

Ghirardelli Square: Top Designers Outfit Eclectic Thrift Shop

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On the main level of the Square, if you walk to the right of the information booth, then down some stairs, a little store with a bundle of one-of-a-kind merchandise awaits.

One would not expect a world-class tourist trap to house the likes of a thrift shop, yet Helpers Bazarre has been a fixture at the North Point Street complex since its inception in 1966, according to manager Joy Bianchi.

The shop resembles a miniature department store, selling everything from upscale used clothing to Christmas cards and toys. A wide array of crafts produced by the mentally retarded is also available.

What's more, according to an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* a few years ago, Bianchi heard voices back in 1997 that told her the business needed something else - mice. It was just one voice, actually, that of a friend of hers, Max Robert, who died of AIDS. Bianchi claimed Robert began whispering to her outside a major charity event on 57th Avenue in Manhattan.

He told her she needed to "dress the mice." Bianchi quickly surmised what he meant and approached some of the world's most famous designers that night, asking them to create a new design for her, but on a slightly



Joy Bianchi manages the many-faceted, upscale Helpers Bazarre.

smaller scale. She explains that most people are as afraid of the mentally retarded as they are of mice.

Next thing Bianchi knew, the *Chronicle* recounted, the new line of fashions were rolling in. Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta, Armani, Wang, Hermes and other designers all knocked out their new designs, then outfitted the duds on stuffed mice. The result was Mouse Couture, a museum housed in a glass display case inside of Helpers Bazarre.

The most famous figure of the set is a mouse replica of Audrey Hepburn descending the steps of her famous film *Funny Face*. Museum enthusiasts can buy a laser image of this and other designers' original sketches.

If you're bent on buying designer clothes, all you need do is mosey across the store. Wilkes Bashford is a regular donor, and Bianchi says you can pick up one of his \$165 shirts for a mere twenty bucks. There's also a huge selection of vintage hats, many donated by Bergdorf Goodman of New York fame.

On the other hand, if you're in the market for a one-of-a-kind gift, you can literally dig for hours among the antiques, jewelry, an-

tiques, linens and silverware that fill the different tables and cases.

One of her vendors, Bianchi adds, is a lady of 102. This industrious soul custom knits booties that sell for \$6.95 a pair. Items produced by mentally retarded people, by the way, are identified by a red tag.

The store is operated by Helpers Homes, a charity that uses all its profits to help its retarded clients stay clothed, housed and fed - not to mention steadily employed.

As for all the change underfoot in Ghirardelli Square, Bianchi says Helpers Bazarre isn't going anywhere.

She insists, "This is a wonderful, wonderful management that is bringing Ghirardelli Square back to its original concept."

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