

Brown Bag Couture

The recession is forcing shopaholics to get sneaky with their purchases
Kathryn Blaze Carlson, National Post

More often than not these days, shoppers along Bloor Street in Toronto's swank Yorkville neighbourhood emerge empty-handed from designer stores, but their empty hands may reveal little about their spending habits or what transpired in the shops that day.

Fewer shopping bags used to mean fewer purchases, but that simple correlation is becoming defunct as those who want to spend are increasingly finding unconventional and quirky ways to conceal their consumption.

Indeed, at this very moment, thousands of dollars worth of couture is being covertly trafficked in nondescript bags, stowed away in tissue paper or mailed directly home.

Although Tiffany blue, Hermès orange, and Holt Renfrew pink have long bestowed status, some shoppers are beginning to feel that these conspicuous bags peg them as insensitive to the plight of those who have been hit by a plunging stock market and massive job cuts. And so, in place of such open flaunting of consumption, the practise of what has come to be called "stealth wealth" is taking hold on luxury streets like this.

Raudel Amores, a store clerk at Bloor Street's Escada store, said it is not unusual for a client to forego the logo-laden Escada shopping bag in favour of generic tissue paper.

"Sometimes people have been asking to have an item wrapped in tissue and just put it in their purse or add it to another shopping bag," Mr. Amores said. "It might be that people don't want to be seen walking around with a ton of designer bags, especially in certain neighbourhoods."

At nearby Hermès, a clerk said the store offers white paper bags upon request.

Janet St. Germain, a photographer and mother of five browsing in Bloor Street's Cartier store, said she understands why a shopper might feel uneasy leaving a high-end store with a retail bag.

"Given the recession right now and how so many people are suffering economically, spending money at this sort of store probably appears wasteful," she conceded. "I'd feel far more comfortable carrying a Gap bag around in public than I would carrying around a Gucci bag right now."

Forbes magazine recently highlighted this trend of hiding high-end purchases as though they were contraband, listing "Ten Ways to Buy Luxury, Discreetly." Among the suggestions for avoiding guilt: shoppers should opt for brands that have a "less look-at-me attitude."

"Nowadays, wealthy people don't want to be seen as ostentatious or as though they're bragging," said Milton Pedraza, CEO of the Luxury Institute, a New York based research and consulting firm. "Some of them realize it can appear offensive to people, and they don't want to be the poster child for greed or insensitivity."

Paurav Shukla, senior lecturer at the Brighton Business School in England and a researcher in luxury consumption, recently launched a survey of recession spending and social perceptions. "We found that in recessionary times consumers become more socially aware," he said, with those surveyed more likely now to refrain from conspicuous shows of wealth. "This reflects social maturity and sensitivity to market conditions."

Jessica Fewster, an operations manager for a Toronto restaurant, was browsing at the Coach store on Bloor Street last week when she admitted she feels a kind of "survivor guilt" whenever she contemplates spending big while others cannot.

"Absolutely I feel guilt if I make a big purchase," she said, quickly adding that the leather Coach bag dangling from her wrist was a gift. "I don't necessarily feel so weird with my Coach bag here on Bloor, but if I were out in Ajax I'd feel different. It's more fitting here than ... where people are probably being hit harder."

She also admitted to minimizing such purchases from her significant other: "I wouldn't hide a purchase, but I've definitely downplayed the cost if I know I've overspent on something," she said. "I did that just yesterday. I told my boyfriend my new computer cost \$1,600, but it really cost \$2,000."

Ms. Fewster is part of a growing, albeit anonymous, group covertly helping to keep these high-end stores afloat. Inside the Coach store, clerk Monifa Charles said she overhears customers chatting about hiding a purchase from a spouse or a parent on a daily basis.

"We've definitely had more people saying they want to pay debit or in cash so their spouse can't see their purchase on the credit card bill," she said, adding the perpetrators are most often wives and students concealing their purchases from their husbands and parents. "This is definitely happening more often than before things got bad."

As more shoppers seek out stealth maneuvers to mask their sprees, high-end stores and online retailers are finding new ways to accommodate the growing need for discretion. Some luxury retailers have introduced enhanced personal shopping services, offering more private rooms and even sending a personal shopper to a client's home. Stores like Holt Renfrew have added a same-day courier service so clients can shop without ever leaving their house.

Some luxury brands are opting to host more private sales events, like the one last winter, where Tamara Mellon, founder and president of famed shoe designer Jimmy Choo, hosted a special sale in her London home.

"People are willing to do whatever it takes to avoid being seen carrying bags from luxury stores because of everything that implies," said Mr. Pedraza, of the Luxury Institute, who said online browsing is among the most popular options for remaining discreet. "There's a lot of resentment out there among people who are suffering, and the wealthy don't want to be the piñata of the populist resentment party."

In response, online boutiques like Net-A-Porter, which touts designers like Jimmy Choo and Chloe, started offering a "discreet packaging" option. A November 2008 e-mail blast to its customer base said this: "You've been shopping – we won't tell ... Hide all your fabulous Net-A-Porter purchases from inquisitive eyes with our new discreet packaging. Your secret is safe with us!"

The service, currently only available in New York, traffics hush-hush items in unbranded, recycled brown paper bags so that the site and the purchaser are "the only ones who know," the email said.

There are some, however, who refuse to be deterred from conspicuous consumption. Nicole Feix, a Toronto fashion entrepreneur who plans to launch an online site in the coming year, said she will not be offering discreet packaging because she does not believe in feeling guilt over spending, so long as the shopper can afford the purchases.

"The aspirational shoppers – those who long for luxury and spend beyond their means – are the only people who should feel guilty right now," Ms. Feix said. "That's the sort of group that got us into this mess in the first place."

David Chan, who browsed in the Cartier store on Bloor and planned to spend a few thousand dollars there, said he likewise does not identify with feeling remorse over excess spending. "I don't feel guilty at all, it's life," he said. "Some people are doing well, others are not. That's just how things go sometimes."

And Ms. Feix, who once worked in sales and marketing for Michael Kors, predicts this trend in stealth spending will likely fade soon enough: "This is about lifestyle. Just because other people are hurting, doesn't mean those with money are going to do a 180 and stop shopping – and they shouldn't."

National Post

Source: <http://www.nationalpost.com/story-printer.html?id=1485982>