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John T. Grelick The Detroit News

"If this works out the way we plan, I imagine we'll open up more stores," says Art Van co-president Gary Van Elslander of the Drexel Heritage store in Bloomfield Hills.

Art Van targets chic crowd

Drexel Heritage store in Bloomfield Hills may give the retailer a lift in dodgy economic times.

Dorothy Bourdet / The Detroit News

Advertisement

BLOOMFIELD HILLS -- Hound's-tooth armchairs, four-poster beds and Armoires de Prosperite sit beneath the soaring ceiling of the new Drexel Heritage store on Telegraph.

Tags on many floor displays show prices well into the thousands; well-trained interior designers armed with tape measures and advice stand ready to guide customers.

The only sign of the store's massive and for-the-masses parent retailer, Art Van Furniture, is the logo on the shirt of a stockroom worker seen briefly at the back of the store.

Drexel Heritage marks the Warren retailer's re-emergence into the luxury furniture market, and principal Gary Van Elslander is optimistic about the store's future in one of the nation's wealthiest counties.

"If this works out the way we plan, I imagine we'll open up more stores," he said.

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Van Elslander, co-president of Art Van, is heading up the Drexel Heritage store, which is relatively small, has a strong focus on service and a broad product line -- avoiding problems that plagued Art Van's former high-end Scott Shuptrine stores.

A second chance

"When we left Scott Shuptrine, we left the market still underserved for choices of higher-end product," Van Elslander said. "We just thought that there was still an opportunity in the market place for a better-end store. We didn't have the model exactly right last time."

Van Elslander, eldest son of Art Van founder Art Van Elslander, headed the two Shuptrine stores in Troy and Novi that withered in late 2002.

"We had very large buildings; the overhead was extremely high," Van Elslander said. "It just missed some of the intimacy and ability to do relationship selling at the level that is required with higher-end products."

'Slightly desperate'?

Retail experts say the move is likely a response to sluggish sales for midprice retailers like Art Van, which tend to struggle in a tough economy, whereas discount and high-end retailers generally fair better.

"It strikes me slightly desperate," said Kenneth J. Dalto, a Farmington Hills retail analyst. "Sales of middle-market furniture are lagging and they see another market where they feel the margin is better and sales are better."

Art Van is not immune to the pinch when furniture business slows in general, but "we're definitely getting our share still," said Art Van spokeswoman Chris Morrisroe.

"Are people in this economy thinking twice about large purchases? Absolutely, especially here in Michigan with people losing their jobs," she said.

Experience counts

The strength and experience of a large retailer like Art Van, which operates 29 stores in 28 cities, may give Drexel Heritage confidence it can compete with high-end niche retailers, Dalto said.

Already the store is making an impression on customers, who can customize the pieces, choosing shape, hardware, fabrics, finish and style. Orchard Lake resident Jane Carlin came in looking for area rugs and was impressed



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John T. Grellick / The Detroit News

The Drexel Heritage store, which is relatively small, has a strong focus on service and a broad product line. See full image

New store in town

Name: Drexel Heritage, a wholly owned subsidiary of privately-held Art Van Furniture, a Warren-based retailer.

Product: High-end furniture store that carries eight collections, including Vera Bradley, Postobello Home and Uptown.

Address: 2125 Telegraph in Bloomfield Hills.

Opening: Grand opening is Nov. 9. Events include a benefit for the Junior League of Birmingham from 7-9 p.m. All proceeds from the evening will go directly to the JLB's sponsored community projects. Wine and light hors d'oeuvres will be served. Cost is \$20 per person. RSVP to (248) 203-9841 by Nov. 2.

Employment: Eight people, with plans to expand to 12.

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with what she saw.

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"It's really great they're here," said the 63-year-old homemaker. "I want one of everything."

You can reach Dorothy Bourdet at (313) 222-2293 or dbourdet@detnews.com.

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