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Critical Shopper
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What Does Taste Have to Do With It?



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTEN LUCE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

IT'S where my mother took me to get a proper suit in high school, and where Benjamin Bixby oxfords and plaid shirt-smocks from Chloé Sevigny for Opening Ceremony go to die.

On Valentine's Day, it was where unshaven men were frozen in quizzical looks while their wives or girlfriends told them to try on that jacket, turn this way and now the other.

For decades, the Barneys New York Warehouse Sale has fed the helpless as much as those in the know. But while watching the unshaven can make for fun sport, it doesn't hold a candle to the dandy train-spotting: hip-hop hipsters checking out plaid-accented Pendleton down vests; model boys rummaging through the bins of tiny-waisted jeans, hoping for a score; European tourists fiddling with iridescent Dior and Lanvin shoes; dyed-in-the-wool sartorial conservatives looking to buy dark suits, plastic-wrapped shirts and striped ties en masse in preparation for another 12 months of doing battle with a Bloomberg Terminal.

This scavenger hunt is held twice a year — the current one runs through Feb. 28 — with absolutely no guarantees: Success here comes only with tenacity, tolerance and luck.

To make things easier for a certain kind of shopper, much of the high-end designer merchandise is split out into its own section. There I spotted a medium-size handful of deeply discounted Alexander McQueen shirts, in St.-Tropez colors; a couple pair of royal blue Gucci jeans (\$180, from \$540); and a few beautifully patterned Dries Van Noten blazers.

Nearby, an electric blue rabbit-hair angora sweater from Marc by Marc Jacobs moped, half off its hanger, demanding to be saved. I obliged (\$89, from \$198, lint roller not included). I tried it on over a lilac spread-collar Spurr shirt with fat white stripes (\$85, from \$285), a light, zesty match. They both made the trip home.

If only I had something to wear over them. Almost any of the plethora of Isaia suits and sport coats would have done, if it weren't for the zany prices. That robust green plaid Kition suit (\$1,490, from \$4,795)? That would have been nice, too.

Just a new pair of pants might have helped, except there are no dressing rooms at the sale. On the relatively calm opening day, two men stripped down to tighties — one neon orange, the other camouflage — to try on pants. But most guys, shopping without guidance or extensive planning, just found a corner, faced away from the crowd, and dropped trou: boxers, boxer briefs, briefs, whatever. Not me. Compared with the women's sale upstairs, which at times devolves into a runway show of bras and leggings worn strategically for efficient trying on, it was a little tragic.

But not anarchic, like the Warehouse Sales of old. Undoubtedly plenty of people stocking up at Barneys had scooted down from the Fashion Week shows, where designers and publicists and the press did a collaborative dance in hope that someone, somewhere, would still pay full price for high fashion.



Barneys Warehouse Sale

255 West 17th Street (Seventh Avenue); (212) 450-8400.

GENDER TROUBLE Women's clothing takes up the main floor. Children's clothing and home furnishings share the bottom floor with men's wear. Women can be found on both floors. Men seem to know better than to set foot upstairs.

THE COMPETITION Bankers, therapists, stylists, teachers, dancers, actors, students, lawyers, tourists, writers, graphic designers, personal trainers, tall, short, thin, stout, bald, crisp, scraggly: the Warehouse Sale doesn't discriminate. Anyone with the patience to sort through several thousand shirts, many of them plaid, or to try on a suit without a dressing room is welcome and appreciated.

WHO'S GOING TO TAKE THE WAIT? Prices will be marked down later in the sale, which matters for big-ticket items, at least a few of which seemed to have been deliberately mislaid, perhaps by people hoping no one will notice between now and the sale's final days.



This sale is just as much of an institution. It's also no longer the only game in town. The recent Opening Ceremony sample sale had the free-for-all vibe of the Warehouse's earlier days. Also, in between my two trips to the Barneys sale, I checked out an Odin clearance and sales on [GiltMan.com](#), as did, I imagine, thousands of other people. We are all sale shoppers now, trained to hold our breath until prices fall, which they inevitably will.

Even at low-ish prices, some items remained a hard sell. I had to walk away from a sharp white Phillip Lim shirt with a faint check pattern and sat-

in-covered buttons because of a rogue collar: too round, too thin, too large, too droopy (\$113, from \$275). Several Thom Browne suits were available at a deep discount, though they were still comfortably in the four figures. Predictably, they had short sleeves and were seemingly unwearable, at least until I watched a guy trying on a white one with black pinstripes, which looked great, especially because he had come in wearing a fedora that matched. A half-hour later, though, the guy was gone, and the suit wasn't.

A few feet away, against a wall behind racks and racks of grim overcoats, was a row of leather jackets, easy to overlook. But smooched in between unimagination selections by Andrew Marc and top American designer Michael Kors was a rogue Shipley & Halmos motorcycle jacket: brute yet luxurious, cut at a reasonable length, and with a soft collar (\$361, from \$895; actual motorcycles best avoided). It was sophisticated, tough and, in my hands, not long for this sale. It looked great over the blue sweater. (Perhaps I should have waited, though: a day later, the jacket popped up on GiltMan, for about \$35 less.)

GOOD taste, bad taste, tasteless taste: it's all accounted for here, especially in the riot of shoes: Gucci pony-hair wingtips (\$459, from \$660), Comme des Garçons animal-print slip-ons (\$240, from \$520) and Margiela lace-ups coated in what appeared to be felt, which had an unexpected moistness to them (\$381, from \$826). Numerous pairs of blue wingtip brogues from Florsheim by Duckie Brown (\$180, from \$395) looked blunt, heavy and unlikely to ever get lifted off their shelf.

The same could be said for the single pair of purple Balenciaga bell-bottoms (\$119, from \$475); the herd of Richard Chai cardigans, rucked at the front; the oodles of Alife sneakers in un-sneakery fabrics; and the Des Kiraz T-shirts, which suggested Ed Hardy-meets-howling-wolf-by-way-of-Bushwick (\$79). There was a shocking amount of paisley on the shirt racks, along with plenty of plaids (Michael Bastian, Burkman Bros. and many, many more) that may well be a couple of years from now, reside in your closet as a museum piece of the Mountain Man era.

That's because this sale induces purchasing through chaos — the lack of dressing rooms or coat check, the low-hung mirrors that ensure no one over 5-foot-4 can get a good look in them. (The ones near the suits are an exception.) Every respectable closet in New York has one or seven items bought in haste at a Warehouse Sale. I'm looking at you, light green, pink and baby blue Piattelli shirt with the clown-suit-wide collar. And don't think you're off the hook, tan suede two-eyelet Heschung chukkas. Ever since I rescued you from the Warehouse, you've been ill-fitting in-gates. I'm hoping your behavior won't rub off on the new guys.