

Intriguing and truly special finds are guaranteed at a new philanthropic store in Paris, says Lucia van der Post. Portrait by Derek Hudson.

You have to say one thing for a recession – it may be unsettling for the nerves and toxic for the bank account, but dull it isn't. Take shops and shopping. Seismic changes are afoot. Names we've all grown up with and that seemed part of the psychological landscape of our lives are either disappearing or are in dire trouble – Viyella, Woolworths, MFI, to name but three in the UK. All three resonate at some visceral level with most Brits, and I'd hazard a guess that almost all of us feel a deep sadness at seeing them go. But think about it more carefully and what really does Viyella mean to you any more? When did you last go into Woolworths? As for MFI – what a missed opportunity. All those factories, warehouses, outlets, all that effort and yet the end results were so dull, and delivery reportedly so inefficient. All three, in some curious way, had ceased to be urgently relevant. And relevance is what is going to matter more and more.

Then those wondering why shopping has lost some of its sheen need only to reflect on the matter of high streets that all over the world have come to seem much the same, awash with global brands that appear to be all-encompassing, spreading their wings too wide and too far, sweeping away the small, the delicate, the quirky and the surprising. No wonder shoppers have in some measure fallen out of love with the sort of shopping that we think of as discretionary. What is it going to take to get us back? Shops that offer something of a surprise, that's what. And quality. And service. Something different, intriguing, beautiful, charming, truly special. Things made with love and verve. But what nobody wants any longer is just more of the same.

Which is why retailers with nous have been busy upping their game, binding their customers closer to the narrative of the brand, trying to give them a feeling of community and of belonging, of warmth; a sense that it isn't merely a commercial transaction that is taking place. They've perceived the current mood and tried to respond. It's why Matches, a small chain of upmarket fashion shops, will send personal shoppers and chauffeur-driven cars to customers' homes and has started offering sartorial advice online or by phone. It's why two online shops, Rous Iland (a chic, carefully



Marie-France Cohen at Merci in February as the store was nearing completion. She is surrounded by products she has selected, including a South African clay-bead chandelier (€4,500) by Werner and Philippa du Toit, an Oskar Zieta Plopp stool (left, €395) and an 1891 Thonet chair (top, €270).

merci, do call again

how to spend it

edited boutique selling little-known labels, and which has recently opened a London showroom) and Vintage Academe (a new online site dedicated entirely to couture vintage clothing) have both formed offline clubs where members can meet and feel part of like-minded communities.

Tom Ford has started taking pieces from his own home and putting them in his stores to give them personality and identity. And New Yorkers woke up one day to find that the window of Marc Jacobs' Bleecker Street store was filled with old military coats instead of the usual pristine Jacobs gear. Robert Duffy, president of the Marc Jacobs company, had found a cache of vintage military coats in Denmark and decided they'd be just the thing to liven up the windows. J Crew, an American company mostly known for its preppy basics, suddenly introduced (as part of a new, higher-priced line) a jacket covered in hand-painted French sequins looking like tortoiseshell – it wouldn't have got me reaching for my cheque book but it certainly caught the attention of the customers. Fashion stores, instead of trying to imitate the big boys, as many did in the prosperous times, have started to stock smaller, more individual designers which give customers a reason to seek them out.

Meanwhile, the boom years have enabled a new breed of shopkeeper to emerge – one who has enough money, thank you very much, not to be worried morning, noon and night about bottom lines but to create the stores of their dreams. In London we have Few and Far (whose opening was previewed in this magazine in March last year), the personal vision of Priscilla Carluccio, funded by selling on the successful chain of Carluccio's cafés. With the security of these funds behind her she has created the kind of idiosyncratic, one-off store that I don't imagine makes a huge profit but has charm and individuality and is a delight just to spend some time in – particularly on Friday afternoons when chocolate cake is being sold.

Now, over in Paris just a couple of days ago, another extraordinarily interesting enterprise has just opened, one which I venture will be, to borrow the immortal words of Monsieur Michelin, "vaut le détour". It seems to embody the mood of the moment quite perfectly. It's the cherished project of Marie-France Cohen who, with her husband, Bernard, started and built up the oh-so-chic children's brand Bonpoint. Those who know the latter – and its ethereally beautiful store in Paris's Rue de Tournon is a must-see even for grown-ups next time you're in the city – know that it is what you might call the Hermès of children's clothing. It's both stunningly chic (taupes, greys, little navy and cream checks and stripes) and yet enchantingly pretty with its little smocks and Peter Pan collars. In a series of financial moves the Cohens have sold Bonpoint, giving them the economic freedom to do those things that interest them without having to worry about the bottom line all the time, and also the time to devote to

them. Marie-France has come up with the concept of Merci and its overarching aims, one of which is philanthropic (it's called Merci because not a single cent will accrue either to the Cohens or to any shareholders – all profits will go to charities chosen by the Cohens) and the other which is luxuriously self-indulgent – Marie-France will choose and sell only those things that she judges to be of interest. But, since she was one of the guiding "eyes" and tastes behind Bonpoint, you will not be surprised that what she finds of interest is likely to be fascinating to you and me.

She has gone to enormous lengths to create a store like no other, seeing

herself more as a curator of beautiful things than a utilitarian shopkeeper. She has borrowed a little from the Parisian store Colette, London's Dover Street Market and the Milanese 10 Corso Como store owned by Carla Sozzani, which sees the truly interesting shop as part art gallery, part theatre, part meeting place and only partly a retailing space. But with the luxury of being able to make Merci an entirely philanthropic project, all monies going to charities connected with deprived children in the poorest countries in the

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world (“I won't even take the cost of a cup of coffee or a taxi fare out of the firm” is how Marie-France puts it), she's added in a very new, 2009 touch. She's calling it Merci because it's a thank you in advance to the many designers, artists, literary figures and what she calls “other creative souls” who will be making special one-off contributions to the store – and no doubt there's also a huge “merci” to the great success of Bonpoint, which has enabled it all to happen. “Enough is enough,” says Marie-France. “I don't want to build another empire.”

So what is she offering? First, the store is large – some 1,500sq m, which is large enough to be airy and welcoming and to embrace all sorts of aspects that can't be strictly money-earning. It's set in a wonderful, light-filled, former wallpaper factory on the Boulevard Beaumarchais, on the edge of the Marais.

There is also a flower shop featuring many of acclaimed florist Christian Tortu's wares. Book lovers are greeted by a literary café on the ground floor to the right of the entrance,

store. There is also a range of products specially designed for Merci and found nowhere else – tasting spoons, glass cake platters, soup dishes, vases. The homeware section looks especially exciting as it is a mixture of hard-to-find treasures, old classics updated and entirely bespoke new designs from top names. A wonderful Philippe Starck vase for Baccarat might sit next to light-weight picnic bowls and plates made from recycled bamboo. Fashion, too, will have special collaborations producing one-off designs from designers such as Stella McCartney, Yves Saint Laurent, Paul Smith, Bonpoint and many others.

You'll be able to discover anything from a special edition Stella McCartney dress to a Nureyev bookcase by the Dutch designer Roderick Vos. The huge, airy atrium will feature a changing cast of exhibitions, showcasing artists who need a platform, as well as collections and events. There might be a girl with a sewing machine – a *petite main* – who will be on site for customisation, or they might have students from the fashion schools who will help edit vintage clothes that no longer quite “work”.

Annick Goutal, the creator of Annick Goutal perfumes who sadly died from cancer, was Marie-France's sister, and six or seven of the original Annick Goutal perfumes will be sold here at some 50 per cent less than in the Goutal boutiques, thanks to the owners of Annick Goutal. “We're going to sell them in simple glass bottles or aluminium containers – and they'll be refillable.” Very 2009, I think.

A changing roster of excitements is part of the ethos of the shop, but above all Marie-France wants it to be “affordable – we will have some expensive things but they will represent great value. Luxury had become so expensive, whereas luxury these days lies in very simple things done very well. That's what we're going to concentrate on. Price will not so much be the touchstone as quality and aesthetics.” You could find a beret next to an Yves Saint Laurent evening dress, an old industrial stool beside a new designer stool. Surprise, innovation, theatre, value for money – all in a philanthropic context. Could this just be where modern retailing is at?

Of course, not many of us have Marie-France's luxury of having made enough money not ever to need any more – but oh, if one had, what a thing to do with it. ↗

WORTH THE DETOUR

10 Corso Como, Corso Como 10, 20154 Milan (+3902-2900 2674; www.10corsocomo.com) and branches. **Colette**, 213 Rue Saint-Honoré, 75001 Paris (+331-5535 3390; www.colette.fr). **Dunhill**, Bourdon House, 2 Davies Street, London W1 (0845-458 0779) and branches/stockists. **Few and Far**, 242 Brompton Road, London SW3 (020-7225 7070). **Matches**, 87 Marylebone High Street, London W1 (020-7487 5400; www.matchesfashion.com) and branches. **Merci**, 111 Boulevard Beaumarchais, 75003 Paris (+331-4277 0033). **Rous Island**, 45 Clarges Street, London W1 (0845-003 8945; www.rousland.com). **Vintage Academe** (01692-538 007; www.vintagecademe.com).



Quirky, sublime and hard-to-find treasures are offered at Merci.
Top: Bakelite reader's light, €79.
Above: spongeware bowl by Fasano in Italy, from €30. **Right:** revolving Nureyev bookcase designed by Roderick Vos, €4,000.