

# AVE MARIA

The economy may be stuttering, but A-list fashion designer Maria Pinto's sartorial voice is loud and clear. And from the looks of the exquisitely crafted, precisely edited stock at her new 2,100-square-foot West Loop boutique, the Chicago-based designer is articulating an authoritative style plan that can work for all women: Buy chic, impeccably made pieces that mix and match effortlessly, make the shift from coffee to cocktails and withstand the ongoing style evolution.

With this missive, Maria Pinto pieces become both an image statement and a reliable investment strategy. It has worked for our new First Lady Michelle Obama, who has made *Vanity Fair's* 10 best-dressed list the past two years by donning Pinto's elegantly restrained yet supremely stylish designs at pivotal times during her husband's presidential campaign. Thanks to an array of political stops, Pinto's purple Sidona shift and turquoise Joanne sheath have set the fashion world abuzz and earned the designer deserved acclaim.

Even in tough times, Pinto is betting that many women can still find use for multifunctional pieces in the \$350 to \$3,500 range (though hand-embellished gowns top out at \$5,000). To wit: The Maggie dress—a body-hugging sleeveless shift that features a high, shaped neckline that plunges into a dramatic “V” in front—runs about \$1,000. With fabric options of tropical wool and silk jacquard, it pleases multiple style palates, and “either way it can be dressed up or down for any occasion,” says Pinto, reporting that tony New York retailer Takashimaya has reordered the shift three times this season. Even Pinto's glamorous gowns are no one-trick ponies. The Buenos Aires halter/Mona skirt ensemble, a show-stopping, slinky silk halter evening gown graced with vertical rows of mini-ruffles, is seemingly a splurge at \$2,850. But appearances are deceiving. The gown is a two-piece, hand-embellished affair that splits into separates for maximum versatility. “It's great if you're shorter or taller than average, and you can use the top and skirt alone or get a shorter skirt to give it a new look,” says Pinto. That makes it a veritable wardrobe in its own right.

With her collections, Pinto thinks big. These are pieces designed to be bought in multiples, year after year. Her tai-



lored yet feminine wool suits, smart little dresses, classic trousers and tops and downright dazzling evening gowns are all executed in extraordinary fabrics that Pinto tracks down herself in biyearly trips to Paris and “are meant to mix with pieces from my earlier collections,” she explains.

Despite her perpetual presence in the industry, Pinto didn't implement a business strategy to support such long-term thinking until recently. Though she had all the right stuff (Pinto graduated from the prestigious design program at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago; cut her teeth at Geoffrey Beene in New York; opened her own business in 1991; and has been carried nationally by Saks Fifth Avenue, Barneys New York and Bergdorf Goodman), a combination of a faltering economy and a staffing issue forced her to close her business in 2002. She launched a retooled company in 2004, complete with an iron-clad business plan, smart advisors and uniquely glorious garments.

Her West Loop store perfectly illustrates her current philosophy. “It's an extension of my atelier [a few floors above], where my customers can find an entire wardrobe of well-edited, flattering clothes,” she explains. With its rich yet minimal décor, executed by architect Elissa Scrafano and interior designer Scott Heuvelhorst, the boutique's ambiance mimics her collection, combining timeless elegance with jaw-dropping details. This harmonious pairing ensures that the pieces shine as beautifully in the space as a client does when she wears them.—Lisa Skolnik

Photo: Daria top and Rani skirt

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