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Dennis Basso Barguzin
sable-and-lace coat,
\$165,000; 212-794-4500

The \$165,000 Question

Designer Dennis Basso talks one conflicted shopper off the fur-lined ledge.

Would it be wrong to buy a sable coat right now? It was a late-Saturday lunch on a perfectly brisk Madison Avenue day. Some shopping had already occurred, and I suppose there was a certain acquisitive spirit in the air. But really, I was just thinking out loud.

"Do it!" said my friend. "But make it only a three-quarter length. You know, because of the economy."

I'm not quite sure she got the point. Or maybe she wasn't the person to ask. Luckily, a primary source was close at hand.

Dennis Basso has been in the business for 25 years. He's done lynx coats, lippe cat hats, and ermine shrugs for everyone from Liza Minnelli to Lynn Wyatt. Two years ago he expanded into a ready-to-wear line that includes organza and chiffon gowns and delicately embroidered cocktail dresses. But he prides himself most on the quality of his skins, specifically his broadtail, his chinchilla, and—especially—his sable.

The first thing I see when I enter Basso's store on Madison is a trapeze coat with chocolate-brown alligator on top and cocoa-colored fur below. "This is mink, right?" I ask. "No," says a warm gravelly voice from the back of the mirrored hall. "That's Barguzin. It's the best." And so I enter the Dennis Basso School of Sable.

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It takes about a minute for the designer to explain the fundamentals: Sable hairs are longer than those of mink, slightly looser, and marked by a signature silver tip. And they are incredibly light. Basso throws a knee-skimming collarless swing coat over my shoulders—"Close your eyes," he says, "and you'll swear all you have on is a cashmere cardigan." Given how warm sable is reported to be, its featherlike weight is surprising. As is its price. Sable has a reputation as "the aris-

ocrat of furs," the ultimate indulgence, and it lives up to it. There is a reason Russian sable clients are seated front-row at Basso's runway shows: A coat designed from 16 rows of Barguzin sable stitched together with barely visible seams of hand-made lace costs \$165,000.

There are people for whom no explanation could ever support paying that kind of money for a single garment. They are not Basso clients. "That man could sell me the Brooklyn Bridge," says philanthropist and "sable girl" Lynn Wyatt. "And I live in Houston." Friend and client Marjorie Gubelmann calls Basso "the Valentino of furs—he is friends with his clients, truly friends with them—and he lives the life." Basso is a master salesman and, as Wyatt points out, "he knows his stuff." The designer's theory on the price

of sable relies most heavily on the Barguzin factor. Sable is available in brown, dark brown, and shades of blond, but, he says, the true prize is a dark-chocolate Barguzin with a clear silver sheen. The skins from the Barguzin valley in southeast Siberia were historically reserved for the Russian royal family, which is why it is also known as Imperial sable. Barguzin prices have always been steep. On November 1, 1921, *The New York Times* ran a story about "the most expensive

but right now a cuff or a collar does very nicely." Basso believes that "there can't be a single type of sable coat for every girl. We are not in the days of the notch-collar, ankle-length mink with the half belt in the back," he says. "Remember those? You would not believe how many are in the studio waiting to be restyled."

Basso designs and creates all his pieces in a 30,000-square-foot atelier in Long Island City, Queens. The space is large enough to house pelts and an impressive inventory

Sable is incredibly light. "Close your eyes," says Dennis Basso, "and you could be wearing a cashmere cardigan."

garment ever stitched together for a private purchaser," designed by Stein Blaine furriers and tailors of 15 West 57th Street. It was an Imperial sable coat and it cost \$60,000—in 1921.

"It's like a big, perfect flawless diamond ring," says Basso. "You just need one." Though he gives clients plenty to choose from. The fall 2008 collection featured a Russian sable and cream alligator coat and a cropped bomber; a Russian sable vest; a Russian broadtail-and-sable coat; and the Barguzin sable-and-lace collarless swing style, which he considers a new classic. "Does anyone do sable more ways than Dennis? I don't think so," says Gubelmann. "It's there in the lining of a shearing coat or on a cuff or a collar." She herself has not taken the full plunge: "Someday I will grow up and buy a coat,

of finished coats, keep clients' coats in summer storage, and employ a team of seamstresses and tailors who can deliver on Basso's—and his devotees'—whims. "If we had to," says Basso, "we could make a sable coat from scratch in ten days."

At the end of my tutorial, I can identify sable from mink—and for extra credit, lippe cat from lynx—but I still have not concluded whether such an extravagance is currently appropriate. Then I remember the words of Lynn Wyatt, who told me that "at the end of the day, a beautiful sable has *always* been a sound investment." —S.V.

Dennis Basso: 765 Madison Ave., New York; 212-794-4500. 980 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago; 312-640-9500. 645 E. Durant Ave., Aspen; 970-925-4499; dennisbasso.com.

That Touch of Sable



I PEZZI DIPINTI

Designer Cathryn Collins lined this Barguzin "mini trench" with her signature hand-tie-dyed silk charmeuse lining. \$47,500; 212-941-9966



HELEN YARMAK

The self-proclaimed child of perestroika has been called Russia's fashion ambassador, and this Barguzin sable hunter hat can be found in her stores in New York and Moscow. \$9,995; 212-245-0777



DENNIS BASSO

We like to think of this Barguzin shrug as Basso's starter sable. \$35,000; 212-794-4500



HERMES

The French house may be better known for its leather goods, but this sable collar attached with the company's trademark silver links is unmistakably Hermès. \$5,950; 800-441-4488