

Montreal Gazette

At the heart of Simons; Britta Kröger lures customers with an eclectic mix of fresh designer fashion. Her message? Do not be afraid

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Illustrations: PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE / Kirsty Hume poses for photographer Douglas Friedman in designs by Pringle for Simons' spring campaign.; PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE / "The designer department is not attached to an age group," buyer Britta Kröger says. "It is a state of mind."; PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE / Britta Kröger, high-end designer buyer for Simons, poses in her personal selection: Balmain blouse, Neil Barrett leather leggings, fur vest and Minelli heels.; PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE / Hair and makeup artist Paco Puertas works his magic on model Kirsty Hume.; PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE / Every hair must be in place for the shot. Paco Puertas smooths Kirsty Hume's blond locks.; PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE / Douglas Friedman snaps Hume in the Nina Ricci dress.; PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE / Photos: Pierre Obendrauf THE GAZETTE Kröger consults with digital assistant Frédéric Robitaille (left) and photographer Douglas Friedman on a shot.; PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE / Photo director Marie Thibault (left) and buyer Britta Kröger check out a Nina Ricci dress at the spring campaign shoot.;

Anyone who happened to see a \$10,000 gold sequin Balmain dress at Simons a few seasons ago - hanging right across the aisle from a \$34.99 sweater - probably squinted at the price tag, blinked, counted the zeros and wondered: "What the heck is this doing here?"

The Quebec City-based department store, known for its stylish and very affordable offerings from in-house brands, is also famous for an eclectic mix of high-end designer collections, for men and women. Here a darling Nina Ricci tulle front top, there a Christopher Kane rainbow dress, Chloé camel pant or Jil Sander Navy pencil pant.

Those labels are among fashion's freshest new names.

Britta Kröger, 52, former model and designer, is the buyer responsible for the high-end women's-wear mélange, seeking that coup de coeur that will inspire the big designer purchase. She is also the partner in life and love of Peter Simons, president

of family-owned La Maison Simons.

"Simons is very eclectic," Kröger said on the set of the spring publicity shoot in the store's studios in Little Italy.

She noted that Simons customers range from age 13 to 80. "The designer department is not attached to an age group. It is a state of mind."

Asked about the unusual merchandising, placing the ultra-luxe next to the everyday, Kröger said it was democratic.

"That's what I love about our store, too," she said. "Nobody has to be afraid to come in and try a Hervé Leger dress.

"For younger women, or girls, it's wonderful to step over that timidity."

Those high-end items move around quite a bit, as does much of the merchandise. The designer collections are next to house brands Icône and Contemporaine, not separated into boutiques as in most

department stores. One anchor is Marella, a contemporary and comparatively affordable division of Italian house Max Mara.

"I like Marella for its amazing balance of quality and design. For sure, it's much easier to understand," Kröger said.

What might not be easy to understand is Manish Arora, another bold buy by Kröger. The Indian designer, who shows in Paris, is known for wild bursts of colour. "He is very theatrical," she admitted. "You have to pick through (the collection). Every piece is a painting."

Kröger was dressed more moderately, on the face of it. To oversee the spring shoot by New York celebrity photographer Douglas Friedman and modelled by '90s supermodel Kirsty Hume, she wore a Balmain ivory silk shirt - cost: over \$2,000 - with Neil Barrett leather leggings and a fur vest. The silk's weight and drape spoke of luxury.

"Can you imagine how long it takes for the little animals to make silk like this? Balmain is not only about the price."

Kröger allowed that her high-end designer collection is something of a flare: "Honestly, it's to attract attention, absolutely," she said. "Sure, I want to sell it.

"And we sell things like this, believe it or not," she said of the blouse, adding that Céline Dion did buy a gold Balmain dress, possibly that same gold sequin number that caused me to blink.

Among other rarefied labels in the department: Rick Owens, Missoni, Paule

Ka, Leonard, Rochas and Alberta Ferretti's Philosophy.

Richard Simons, Peter's brother and vice-president of merchandising for the stores, leads a team of 40 to 50 buyers who fan out around the world seeking the next new thing.

"Our philosophy is to bring the best products from around the world to our customers," he said. "We're on every continent, at every show, scouring the market for new ideas, new talent.

"What Britta buys is the summit of fashion. It's what anybody who is interested in fashion is watching. These designers - they inspire the world, they inspire change. Each piece is like a tableau."

Simons, with seven stores in Quebec, will be expanding to Edmonton this fall. An Anjou store is planned for 2013.

The company has also kept its eye on the home talent: designer Philippe Dubuc creates affordable women's collections for the stores, and Sabrina Barilà and Denis Gagnon will both create capsule lines for next fall.

Kröger said she is seeking surprise in her fashion buys, "for that heartbeat the woman is going to have when she looks at it."

Sometimes a woman will make a sacrifice, saving up and buying elegant investment pieces.

"But here, you go for the coup de coeur," she said. "I have no restrictions in what I bring in. I just want the Québécoise woman, or the Canadian woman, to see what's going on out there in the world. And

touch it and try it on and feel the fabric on the skin."

Fashion has always been a passion for Kröger. She sewed her own clothes as a child and began modelling while still in school in her native Germany. She landed in Paris by age 20, where she continued to model, then became a designer, creating the Lili Crépon line in the 1980s.

"It was quite funky and colourful," she said, noting it was sold in Joseph and Harrods in London, Bloomingdales, Charivari, Henri Bendel and department stores in Paris.

Simons was a client of her business at the time, and she maintains a Paris residence and buying office.

"Peter saw an advertisement for Samaritaine and wanted to buy the brand," she recalled. "So this is how he showed up for the first time in my office, this tall Canadian."

Fast forward two or three decades, and they became a couple. "There's a sort of destiny," Kröger said.

Fine fashion is a form of art, Kröger said. "There is a creation behind it. There is research of beauty, embellishment.

"This is always the first goal - to make a woman more beautiful."

Kröger said she liked the style of Montreal women, but found it monochromatic compared to the streets of London or Paris.

"In general, the Montreal woman is quite elegant, in a more sober way. When she goes out to a nightclub, party or ball -

wow."

It has a lot to do with the two dress codes, work and play, in North America, she guessed, "which we don't really have in Europe. It obliges you to have two wardrobes here. Which is a pity."

Kröger could not and probably would not say what percentage of the designer goods sell on discount.

"There are surprises and it's very encouraging," she said.

Richard Simons added: "I won't lie to you - a good portion does go on sale. But our full-price business has grown substantially. It's all part of an orchestra. What instrument makes the music sound the best? It's all part of a formula that works together.

"It's meant to position Simons as a fashion leader. It's meant to inspire us. It's meant to stimulate our ideas of what we think is going forward. Every piece of merchandise that we sell is a piece of information about what the customer wants."

SIMONS SEES COLOUR

Britta Kröger, designer buyer for Simons, headed for Paris and Milan last week for the European fall collections. She had already noted a strong trend to rich petrol greens, burgundies and raspberries for next season, with a move away from the orange we've been seeing for several seasons.

But most of us are still focused on spring. Here are her picks for the trends of the new season:

Cropped cigarette pants to wear with

high-heel sandals, pumps or ballet flats.
"It's in every collection, very elegant.

reserved.

With one pant you can do so much."

A move to more oversize, blouson shapes.
Shirts are back, too.

Dresses, dresses, dresses. "It's so easy. You
throw on a dress."

Skirts are coming back in pleats and
gauchos.

Old-fashioned heavy fabrics. "It's so
forgiving, it's wonderful. They shape the
body," she said, mentioning Jonathan
Saunders.

Brights and pastels will persist through the
summer. The pastels are not baby pastel -
they're more mature. "I love to mix pastels
with vivid colours. ... I love to experiment,
and I would love for women to
experiment."

Richard Simons, vicepresident of
merchandising for Simons and in charge of
the team of 50 buyers, offers these trends:

Pastels

Metallics

Mixed-media plays of fabric and colour

Leather

Retro fashion

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