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## ThursdayStyles

### If a Picasso Had Buttons...

**Like treasured works of art, the clothing of the rich is not just stored but pampered.**

by **STEPHEN HEYMAN**

Secreted away in a nondescript warehouse in Long Island City, Queens, may be one of the most valuable collections of contemporary fashion in the world. Few know of its existence. There are no signs on the building. To get there, you take an elevator to the second floor and enter an unmarked door.

Inside is 15,000 square feet of air-purified, temperature-controlled closet space filled floor to ceiling with identical polypropylene garment bags. Walk along an aisle and you will see that the clothes, 30,000 pieces in all, some still with price tags, are organized by owner.

Here are Ivanka Trump's empire-waist dresses, Gwyneth Paltrow's couture gowns, the model Iman's cashmere car coats and a shoe collection belonging to an Oscar-winning filmmaker who prefers to remain anonymous.

Also here, occupying several racks, is Oscar de la Renta's complete archive of ready-to-wear collections, dating back to his first in 1965.

These are the headquarters of Garde Robe, a wardrobe storage service for the rich, the famous and the fashion-obsessed. Security is tight.

"We're not Fort Knox," said Adam Gilvar, the company's president, "but we have the same surveillance system as Harry Winston."

Each item that comes in for storage is inspected for dirt or other contaminants, sterilized, photographed and cataloged in a database. Clients can view their virtual closet on an iPad, and schedule same-day deliveries. A "rush" 90-minute delivery is also available, which comes in handy in summer, should you need a maxi dress to arrive at your seaplane before it takes off for East Hampton.

Garde Robe has about 300 members, including a billionaire real estate magnate and his wife, who store 3,000 pieces at a cost of more than \$150,000 a year. Most clients have smaller storage needs, though the minimum is a single rack, which

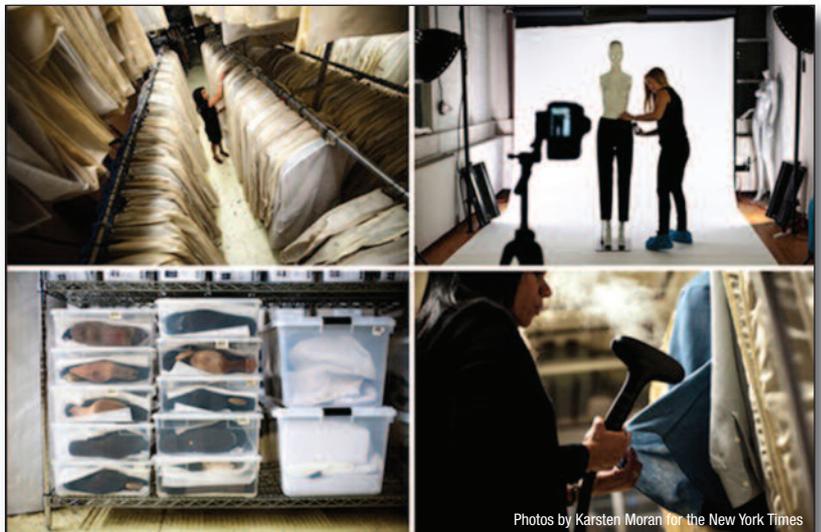
goes for \$4,200 a year and is enough for 50 items of clothing, 10 pairs of shoes and a box of accessories. (By contrast, a 25-square-foot room at a nearby Storage Deluxe runs about \$59 a month.)

The couture rent-a-closet concept is the brainchild of Kim Akhtar, 48, a Renaissance woman and polyglot who helped manage the English rock band the Cure and later became Dan Rather's personal assistant.

"Like every New Yorker, I was always perpetually complaining about the lack of closet space," Ms. Akhtar said.

She tried one summer to store her winter clothes at a dry cleaner on the Upper East Side. The bill was several thousand dollars, and soon she could not remember what clothes she actually had in storage.

*(continued on back)*



Photos by Karsten Moran for the New York Times

From left clockwise: bagged clothing in racks in the temperature-controlled warehouse; clothing is photographed and cataloged; clothing is steamed; shoes and accessories in containers.

(continued from front)

“Everything disappeared for six months,” she said. “I’d end up buying another black cashmere cardigan because I would forget that I already had a black cashmere cardigan.”

Her dreams of renting a walk-in closet led her to start Garde Robe in 2001 in a TriBeCa loft. Six years later, Ms. Akhtar sold the company to Mr. Gilvar and moved to Spain to pursue another passion, flamenco dancing, under the stage name La Maha.

Mr. Gilvar, 40, who was previously a business development manager for a Dutch media conglomerate, quickly expanded Garde Robe; the company relocated it to its present location in 2007.

It is still growing: Mr. Gilvar has taken on a partner, Doug Greenberg, and together they have opened satellite locations at high-end dry cleaners in Los Angeles and Miami and are working on expanding to Brazil and Europe.

“People are realizing that there’s an asset behind their closet doors,” Mr. Greenberg said. “Some of them are wise enough to protect it like a piece of art. They wouldn’t buy a piece of art at auction and then give it to A1 Storage on the side of the West Side Highway.”

Garde Robe’s staff comprises proud fashion geeks, all of whom have signed strict nondisclosure agreements so they will not gossip about the celebrity clientele, or their dirty laundry.

“It’s killer,” said Sara Lincoln, a 28-year-old account manager who grew up reading *Vogue* and studied apparel merchandising at Colorado State University. “During Fashion Week, I told my parents I had to go to Paris to deliver some furs for a princess. And that was the extent of what they knew.”

Inside its headquarters, a covey of F.I.T. grads photograph clothes on mannequins while wearing surgical scrubs on their feet so they do not smudge the backdrops. Nearby is a diagram with swatches of 33 types of fur — chinchilla, white mink, Russian sable — so employees can identify the coats that come in by sight and touch.

No staff member commands quite as much attention as Damion West, a charismatic 36-year-old wardrobe manager who speaks in a soothing baritone and calls himself the “the royalty liaison” because he deals with the V.I.P. clients.

“There’s a client that I visit who is an editor for a fashion magazine,” he said, “and when she opens the door she’s like, ‘Oh, it’s Damion and the girls!’” (The “girls” are her shoes.)

One of Mr. West’s clients even invited him to her hotel room to pack up clothes while she was in dishabille.

“I felt a bit odd because she got in the tub, with all these bubbles, and she’s kind of talking to me through the door,” he said, “and she has this extremely sultry voice, ‘Oh, Damion, could you just check the drawer with my intimates and just make sure you pick them all up?’”

It’s that type of personal service that Garde Robe emphasizes in its pitches to new customers. The company barely advertises, keeps its starry client list confidential and its address undisclosed. And unlike, say, the name of a hot new restaurant, clients don’t usually talk up the service, perhaps too embarrassed to admit they spend a small fortune on keeping party clothes in museum-quality conditions.

“I just wouldn’t bring it up,” said Sarah Wolfe, a fashion collector

from Southport, Conn., who stores her haute couture Chanel and Balenciaga at Garde Robe. “Maybe it’s because I’m a New England girl, but it would seem kind of baggy.”

Nevertheless, word is spreading. Bridget Foley, the executive editor of *Women’s Wear Daily*, typifies the kind of fashion establishmentarian who has recently joined. Ms. Foley said the process of deciding what to store at Garde Robe helped her edit down her wardrobe.

“I’m incredibly disorganized,” she said. “I don’t want my grandchildren to say, ‘Ooh, God, what a batty old lady she was’ when they’re cleaning out my closets.”

Another new client is Stacy Lauren Smith, an entertainment executive who recently moved from Virginia (“hillbilly country,” she called it) to Central Park West. A fashion enthusiast, she has amassed every collection that Tom Ford designed for Gucci and Saint Laurent, along with an array of Azzedine Alaïa dresses, custom Prada skirts and Hermès bags. A big chunk of it is now bound for Garde Robe.

“When you move from the South, you’re moving from closets that look like Scarlett O’Hara’s plantation,” Ms. Smith said. “You come to New York and you think you’re getting a really nice apartment, but there’s still very little space.”



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