

Palm Beach Daily News

THE SHINY SHEET®

PALM BEACH, FLORIDA SATURDAY, DEC. 22, 2001

More than just mere cashmere

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Published: December 22, 2001

What some consider luxurious, **Valerie Louthan** views as a fashion staple.



Daily News Photo
by Ruth Cincotta

Scottish-born designer **Valerie Louthan** wears her own Louisa evening sweater, \$495, in cashmere with silk-satin bows.

The commodity in question is cashmere. Louthan, a Scottish-born stylist who is devoted to the fabric and its intricacies, has designed cashmere knitwear for more than 35 years.

She started as a designer for Braemar and other mills in Scotland after training in fine arts and fashion design at several British institutions, including the Royal College of Art. In the early 1970s, she ventured out on her own - buying a former Ballantyne factory to manufacture apparel - and sold her creations to specialty stores around the world.

Twelve years ago, she moved to Palm Beach, having visited friends on the island over the years from her principal residence in the Bahamas. She bought a house on the North End and opened an office, basing the United States end of her business here.

It wasn't until the mid-1990s, however, that Louthan's cashmere sweaters and other pieces could be purchased in Palm Beach. "They would beat at the doors," said Louthan of her first few years of business, with potential customers mistaking her office for a retail outlet. She opened her only boutique at The Paramount building six years ago.

Since then she has sold the Scottish factory and her Palm Beach residence, moving to a West Palm Beach pied-a-terre and settling on a more permanent basis on Harbour Island.

Louthan continues to produce cashmere designs with the help of a handful of choice Scottish mills and has maintained the shop at The Paramount, which remains her only permanent year-round sales venue. "We're a bit of a well-kept secret," she said.

Her creations no longer are available at specialty stores but through seasonal trunk shows around the country and in Europe. "The Palm Beach store is responsible for about 30 percent of

our business," she said.

Among cashmere connoisseurs, Louthan is a celebrated design force. What separates her creations from other labels is her treatment of the knitted fabric in the same fashion that other designers use silk, cotton or linen. There also is a difference in her approach to cut and fit.

'I do not offer what you can get everywhere'

"I designed evening sweaters, hot pants, caftans, capes with pointed corners," she said. Among her latest creations are a buttonless tunic jacket, a fitted camisole without darts, a bat-wing sleeve top, a draped-neck sweater and a fitted jacket with rollover collar.

With 43 sweater styles for women, Louthan offers about 75 percent more choices than her competitors. "I do not offer what you can get everywhere," she said. "If that's what they want they shouldn't come to me."

Her mission has been to demystify cashmere. "I wear it year-round and find that the evening sweater is the best way to get dressed up without being so dressy," she said, donning her Louisa sweater, a \$495 model that features silk-satin shoulder bows.

"I am also significantly less expensive," she said, although she emphasizes that she does not scrimp on quality. "You can buy a similar cashmere jacket from me for \$525, when others charge \$2,000," she said. Louthan's prices range from \$220 for a sleeveless one-ply cashmere shell to \$1,000 for a large cape or long tunic jacket. "I also have bathrobes for \$1,500," she said.

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