

Is San Francisco Losing Its Fashion Identity?

International labels are displacing local designers on the city's red carpets. **By MARYANN LoRUSSO**

THEN (L-R)

A very pregnant **Jennifer Siebel Newsom** (with hubby Gavin) wearing Lily Samii in 2009; **Barbara Brookins-Schneider** dressed in Michael Casey in 2003; **Sallie Hunting** wearing Colleen Quen in 2006.



Two or three decades ago, when a member of San Francisco's elite headed to a red-carpet gala, she'd turn to a local designer for her eveningwear. It was a luxurious, almost intimate experience to purchase an elaborate gown from one of the city's few high-end department stores or, better yet, to be fitted at one of the even fewer couture studios. If the client chose the latter, she might have been on a first-name basis with the dressmaker, who probably also clothed the patron's mother, and perhaps her grandmother.

The dresses would be made to measure, grazing every curve and shimmering and swaying with just the right personalized details. There would be several fittings, and on gala night, friends and colleagues would try to guess who made the dress—relying on signature accents and the fact that there were only a handful of possibilities.

One of those possibilities was Michael Casey, who had designed costumes at Radio City Music Hall in New York, swathing celebrities in his glamorous threads before moving to San Francisco and running his eveningwear business here from 1984 to 2005. Another was Gibson Palermo, a label launched in 1979 by John Paul Gibson and **Phillip Palermo** that outfitted local fashionistas such as **Danielle Steel** for 16 years. A third choice was **Colleen Quen**, who arrived here around the turn of the millennium and quickly developed a following with her exotic, nature-inspired gowns.

Then there was **Lily Samii**, whose impressive resume included an apprenticeship with Oscar-winning designer Edith Head. Samii ran



a high-end shop in Marin before opening a showroom in Union Square in 2001. Her classically styled, European-influenced gowns were favored by many of San Francisco's illuminati, including **Gretchen Kimball**, the late Ann Fisher, and members of the Haas family.

"Back in the day, the local designers were the names women wore when they wanted to make a fashion statement," says stylist **Jacques Pantazes**. This was especially important on opening nights of the ballet and opera, when the rest of the nation actually had their eyes on San Francisco. "Those were the events that got covered in *Town & Country*, *Vogue*, *Bazaar* and the *Nob Hill Gazette*," Pantazes recalls. "Those were the moments that counted."

As the city began attracting a new kind of globetrotting wealth, our retail landscape exploded. In 2007, Barneys arrived on the scene, and in no time Union Square was overflowing with design houses from Carolina Herrera to Valentino. Concurrently, social media began giving women instantaneous access to couture around the world. All of this altered the way local ladies shopped, as they began to look beyond their beloved Bay Area designers.

"The women I know who attend these galas are way more international and fashion aware," says **Simon Ungless**, executive director of the School of Fashion at Academy of Art University. "They'll order one-of-a-kind pieces from design houses in New York, London and Paris, or work with sales representatives at local department stores to secure special pieces. They're no longer reliant on a local dressmaker. There are way more social kudos associated with wearing an 'it' brand, rather than supporting a local designer."

Among the hot international labels recently seen around town are **Peter Copping** at Oscar de la Renta, Saint Laurent, Balmain and Givenchy. Designs from **Stella McCartney**, **Christopher Kane**, **Naeem Kahn** and **Zac Posen** have also been spotted with increasing regularity.



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NOW (L-R)

Komal Shah rocking Oscar de la Renta in 2014; **Karen Caldwell** wearing one of her own creations last year; **Deepa Pakianathan** in Rubin Singer and **Sonya Molodetskaya** wearing Vasily Vein in 2014.

So is anyone still wearing local? Yes, Ungless says, but in rare cases. Fashion journalist **Christine Suppes** has been a huge fan of Los Angeles brand Rodarte, for example, while **Sonya Molodetskaya** has flaunted several of Sausalito-based designer **Vasily Vein**'s intricately detailed, show-stopping frocks. "Sonya has a big following in the Russian community and has put Vein's designs on the map here," Pantazes says.

One could argue that as we've developed a more global mindset, some much-needed fun has been thrust onto our red carpets. Once in a while, an edgy statement—such as a corset-inspired creation by Hayes Valley designer

Autumn Adamme—will pop up at a fundraiser, and overall it seems more ladies are experimenting with designers they might not have considered previously. "Women are trying to be original," says frequent gala attendee **Karen Caldwell**, who has worn everything from Lily Samii to her own original designs. "They are buying off the rack and collecting a wide range of gowns, including those from young, up-and-coming designers."

Where does that leave high-end local dressmakers like Samii, whose gowns are still carried by Saks, but who has fallen off the radar somewhat in recent years? She says that over the past decade she's dressed a new generation of jet-setting clients, from former San Francisco First Lady **Jennifer Siebel**

Newsom to tech goddess **Marissa Mayer**. But she acknowledges that the business "just isn't the same," as fewer and fewer women "have the time for fittings or the appreciation for a [made-to-order] dress."

More optimistic about the current fashion scene is Quen, who stepped away from the couture scene after a breast-cancer diagnosis and is now focused on her new career as a watercolor painter. She says she's invigorated by San Francisco's diverse new fashion scene. "There are so many more avant-garde, dramatic looks out there," she says, adding that she'll still produce a made-to-order gown in her 7 Heron St. studio for special clients. "In years

past, the women here were more conservative," Quen says, "but now I love going out to a gala and seeing such a great mix."

Pantazes agrees. "The French have an expression, *l'embarras du choix*, which means 'an overload of choices.'" San Francisco's fashion scene is contending with that now and, for some, it's about time. **NHG**

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Clutch Time

Is the world ready for men carrying purses? **By ROBYN HAGAN CAIN**

You won't spot **Lorence Manansala** without a bag. The San Francisco-based stylist has an enviable collection of totes and messenger bags that he carries to and from work. But take a peek into any of them, and you'll find a clutch nesting inside.

"A clutch, to me, is a must after five. It's a way to complete your evening look. It's beyond metrosexual," Manansala maintains. "It's just as much an accessory as a beautiful shoe or a Rolex." (His collection, ranging from Bottega Veneta and Gucci to Judith Leiber and YSL, isn't a bad place to start.)

While man bags, also known as murses, are ubiquitous now, that wasn't always the case. Stylist **Jacques Pantazes** explains that the man clutch trend originated about 40 years ago. "From 1975 through around 1981, clutches were a somewhat common accessory for stylish European men,

and an outward sign of sexual ambiguity," he recalls. "They were the first 'purses' that men could wear in our time. Naturally, they were adopted by the early pioneers of the outwardly gay community."

In the '90s, television shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* mocked the idea of men carrying bags, but the surge toward metrosexuality in the early aughts destigmatized the look. Most stylish gents today embrace the carryall; clutches, however, remain the third rail of men's accessories.

Publicist **Mark Olson** says that strangers sometimes

stare when he carries a clutch, and he rarely runs into other men carrying one—but he's hopeful that will change. "The whole androgyny and gender fluidity trend seems to be picking up; you can see it even more in the men's Spring/Summer 2016 collections that just showed," Olson says. "Right now, man clutches seem to have only really caught on in Europe and New York. But it's only a matter of time before it spreads."

Perhaps Olson is right. He and Manansala use their clutches to carry the

standard items that women carry in mini bags—a phone, wallet, keys and lip balm—without spoiling the lines of their pants or jacket pockets. "They're wonderful for dinners, events and nights out," Olson explains. "They show your style while holding everything you need, and keep your pockets from bulging."

Pantazes, however, remains unconvinced. "Carrying a clutch today is unnecessary as a man can just as easily carry a 'murse' and be better served by it," he says. "I would never recommend any man carry a clutch. There are so many better options out there, including those little pouches that slip on your belt."

Murses. Clutches. Fanny packs. The options seem endless. The only question at the end of the day is: Who'll be left holding the bag? **NHG**

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Lorence Manansala (above) never goes anywhere without his clutch; Mark Olson (far left) and Cameron Silver are also devotees.

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