



*Merchandise on the*

## ORIENT EXPRESS



**The train's  
classic image  
drives new  
VSOE boutiques**

B Y V I L M A B A R R

**W**HEN THE FIRST ORIENT EXPRESS PULLED out of the Paris Gare de l'Est in 1883, the gleaming teak carriages were luxuriously appointed. They were stocked with beautiful crystal and linen, elaborate food, and excellent wine. The service was impeccable. Now, 106 years later, it is not the operation of the fabled train — now the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express — that promises to be the most profitable area of

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Passengers dress for dinner in VSOE's carefully restored vintage cars. Brochures for the train line tactfully suggest that "one can never be overdressed aboard the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express."



**PROJECT**  
VSOE boutique, Macy's, San Francisco, CA

**DESIGN**  
Daniel J. Prouty, vice president, North America for Collection Venice Simplon-Orient-Express Inc., San Francisco, CA

**FABRICATION**  
Macy's, San Francisco, CA



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revenue for its current owner, the British-owned Sea Containers Group, but the worldwide merchandising of its 500-piece collection of luggage, handbags, garments, fixtures, and train memorabilia.

According to Daniel J. Prouty, vice president in charge of North America for Collection Venice Simplon-Orient-Express Inc., "there is more potential from sheer business numbers in the collection than there is running the train. The train can only hold 194 passengers. Its intrinsic value is its ambience — the image that is conjured up when you hear the name 'Orient Express' — that's where the potential is."

Prouty said that while the train runs at a profit, the "real gems in the crown" are the collection items. An 8-ft. counter on one of the train's superbly restored vintage cars, stocked with elegant souvenirs, sells out every trip. The collection is also sold at retail in a 425-sq. ft. first floor boutique in Macy's, San Francisco; at El Portal and Nordstrom stores; and at free-standing, company-owned stores in Colorado, Vancouver, Venice, the Swiss Alps, and Paris.

The sides of the original Orient Express cars displayed the name "Compagnie Internationale des

Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens." During the 1920s, Wagons-Lits built its most luxurious fleet of coaches for the Simplon-Orient-Express (named for the 12-mile Simplon Tunnel through the Alps) and other trans-European luxury expresses, such as the famous *Train Bleu*. But train service was suspended during World War II, and when it resumed in 1946 the elegance that had made the Simplon-Orient-Express the most famous and successful luxury express was gone. When passengers learned that the train didn't always have a restaurant car and looked the worse for wear, they transferred their patronage to airlines. The Orient Express never regained its lost elegance, and eventually went into bankruptcy. Its last trip took place in May 1977.

The publicity that followed the final trip generated worldwide interest later that year when Sotheby auctioned five carriages that had been used in the film *Murder on the Orient Express*. James B. Sherwood, head of the Sea Containers Group, was impressed by the crowds. The mobs convinced him that there was still magic in the Orient Express name.

Sherwood bought two of the coaches and stored them in Bordeaux while the company planned the return of the world's most celebrated train. Restoration took more than four years. The first run of the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, a trip from London to Venice, was on May 25, 1982. Today the line makes trips through England and Wales, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy, and in 1990 will make a run from Bangkok to Singapore. French designer Gerard Gallet supervised the restoration of cars like the *Audrey*, *Xena*, and *Minerva*. Decorated with marquetry depicting flowers, Greek dancing girls, or art deco designs; paneled in mahogany; and detailed with Lalique glass; the cars are once again the standard of excellence in railway travel.

Sherwood has also used the magic Orient-Express name on eight Orient Express luxury hotels, the

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Brass signs, simulated etched glass, and marquetry echo the design of the world-famous train in the VSOE store in Macy's, San Francisco. Crystal, china, lamps, fixtures, and clothing are only some of the items available — all marked with one of the company's logos.



VSOE's five logos are used on decorative items and merchandise. In addition to the crests of the Pullman Car Co. and Wagons-Lits, which the company does not own, there are three distinctive VSOE logos. The script letters and crown, the corporate logo of the train, was designed by P. Sharland. Based on the work of René Prou and the art nouveau floral marquetry found in the trains, P. Stillwell designed a mark with stylized leaves and flowers. Gerard Gallet designed the art deco monogram.

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cruise ship *mv Orient Express* — and of course, the merchandise.

Prouty opened the Macy's San Francisco boutique in March 1987. The original VSOE shop in Paris near the Rue St. Honoré opened in 1981, followed by shops in Crans/Montana in the Swiss Alps, and in the Cipriani Hotel in Venice.

The Macy's unit was constructed by Ron Montbleau of Macy's, from Prouty's detailed designs. It echos the vintage cars with intricate marquetry, simulated train doors, and brass signs. The etched glass look of the display cases was created in Macy's shop by "frosting" a decal of the company's train logo, and signage was produced in local shops.

Macy's helped design the floor plan and locate the display units. Best sellers are leather handbags made in Florence, which sell from \$225 to \$900; stemware; and a \$65 HO-scale model train carriage. Prices range from \$4 for a post card to \$2000 for a steamer trunk.

The Macy's unit is the first VSOE "shop-in-a-shop" planned for top-line department stores around the country. "My goal is to penetrate the Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, and New York markets through higher-end department stores," Prouty said. "Macy's is the first step in establishing a proper market identity. Department stores are not really interested in doing business with you unless you are a proven entity. And because we've been in business for just about two years, we're not known to everyone."

Prouty is also negotiating for free-standing shops, hoping to open at least one before the end of the year. "The exterior will look like a VSOE train, and the interior will look like a VSOE train — but it won't be a train carriage," Prouty said. While he declined to give more specific information, Prouty promised the results would be "spectacular."

What else would anyone expect from the Orient Express? ■