

Shopping With...Christina Hurvis, Designer

By Lauren David Peden

January 27, 2005 - New York

Designer Christina Hurvis may be based in San Francisco, but she possesses the skill — and soul — of a classic European couturier.

"My line is really more [in the style] of French couture like old Balenciaga and Dior, with a lot of bias-cut gowns," the petite blue-eyed blond told FWD as we sat in her sunny 4,000 square foot SoMa atelier, which is where she designs Couture SF, her bridal and special occasion attire collection. "You really don't find anything like that off the rack, with really good bias and interesting cuts."

FWD was there to take her shopping, but first a little background: Hurvis studied fashion at Parsons School of Design in Paris in the early '90s and interned at Christophe Lemaire before landing full-time gigs at Christian Dior (under Gianfranco Ferré), Pierre Balmain (under Oscar de la Renta), and Jean Paul Gaultier (during his Blond Ambition cone bra period).

"It's very small, only 25 people, so you really get to do everything," she said of her four years doing couture in the City of Lights. "It was really neat. Jean Paul would go to London and bring back a whole pile of amazing, 19th century stuff from the flea market. He would say, 'Take this top apart and make a see-through rubber gown on the bottom with this sequined vintage thing.' So I learned from the best, not only from the design perspective but also [about] construction."

Hurvis also got major on the job training vis-à-vis celebrities. "When I worked with Gaultier, because I spoke English I had to take care of Madonna when she was in that show," Hurvis recalled. "I actually had to make a last-minute thong for her to wear under a sheer rubber dress at 2 a.m. the night before the show. It was craziness!"

At Dior, it wasn't unusual for Hurvis to rub elbows with clients like Sophia Loren and Saudi Arabian princesses, who would pop in with ten of their closest friends to commission \$250,000 wedding gowns. "It was really wild," she said. "I learned a lot."

After her stint in Paris, the Chicago native moved to New York to work as a technical designer for Nicole Miller. "It was completely different," she told us. "I really learned about mass production, American style. That was much more about the business of fashion than the art of fashion, which is what Paris couture is all about."

In 1996, the self-described "coat fanatic" launched her own line of high-end camel hair coats, which sold in better boutiques across the country (Max Mara and Armani were her main competitors, stylistically speaking), then she switched gears and designed a line of jersey travel separates, not unlike Donna Karan's seven easy pieces.

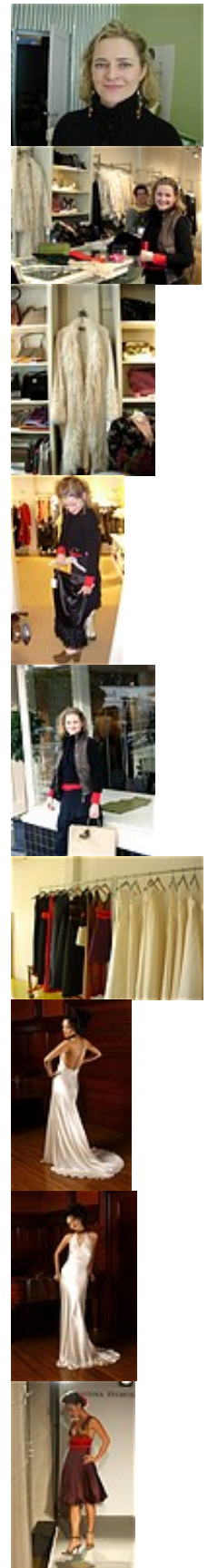
Hurvis switched gears again in 2000 — having burned out on the fast-paced New York fashion scene — shuttered her business and moved to Hawaii for 18 months.

She came back to the mainland — San Francisco — in 2002 and launched Couture SF shortly thereafter, this time focusing on luxury bridal, evening and cocktail dresses, which take up to six personalized fittings (and four to six months) to complete and start at \$2,500. Her clients include local society ladies, along with celebrities such as Courtney Cox Arquette and Curb Your Enthusiasm's Cheryl Hines, all of whom appreciate the level of craftsmanship and individualized attention Hurvis provides (which you can see for yourself at www.couturesf.com).

"I love to work with the client directly and do a collaboration," she explained as she led us around her airy work room, where sketches and elaborately beaded lace swatches from France were strewn across a massive white table. "I'm not selling in stores, so I do everything. I got so far away from the client when I was wholesaling — I never saw my customer!"

Hurvis herself is getting married in April — at Grace Cathedral, no less — to a software designer she met shortly after moving to San Francisco. "I'm going as Grace Kelly pretty much," she said of her self-designed dress, a long-sleeved lace confection that will, of course, have a train. "Are you kidding me? Grace Cathedral? You need a train!"

On this day, however, she was outfitted for shopping in a red long-sleeved Gap Body t-shirt, black



Miss Sixty sweater, knee-high ivory OXS combat boots, earrings from London's Top Shop and a black ruffled bias-cut skirt from DKNY.

"I usually buy a couple of her pieces each season because I get inspired by the way she cuts them," said Hurvis as she swished her hips to make the ruffles dance. "It's really complicated and I can't believe she's making this for ready-to-wear." See? Under that Miss Sixty sweater beats the heart of a Natural Born Couturier.

We hopped in her black Ford Focus and took off for Cris (2056 Polk Street; 415-474-1191), a designer consignment shop in the tony Russian Hill neighborhood.

"It's got all good stuff and everything is under \$100," Hurvis enthused while parallel parking on the hilly street. "It's a little bit like a Hamptons crowd, and that's who comes and brings stuff. I've found really interesting jewelry and the most amazing shoes there from Italy — not even worn. I have very European, expensive taste but I don't like to spend a lot. There are other consignment shops here, but they have a lot of teeny bopper stuff. Cris has all the European designers — and the owner wears Chanel and she's beautiful. She's European. I haven't been here in a long time, so this will be great."

As we made our way toward the store, Hurvis confided that she always gave herself a \$200 budget when shopping at Cris, lest she get carried away.

"\$200 maximum" she repeated firmly. Which meant she could spend up to \$300 today, since FWD was giving her a \$100 allowance.

Within seconds of entering the cream-walled store — which did indeed feel more like an old-world European salon than an American second hand shop, with its dramatic floral arrangements, wall-to-wall carpeting and hushed, monied ambiance — Hurvis was crouched down in front of the jewelry counter, surveying the shelves of rings and glittery brooches and bracelets. She asked to see a Lois Hill carved sterling silver stacked ring (actually five rings that could be worn together or separately), which was priced at \$65.

"This is really cool," she said, splaying her lilac-tipped fingers. "I like it because it's big and I have big fingers. But there are so many things in the store I love. It's good to look at everything and go back."

Heeding her own advice, Hurvis handed the ring back to owner Cris Zander (who was the picture of understated elegance with her chic cropped 'do and a butter yellow sweater draped just so over her gray cashmered shoulders) and headed over to — where else? — the coat rack ("its always about the coats"), where she ogled a classic camel balmacaan and tried on a colorfully embroidered ivory suede coat by Scervino that was trimmed with acres of Mongolian lamb fur (\$275).

"It's a little too big," she declared as she examined herself in the gold-framed mirror that hung on the back wall. Hurvis hung the coat back up then worked her way through a rack of skirts and pants, stopping dead when she spotted a black satin slip skirt with ivory lace panel (\$125).

"It's DKNY," she said with a laugh. "That's so funny. We'll definitely put this in the pile." She tossed the skirt onto a spindly-legged table beneath the mirror and resumed browsing. "Oh, \$135 for a Karl Lagerfeld feather trimmed skirt!" she crowed, brandishing a black pencil skirt that was as skinny as The Kaiser himself, this one ending in a sea of black plumage. "You cannot reveal the address [of this store]," she said, throwing a mock-threatening look our way. Not likely, toots.

"This blows away poor Donna," she added as she placed the Lagerfeld on the table for closer inspection. "We're going European. This will fit me. This will definitely fit me. This is amazing. It's stretch silk. It's probably a French fabric. In any case, it's expensive fabric. We'll try it on for comparison. I love it."

She went back and disengaged a Prada skirt from the rack. "This is really expensive, look at that workmanship! I get such inspiration..." She paused to examine the price tag. "Twenty-five percent off \$225. So that would be \$175. But it's too small, I can tell." Back it went. "I think that's it for skirts," she said, scanning the rack. "Move away from the black."

She spied a pair of (black) pants hanging nearby. "Chanel pants," she announced. "But I don't need anymore black pants. I have them coming out of my ears." She picked up second pair of (black) trousers. "Oh, Alexander McQueen for \$138! You can lure me away, but you have to look at Alexander McQueen."

So who are her favorite designers — other than Donna, that is? "At the moment? I like what Jean

Paul Gaultier is doing at Hermés, it's very exciting," she replied as she walked across the room to examine a rack of non-black designer duds.

"Look at this," she said, holding aloft a beige Armani overcoat-and-pants set. "\$500 for the whole thing." (Apparently, the store has raised its prices a bit since her last visit.) Hurvis thumbed through the rack, pausing to look at an outlandish Roberto Cavalli number before turning a pleated peach Marc Jacobs dress inside out to examine the lining, which was impeccably finished.

"This is really cool," she said. "Look at the construction. Marc Jacobs I'm pretty impressed with. It's got boning in here, it's got finished ribbons. It's beautiful. It's such old style couture. I wonder where this is made? This is very complicated. A normal factory won't do that because it's so time consuming; they don't make any money if it takes too long." She fished around and found a Made in the USA tag on the side seam. "Oh, he makes it locally," she murmured, nodding her head. Tutorial over, we went into the adjoining room, which contained less expensive clothing and shoes, shoes and more shoes, with Christian Louboutin, Manolo Blahnik, Jimmy Choo and Prada democratically displayed next to Aldo and Nine West.

Hurvis tried on a pair of chocolate suede Dolce & Gabbana clogs — "I can't do stilettos anymore. I did it for ten years and ruined my feet. I have to wear the chunky ones" — but deemed them not quite right.

She circled around to the front of the store and knelt down in front of yet another cache of shoes, plucking a sky high black leather ankle-strapped Manolo from the bunch. "*This* I would wear," she purred seductively. "This is worth the pain. Aren't those amazing? Unbelievable. These are the best ones — so pretty."

Hurvis stood up and came face-to-face with a boxy green leather clutch with mod silver trim. "Ellen Tracy, \$49," she read from the tag. "'It's so beautiful. It would go with black — and with silver jewelry, too."

She bypassed the racks of knit and woven tops, saying "I don't do sweaters secondhand — I think it takes the oils of the body and doesn't come out."

Hmm. So would she buy a vintage t-shirt? "No, just trousers or skirts." Interesting. But she'd buy used shoes? "Yes, but not really dirty shoes." OK then.

She went into the dressing room and tried on the Lagerfeld skirt, then sat on a chair to strap herself into the vaguely S&M Manolos. "They're too big and I'm in pain already," she said. "I can barely even stand up in these. They hurt my toes too much." The Lagerfeld skirt looked great but was a tad too small — she couldn't zip it all the way up.

The DKNY fit like a dream (of course). CHSF emerged looking very pleased. "We're going to take the skirt and I'm definitely going to get this bag," she told us. "It's so interesting."

We went to counter to pay — but first she tried on the Lois Hill ring again. "It's so cool," she said. "I have some of her stuff already. I love the versatility."

Zander rang her up — \$259.32 total — and Hurvis pulled a Visa card out of her bag. Which was made by...? "Guess," she said with a smile. Umm, let's see...how about...oh...I don't know...Donna Karan? "I got it at a DKNY outlet store down near LA," she laughed, patting the black leather satchel. "I don't know why I relate to her stuff."

She's reminded that she came in under her self-imposed \$300 budget and still had \$41 to burn. "That means I made some money today," she crowed. "I always turn it to my advantage."

We stepped outside to take a parting photograph, and Hurvis noticed a meter maid parked next to her car. "Oh, I forgot to put money in the meter!," she cried. She ran down the street but was, alas, too late. So how much was the ticket? "Thirty five big ones," she answered cheerfully. "But don't worry about it. I'm under my \$200 limit, so I still made money." Now that's the kind of logic we like.

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