Jungle Fever

Designers are taking a walk on the wild side this fall. Colored skins, feathers and fur have a striking effect. For more exotic pieces, see pages 6 and 7.

Darkening Clouds: Retail Outlook Dims as Economy Takes a Bite

By Evan Clark

HOLD ON TIGHT.

J.C. Penney Co. Inc.’s slashing of its first-quarter profit projections by a third after a disappointing Easter could be a warning for the overall retail sector that the proverbial wall is just ahead. While retailers have been dancing around the impact of the economic slowdown for the last few months, evidence is mounting that the second half might not be pretty. Consumers are pulling back, the subprime mortgage crisis continues to unravel, confidence is low and employers across the country are cutting payrolls. All this means Penney’s probably won’t be the only retailer to...
Dooney & Bourke Heads East
As Brands Seek Asian Growth

By Sophia Chabbott

Dooney & Bourke is the latest in a wave of American accessories firms sailing into the Asian market.

The 33-year-old privately held leather goods firm opened its first store outside the U.S. in May at its Venetian Macau Resort Hotel in Macau.

Dooney & Bourke plans to open from five to 10 stores in Asia over the next three years, focusing on locations in Japan, South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia. Dooney & Bourke president Peter Dooney anticipates the Macau store will generate a minimum of $1,000 a square foot in sales annually.

But the brand also is remaining aggressive about expansion in its home market, where Dooney & Bourke expects to open up to 50 stores in mall locations across the U.S. in the next few years. The Asian and American stores will average 2,500 square feet.

The Norwalk, Conn.-based brand currently has eight boutiques in locales such as New York, Las Vegas, Dallas and Honolulu. The retail push includes a new store concept designed by Manhattan-based Jeffrey Hutchison & Associates.

The brand is also sold in stores such as Bloomingdale’s and Nordstrom.com.

Asia is a key accessories market and one we have yet to capitalize on,” said Dooney “We see it as a major growth vehicle for our brands.”

Dooney & Bourke is following many of its American competitors into the market. Coach, the $1.9 billion American accessories firm, entered Asia — with Japan as its first stop — in 1988 and has slowly been increasing its presence there. In fiscal 2007, Coach’s international sales including Asia were just under $800 million at retail. The brand’s sales in Japan last year were $7 billion yen, or $480 million at current exchange.

This spring, Coach will open a 9,500-square-foot international flagship in Hong Kong. The store is the company’s second largest in Asia.

Cole Haan, with a volume in the U.S. estimated at $450 million, is also expanding into the Far East. Cole Haan chief executive officer Jim Seuss named Japan, which accounts for 2 percent of sales, as a priority market and China as another country with growth potential. The brand recently opened in Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau. Cole Haan has 70 points of distribution in Asia, including in-store boutiques and stand-alone stores.

Seuss said there are also opportunities in e-commerce for both Japan and China.

Bittar Bringing Bangles Into Bleecker Street Shop

By Caroline Tell

Alexis Bittar is putting one more shopping destination on New York’s downtown map.

The Brooklyn-based jewelry designer is opening his second store in late May on Bleecker Street, home to designer boutiques, upscale eateries and specialty store chains.

Bittar unveiled his Bleecker Street flagship in March 2007, a 5,000-square-foot store opened to four more stores over the next five years in cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco and London. He may also add another New York location on Manhattan’s Upper East Side.

The new, 3,500-square-foot space will feature Bittar’s signature Lucite bangles in eye-popping colors and handcrafted pearl and gold vermeil pieces that have helped him achieve a cult-like status among the costume jewelry set.

Having started selling his collections on the streets of Soho 20 years ago, Bittar has grown into a designer whose jewelry wholesales in 600 stores worldwide, including Saks Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom and Selfridges.

Like its other location, Bittar’s new store fuses antique touches and modern objects. Victorian wallpaper mixes with ivory-colored Venetian plaster, Lucite jewelry is also juxtaposed against the new with the antique, but in a different way.”

According to sources outside the company, his 15-year-old brand has estimated sales of about $25 million. Each year Bittar experiences double-digit growth and has just seen a record 30 percent sales increase from last spring into fall. He often collaborates with ready-to-wear designers, having done Michael Kors’ bold necklaces, rings and bangles for the designer’s spring show, as well as bright, beaded pieces for Bryan Bradley’s Tulip spring collection.

“I enjoy straddling the bridge between costume jewelry and high fashion,” Bittar said. “I think it’s all about the high drama in jewelry today and having an impact. On the sales end, we’re feeding this insatiable need right now.”

Tara Silberberg, owner of Brooklyn jewelry store The Clay Pot, is known for featuring independent, under-the-radar brands. She has carried Alexis Bittar since he began his line.

“Alexis has really grown in such interesting ways over the years,” Silberberg said. “Part of it is the strong sense that those in the midrange — if they can capture that and have a customer for that — will do well. People are looking to not break the bank and still look good. And the runway backing is going to make a big difference.

Bittar doesn’t seem to mind the increasing competition in the marketplace. He managed to bring his eponymous, colorful brand into the fray during a time when minimalism was a key trend and bright Lucite bangles were not exactly lauded.

“Costume jewelry is a cottage industry that has been growing heavily over the past five years,” Bittar said. “I remember in the Nineties, buyers would ask, ‘Is jewelry still happening?’ But now, young girls are experiencing it for the first time and they love it. Older women want to know if it’s OK to pile on that next bangle and it is right now.”