

# The New York Times

FASHION & STYLE

## On Planet Proenza

**Critical Shopper**

By ALEXANDRA JACOBS SEPT. 19, 2012



CreditHiroko Masuike/The New York Times

IN a world of fashion design densely populated by difficult, messy individuals, one can well understand the temptation to team up and clean up, à la Dolce & Gabbana or Viktor & Rolf. You and your partner may not agree on every inch of rickrack, but he'll probably stop you from alcohol-fueled anti-Semitic rants and affairs with a tanned pornographic-film star half your age.

Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez, the perpetually schoolboyish duo behind [Proenza Schouler](#), may not have an ampersand or the

# The New York Times

blockbuster bank-swelling perfumes of their predecessors, but they have accomplished a moderate hit: the PS1 messenger bag, many iterations of which appear on the first floor of their new store on Madison Avenue.

Personally, I think the thing looks like something a midlevel male account manager might use to lug his Dell laptop on a commuter flight to Buffalo, and I was glad to see many more-feminine, beautiful purses on offer, like the Toshi, a variation on the bowling bag, with a lock (woven leather and nylon, \$2,375; woven leather, \$2,925); and a whole menagerie of what I like to call Tribble bags, after the furry creatures on “Star Trek.”

Actually the whole place, tucked into a frilly brownstone but with interiors designed by the architect David Adjaye, is kind of “Star Trek.” Glass doors at the entrance slide open automatically. Cactuses rear up, an alien life form in humid New York. Reached by a flight of stairs behind a triangle-patterned screen, the second floor has a pockmarked look, as if brutalized by a recent meteor shower.

And many of the current clothes, like the jagged miniskirts in techno fabrics, suggest something Lieutenant Uhura might don to seduce or confuse Captain Kirk into another clinch. A white sweater with black sleeves and gold zippers at the shoulders was a basic but brilliant feat of optical illusion (\$700) that would go nicely with basic black skinny jeans (\$255). One Tribble, a gray alpaca clutch, folded out cleverly at angles, like a piece of origami (\$1,500).

To their eternal credit, these items didn’t conjure any particular time or place but Planet Proenza, which means a woman of any age can wear them without dating herself.

NOT that I observed so many customers making the leap.

“The colors are my colors, but I fear the print wears me,” said one short-haired matron fretfully, popping out of an upstairs dressing room in a sleeveless chinoiserie ensemble one recent fetid Friday. In the shop window, a shiny PS1 showpiece was suspended in a “block of ice” under a whirring fan; around the corner, as a sweating model sipped iced coffee through a straw, stylists on a photo shoot were sadly arranging puffs of cotton in a hedge to simulate snow.

The concept of assembling a wardrobe for fall, let alone winter, in such conditions seemed light-years away, and yet still I was inexorably drawn to a neoprene-coated black jacket with another gold zipper, this one off-center, and an enormous, enveloping shearling collar. It was \$3,850, but

# The New York Times

I figured if I wore it until Stardate 2233.04, that would amortize down to practically nothing.

“It’s almost frightening how great it is,” said my sales-bot, Emerald Whipple, whose resemblance to a young Zooey Deschanel (saucerlike blue eyes, brown bangs and winsome equanimity) was also almost frightening.

With the Instagram nonchalance of her generation, the talented Ms. Whipple kindly snapped an [iPhone](#) picture of me in the jacket for later contemplation. Upon hearing that I had had only four hours of sleep the previous night, she offered to make me an espresso on the spot. And she called the next day to see if I was interested in returning “even though it’s a bit dreary outside.” I wouldn’t have been surprised if she had offered a kitten as a gift with purchase.

Recruited, she said, from the SoHo boutique If, Ms. Whipple was part of a cadre of staff that seemed specially chosen for their emo, chic-librarian mood. Though the stock they’re pushing can be afforded only by the very rich, the message conveyed (as with Marc Jacobs) is not one of snobbery, exclusivity or status anxiety but accessibility, sympathy — even a little goofiness.

On a half-dozen asymmetrically stacked television monitors downstairs, cartoon brunettes in ankle boots were performing what looked like tai chi in front of a waterfall, dolphins plunging around them.

Back outside, a tinsel parade float marked “Health Care Workers for Obama” idling just steps from the store was a reminder that selling four-figure clothing in this economy, even if the clothing resembles an art piece, remains an iffy proposition.

“Would you like to buy me a pheasant-embroidered sweatshirt?” said one Proenza shopper to her companion as they exited empty-handed.

“Not today,” came the reply.

## **Proenza Schouler**

822 Madison Avenue, (212) 585-3200;

[proenzashouler.com](http://proenzashouler.com).

**COOLER** This attractive designing duo is a refreshing infusion of “downtown” talent to the moneyed Upper East Side. The staff is helpful

# The New York Times

and enthusiastic but not pushy, offering refreshments and messenger service.

**CRUELER** But who exactly can afford, or wants, messenger service of \$2,000-plus handbags now? Especially when they telegraph luxury to such a small circle. If you're asking, there is nothing for you here.

**BACK TO SCHOOL-ER** Luscious sweaters, striking jackets and rock-star ankle boots, plus the popular PS1 messenger bag, promise a look of Botoxless youth and vigor for the woman who can afford them.

A version of this review appears in print on September 20, 2012, on page E4 of the New York edition with the headline: On Planet Proenza.