

A Furocious Future for Oregon?

Fabulous Furs Hit the Fashion Radar

By *Lisa Baker*

Audrey Hepburn did it.

So did Marlene Dietrich.

Famously, boldly: they wore fur.

But they're dead, you say. And besides, that was when mink was *in*—a time when a fur was something to aspire to.

Nobody, you say, wears fur anymore.

Tell that to the fur industry, which is wrapping itself in record annual sales of \$1.8 billion, an increase of 7.5 percent over the previous year. Celebrities, who a few years ago eschewed fur, are returning to the fold. Most famously—model Cindy Crawford, who appears in the current Blackglama Mink “what becomes a legend” campaign bundled in black, sleek fur.

Nothing faux there.

It represents a return to the table for furriers, an industry unrelentingly targeted by animal rights activists who have resorted to arson, vandalism and physical threats to drive fur from the fashion pages. Among the activists' legal tools are celebrities who appear in various news stories and ads declaring their aversion to fur. One of them was Cindy Crawford, who activists say ten years ago posed for the infamous “I'd rather go naked than wear fur” ads, wearing only a hat and a saucy look. Crawford says she never intended to make a statement about fur, and that the anti-fur slogan was added to the photo later.

Nevertheless, the campaign appeared to be successful. Fur disappeared from runways and thus from magazines and therefore from retailers' windows. Women who'd finally inherited furs stored them rather than wear them in public.

Until recently.

Suddenly, fur salons are teaming with customers again—even, retailers say, in Oregon.

Portland's Schumacher Fur Co. reports a 32.6 percent increase in sales in the past year. Nicholas Ungar Furs in Oregon City reports two very busy years in a row. And Mario's, downtown Portland, lists fur as one of its top fashion items for the year.

Wilson's Leather, a national chain with an outlet store in Eugene, reports growing customer interest in any items that contain fur or fur accents. Ditto Bon-Macy's stores in Salem, Roseburg, Coos Bay and Eugene.

Beverly Mills, vice president of women's accessories for Bon-Macy's, said all things fur went like hotcakes in 2004, especially during the Christmas shopping season. "It was an excellent year."

Women's Wear Daily found that 74 percent of 200 high-end retail stores the magazine surveyed currently carry fur. Seventy-nine percent of remaining stores plan to add fur to their merchandise over the next 12 months.

Not that you'd recognize it right away—it's not your mother's mink coat. Fur is a different animal these days.

It's a knitted fur poncho, light as Splenda, swooningly soft. Formal with a dress or casual with jeans, ponchos are coming off the racks as fast as retailers can stock them.

Or, it's a velvet-sheen, full-length sheared fur that reverses to a microfiber raincoat with a discreet fur collar. It's daily grind rainwear and Friday night glamour, all in the same coat.

How about a fur vest? Or something with a funky fringe? Fur cuffs, even.

And color. Red fur, purple fur. Streaked like a punkster's hair, highlighted, or engraved in fanciful furrows.

Furriers say the new styles are drawing a new clientele. Sheared black fur jackets with leather on the reverse side are drawing men into the mix. And young adults, in particular, are seeing fur as something hip that can be worn casually. In the past year, 55 percent of the fur customer base was younger than 44, fur retailers say.

Bon-Macy's Mills says shoppers are drawn to what they see in the fashion magazines, and what they're seeing is fur. Fur everywhere and in so many different forms. "We have fur mufflers, gloves with fur trim, fur handbags. And the ponchos. Those were the really versatile item, very forgiving—anyone can wear them," she said.

Colors drew shoppers who aren't stirred by traditional black. "People really responded to color, the bright colors—fuschia, green, blue—it was something they didn't already have in their closet," Mills said.

And then there's the cost. Traditionally, fur was associated with accomplishment. Financial accomplishment, or, possibly, a profitable marriage. Now, fur—especially when woven with other fabrics—can be obtained for the pittance of \$100 to \$500. A fur vest: \$600. "It really is an affordable luxury," Mills said.

Those wanting the look without the price can still buy faux fur, which passes muster to the untrained eye but feels different to the touch.

Another development: New pelts. Raccoon and even nutria are sheared of the outer “guard” fur layer to expose softer-than-mink undercoats that shimmer like velvet.

Keith Kaplan, executive director of the Fur Information Council of America, said it is clothes designers that drive fashion and designers are inspired by new technology that allows fur to be more versatile than ever. “One of the greatest growth areas is the knitted furs, and it’s because they’re so adaptable. They’re so light, they can be worn 10 months out of the year.”

Lightness means West Coast states, with their more temperate climates, can become boom markets for fur products, he said. “In Los Angeles this year, the first shipment of knitted ponchos sold out in three days.”

Gale Olsen pulls the jet-black collar around her throat, and then runs her hands down the mink lapels. Her friends say it for her: “Wow.”

She looks up from the full-length coat, eyes shining, but she checks an all-out smile before it bursts on the scene. Attempting detachment. “I don’t know...” she ventures.

“It’s a lifetime investment,” one friend urges.

“That’s true,” Olsen agrees, the smile breaking through restraint.

But she is torn, tinkering with the idea of trading in her mother’s mink—out of fashion and several sizes too big—for one of the new furs. Maybe something reversible: Fabulous when the occasion calls for it. Tastefully understated for flying under the fashion radar. Perfect.

Perfect, but still not mom’s. “I don’t think I can do it. That coat has such memories attached to it.”

She speculates a few minutes more and then slowly unwraps herself, handing the coat back to the furrier. “Maybe I’ll have Mom’s restyled,” she says.

Olsen, from Southeast Portland, says fur is one of the few materials warm enough for winter yet classy enough to wear to a formal occasion. “If you have something that’s down-filled, it’s warm, but it has that stuffed look. It’s not for a dress evening.”

Her friend, Claire Harmon, is already sold on fur, having three at home so far. Today, she tries on a velvety sheared fur in a deep black that contrasts with her short, blond coif. It, too, is reversible. Two coats in one, but even on sale, this coat will mean trading in her other three. It’s worth it, she decides. “I think it’s more practical than the ones I have,” she said. “More Oregonian.”

Schumacher’s on a weekday morning, where Harmon and Olsen are shopping, is already jumping with customers. A rare sale, begun before the holidays and so popular that it was

held over, means long hours for the store's employees, who provide personal attention to every shopper.

Gregg Schumacher, the last member of the Schumacher family still hands-on in the store, explains in detail the craft associated with each coat, each vest, each poncho, bringing to each customer styles compatible with her figure. "Christmas went absolutely superb. We were just swamped," he says. "It's been amazing...I've had to staff the place with threefold the number of people to keep up."

Oregonians, he says, are looking to wear furs that are elegant, but not ostentatious. "They want a look that says, 'I'm wearing fur, but I'm not wearing FUR,'" he says. And so, they look at the reversibles and the sheered furs. He tells them fur fits Oregon because "rain doesn't hurt fur." Further, he says, "It's completely biodegradable. It's the most natural thing you can put on your back. That's why the environmentalists love us."

But the transaction, he says, doesn't end with the sale. Customers come back each year to have their furs professionally cleaned and stored in temperature-controlled vaults during the summer so that heat and insects don't ruin them. Over the years, they have their furs altered to fit new styles, or refitted to conform to their changing figures. After all, Schumacher says, a fur is forever.

And he should know, because he's been in the business forever, or nearly so. Schumacher Fur Co. is the oldest fur company in America, having been founded by Schumacher's great-grandfather in 1895 and passed down through the generations. Gregg Schumacher, 49, the fourth generation, started in the back shop, sweeping up. "My grandfather said to me, 'You want to be a furrier, you gotta start with the floors.' And so I started on that, working my tail off."

Later, he learned shipping. Then came the apprenticeship in refashioning furs and repairing them. But when he got old enough to be out on his own, he thought maybe he could do something else. After earning a business degree and a psychology degree, he thought about medicine for a career. "But I was already very good in the fur business and it was like a passion of mine. It went with my heart to carry on the tradition of the family."

And so, Schumacher Co. endures, its showroom full of fancy furs and its back rooms tending to the age-old craft of making and caring for customer treasures. Charlie Mullen, a 24-year veteran of the company, hand-cleans fur coats whose owners have run into trouble. Sometimes, serious trouble. "We had this one lady, well, a kid threw up on it," he says. The good news is that Mullen knows just how to handle it.

Other Schumacher professionals design custom garments, modernize old ones, and embroider linings.

It's quiet work, but the shop has had its brushes with fame. Robert Goulet, for instance, is a client. And the shop has outfitted at least one of the Trail Blazers in mink. "Obviously,

those coats have to be custom-made because basketball players are so large,” Schumacher says.

But the best days, Schumacher says, are not so much those times when the elite show up, but instead those clients for whom a fur coat is a rare and special thing. “Women come in here for a fur coat and walk out lit up,” Schumacher says. “There is something about fur that makes them feel feminine, sexy. It does something to them, and there’s nothing like it.”