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BEST DRESSED MONK : SB residents draw from religious experience for new menswear line

By ELIZABETH HAMILTON news-press correspondent

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Best dressed" and "monk" are two words rarely used in conjunction. At best, the word "monk" conjures visions of homespun habits and balding heads, at worst, sackcloth and ashes. The idea of a monk dressing up borders sacrilege. Monks are humble men who turn their attention to God rather than the gaudy glamour of the physical world.

But according to Santa Barbara fashion designers Allen and Kira Gold, the monastic and the chic are compatible, at least for the modern man. The couple will launch their new men's fashion line Best Dressed Monk in mid-November, simultaneously opening a store in Montecito where they will sell the menswear.

The line is as intentional as a monk's prayer. Its name originated in 2001, when Mr. Gold, then 53 and living in the Bay Area, embarked on a religious quest, selling his house, retiring from his position as chief executive officer of Ally Capital Group and traveling across the Atlantic to a Tibetan Buddhist hermitage on an island off the coast of Scotland. The journey was prompted by a twin interest in comparative religion and a desire to unearth and understand several of his personal and past issues.

Holy Isle, the Scottish island, is as rugged as it is remote. There are no TVs or radios. The ferry to and from the island is an infrequent rowboat captained by an oarsman with a fondness for hitting the bottle. Nuns toil in fields of bracken with nothing but machetes to clear the thick underbrush.

The ascetic experience was especially daunting for Mr. Gold, a London-born cosmopolitan with successful stints in fashion and finance, including touring Paris with the fashion director for Bloomingdale's, managing stores in Toronto for English designer Laura Ashley and financing venture capital to Silicon Valley start-ups.

As Ms. Gold, 54, aptly put it, "He was a complete urbanite."

He did not own the necessary hiking boots, fleece jacket or rain gear necessary for surviving seven months on a stormy island.

So before the fashion connoisseur left, he followed his natural instinct: He went shopping.

"The people at REI and Patagonia in San Francisco knew me by my first name by the time two weeks had gone by," said Mr. Gold, now 65, over a recent lunch at Finch & Fork in downtown Santa Barbara. "I'd buy stuff, take it home, think about it, look at it, put it together with other stuff I had, take part of it back, buy new stuff."

Both the function and appearance of the clothing were equally important to him.

Just before his departure, a friend visited Mr. Gold. When he saw the array of designer clothes, the friend laughed at him and said, "Oh my God! You're going to be the best dressed monk!"

Thus, the name Best Dressed Monk was born and the idea of a clothing line centered on man's spirituality took root.

It may have remained a mere concept if Mr. Gold had not moved to Maui after the retreat and met costume designer Kira Jones, now his wife, whose practical skills catalyzed the actualization of Best Dressed Monk. She is a skilled designer whose expertise provided the technique necessary for bringing the line to fruition.

The couple constructed a hypothesis about the new values of modern man that forms the foundation for Best Dressed Monk.

According to Mr. and Ms. Gold, a man at the turn of the 20th century wore the classic black suit both as a signal to others of his power, wealth and authority and to evoke feelings of prestige in himself.

"The focus of menswear for years and years and years has been to convey the illusion through dressing, through wardrobe, that that man is a person of power and authority, which translates into wealth, so that man appears like a good mating (or business) potential," said Mr. Gold.

Contemporary man, on the other hand, no longer requires the illusion of power; he is confident in his abilities regardless of popular opinion. His worth does not depend on his appearance and his value is not determined by the semblance of influence. The "Don Draper Look" or the "Country Club Look," as Mr. Gold called them, are moot.



Model Tom Pricone wears pieces designed by Santa Barbara residents Allen and Kira Gold for their new menswear line, Best Dressed Monk

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"More and more men are coming into the recognition that their power and authority lies within them," said Ms. Gold. "It's how they carry themselves, it's how they are in relationships, it's what they've done. All those things show it and what they wear is a much more personal choice."

Mr. and Ms. Gold believe the modern man is part of a new class of men, those who regularly attend yoga classes, eat organically, drink herbal tea, advocate environmental wellness and value artistic inclinations. They are self-assured, and this confidence is sexy.

The conventional suit and tie are too restrictive for this creative, confident man. Yet while the power suit is no longer "what success looks like," men still have limited wardrobe alternatives. There is a shortage of casual but elegant clothes for the modern man, and Mr. and Ms. Gold hope to fill that gap.

"What we have available to us and what you see out there are variations on the old theme," Ms. Gold said. "It might be a little narrower or a little shorter cut for the young men, but it's the same old stuff."

Mr. and Ms. Gold said they intended Best Dressed Monk apparel to be simple and elegant, like the life of a monk. The line's palette is muted grays, muddy browns and charcoal blacks. The fabric, including silks, cottons and lightweight wools, is sensual. Pieces include button-up shirts, vests, scarves and trousers, with prices ranging from \$195 to \$375 for shirts, \$250 for trousers and \$700 to \$900 for jackets.

Mr. Gold wore one of the shirts to lunch with the News-Press - a black tunic resembling a relaxed priest's cassock with the sleeves rolled up and tails untucked.

The two hope the look reflects modern man's spirituality and system of values, which they believe are no longer the construction of societal convention, but rather, originate inside him.

"Historically, going back thousands of years, in order for people to get to know themselves and get to know what the culture would call 'God' or the sources of life, they would have to go away from society," explained Mr. Gold. "They became monks and nuns. They went into monastic existence ... You needed to denounce the world, you had to leave the world in order to become a person of God, a person of spirit, a person of real love.

"Well, I don't think that's true anymore," he said. "I think there's been a huge shift and I think there are lots of people now in the culture who are finding that connection within themselves."

Mr. Gold said he hopes Best Dressed Monk will offer modern man apparel options that reflect his spirituality and creativity.

"OK, so you've found inner peace, you've found a new value system, a source of inspiration and creativity. Now, dress the part," Mr. Gold said. "Don't hide your light. Don't be a closet weekend yogi. Show up, because the world needs you."

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FYI

Best Dressed Monk is a men's clothing line designed to reflect the wearer's inner spirituality and creativity. It will be released mid-November. For more information, visit www.bestdressedmonk.com or call 682-6160.



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Kira and Allen Gold relax at home with their goldendoodle, Leo. The couple have designed a new menswear line based on their religious and cultural experiences. - MIKE ELIASON / NEWS-PRESS

Best Dressed Monk is a new menswear line centered on the belief that a man does not need to wear a suit and tie to appear powerful and attractive

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