

Specialty Stores - They've Found Their Niche

By Judy Mir

Specialty store, boutique; the labels no longer really describe the smaller shops trying to survive in a world of rising prices, rising wages, talented shoplifters, and the shrinking dollar.

Many have not made it. Up and down Newbury Street, in and out of Cambridge, on both sides of Charles Street—if you have a good memory you can do a slow film in your head of signs going up and down, fresh paint, hopeful flowers in the window, and shortly thereafter, "space for rent."

What makes one store make it, and the next sink? Since the endless string of Boston's fade-outs seemed rather pointedly one-shop shops, we began our investigation with smaller multi-store specialty shops, suspecting there is strength in numbers.

Talking to the ones who have found "the knowledge" as they say, another secret of longevity seems to be in each shop finding its own niche, its own price range, and its own brand of customer. Retailers have turned from specializing in one kind of clothing, to specializing in one kind of woman (or man).

Mark Cohen, long-time successful Boston retailer, owner of Leeds and the leased clothing departments of Pappagallo's Boston and Chestnut Hill, believes strongly in the "divide and conquer" theory. Multi-store diversity, he feels, offers power and strength to the retailer astute enough to take advantage of it. "One big store can make or break you, several smaller stores can support each other." Also, dividing one's energies between town and the suburbs can enable the shop owner to take advantage of the sophistication of the in-town buyer, as well as the loyalty and dollars of the suburban buyer who will not hassle downtown.

Having more than one shop at his disposal means he can shift merchandise from one store to another, to wherever it will sell the best. It means being able to "mess up" one store with end-of-season sales, while the next store is neatly stocking fall merchandise as it comes in. It means being able to buy in quantity and offer more variety to the customer.

Mark's second prejudice (or pride) has to do with finding the best merchandise for his customer at reasonable prices, no easy task today. Where he once turned to small European lines for variety and style, economic conditions are now so difficult, and European prices so high, the retailer is thrown back on American resources.

With the goal of reasonable pricing for the working girl with sophisticated taste, Leeds stocks deep in pants and shirts, cool contemporary dresses by Clovis Ruffin, sexy lingerie, and well-priced furs, all under the

jurisdiction of helpful sales personnel. Leeds also keeps its customers seasonably happy by running some of the best rock bottom sales in the city.

Appealing to the same age group, but not really the same girl, Pappagallo caters to a diverse crowd of young collegiates and young suburbans with more casual sporty styling.

Joe Brooker, general manager of the Adam & Eve stores, feels the strength of these shops is in serving up the right mix of funky and traditional to the hip customer, 18-34 male and female, looking for quality and variety.

Started by one Jerold Rutberg, the two A & E shops in Danvers and Brookline (there are more planned), are attempting to come in under the wire at "moderate priced." Their commitment to in-depth stock in jeans helps out there. Mr. Brooker justifies whatever price increases are necessary by trying to give the customer "more for his money". That is, by being very selective of manufacturers, and pushing them hard on the subject of quality control. "The customer may have to spend a



Clothware — a unique shop run by four women who make the clothing.

bit more, but we give them more quality and wear for the money." In general, Adam & Eve expects its customer to be still looking for quality, to ante up and pay more, but buy less.

A & E stores are also counting on their in-store policies to keep the customers coming. The relaxed atmosphere of jean-piled

bins and saloon-door dressing rooms is compounded by friendly, chatty sales people that are hard to tell from the customers. Also on tap: a very sympathetic return policy that works, and a very accommodating invisible tailor who will take in the back of your jeans for a token sum.

A & E is putting its money on

their brand of rather independent self-assured customers, with do-it-yourself separates, rather than outfits. In both advertising and buying, Adam & Eve is counting on the intelligence of their customers.

Bonwit's "Twig" has had its ups and downs in its 1970-built Brave-New World style up-and-down Newbury Street shop. Originally called Rive Gauche and devoted to St. Laurent merchandise, it was designed by New York architect Harry Hanson. The original shop was so darkly chic and elegant, it scared Boston customers away.

Now managed by Pam Johnson, the new look for the "Twig" as it is called, has successfully changed from the avant-garde to the casual, from high-priced to reasonably priced, from missy to junior. With brighter lighting, moveable displays, and a more youthful atmosphere, the shop is quite a departure from Mother Bonwit's across the street.

Ms. Johnson describes the merchandise as having a "contemporary American Sportswear look" provided by such houses as Ellen Tracy and

—[Please turn to page 22]



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Boutiques

[Continued from page 21]

Hang Ups. The clothing is definitely not top priced, geared to the young career woman who can probably only afford to buy a little at a time. Thus the Twig's commitment to color coordination that works through an entire season. The customer can buy one thing, and month by month find new things to go with it, even from different manufacturers.

The Twig is into classics, moving with the trend toward the well-kept, well put together look of outfits, while keeping prices in reachable bounds. Downstairs at "Pearl's Place" there will be less expensive junior clothes for the younger girl. The Twig is now thriving on a younger, more price-conscious sportswear customer.

Ann Taylor, a privately owned twenty-two store complex out of New Haven, by Richard Liebeskind, is moving into a new era. Leaving behind its casual suburban past, it is fully committed to a new European kind of elegance with prices to match. The shop describes its fall look as ranging from "thoroughbred" tweeds, sweaters and mufflers, to

the "French chic" of finely tailored jackets, pleated skirts, tissue wools, and fine leather clutch bags. Items are displayed on easily accessible center-floor open racks.

While still carrying the American look of Jones, Benson and Clovis Ruffin merchandise in a range of prices, Ann Taylor is forging a special look of its own based on restyled European couture sportswear. Suzanne DeMont, manager of the Boston store, feels the shop is moving toward a more original, exclusive kind of merchandise. As well as its own European finds, the shop carries Cacheral pants at \$68, and shirts at \$34. So far, no one has fainted, and the merchandise is walking out.

Re-Educating Customers

Ms. DeMont attributes the success of the new philosophy to the re-education of their customers. They think differently and are buying differently: "more the way our mothers used to buy—carefully." They buy less, want high quality, and are willing to pay for it, almost mirroring the typical European girl who would rather have one or two of the best. "Now its style and look—not price—that count."

Palmira and Steve Giglia of

Settebello Eleganza (Copley Square and Cambridge) have always followed that philosophy in their eight years of running the most authentically European shops in Boston. Their elegant family-run stores were created by John Vaccaro, organizer and primary buyer who is in Europe every three months to find the best of everything.

them in Italy. Years ahead in styling, they are fine quality leathers lined only in leather or suede.

Their clothing stock runs from gaberdine pants, handsome leathers and suedes from Belgium, to bins stacked with chic little imported tops, and their own special turtleneck with just the right rib. Also well-

of metallics for fall.

A sharp contrast to the multi-unit shops is provided by a very thriving little workshop we stumbled into in Cambridge. Only one shop exists.

Clothwear is on the second level above Boylston Street in Cambridge, which means hopscothching the crowded outdoor cafe tables, finding the right door, the right stairway, and asking someone sitting in a pile of fabric and measuring tapes, eating a sandwich, "do you sell things here?"

In this particularly Cambridgean working arrangement, four young women work loosely together, each designing and sewing her own things, splitting rent, shop time, and headaches. Started by Donna Southwell, gradually adding Peggy Weber and Jeanie Danowitz, and finally Janet Speers, they are able to claim almost one of a kind styling because of their hunt and peck fabric buying of five to ten yards at a time (Jonathan Logan, are you listening?)

Fey, casual styles, done in a vague size range ("after we finish a dress, we sort of guess"), they are young, uncomplicated, surprisingly figure flattering, and startlingly priced at \$10-25. They lean to lightweight fabrics, low-key colors and patterns.

The merchandise-customer marriage works here, and it is in shops like these that you will find the customers that reject the current craze for "the right thing at any price." The Clothwear women say their student and working girl customers simply won't pay outrageous prices, don't put a high priority on clothes, and insist on comfortable, wearable clothes.

Given the non-monetary value of the dollar these days, will the customer pay more and buy less? Or pay less and buy less? It will be interesting to see, one year from now, if Ann Taylor is still selling \$68 pants, and Clothwear is still putting out \$10 dresses. Tune in same time, same station. That is, if we're still in business.



Ann Taylor — a group of stores serving fashionably minded young women.

Their own brand of Italianate originality and artistry is seen in their bags (\$39-85) and luggage (\$125-300), made especially for known are their deceptively simple, long, beautifully printed banlon "nothing", dresses at \$90. And they are predicting lots

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GLOBE

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1974

Getting Around

By SUE MITTENTHAL

LADIES OF THE CLOTH

"We're women sewing for women. Usually clothing buyers and designers are men. We feel we're more in touch with what women our age want, and want to pay," says Donna Southwell, who is, like partners Peggy Weber, Janet Speers and Diana Vanderbeck, an all-in-one fabric buyer, designer, seamstress and saleswoman in their cozy Harvard Square shop, Clothware. Each of the women, who learned to sew from their mothers — making doll's clothes before they were old enough to make theirs — use only their own original designs. Friends of the shop can look at the dresses and point out "a Peggy" or "a Donna." Designs are rarely made out of the same fabric more than once, a policy that rules out, thank God, the department-store anonymity of carbon-copy clothing racks.

The women take pains to search out fabric that "feels good and hangs nicely," and that they can afford. "We put a lot of time and energy into selecting fabric," says Donna, "and we usually end up traveling to New York, and mills in Western Mass. and Framingham. We use corduroy, wool, velour, acrylic knits and matte jersey — in a lot of floral prints, though we're trying to get some geometric. We don't use double-knits or textured polyester — that old lady stuff."

Each dress, skirt, top and smock meets certain requirements: it must be comfortable, hand-washable, geared to the late teens-early 30s set, not "super-formal, frilly or gaudy," and affordable — most tops are \$8-\$10, dresses and skirts are in the \$12-\$25 range.

Clothware, 56 Boylston st. (second floor), Harvard Square, 354-8913/Mon.-Fri. 11-6, Sat. 10-6.



Peggy, Donna, Diana, Janet.

Earthwatch

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Seeing Things as They Are.

April 1975

Business

Clothes By and For Women

"These are the clothes I've been looking for!" "This store is the kind of thing I've always wanted to do!" Such comments typify women's reactions to Clothware, a women's clothing store in Cambridge, Mass. Small wonder women are delighted when they find such beautifully designed, handmade dresses, skirts and tops, at eminently reasonable prices, in a store owned and run by the women who make and design the clothes.

Clothware began almost three years ago, when Danna Southwell, Peggy Weber, and Janet Speers rented a small space on the second story of a building in Harvard Square. The space had previously been an office, but with a little help from friends, they converted it into an attractive storefront and workshop. Wooden floors, white walls, plants, chairs, and display racks bordering the room make the store seem spacious and comfortable.

As the business grew, Peggy, Donna and Janet were joined by another seamstress, Diana Vanderbeck. All four, now in their twenties, have years of sewing experience, from doll's clothes on up. Business experience is another matter. Going to New York to buy fabric in quantity has been an education in itself.

The finances of the business are simple: each woman chooses and buys her own fabric, sews her own designs, and collects the money from the sales of the clothing she makes. (This is an arrangement known as in-



Clothware ladies: Janet, Diana, Donna and Peggy

dividual proprietorship in a shared space.) They attribute much of their financial success to low overhead. A loan of a couple of hundred dollars was enough to get them started, and they do whatever they can themselves — for example, they designed and constructed the wooden sign which hangs on the front of their building. They do little advertising, relying mostly on word-of-mouth to bring in customers.

Though they haven't time to make clothes to order, free alterations are included in the price of each garment. The work pace varies — in the fall and up until Christmas they can hardly sew enough to keep up with the demand. In February and March, business is much slower.

The good feelings they have about the business are reflected in their creations. The clothes, made from fabrics such as corduroy, cotton velour, challis and jersey, are primarily comfortable and practical, but also exciting in terms of design.

"Our clothes don't distort women's bodies to fit some idea of fashion or beauty. We think women's bodies are naturally beautiful, and we design clothes to fit them naturally."

Urban Eye

By Brenda Payton

Loose threads

After window-shopping for spring clothes you might have wondered how you would ever *move* in one of those creations, let alone pay for it. And if the experience almost drove you to pulling out the old Singer, except you can't remember what a bobbin is, there is yet another alternative. **Clothware** in Cambridge is run by four women who design and make women's clothes at very reasonable prices.

They make most of the clothes from soft and natural fabrics — cotton and wool — that are comfortable, practical and easy to wash. The women think that their designs are, by definition, better suited for women's needs than those of male designers. "How can you expect a man to design women's clothes when they don't wear them?" asks Janet Speers. "They don't know what's comfortable. I couldn't design men's clothes," Pebby Weber adds, "Women have been hung-up on the idea that a design by a man is what men will find attractive on women. And that's the wrong reason to wear anything."

Clothware's designs are simple but creative. Each of the women has her own style — Weber likes tucks and Louise Ciampi likes ribbing — and her own source of inspiration. Weber prefers the fashions in old movies. Many of the creations are combinations of popular designs. If you've ever wanted the sleeves of one shirt with the collar of another, you will probably appreciate the clothes at Clothware.

And surprisingly enough, these well-made clothes are less expensive than the mass-produced wares in department

stores. The shop has corduroy jackets for \$26, velour dresses for \$24, pants for \$17 and shirts for \$13. The most expensive item is a beautiful smock-like cotton dress with a tie on the side and a square neck for \$33. Alterations on any purchase are done *gratis*. In addition to low prices, the store gives away scraps and has a bargain box of unfinished or discarded dresses, at \$5 each.

The four-year-old store is a collective. "Everybody does everything," says Weber. And the women, with the help of friends, have done everything in the store, from sanding the hardwood floors and building racks and dressing rooms to painting signs. Speers even assembled the surveillance camera from a kit. ("It said it could be done in a day," she said, "but it took me a week.") The roomy store, with plenty of windows decorated with hanging greenery, is ideal for unhassled shopping.

The key to their success, they say, is that they started with a low overhead. "I think we started the business with less than \$1000," said Donna Southwell, one of the founding members. "We operate on the basis of trust. We don't have any contract with each other. Everyone is an equal partner."

If you would like reasonably priced, comfortable clothing which you will not see on 10 other women on the subway, visit Clothware, 56 Boylston St., Harvard Square, open Monday through Saturday from 10 to 6; from May 1 open on Thursdays until 9.



Women of the cloth at Cambridge's Clothware: From left, Donna Southwell, Louise Ciampi, Janet Speers and Peggy Weber.

PHOENIX

3/30/76

Designer-Run Boutiques: Creativity and Common Sense Breed Success For Small Businesses



The group of designers at Clothware is committed to creating fashions for busy women interested in style at a moderate price. The attractive dual print dress, \$32, is a four-season style for office or entertaining.

Starting a retail operation is never easy work, and the task is compounded when designers go into business for themselves. In addition to establishing a fashion image, the designer in charge of a shop must contend with financing, maintenance and employees. Three such boutiques in Cambridge, Massachusetts—Clothware, Adornments and Khoka—are all successful small businesses run by designers and partners. By giving customers special services not available in larger stores and by keeping prices at a moderate level, these stores have survived in the highly competitive retail atmosphere of Harvard Square. None of the partners involved in these stores had previous retail experience, and all

began their enterprises with little outside help.

Clothware is the longest-established of the shops. Located on the second floor of an old building in Harvard Square, Clothware came into existence in 1972. The store is operated by four women who share in the work and profits as well as in the design. "We try to make original designs and not charge ripoff prices for them," says Louise Ciampi, one of the partners. The styles, many in soft fabrics like velour and corduroy, are touchable and natural.

Clothware was undertaken as a shoestring operation. The four original partners pooled their savings, which amounted to \$1000, and started their business. "None of us had anything to lose," says Janet Speers, one of Clothware's founders. The store's second-floor location helped keep rent down, and part of their space was originally rented out as an apartment. Although Clothware was operated by women with no previous experience in business management, the partners learned to fend for themselves. "We refinished the floors, and built the racks and dressing rooms ourselves," says Speers. "Recently I put in an alarm system—and before that I didn't know much about electricity."

All four partners share the design and business responsibilities. Last May, the women reorganized their system to allow for a more effective method of dividing profit and meeting expenses. Common expenses are paid out of a general fund, and the partners are paid a small commission for each garment they sell in addition to an hourly rate for sales work, fabric shopping and other tasks. "In the beginning, none of us got wages," Ciampi explains. "Now, we're paid for

everything we do, and if we don't do something, we're not paid for it."

Clothware fashions appeal to women in their twenties and thirties who want fashions that are comfortable and reasonably priced. The most expensive item in the store retails for \$35, with the exception of some custom items. Dual printed dresses for day and evening and sporty corduroy jumpers to pair with cowl-neck sweaters are popular items for fall and winter, in addition to roomy velour tops and pants. According to Ciampi, much of the store's fashion direction is a result of customer input. "Customers are willing to tell us what they like and dislike," she says. "And you can tell what's selling and what is not by the number of times an item is tried on and put back on the rack."



Clothware designers favor cotton velour for its softness and comfort. Their classic A-line dress, \$25, is simply styled with scoop neck, cap sleeves and tie belt.

Clothware's partners go to New York each season to shop for fabric, and also buy from mill outlets. In addition, some of

3

WHO MADE IT

By Susan Klein

When Donna Southwell, Peggy Weber, Janet Speers and Louise Ciampi opened Clothware in March of 1972, none of them had any small-business experience, though they had all been designing and sewing clothes independently for several years.

Donna had been selling her clothes through a crafts store, and when it went out of business she decided to take over. She advertised for partners who could design and make clothes, and she found Peggy and Janet. Together, they made the kind of clothes they liked to wear

themselves, comfortable things that were attractive and not too expensive. Four days before they were scheduled to open, after months of preparation, the store burned down. Clothware hadn't even been insured, but fortunately the clothes hadn't been in the store. Undaunted, the women borrowed money from friends and relatives and opened the store on Boylston Street with less than \$1000. They did all their own labor—knocking out walls, sanding floors, building an arch, painting. Again they opened with no insurance.

"See, we were working on the principle that if you have nothing, you've got nothing to lose," Janet explained. "We talked to the Small Business Administration," said Peggy, "and they told us all the orthodox things. They're pretty helpful actually—but we couldn't afford any of those things, so we just did it anyhow."

They had almost no money for advertising, but word of mouth carried them for the first two years. In the beginning the four worked as individuals, making their clothes at home and deciding what to charge for them, then collecting the whole retail price. They shared the overhead, and they used to buy the cloth together and then divide the cost on a per-yard basis. But recently they've reorganized themselves into a collective. Now, they pay themselves an hourly wage for any work they do for the store, like shopping or selling, as well as a per-piece fee for sewing and a small designer's royalty every time one of their items is sold. The rest of the money goes into the till. One person minds the store each week, while the other sew in workrooms in the back. They don't have much paperwork, as each partner does her own taxes. They've

found the new arrangement much more efficient.

When they first opened, Donna had a friend in the Harvard Business School who chose them as a case study for his thesis. He used to come around and ask all kinds of questions; eventually he predicted they would fail within six months. That was four years ago. Today, Clothware is still in business.

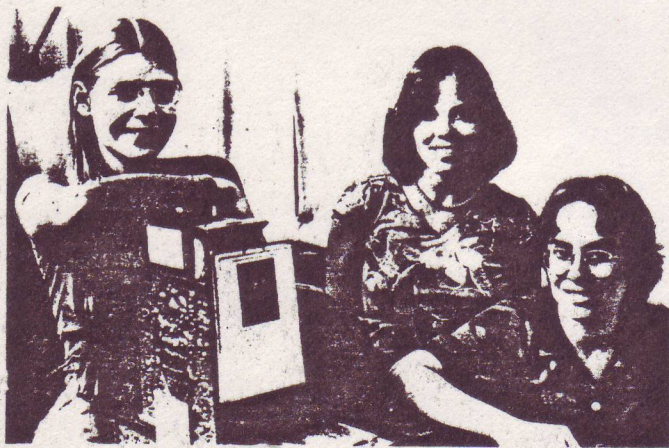
"We're surviving," Peggy says. "I wouldn't consider any of us capitalists by any stretch of the word. But I do want to make a decent living. And that's what we're doing—we're all making a living."

Actually, they're doing better than that. Not only do they never have to worry about paying the rent, but they've expanded to three rooms and have bought equipment such as a felling machine for quick hems, electric cutters that slice through as many as 10 layers of fabric at at one time, three sewing machines, a couple of air conditioners, a cash register and a large stock of fabrics. They estimate they're worth at least \$10,000 now, just in capital assets and stock on hand.

And they're having a pretty good time. "Even when I get bored or discouraged," says Janet, "I think about what it was like out in the real world, with a boss breathing down my neck and 10-minute coffee breaks."

"I don't work well in that kind of situation," Louise agreed. "I always feel overworked and underpaid. Actually, I tend to work best all by myself, but this way you divide the headaches—when something goes wrong, you have three shoulders to cry on."

The owners of Clothware aren't sure where they'll go from here, but they're ready for some changes. Perhaps they'll open another outlet or set up a special rack of one-of-a-kind designer clothes. But they don't think about getting very big. "Customers like to come in and see that we're just like themselves," said Janet. "It's a personal kind of business."



Own-business women Louise Ciampi, left, Peggy Weber, center, and Donna Southwell.



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