

THE VINTAGE UNDERGROUND

By Rosie Gillam

Betty Dinsdel's frail, wrinkled hand grasped the blue fabric of the 1950's style party dress. Betty appeared undeterred by the size of the dress, an extra large, as she pressed the aged cloth against her thin, withered body. She smiled, faintly, as she glanced into the full length mirror behind her.

"I used to have a dress just like this," she said. Dinsdel, 75, has spent her life in Chicago. She frequents antique stores and vintage shops in search of articles from her childhood and adolescence. "It seems as I grow older, I just become more nostalgic," said Dinsdel.

The Vintage Underground, on 1834 W. North Ave., seems to make a lot of people nostalgic. The antique shop, located in a church basement, sells anything from jewelry to paintings to furniture. The pieces, mostly ranging in date from the early to middle 20th century, are affordably priced.

"Take a church basement, raid a bunch of estate sales, slap on a price tag on odds-ends and you have the Vintage Underground," said Christina Pilot, a frequent shopper at the store.

Unlike some other vintage shops in the Chicago area, the Vintage Underground does not accept donations. Rather, owner Mark Freemont attends estate sales in search of special merchandise.

“I’m not interested in selling a bunch of old ratty dolls. I’d rather sell that one porcelain doll, that one-of-a-kind find,” said Freemont.

He also stresses affordability. “You can walk up and down Milwaukee or North Ave. and find a lot of vintage shops. The problem is finding *affordable* vintage shops,” said Freemont. The Vintage Underground often compares its prices to neighboring competitors such as Store B Vintage, a vintage clothing store in Wicker Park.

“We want to make sure we’re selling the most unique finds at the most reasonable prices,” said employee Claire Lee. The store attempts to accomplish this through selectiveness and careful price comparing.

The often strange items allure customers. As pedestrians walk by the display window, they can glance down at a marble statue of a naked boy, a beaded necklace, and a (real) stuffed armadillo.

The inside of the store reflects the same sort of semi-haphazard arrangement. Plastic display tables of jewelry stand next to bookshelves filled with old cameras and cocktail glasses. Paintings lean against clothing racks of beaded dresses and sable fur coats.

Freemont wears a flowery apron that appears to be stolen from the television show *Leave it To Beaver*. His assistant Lee glides around the store in a 1960’s style mod dress and black leggings. The pair approach customers and comment on new finds.

According to Lee, many people arrive to browse and end up purchasing three or four different things. “The low prices tend to be very persuasive,” said customer Tricia Dwyer.

“Well, I bought these earrings, and then I saw the necklace that goes with them. They were both about \$6 each, so I said what the hell and bought them both.” said Dwyer.

Trinity Kocmoud, a young professional, just purchased her first apartment. She arrived at Vintage Underground in hopes of finding some unique pieces to furnish her new place. She took a look at several couches, a few coffee tables, and a book shelf, yet her jaw dropped when she saw an old baroque-style wooden chair sitting in middle of the room.

“I just fell in love with this chair. It is such a unique find. I mean where else am I going to find a chair like this?” said Kocmoud. The intricately carved wooden armrests and sandalwood seat make the chair eye-catching.

Like Betty Dinsdel, Kurt Mclinn is in search of items that remind him of his childhood. Several weeks ago, he purchased a toy airplane at the Vintage Underground. “The airplane reminded me of the summers I spent in Minnesota with my brother. It brings back good memories. I’m glad I bought it.” said Mclinn.

“Shopping here is addicting. I keep finding new things and I keep coming back to look for more,” said Mclinn.

Every nook and cranny of the cellar has been packed with merchandise. “You’ve got to spend your time and really look around. Trust me, you’ll find some neat things,” said Freemont.

Many of the best finds seemed to be hidden in the bottom of boxes and above bookcases. “It is just like exploring your grandma’s basement. There is so much cool stuff just laying around.” said Dwyer.

Many customers may have failed to notice one of the store's paintings that lay hidden behind a rack of fur coats, which depicts a nude woman petting a white cat. Other finds include, a squid body pillow, a necklace with a sloth pendant, a music box with a dancing pin up girl, and a throne-like chair made out of faux zebra skin.

"As you can tell, Mark has a good eye," said Lee.

Freemont needs a good eye to find the right items at various estate sales. "I try to go to as many weekday estate sales as I can. I'm always looking for collector's items or items that will just sell well," said Freemont.

Freemont opened the Vintage Underground two years ago, after quitting his job at an antique store. He wanted to create a place that would foster nostalgia and memories of times past.

"I've always loved antiques. There is nothing like finding something totally forgotten or lost," said Freemont.

Lee would agree. "We sold an old wedding ring the other day. If that ring could talk, think about the interesting stories it would tell," said Lee.