats' wives often call ahead when they have a function coming up to get their name on a waiting list. "They want Louis Vuitton and they want the little Gucci clutch bag to go with their outfit. It's all about the brand names," Dugas says.

When they shop, they drop the names of their fashion role models. They tell Dugas they want the conservative, classic look of Aline Chretien and Mila Mulroney, the wives of former prime ministers. They aspire to dress like Adrienne Clarkson, the Governor-General, who often moves in the same circles. The Jackie Kennedy and the dainty Audrey Hepburn looks are sought after.

A handbag that was the same as one carried by Mila Mulroney during a television appearance went fast. The purse was black and had a unique lock on the bottom for jewellery. It came in without a label but the seller was a regular at the store and known for her high fashion (she also brought in Gucci bags that day). "Everyone was telling me, 'Oh my God, Brian Mulroney's wife had a handbag like that,'" Dugas says. It likely retailed for more than \$2,000 and sold for \$450.

One of the much-talked-about Hermes bags Martha Stewart toted around during her stock trading trial in Manhattan, which costs nearly \$1,500 and has since been sold out in New York boutiques, has been much in demand. "They have been phoning, saying, 'If you get one, call me,'" Dugas says.

With some clients, Dugas will take everything from their closets because of their reputation in Ottawa society. Usually, though, she asks that they bring in items that are no more than two or three years old unless they are vintage items or classic pieces.

One gem, a green taffeta dress, with chiffon around the waist and crinoline underneath, originally worn to the New Orleans Mardi Gras and bought for \$2,000, sold for around \$600.

Last summer, a woman brought in the complete ensemble she had worn to the wedding of Charles and Diana, the Prince and Princess of Wales. The woman has so many outfits she did not feel sentimental about letting it go.

The sage green jacket and skirt, made by designer Jean Muir and bought in London sold for a mere \$325. The buyer, who happened to be a cousin of Muir, also took the matching shoes and hat. She wanted to know the story behind the dress -- who had worn it to dance with royalty. "They are always curious to know the name. I say, 'I can't tell you. It's confidential,'" Dugas says.

As well as diplomatic wives, senior civil servants shop here. Teachers also come into the store, picking up bargain designer labels for the classroom.

Women also shop for their teenage daughters. They have already started coming into the store to buy their daughters' spring prom dresses, picking up fancy gowns for only a couple of hundred dollars. For their daughters, they look for Jennifer Lopez and Charlize Theron styles.

At two sales during the year -- winter and summer -- brands are discounted another 50%. Even in the cold, many customers line up outside after having scouted out the shop a couple of days in advance to see what will be on offer. They have fought over Linda Lundstrom outfits and nearly-new Kate Spade bags.

One woman, who comes regularly and lines up for the sales, shopped with her daughter for outfits the two wore to the prime minister's Christmas gala for Foreign Affairs staff, held at the Museum of Civilization. "I wore a black Anne Klein, below the knees," says the mother, who did not want to be named. Her daughter, who works for Foreign Affairs, also bought an outfit for a reception she attended at the Polish embassy.

Clients come through word-of-mouth. Consignment stores selling high-end labels are relatively rare, so some customers who have moved to Toronto or Calgary still send their designer outfits to the shop. "They spend so much on designer clothes that they figure it's worth their while," says Dugas, whose clients get back 50% of the final sale price.

Customers have also driven from out-of-town to shop here. One couple from Kingston, Ont., travels to buy clothes three times a year. The husband and wife both shop; he picks up all of his brand-name suits and ties.

The men's clothing, located in the store's lower level,

sells for less than the women's items. Men are not willing to pay as much for second-hand clothes, Dugas finds. A Harry Rosen tie sells for \$5, an Armani carry-on luggage bag sells for \$15 and a grey Hugo Boss suit goes for \$425. There are a lot of tuxedos that have only been worn once.

Many of the items come from Europe, New York or high-fashion stores in Toronto or Montreal. They often come from the diplomats' home countries or were picked up during travels to exotic locations and can be rare finds. Some are expensive Canadian labels, such as Lida Baday.

The bargains are part of the attraction but the women also shop for variety, originality and vintage appeal. Buying here means there is little chance of someone showing up twice in the same Holt Renfrew dress at a party. Though, with Ottawa society moving in fairly small circles, there is always a risk the original owner could be at their function.

Andree Girard, an Ottawa woman, comes in regularly looking for one particular woman's recycled items. She knows the woman often travels to Paris and New York and sells her second-hand items, including custom-made clothes.

Her best buys include two fancy dresses she wore to parties in Europe with her husband, an entrepreneur who works for Canadian and foreign companies doing business abroad. One was a red, mid-calf-length Anne Klein dress she got for only \$200.

When she is at private functions around Ottawa, she often recognizes diplomats' wives from the shop, she says.

As with the ambassadors' wives who declined to talk about shopping at the store, so great is the concern about keeping a certain image that Girard and her husband requested her identity be protected and only her maiden name be used. The couple mix in diplomatic circles for his work. He did not want foreign officials knowing his wife shops at a consignment store.

"Everyone does it," says her husband. "But they don't want people to see them at parties and say, 'Oh, I wonder if she bought that second-hand?'"