

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 6
Biba's

c/o Hempstone
101 Eaton Terrace
London, SW 1, England

12 July 1967

Mr. R.H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

"Could you meet me at Biba's at 12:30?" my stylish friend asked over the phone. "I need a new dress, and while these things change very quickly, Biba's is still the most swinging boutique in London. Besides, it is something you really have to see. It's quite dark inside, but I'll find you."

The bus stops right in front of the shop on Kensington Church Street. The facade is painted black. BIBA says the dull gold sign. There are two additional words of warning, one over each door. EMPIRE. HOUSE. The Empire door is open. There are three windows along the front, each decorated with swirling, black, pseudo art nouveau designs around gold rimmed portholes through which the curious, but timid, can peer. From the inside the black window designs give the illusion of being back rests to window seats of muddiest brown fabric. The window seats hold an assortment of little pillows of ochre, mauve and purple as well as a bevy of spectators, mostly male. They fall into three groups: uncomfortable tourist types of all ages, recognizable by their sports shirts, cameras and expressions of confusion and barely concealed voyeurism; hippies, both native and foreign born. They are languid, long haired, utterly disinterested and slightly bored. The third group, the peacocks, are splendidly garbed, nattily trimmed young studs, impatiently waiting for their birds to hurry up and try on. The peacocks occasionally wander onto the floor to browse and select items for their girls.

If lots of purple makes you feel slightly seasick rather than royal, stop at the door. The large room is papered, walls and ceiling in a ripe, reddish, plum shade with an all over design of dull gold. The beams, cupboards and counters are painted a dark, muddy purple. Purple is also the favored color for clothes. The counter wall on the left is full of neatly piled stacks of jerseys, sweaters, baby size purses, berets scarves and shoe boxes. The shoe boxes are all purple. Except for touches of mauve, lavender, turquoise, orange, a dab of pale pink and a spot of baby blue, everything else is purple, too. Across the aisle there are two large tables draped with rosy purple velvet cloth, displaying baskets of earrings, bracelets, and beads. All colors here, all shapes too, but mostly large.

Besides a color scheme, a swinging boutique has to have a display gimmick. Biba's uses old coat racks. Tall, homely, brown, bentwood coat racks, probably three or four dozen of them, each with at least a dozen hats on the hat rack part. Hats are very big this year. Especially big, floppy, neon colored felt ones with swiss cheese holes. The hatted racks near the floor drip ropes and ropes of beads, mostly paler colors, and boas. The back of the store is lined with hat and boa racks. I always thought that feather boas were big, soft, fluffy things, usually cream color, and very luxurious. From a distance, in the dim light, these look gorgeous - fat streams of intense color, thick hanging bands of sharp pink, blue and bright white. But when I carefully pulled out just one it seemed to be merely a scrawny string with some feather trimming. Designed for Twiggy, I suppose, not Mae West in the days of yore. No matter, they don't appear to sell very well.

The racks in the front of the store also feature horizontally striped football jerseys. Some are long, designed to be worn as evening clothes. Some are regulation size. In London, that passes for street length. Or short, as the case may be. This summer micro is a more accurate description of skirts than mini.

The whole area to the right is a slightly raised platform that, in effect is a stylized jungle. In color and intensity of foliage it is not unlike the paintings of Henri Rousseau. Some dusty potted plants add a touch of "realism." The coat racks are thickly scattered, each with brilliant hats on top, and a dozen or so dresses hung on the poles. The few solid color dresses are made of heavier materials that make the colors seem even more exotic. The majority are patterned. Many of the designs are large, wild, glaring; the rest have prim, intricate, repeated patterns. The fabrics are, of every sort, some quite sheer. For those given to fits of modesty there are one or two racks of amethyst, rose and pale blue chemises to wear underneath the absolutely transparent party dresses.

The styles are very simple - as one manufacturing organization recently pointed out, being so short they have to be simple and therefore don't use much yardage. There are baby dresses, pleated school girl frocks (usually dark with proper white collar and cuffs) delicate items consisting of no more than three ruffles, high collared tents with big zippers in the front, a few pants suits and coat dresses, and, one very conspicuous number with a wide sash that ties, of all places, at the waist. Almost every garment has long sleeves and tight wrists. In the center of the jungle are a few pools of light perpetually crowded with serious shoppers trying in vain to determine the exact color and possibly the size of their potential purchases.

I've never seen such a complete collection of contemporary fashion as the noontime show at Biba's. Not in New York, which, by comparison, is drab. Nor in Montreal, where the hostess and guide uniforms at Expo were very mini and cheerfully unofficial. King's Road in London on a Saturday afternoon is a good show, but diffuse. The look is flexible: skirts as short as you dare, eyes as big and dark rimmed as can be kept open, skin as pale as personally possible without alarming the mortician. Hair of any length so long as straight. Shoes as sensible as possible, hand bags just the opposite. As they single mindedly flutter among the racks, snatching whatever catches the eye, everyone hums and sways lightly to the music. The Beatles sing of loneliness.

"Fantastic" said my friend when she finally found me, "I've never seen it so crowded. Take something to try and come along."

The stairway to the dressing room is in the back of the shop, marked by a spotlight and a pink, red and gold fence with cut out valentine shapes. At the bottom of the stairs a pair of doors covered in bright fuchsia felt swing back and forth and then are held open.

Do you remember the Ingres painting "Turkish Bath?" Painted when he was an old man, it shows about twenty, soft, voluptuous young nudes, all lolling calmly around the bath. Clear, pale light suffuses the painting. Skin glows. The shapes and spaces of the room are simple, spare, deliberately kept both clean and modest so that nothing may detract from the youth and beauty of the tranquil subject. The dressing room at Biba's is the living opposite. The walls are covered with more of the hot fuchsia felt. The lowered ceiling is of patterned gilt paper that gleams and further blunts the half light. There are five large, ornately framed mirrors, one short wall of little mirrors with large frames, a few gilt chairs and some more dusty potted plants. A few hat racks have been provided for hanging your own and try on clothes, but nobody bothers and the floor is littered with garments. Almost every inch of open space is filled with an astonishing collection of lean, angular, writhing, mausoleum pale, young female flesh.

What goes under mini clothes? The answer to that question, which apparently consumes one half of mankind with curiosity, is made abundantly clear. White tights, flowered bikinis, a bit of lace here, or perhaps there, and not much more. You might think that since the dresses have no waists or formal shape to speak of, since they are loose from shoulder to hem (wherever that is) the wearers would pull them on and off with ease and grace. Not so. The London underfed ingenue cum innocent schoolgirl look means very narrow, pinched shoulders. The clothes are both badly cut and casually made. They are very cheap, meant to be discarded rather than cleaned. Size tags, if you can find them, mean next to nothing. To find a dress that approximately fits you must try on, try on, or, as is often the case, try to try on.

So - what happens is a frenzy of tugging, pulling and jerking to get both arms into the long sleeves of a dress and then get the arms back down to the sides without splitting the back. Since many twist, strain and hop in time to the vibrating music it looks like the prelude to an orgy in an underage harem. In one corner a magnificent, tall Swedish girl was desperately trying to get out of a dress she couldn't get into in the first place. Finally the **impaled** creature got down on her knees while her equally beautiful companion (who had managed the trick and was planning to wear her dress home) helpfully tugged from above.

The scene is designed for those under twenty. One or two middle aged American mothers helpfully accompanying their ecstatic teen age daughters looked terrified. The occasional matron attempting to model the styles is ignored in the silent, but fervent, hope they will recognize their grotesque incongruity. Those between twenty and bulge either try selectively, keep laughing, or are kidding themselves.

A little before two o'clock the crowd thins rapidly. Working girls hurry back into their clothes, make their choices and rush off in covies. Suddenly you can tell which ones were the Biba's sales girls. They weren't wearing sunglasses or hats and they are now slowly picking up the piles of clothes and tidying things before the next wave of shoppers. The remaining tourists look bewildered and self-conscious.

I didn't buy a thing. Neither, that day, did my friend.

Sincerely,

Eden Ross Lipson.

Received in New York July 24, 1967.