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An Occasion to Wear 'Empire State Burgundy'



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Robert Gross, a guard at the Empire State Building, at a fitting with Jennifer L. Busch, and her father, Stuart, of I. Buss Uniform Company.

By JAMES BARRON Published: May 26, 2008

Fifteen years after the movie "Sleepless in Seattle" gave his workplace even more fame, Robert Gross finally has a uniform that is camera worthy.



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

A makeover inside the building was extended to the uniforms.

Mr. Gross is a guard at the Empire State Building who is usually posted at the 86th-floor observatory. The view from there is something. The uniforms that he and his colleagues used to wear — plain polo shirts and dark slacks — were not.

But his on-duty look is changing. The building is getting something of a makeover inside, and the building's owners

decided to extend that to custom-made uniforms that have just been delivered — 300 uniforms, each including 3 jackets, 4 pairs of slacks and 11 shirts.

The uniforms were hand-trimmed in a workroom 10 blocks from the Empire State Building. The building commissioned a Manhattan company that makes the uniforms seen on many apartment doormen and on some staff members at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the United Nations and the Waldorf-Astoria.

"I love that they're doing this more formal look," said Jennifer L. Busch, a vice president of the uniform company, I. Buss. "They were in polo shirts. That's not a uniform."

I. Buss has off-the-rack styles like the Gramercy, a three-button double-breasted jacket, and the Windsor, a two-button single-breasted. But the Empire State Building wanted

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something special. So Ms. Busch, whose great-grandfather started the company in 1892, scoured old photographs to find a look that was in style when the Empire State Building was new.

It opened in 1931, when Art Deco designers were celebrating the Machine Age. Ms. Busch soon settled on a distinctively Art Deco look.

That led her to design uniforms that are a throwback, but not just in appearance. In the 1930s, such outfits were probably made by hand. I. Buss still makes its clothes by hand, with Trevor Lett cutting the fabric and Ms. Busch's 73-year-old father, Stuart, doing the fitting.

The jackets' sleeves bear chevrons. "This is a classic for Art Deco," she said.

The rest of the jacket is a particular shade of red — "Empire State burgundy." It is a custom color chosen to match the setting in which the uniforms will be worn, the building's marble corridors.

"We thought if you look at the different marbles here, you'll see a common theme, which is maroon," said James T. Connors, the building's general manager. "That's where the color came from."

Ms. Busch also designed ties with a special logo — the building against a starburst pattern, also an Art Deco touch. And she worked out a custom-made typeface for the hats that go with the uniforms. That typeface will also be used on signs for stores in the building, and was approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission because the building is a city landmark.

The new uniforms were commissioned to coincide with a \$500 million renovation intended to give the Empire State Building a look that is "historically accurate and historically reminiscent," Mr. Connors said.

The plans call for removing dropped ceilings in the lobby that were installed in the 1950s, he said. That will expose the original ceilings, making the corridors look pretty much the way they looked when Alfred E. Smith, the former governor of New York, signed on as the Empire State Building's first manager.

The new uniforms presented another problem: how to store them and distribute them at the beginning of each shift. "Moving from slacks and a golf shirt to this fairly cumbersome package resulted in the challenge of how to manage and house it all," Mr. Connors said. "We looked at a much larger locker room, or a much smaller room" where the uniforms could be stored and handed out by a clerk.

Instead, the building installed an automated system that Mr. Connors said was the first of its kind in New York, though it has been popular with casinos. It dispenses and collects the uniforms automatically.

An employee swipes his identification card at a device that looks like a cash machine. Inside, a rack like something out of a dry cleaner's shop whirls. A door opens, and the employee can reach in and lift out his uniform, on its hanger.

It works for any employee with a uniform — and that includes Mr. Connors. After all, he said, "I was often the model for the jacket."

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