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Inauguration gown buyers go Goodwill hunting

Thrift shops offer top pick

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WAITING FOR OBAMA

You've snagged the highly coveted inaugural ball tickets, a hot date and, most importantly, a place to crash afterward. Now the real challenge - finding a gown or tux at a recession-proof price.

This winter, according to local thrift-shop merchants, the shopping-savvy and cash-deprived are flocking to discount and consignment stores to outfit them in fashions fit for a first lady or first dude during inauguration week.

Goodwill stores "are a great place to find very inexpensive yet beautiful vintage and contemporary high-end fashions for the inaugural festivities," Brendan Hurley, vice president of marketing for the popular thrift-store chain, said via e-mail. The Goodwill in Gaithersburg, he said, has reported "far more customers looking for formal wear this early in the season than usual."

Mr. Hurley said customers are not concerned with wearing other people's clothes because "many of the formal gowns that are donated to Goodwill have only been worn once, while some have never been worn at all."

Don't be surprised if you even run into some blasts from the glamorous past.

Goodwill's fashion blogger Em Hall has excavated inaugural gowns from the 1960s designed and donned by Jane Quisenberry Wirtz. Mrs. Wirtz was the wife of Willard Wirtz, 95, secretary of labor under President Kennedy. She also was a Washington social doyenne and accomplished seamstress.

"In our current vintage collection at Goodwill, we have the inaugural gowns she wore to both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson's inaugural balls," Miss Hall said via e-mail. "Adding a level of intrigue is the fact that she sewed each gown from a Vogue pattern; and we have the patterns, too. These beautiful gowns are truly pieces of history."

Goodwill has two other gowns, both circa mid-'60s, from the Wirtz collection that are "eminently wearable" for inaugural events. One is made of French silk with strapless bodice and beaded evening jacket, and the other is a Japanese silk full-length dress with matching silver bow and trim.

Mr. Hurley explained that the Wirtz gowns will be sold online and that no price has been established. But he promised "they will be a great buy regardless."

For the gents, Miss Hall suggested checking out Goodwill's selection of tuxedos, suits and shirts. "The classic black tux is a must-have. Satin lapel, side-seam satin stripe - this is most certainly the time to go all out."

Shopping for inaugural gowns and tuxedos at nontraditional places is a sign of the times, said Michelle Sterling, founder of the Global Image Group, a style consulting firm. "With the down economy, many people are cleaning out their closets and selling their old clothes," she said. "You never know if you'll find vintage Chanel, Dior or Gucci in a consignment store."

At Sequels, a consignment store on Wisconsin Avenue, many shoppers are looking to the past for inspiration and saving money in the process.

"I did not want black, and I did not want full length. I wanted something more retro and '50s," said shopper Ethel Stewart, who tried on a burgundy midlength frock.

Sequels owner Julie Quinn confirmed that she has been besieged with business as women search for hand-me-down dresses and accessories to complete their inaugural looks. "All but two pair of my opera gloves are gone."

At Encore, another consignment shop in the Northwest, secondhand fur coats seem to be in great demand for inaugural events. "Women want a fur coat to go with their beautiful gown, and they can get that here at a fraction of the price they would pay at a department store," said Nina Du, Encore's owner. "We are getting a lot of people in government and their significant others coming in."

One accessory that cannot be overlooked are the shoes. On Inauguration Day, chances are you will be on your feet all day and will walk through snow, mud and littered streets. Not exactly optimum terrain for your Carrie Bradshaw Manolos or Gucci loafers. You will need something easy on the arches and wallet. Payless ShoeSource's Carmelita peep toe pump by Lela Rose in black is classic with a good heel, and its oxford in black will suffice for men.

If rummaging through other people's castoffs is not for you, remember that the economic misfortune can be your good fortune. "With our economy being in an unfortunate state right now, you can find some great deals at regular stores," said Washington style-consultant Kara Allan. "Ann Taylor and Banana Republic are some of the higher end stores that are having fabulous sales. Bargain stores have outfits that look like they cost a lot more."

Miss Allan said you can go cheap, but keep it high-class. "Make sure it's an authentic representation of you," she advised. "Be reasonable as well - no big feathers, no crazy patterns. Simple, elegant, you."