

Women's Wear Daily

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Chicago Shows Its Stylish Side

By Beth Wilson

CHICAGO — Naysayers who questioned Chicago's place in the fashion industry may have to think twice now.

The Windy City just hosted Fashion Focus, a 12-day festival that highlighted local talent ranging from looks by students and emerging designers to styles from the city's best-known fashion names. Designers, buyers, students and industry insiders came together from Sept. 20 to Oct 1. in a way unseen in decades and turned some industry heads.

"We think the talent is here," said Frank Guzzetta, chairman and chief executive officer of Macy's North. "For up-and-coming designers, they are in the same league as New York. They just haven't had the place to showcase it."

Earlier in September, Macy's on State Street unveiled its Designers of Chicago shop, a collection of work from 47 local designers featuring women's, men's and children's apparel along with jewelry, handbags, shoes and other accessories.

During Fashion Focus, it held a Designers of Chicago fashion show highlighting dramatic attire from some of the city's most successful designers — Lara Miller, Katrin Schnabl, **Cyndi Chan**, Doris Ruth, Kent Nielsen, Michelle Tan, Orlando Espinoza, Maria Pinto and Price Walton.

If any of the local designers' merchandise performs well enough at Macy's on State Street, the retailer plans to expand its buy to stores across the country.

"We want to start it here as an incubator and take it national to San Francisco and New York," Guzzetta said. "This is one of the most exciting things we're doing as a company. They can help us and we can help them."

All this is music to Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's ears. The mayor four months ago decided to put his clout behind improving Chicago's fashion reputation. "Chicago is a true global city and nowhere is this more evident than in the city's growing fashion industry," Daley said. "Fashion Focus Chicago has proven to be a wonderful way to support the city's fashion community, highlight the talented artists who live and work here, and draw people to the neighborhood shops that sell fashions by local designers."

In June, Daley created a Fashion Advisory Council to help consolidate the city's fashion and retail resources and help promote its talent. He appointed Melissa Turner as director of fashion arts and events for the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, who was a constant presence at the nightly Fashion Focus shows.

"The turnout was amazing," Turner said of the four standing-room-only fashion shows at the city's Millennium Park that each attracted more than 800 people. "We're excited with the way the industry and community responded."

GenArt's Fresh Faces in Fashion kicked off the runway shows on Sept. 25, highlighting glam vintage-inspired looks from Shanel Regier; easy, breezy dresses from Malena Maree; colorful creations from Joynoelle, and cocktail classics from Vaitit Itthi, among others.

On Sept. 26, Daley and his wife, Maggie, attended Chicago Sister Cities' World Fashion Chicago runway show featuring designs by many of its 25 international sister cities. On Sept. 27, Macy's hosted its Designers of Chicago fashion show and on Sept. 28, another 50 apparel and accessories designers participated in the seventh annual "Chicago Is...Red Hot!" fashion show, coordinated by Chicago's Apparel Industry Board Inc.

"I think this [Fashion Focus] is the beginning of something wonderful," said Dorothy Fuller, president of the board. "[Chicago] used to be a fashion center and we're seeing a revival. It's reemerging now because of the mayor. If the mayor wants it to become a fashion capital, he has the clout, the staff and the people, and that is what it takes.

"We have a lot of talent in the city and now we have to showcase it," Fuller added. "Maybe we've been too quiet about it."

Adding some celebrity power, Beyoncé Knowles and her mother, Tina, unveiled the nation's first House of Deréon shop-within-a-shop at Macy's on State Street on Sept. 28, to a cheering crowd of 2,000.

"We hope everyone everywhere will love the House of Deréon line," Knowles said. "But there are some truly lovely and gorgeous ladies in Chicago and we hope they will respond to our fashion in a positive way."

Knowles, who was also in town to perform at Macy's Glamorama Sept. 29, a highlight of Fashion Focus, need not worry. Hundreds of fans filled the aisles of Macy's that afternoon to get a glimpse of the ponytailed star during a personal appearance, and some 250 people paid \$150 apiece to shop the 2,000-square-foot House of Deréon space during a private shopping party with Knowles and her mother that night.

Shoppers scooped up House of Deréon's opened-toed sandals, novelty jackets, bustier tops, pencil skirts with ruffle trim and paparazzi-ready red strapless gowns and curve-hugging jersey dresses, positioned on Macy's third floor,

along with other contemporary lines such as Theory and BCBG.

Although Beyoncé and Tina Knowles abruptly ended a TV reporter's interview when she commented that Chicago retailers had complained that some of the tops didn't fit, Charles "Chip" Rosen, president and general manager of House of Deréon, said afterward, "I have not heard there is a size problem."

He said that both Beyoncé and her mother wear House of Deréon clothing. "It would appear to be an isolated issue. I'm not denying that there is a retailer out with a style that had a size issue. Maybe they didn't have the size range," he said.

Beyoncé said it had always been her dream to build a business with her mother, who designed and created the wardrobe for Destiny's Child. Today, the two collaborate on concepts, direction and themes for the line, which has a sexy, urban diva feel that mirrors Beyoncé's look.

Beyoncé and her mother are expanding House of Deréon into juniors with a line called Deréon and hope to develop it into a complete lifestyle brand, she said.

About 3,500 people turned out for Macy's Glamorama's runway show, a sold-out fashion extravaganza at the Chicago Theatre. Spotighting fashions from Just Cavalli, Badgley Mischka, Tuleh, Ralph Lauren, Temperley London and House of Deréon, among others, the event was more cohesive than in past years, presenting a clear theme of multicultural entertainment, from the multiracial Grammy Award-winning Ozomatli, to the urban street feel of Tommy the Clown to the finale presented by Beyoncé, who sang "Crazy in Love."

Afterward, some 2,300 people traveled across the street to the seventh floor of Macy's on State Street for the after party, which raised \$375,000 for the Art Institute of Chicago. The fashion festival gave design students and beginning designers a chance to gain recognition and information. Onlookers could watch students and instructors from Columbia

College, the Illinois Institute of Art-Chicago, the International Academy of Design and Technology and the School of the Art Institute Chicago create one-of-a-kind designs under the Chicago Theatre marquee along State Street while some of the city's other fashion design students touted their creations during "Street Beat," an outdoor fashion show along the street. Another opportunity for young designers was Macy's Distinction in Design contest, when one designer was named "Best in Show."

There were special events in the city's top shopping neighborhoods of Lincoln Park, Lakeview, Wicker Park, Bucktown and the Gold Coast, as well as a half-dozen industry seminars, including how to finance a fashion business.

"Fashion week seems like it garnered a lot of attention to designers in Chicago," said women's wear designer Maria Pinto. "It certainly wasn't fashion week in New York, but it served its purpose in that it brought people's awareness in Chicago to Chicago designers. "You don't have to leave Chicago to succeed in the industry," she added.