

The Gilded Capital: D.C.'s hidden luxuries

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In Washington's civic-minded culture, where image is everything and less is usually more, after people make the money and get the power, the next step is a bit tricky.

Look no further than their noses.

"A huge request I've had recently is sunglass appointments," said Lauren A. Rothman, principal of Styleauteur, a fashion consulting firm based in Washington. When someone with a bright future wants to spend \$350 on a pair of shades, they call Rothman.

This culture of wealth has become about the \$40 BLT Steak filet, the \$400 Jimmy Choos, that priceless Rembrandt and then, depending on who you work for, keeping all that money deftly hidden and sparingly displayed.

It's also become about people like Rothman, on whose taste, guidance and connections the newly rich depend to help them elegantly straddle a line somewhere between Boston Brahmin and Vegas showy.

Over the past year alone, Rothman watched with pride as her clients climbed the "ladder of brands." Upgrading, she said, is the new thing to do -- from costume jewelry to David Yurman, from Ann Taylor to Dana Buchman and from Coach to Chanel.

Wannabe Glitzy

Statistics bear out Rothman's experiences.

According to a local study conducted by Simmons Market Research Bureau based in Florida, 11 percent of Washingtonians spent \$300 or more on a watch for themselves or someone else; 6.5 percent spent \$500 or more. In 2006, 3 percent bought one or more fur coats, and 15 percent said they buy "the latest fashions" every season.

Even more telling, 21 percent of D.C.-ers said "they like other people thinking they are financially successful." Compare that with 20 percent of New Yorkers, 19 percent of Angelenos and 17 percent of Miamians, and Washington seems a bit more glitzy -- well, wannabe glitzy.

"There's certainly a lot more money," said John Limpert, editor-in-chief of Washingtonian magazine, but "it's not a simple subject."

Specifically speaking, the ways in which Washingtonians spend are complicated, according to several sources.

Most likely because the District is a "don't show off, don't overdo it" culture, Limpert said.

Conspicuous consumption and the 'Wealth List'

The notion of "conspicuous consumption," according to Greg Squires, head of the sociology department at George Washington University, is a thing of the past. Meaning people aren't advertising their wealth like they would in the late 19th century's "gilded age."

Remember, it was a D.C. socialite -- Evalyn Walsh McLean -- who was the last private owner of the 45-carat Hope Diamond, which she donned at around noon.

"I have clients who won't wear diamonds to work still," said Rothman. "That's just the mindset in D.C."

This is not to say they can't afford them.