

Happy at Holts

Written by Alicia Melamed

I've always believed in self-care. But the COVID-19 pandemic has made the concept trendy. Self-care takes many forms, but sometimes an utterly extravagant treat is the perfect mood-booster. Retail therapy is a quick fix that makes our dopamine levels soar, and in these strange COVID times; we can all use a little extra dopamine.

Historically, Montreal was home to two department stores that were synonymous with luxury: Holt Renfrew and Ogilvy. In 2019 the pair were rebranded; renovations and expansion were completed in 2020, merging the two retailers into the luxury behemoth -- Holt Renfrew Ogilvy. Located at the corner of Saint-Catherine Street West and Rue De La Montagne, the department store is surrounded with high-end neighbours such as Christofle and Tiffany & Co. By the main entrance, up until his retirement in 2017, you could hear Cyrille, Montreal's Spoonman, making music. The clanging sounds, along with the magical Christmas window display, were as iconic to the city as the store itself.

I am not only an occasional customer, I've also had a business relationship with Holt Renfrew. I worked in fashion for a decade, selling various brands of clothing and footwear, and collaborating with their buyers to curate a collection suited to their clientele. These meetings had important repercussions. Other stores and boutiques in the country were eager to know exactly which styles Holts had chosen so they could place similar buys. Typically, the Holts buyers would stick to neutral colour palettes, but they would also choose one show-stopper for their display tables. "It's important to go bold," a footwear buyer once told me as she chose a bright blue pump to be the season's "IT" item. The word "elevated" came up a lot in our meetings. The buyers wanted to provide an elevated shopping experience for the elevated consumer.

My absolute favourite Holts' purchase, and probably my favourite purchase of all time, is a neon orange mink coat from the fur section on the third floor in contemporary fashion. It was definitely what is referred to in French as a "coup de coeur" – a combination of love at first sight and a serious impulse buy. The salesman tried to discourage me from buying it, advising the black version would be way more wearable. "If this is your first mink coat, you should definitely choose black," he warned. To which I replied,

“Something tells me this will be my only mink coat, so I’m going for orange.” If I learned anything from working with Holts, it’s that it’s good to go bold, and that sometimes you need to be the show-stopper.

Because of COVID, those days of treating myself to a fur coat or designer handbag are very over. Thank goodness there are a few smaller-scale luxury items that can still raise my dopamine levels. When I need that quick fix, I head to the beauty and fragrance section in the lower level and treat myself to a fancy candle from Dyptique. My favourite is Roses. It smells like a freshly picked bouquet, only better. I justify the purchase by telling myself that now that I work from home, my living-office space should smell delightful. Eva Koulouris, the beauty specialist at Dyptique, who has been with Holts since 2004, is very generous with the complimentary samples. The last time I was there, Koulouris filled my pockets with samples for their new scent, Orphéon, which has notes of tobacco, juniper berry, cedar, tonka bean and jasmine.

Now that we can’t leave our homes without sporting a mask, I haven’t worn lipstick in over a year. But another luxury splurge I can’t get enough of is the Gucci transparent shade lip balm. The Gucci counter is only a few steps away from Dyptique. The balm is way more expensive than ChapStick, but hey, it’s pure luxury on the lips, and after all, aren’t we Montrealers just emerging from a cold, dehydrating winter?

A perfect day of self-care should end on a high note -- high tea at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Sherbrooke Street West, just around the corner from Holts. There was a brief interlude during the first lockdown when restaurants re-opened for a short time. My friend Shaza and I dragged our boyfriends to high tea for the ultimate posh double date. It was one of our high points during the pandemic. We dressed-up and spent the afternoon sipping Tropical Green Tea and nibbling crumpets. (Of course, such an occasion calls for an orange mink coat.) At the Ritz, bigger spenders can opt for the royal tea, which includes a glass of champagne.

Whether you’re treating yourself to a specialty item or experience, a little luxury can elevate anybody’s mood.

Holt Renfrew Ogilvy

1307 Saint-Catherine St W.

holtrenfrew.com

The Ritz-Carlton Hotel

1228 Sherbrooke St W

ritzcarlton.com