

Doorman

Written by Steven Heller

Who is the stylishly dressed man standing nonchalantly in front of New York's Mercer Hotel? Wearing an impeccably cut Isaac Mizrahi suit he resembles one of the upscale tourists who outnumber SoHo natives ten to one. But he seems to be playing a different role.

For suddenly, as he jaunts curbside to open a taxi door, he betrays the fact that he is, indeed, a doorman. His natty wardrobe and cool demeanor, not typical of most doormen, perhaps better describe an undercover doorman. And yet, though his garb is hip and chic, his function is duty and service, as he carries on the tradition of this uniformed profession.

Doormen, the guardians and servants of the upper and middle classes, are members of a profession for whom the uniform, whether a designer's suit or a military greatcoat, is more than mere articles of coordinated clothing. Like those worn by a palace guard, the doorman's uniform is a symbol of station, rank, and responsibility.

Aside from the Mercer, doormen's attire for hotels and residences has changed little since the profession began during the late 19th century in New York City. Swanky hotels catered to a well-scrubbed clientele, and luxury apartment buildings along upper Fifth and Park Avenues housed the swells of Manhattan. "There is really no reason for change," explains Seralie Busch, spokesperson for I. Buss Uniform Company, the city's oldest family-owned manufacturer, founded by her grandfather in 1892. During the seven decades since I. Buss (originally producers of military, police, and fire department uniforms) started producing both stock and custom residential doorman attire, changes have been subtle. As Ms. Busch points out, "Uniforms do not conform to prevailing trends in fashion." The style variations reproduced in one of I. Buss's 1930s catalogs do not significantly differ from the current one, except for the illustrations themselves (the former used drawings, the latter uses photography).

The origin of the quotidian "doorman style" is not exactly known. Stuart Busch, president of I. Buss, speculates that it began in the mid-1800s at the leading hotels, perhaps to distinguish doormen from bellhops. Gabriel E. Piro, president of Dornan Inc., another venerable family business, founded in 1924, which originally manufactured chauffeur and butler attire, thinks that uniforms, particularly for private residences, became popular during the early 1930s, possibly owing to increased divisions between Depression-era haves and have-nots as well as the desire to signal exclusivity. Scott Markell, of Top Hat Inc. of Hempstead, New York, adds that "There has always been someone at the front door," and these doormen have always worn a uniform of some kind. There is consensus that

when-ever and however uniforms became standardized the design and detailing, such as braid, piping, epaulets, embroidery, and insignia, were inspired by full-dress military costumes from the 19th century. The toy soldier aesthetic prevails today, and most uniform design evokes the seminal models. Seralie Busch cannot trace original designs but she believes--and it is as good a theory as any--that “a lot of uniform companies copied the designs that my grandfather initially showed in his catalogs.”

Doormen fall into two groups: commercial (hotel, retail store, and restaurant) and residential (apartment house), each with specific institutional requirements that dictate the nature of their uniforms. Generally, commercial uniforms are more ostentatious, residential uniforms tend to be more conservative. The former demands a military posture, while the latter does not. Commercial uniforms are determined by particular house styles that are distinguished from hotel to hotel, and within each hotel they may vary from season to season. A few years ago the Helmsley Palace’s summer uniform featured a foreign legionnaire motif, including khaki short-sleeved, belted jacket and kepi, the French military round hat with black visor, while its winter uniform included a black caped full-length jacket and a top hat. Changes in style may be coordinated to echo interior or exterior renovations of a building or they may occur at the whim of an owner. When Leona Helmsley commanded her real estate empire she demanded eccentric fashions to distinguish her Palace from other hotels.

Residential uniforms adhere to minor variations within a basic range of styles, with customized elements. Among the most popular stock styles from the I. Buss catalog, for example, are the Windsor, a two-button charcoal gray jacket with silver stripes on the sleeves and lapels, with matching trousers; the Gramercy, a three-button charcoal gray, double-breasted jacket with gold braid on the sleeves, lapels, and down the pants; and the Classic, a four-button single-breasted jacket similar to the Windsor but with gold-braid stripes. The Gramercy and Classic include military-style hats with coordinated braid. Changes in residential building uniforms are either decided by the co-op boards, resident manager, or management group, and--given their tight budgets--rarely diverge from the norm, unless a designer or wannabe-designer is on the board. Then whim and hubris dictate, such as the time the president of the board of a luxury co-op on the Upper West Side decided to dress his doorman in year-round full-dress tail coat and top hat, which was extremely uncomfortable and overstated the status of the building.

While such ostentation may increase the self-esteem of residents, it may also have a deleterious effect on employees. “I don’t like wearing uniforms to begin with--especially the same uniform for five days a week for two or three years--but this is my job and I accept it,” asserts a veteran doorman who has served the same Manhattan building (first as porter and then hallman) for 20 years and preferred that his name not be used in this article. He adds, “But to look foolish is beyond tolerable. I take pride in my work, but I want respect that I can’t imagine getting if I look like a clown.” Dornan’s Piro concurs that “Most people don’t like to be told what to do, or wear; and most [residential] doormen don’t like wearing uniforms, particularly the military-styled hats.” Nonetheless, a uniform is an integral part of the job, and “If you’re a doorman, you have to look the part of a doorman; that’s what you get paid for,” he concludes.

Playing a role is an apt description. Unlike the guards at Buckingham Palace, doormen are not ceremonial: both service and image are integral. In fact, to emphasize this point Dornan Uniforms calls itself “The Image Maker.” For residential buildings the role is a combination of gatekeeper, concierge, bellman, and security guard, each of which demands a distinct appearance. “Doormen are not police,” says Seralie Busch, “but a building with a highly

visible doorman is much safer than one without.” And so to a certain extent doormen are outfitted with security in mind.

With commercial establishments the role playing is even more theatrical, and the doorman’s costume has symbolic ramifications. The doormen for Gallagher’s Restaurant in New York, for example, are dressed in uniforms of bright red and shiny gold (the restaurant’s colors) for increased pedestrian visibility--they are in fact signs as bright as any neon. The Plaza Hotel, among New York’s oldest and finest lodgings, has more conservative yet nonetheless distinctive uniforms. According to Markell who, in addition to the Plaza, supplies uniforms to the St. Regis, Carlyle, and Four Seasons, “Each hotel wants to advertise its high level of service through the elegant look of its doormen. When you charge \$700 a night you want the customer to feel pampered at every stage.” Doormen, therefore, not only open doors, but with that characteristic tip of the hat and knowing smile, they are the official greeters of their respective institutions.

Military uniforms signify levels of rank and status, but in doorman culture uniforms indicate certain dichotomies. Searlie Busch asserts that distinctions within the residential ranks are minimal because “all uniforms are more or less uniform.” But Markell notes that this is not the case with commercial doormen: “The residential doorman takes less pride in his uniform (durability and mobility is his greatest concern), but the commercial doorman (and particularly the bell captain) is more status conscious.” Markell adds that at some hotels certain markings (or hash marks) indicate length of service and badges are awarded for the quality of performance. But a more important factor in instilling pride is that the better hotels assign their doormen two or more good uniforms per season, while residential doormen usually get only one that must last a few years. “Forget pride,” said one lower Fifth Avenue apartment house doorman, “This makes dry cleaning almost impossible.”

Another dichotomy has less to do with uniforms than with a doorman’s station in social and professional hierarchies. Residential doormen belong to Local 32B-32J of the Service Employees International Union (building owners are represented by the Realty Advisory Board on Labor Relations). According to the building services contract, seniority, say for a 30-year veteran, does not bring any higher base pay (approximately \$518.17 a week under the 1991 contract) than a comparative neophyte. Only ambition to become a superintendent or a concierge leads to higher pay scales, making Christmas tips a substantial addition to a doorman’s annual income. Quality of the uniform to the contrary, being a residential doorman is only a stepping stone (although a very high one, since turnover in these other positions is slow) to a more elevated station. Moreover, according to the Apartment Building Agreement, there are only two service classifications: “handypersons” and “others,” which includes doormen, hallmen, concierges, and elevator operators. Being a nebulous “other” allows management the flexibility to utilize employees in other capacities. Commercial doormen, conversely, are less constricted by contractual classifications because job descriptions are not as vague--bellmen carry bags, doormen open doors, and bell captains command the troops. In this area doormen are beholden to their supervisors for the right shift assignments: during peak hours an ingratiating, hard-working doorman can usually expect an additional \$100 a day in tips.

Most doormen (and gradually more doorwomen) have held onto the same jobs for an average of more than ten years, with a slightly longer average in the residential area. When a few were asked why they stayed in their jobs, the response included satisfaction with benefits, nice tenants, and pleasant working conditions. Uniforms were rarely a significant positive factor. “A uniform means authority,” said one doorman. “But my only authority is who

gets into the building with or without hassle. It's not real authority." And another residential doorman who was snappily attired in a single-breasted maroon jacket with yellow epaulets and braid said, "I like wearing a tie and white shirt at work, but I'd just as soon not wear this silly getup." Similar unenthusiastic responses belie the smiling faces of the models shown in the uniform manufacturers' catalogs. In fact, when another doorman was asked whether or not he would rather dress like the stylish doormen at the Mercer Hotel, he said, "I don't need no Armani suit, a blue blazer will do nicely."

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).