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TRENDS: A SPECIAL REPORT

Plain Is Out, Vibrant Is In

By TERI AGINS

IN THE '90s, the fashion word was "minimalism" — the sleek, unadorned jackets, pants and casual knitwear worn by both sexes.

Minimalism is now out. During the past year, the fashion industry has been buoyed by a new "fashion cycle," a major shift in clothing styles that happens every few years, compelling people to update their wardrobes.

Designers have turned away from plain-looking black, beige and gray apparel, becoming bullish on bright colors, vibrant prints and bold stripes. What's more, the Iraq war and uncertain economy may have also sent people searching for solace in a more colorful wardrobe. "Color provides amusement, allowing fashion to play an escapist role," says New York fashion historian Caroline Rennolds Milbank.

"Whenever you have dramatic fashion changes, people go shopping," says Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst at NPD Group, market researchers in Port Washington, N.Y. And sales this year got off to a strong start, with analysts expecting that 2004 will bring gains, instead of continuing the declines of the past three years.

For all of 2004, apparel sales are expected to increase between 2.5% and 2.8% from \$165 billion in 2003, according to NPD Group. The following trends are what designers, apparel makers and customers are living with today:

1. Your Own Thing

More women are shunning the matched wool suits that defined their wardrobes in the 1990s. Instead they're more inclined to mix designers, brands and colors in an individual way, such as wearing a pearl necklace with a sequined top, jeans with high heels. Just as people have gotten into the habit of burning their own music CDs, they're exercising more freedom in the way they dress, following the quirky style of celebrities such as Sarah Jessica Parker of TV's "Sex and the City."

"With no more rules to follow, people have come to understand that there is no right way to dress," says Gerald Barnes, senior vice president of the catalog and online business of Neiman Marcus Group Inc. "Our goal is to help them interpret looks that are individual and not canned."

Meanwhile, the billion-dollar chains such as Gap Inc.'s Banana Republic and Limited Brands Inc.'s Express are trying to give the impression of uniqueness by stocking a broader selection of items that aren't designed to be worn together. "When American women talk individual style, what they mean is they want something that is new, yet familiar," says Veronique Vienne, New York-based fashion-industry consultant.

2. Premium Denim

Blue jeans are now for dressing up. Women wear them with their best cashmere sweaters and stiletto pumps, while men think of jeans as fine sportswear, to be worn with an expensive blazer and dress shirt. More people are also willing to spend more than \$100 for a pair of jeans, especially underground brands that are never advertised and found at boutiques, such as Rogan, Paper Denim & Cloth and others. These upscale jeans differ from the \$50 versions by holding out the promise of a unique, figure-flattering fit, and distressed "antique" finishes.

Such jeans get cachet from celebrities such as actress Nicole Kidman who wore \$200 Notify brand jeans when she sat in the front row at Chanel's October fashion show in Paris.

3. Fast Fashion

When apparel trends in the past would debut on high-fashion runways, it often would take as long as two years for the styles to trickle down to the masses. But nowadays, Middle America no longer has to wait for affordable versions of the latest fall trends.

That's because technology and globalization have turned fashion into a faster-paced business that has become even more dynamic with the popularity of fast-fashion

chains such as Inditex SA's Zara, Hennes & Mauritz AB's H&M and Polo Ralph Lauren Corp.'s Club Monaco. Soon after digital images from runway shows in Paris, Milan and New York hit the Internet, knockoff houses move quickly to reinterpret styles for the mass market that they can rush into stores in a matter of weeks.

Take the beaded cardigan sweaters shown by designers such as Marc Jacobs and Tracy Reese: The October issue of *In Style* magazine features five versions of the latest vintage-style sweaters embellished with rhinestones and sequins, from \$50 for a wool-blend version to \$250, in pure cashmere.

As consumers demand to own the latest styles immediately, apparel makers are under more pressure to stay ahead of the fashion curve. Says Todd Slater, retail analyst at Lazard Freres: "This fall's crocheted poncho will have legs for only about one season."

4. Couture in the Bargain Bin

Taking cues from Martha Stewart's success marketing home furnishings at Kmart, high-fashion designers can't resist the volume of the mass market, with the promise of millions in licensing royalties.

Designer Isaac Mizrahi, who closed his upscale fashion house in 1997, is now becoming a household name at Target Corp. stores only a year after his women's apparel made its debut in the chain. Oscar de La Renta's O by Oscar line markets women's apparel under \$100, while Chanel couturier Karl Lagerfeld will launch a signature collection for one season at fast-fashion purveyor H&M.

5. It's a Handbag World

When clothing styles became casual and nondescript in the 1990s, designers shifted the focus to handbags, which they deftly positioned as status symbols by giving them to highly visible fashion editors and celebrities such as Catherine Zeta Jones and Gwyneth Paltrow.

Nowadays more women buy three or four handbags a year — double what they bought six years

ago. Far more profitable and easier to market than apparel, handbags are the locomotives of fashion houses such as Gucci Group NV, Prada Group NV and LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SA, which churn out dozens of new styles each season, priced at \$500 and up. The hottest handbags are colorful and embellished with heavy buckles and snaps, jewels and embroidery.

6. No Stains, No Wrinkles

During the 1990s, with menswear fashion stagnant, apparel marketers looked to improve classic shirts and pants to give shoppers a reason to buy.

The latest generation of technologically enhanced clothes designed to resist wrinkles and stains feels natural to the touch — and is virtually indistinguishable from its natural-fiber counterparts. That's because the high-tech properties are baked into the fibers, so there's no waxy feel.

Retail Brand Alliance Inc.'s Brooks Brothers and J.C. Penney Co. are among the retailers gaining a big following for their no-iron all-cotton dress shirts for men and women. And as business-casual attire has become a bit dressier, brands such as Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s Lands' End, Levi Strauss & Co.'s Dockers and Tropical Sportswear International Corp.'s Farah have won over millions of men to their wrinkle-free, stain-resistant khakis that come close in spirit to dress pants.

7. Fur Keeps Flying

The popularity of casual-dress trends in the 1990s forced America's \$1.8 billion fur industry to come up with ways to make furs more affordable and fun to wear. Instead of buying a \$10,000 mink coat, more women are inclined to wear a rabbit vest, shawl or poncho for under \$500.

Fashion's return to color in the past two years ago has sent furs to the dye lot, as in sheared pink mink or purple fox. Among this year's hottest fur accessories are tie-on fur collars and stoles in "rex" rabbit, a hybrid rabbit whose pelts are thicker and longer than traditional rabbits.

8. Coats Come Back

The lightweight spring coat returned in 2004 as designers updated traditional trench coats in bright pink, polka dots and leopard prints. Retailers are now devoting more floor space to coats to encourage women to buy a selection, including transitional coats to wear between seasons. Replacing heavy navy or camel coats this fall are thinner printed coats in colorful tweeds and embroidered floral prints.

9. Latino Crossover

Just as oversized hip-hop fashions penetrated the mainstream, the Latino look is catching fire as America's Hispanic population continues to grow in size and influence. The Latino fashion sensibility for men centers around linen pants and a loose-fitting guayabera shirt, worn untucked — a look that Perry Ellis International Inc. has mined through its Cubavera, Contingo and Havanera brands sold at department stores.

For women, the styles are generally sexy and feminine with asymmetrical skirts and off-the-shoulder tops — think Jennifer Lopez, whose J-Lo line has expanded into 11 product categories. Catering to both sexes at the malls is Men's Wearhouse Inc.'s Eddie Rodriguez chain of dressy casual sportswear with a Cuban flair.

10. A Fitting Proposition

Many fashionable dressers are demanding more than just a designer wardrobe and are splurging for made-to-measure suits and shirts. Chains such as Brooks Brothers and Saks Inc.'s Saks Fifth Avenue stores have lured more men to the category with made-to-measure suits priced as low as \$800. Lands' End dubs its custom program "Fits like it was made for you," to attract casual dressers to its affordable customized jeans, chinos, shirts and even a fleece Marinac jacket.

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