

# Meet the Society Seamstresses!

'There is something in women's psyches that wants an original,' says the client of one of the custom dressmakers below. **SUSAN M. KIRSCHBAUM** unzips the world where Lauren Bush and Reese Witherspoon get naked and where every woman's a muse (if she's rich enough).

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private dressmaker, Catherine Walker, for her own private wardrobe. "You can always spot a woman who does custom," she said, "because it always looks best."

Naturally, name-brand design houses want a piece of what might be dubbed the New Couture. Witness Helmut Lang, who began offering made-to-measure tailoring last autumn (the appointments are booked solid for several months); Gucci, now offering "made-to-order" handbags and shoes; and Isaac Mizrahi, who is offsetting his foray into mass-market retail at Target with a custom business. At the end of July, Mr. Mizrahi sent 100 private invitations to ladies around town, which made clear that the recipients of these cards were his personal choices as custom clients. Socialite Helen Lee Schifter said she was looking forward to her fitting. "It's more about supporting the designer," she said. "It's a creative process, and you can be clued in. The end product is unique."

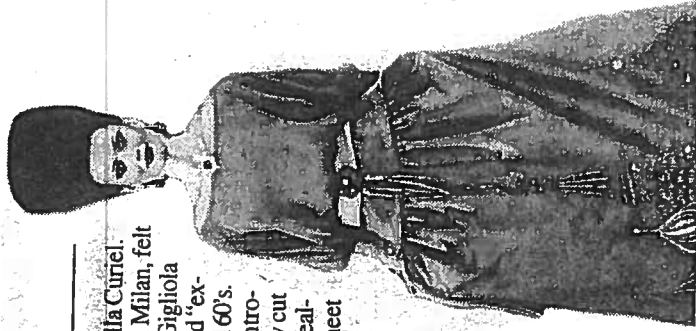
Ms. Schifter demurred when asked to name some of Mr. Mizrahi's other secret clients. "I know they didn't send these cards to too many people. It's very quiet," she said. (*Shhh.*) Introducing the latest breed of urban outfitters:

## Raffaella Curiel

"I create luxury door-to-door," said Raffaella Curiel. Ms. Curiel, a 60-year-old designer based in Milan, felt the pull of a legacy to fulfill. Her late mother, Gigliola Curiel, was the first Italian designer to be carried "exclusively" at Bergdorf Goodman in the 1950's and 60's.

Gigliola's daughter explained how she introduced her own demi-couture line of classically cut suits and dresses to America. "The moment I realized that people didn't want to go out and meet each other wearing the same Chanel suit or dress, I put my samples in a suitcase and came to Manhattan," she said in a raspy lilt. That was 11 years ago, when she had two clients. Now she's got 200, including society dames Susan Soros, Brooke Astor, Lee Thaw, Catherine Cahill and Michelle Herbert. They keep her so busy that

Clients include  
Susan Soros and  
Brooke Astor:  
A dress from  
Raffaella Curiel's  
couture line,  
an homage to  
Russia.



## Danielle Gisiger

About four years ago, Danielle Gisiger saw a sudden uptick of business at her eight-year-old Chelsea custom atelier. Soon after Nicole Kidman wore an ice-blue gown to an awards show—"I saw four actors in the same dress," she said—she had to hire 15 additional seamstresses for what was once a one-woman shop.

Ms. Gisiger, 44, who looks to be in her 30's despite an ingenue's high brown ponytail, was born in Bern, Switzerland, and arrived here after winning a Swiss design contest that landed her a loft in the East Village.

She currently outfits first niece and former Tommy Hilfinger spokeswoman Lauren Bush; Tiffany Dubin, the founder of Sotheby's fashion department; and Liya Kebede, Estee Lauder's first African-American "face." Ms. Gisiger also makes complete seasonal wardrobes for a variety of uptown ladies.

"It's worth it," said Ms. Dubin, who collaborates creatively with Ms. Gisiger on several candy-colored jumpsuits—\$800 to \$1,500 apiece—each season. "It fulfills my creative fantasy. A very 19th-century concept—the way women used to get new clothing before the rise of the dictatorial fashion designer." Earlier in the summer, they were working on a black-and-white-striped Elvis Presley-themed ensemble. Close to 600 muslin templates fill the back corner. A black-and-white photo of Diana Vreeland—fashion's ultimate individualist, and the lady she calls "my hero"—sits on the wall above her aluminum desk.

"The people who come here have the Gucci, the Dolce in the closet." Ms. Gisiger told *The Observer*. "And they want something that you can't find anywhere else. We work around the clock."

(*Evening wear from \$3,000 to \$10,000; trousers and skirts range from \$500 to \$1,200 an item. 212.352.0447*)



The Fanjul and Hilton clans come to Alvin Valley; and when he took Tinsley Mortimer dancing, husband Topper got plenty steamed!

makes you feel a little more special. Like a muse. But I know he has several.

"At first Topper was saying, 'You're spending a little too much time with him,'" Ms. Mortimer added. "But they had a long talk, and now Topper loves Alvin."

(*Alvin Valley, off the rack/samples: trousers, \$300 to \$700; jackets, \$450 to \$900. All can go up to \$2,000 to \$3,000 apiece when customized, depending on fabric and fittings. Custom dresses: \$2,000 to \$4,000. Couture: \$4,000 to \$8,000. 212-253-0095*)

## Gabrielle Carlson

The South African-born Gabrielle Carlson, with her short, shaggy brown hair and wide grin, seems to have cornered the market for the over-40 and beyond-size-six set.

Ms. Carlson, who doesn't reveal her age, was handing out champagne flutes recently at her small West Village shop to about 30 of her "ladies," including Ronnie Eldridge, the former Upper West Side Councilwoman; Kathy Landau, vice pres-