

"Mary Efron -- A Living Doll"

After decades of being the "world's most overdressed executive secretary," Mary Efron now enjoys watching the world go by from inside her Greenwich Village Vintage store.

As you enter this oversized walk-in closet, you are propelled into another era: Sounds of a speakeasy waft from the gramophone-like stereo playing jazz; Antique teapots line the shelves; Ancestral dresses are displayed on walls and gracefully hang from two floor racks enveloping the store's cramped quarters.

The proud owner of her self-named store, Mary is perched behind a small counter rifling through a book about handbags. Having opened the store just six years ago, she admits that books are a great resource to understand the history behind her rare finds.

Hoping to transform women with her original pieces, Mary shutters as she thinks about the occasional suburban housewife she has to call on. "Pudding in a box" she calls them. She tells of the day that crystallized her aversion for the conformist customer:

"A housewife from New Jersey was trying on a straw hat that 'transformed' her. Instead of seeing herself in a new light she cried out, 'I cannot buy this. Now I won't fit in!' Since I am not paid to be her shrink or life counselor, there was no use in trying to help her see otherwise."

This disdain is not new for Mary. She explains how as a child in LA, she would cringe when she saw girls in uniforms going to school. "How could anyone want to wear the same thing everyday?" To Mary, that is a death sentence.

Despite her large personality and prowess over her store, Mary appears doll-like. Standing well under five feet, she is dressed to the nines in a 1940's navy blue suit with elegant diamond brooch and earrings. She innocently tugs at her curly speckled coif, while she deliberates over her answers. It is then that I realize that she is wearing a wig.

At age sixty-one, Mary personifies the rare, antique clothing she sells. But, I am weary of categorizing her as aged, as she tells me that, like a bouncer, she has been known to ask unpleasant people to leave her store. Having witnessed her annoyance with a customer who did not carefully re-hang an antique beaded dress, I know she is a force to be reckoned with.

While initially dodging the question about how she came to open the store – "That's personal" she said with a cackling laugh that could chip paint – she ultimately breaths the answer, "Inheritance." "A small inheritance."

Before acquiring the money, Mary attempted to be visually stimulated through intermittent jobs at art galleries and museums. "Being fired from the Whitney for insubordination" clinched Mary's belief that she does not have a head for office politics and needed to work alone. Thinking back, she says a boutique was the only answer. For once, her personal style could be admired, not gawked at by office drones.

Like many Vintage Store owners, she remains tight-lipped about her sources. Coyly, she does reveal that she has a lot of dealer friends. Like her customer base, she is extremely selective with the items she places in the store.

"Pieces have to be a reflection of me" she says.

An intensely visual person, Mary painstakingly arranges her store. "Everything has to be a picture. Even in my apartment; my kitchen is so cluttered I cannot even cook. If something is in the wrong place, it makes me nuts." Which could explain the overflow of teapots and glassware throughout the small store.

While Mary does not describe herself as fanatical about her selection process, she admits that she's often thrown pieces away that might degrade her other merchandise. She brings out a black, crocheted handbag, noting that it made the cut because it is very serviceable. "It is \$20 – a flea market price," she says with pause, as if she is still questioning her decision to hang it in the store.

As today's designers frequently examine vintage fashion for inspiration, I inquire about those who grace her store.

"Marc Jacobs?" I ask. "Anna Sui?"

With a blank gaze, she informs me that she "refuses to name drop." Moments later, she admits to seeing Rebecca and Patricia Field, the well-known stylists from "Sex & The City," on occasion. When asked if she would have preferred to be a stylist, she reminds me "in her day, there was no such occupation."

As I gather my things to leave, Mary lunges in as if to hug me. Instead, she presses an antique boot refrigerator magnet in my hand. She has enjoyed our

conversation and wishes to thank me for flattering her with my inquisition. As I suspected, she really is a doll.