

BY TAYLOR STAUBACH  
PHOTOS BY OGDEN GIGLI



Surrounded by Style: Vicki Bonnington stands out amidst her mannequin muses.

# FASHION

*With Compassion*

BERKCHIQUE!  
MAKES ITS RUNWAY RETURN



**THOSE OF US** who grew up with a trunk full of dress-up clothes know the magic that an article of clothing can hold. In an instant, you're no longer yourself, transformed into a medieval princess holding court or a swashbuckling pirate on the high seas. And then we grow up. We close the trunk and begin to dress for the job at hand.

What if that job of dressing up is to bring joy not only to yourself—but also to others?

Vicki Bonnington is the living embodiment of the aphorism, "Clothes make a statement. Costumes tell a story." Walking into the former litigator's third-floor expansive storage space in downtown Pittsfield is like entering a portal into another world, a Narnia of fashion where the wardrobe is the wonderland. Clothes in every shade, texture, length, and size fill the space. The walls are lined with an array of accessories—an impressive crown section, hats for every day of the year, and

sentimental touches like the handmade crocheted hangers gifted to Bonnington as a child by her grandmother each Christmas.

Tabitha Rasmussen, Bonnington's project manager and assistant, has curated and organized the space into what it is today. Bonnington's "personal MacGyver," Rasmussen is also a seamstress, integral to the care and upkeep of Bonnington's collection. "We have fun here," says Rasmussen.

Bonnington is the driving force behind Berkshire County's popular fashion fundraiser. She is like a fashion fairy godmother, a youthful sprite dressed in dusty rose who hasn't stopped playing dress-up since the first Young Edwardian dress she donned during the Beatle-mania days. Often labeled a "fashionista" by the local press, that term doesn't resonate with Bonnington, whose personal style isn't about trends or labels—it's about who she becomes when wearing it.

As we talk, we explore both her closet

and the racks of clothing hand-picked for BerkChique!. More than once, the conversation veers off on a tangent, and Bonnington is off searching from room to room for the garment in question, a visual prop for the story she is telling. From the "defenseless" hand-painted slip dress she "rescued" from a Filene's Basement 30 years ago, to a stunning Victor Costa gown whose look-alike Bonnington gifted to a past BerkChique! Cinderella, Bonnington has collected a textile scrapbook where every article is a piece of her own story.

Her exuberance for clothes spills over into her personality, animating this larger-than-life character that draws you in. "You would be surprised at how happy it makes other people," she says. "I do love clothing, and I love crazy hats and outfits and all of that, but I get a lot of positive feedback from people."

A staple of the local gala circuit, Bonnington has been told that her presence elevates every event she attends,

and if they were handing out awards for "best dressed," she would win every time. But in Bonnington's words, "It's not about the product, it's the process. If there were a contest, I would not come."

Thankfully, she has been showing up with racks in tow to BerkChique! since its inception in 2012. The brain-child of Nancy Fitzpatrick, this harmonious blend of philanthropy and fashion is now a celebrated local tradition, boasting a unique shopping experience that brings together chic clothing, stylish accessories, and a commitment to supporting the community.

After a four-year hiatus, the pop-up boutique will triumphantly return from April 26 to 28, hosted for the first time in Lenox at the historic Ventfort Hall, now under the helm of Executive Director Wendy Healey. A beacon of goodwill that channels its proceeds towards local charities, including

the Ventfort Hall's restoration efforts, BerkChique! re-sells women's and men's clothing and accessories. Shoppers can expect casual and dressy, scattered with designer wear and high-end fashion finds.



One of the standout features of BerkChique! is Bonnington's own impeccably curated collection. Separate from the main sale, attendees can expect nothing less than a carefully selected

assortment that reflects the quirky fashion philosophy of the local style icon. The Bonnington Collection ranges in price, with racks beginning at \$20 and increasing incrementally to \$150. The "Priceless" racks, priced at \$250 and \$500, are full of treasures that Bonnington hand-selects and sells at her discretion. All proceeds from that portion of the sale are split between charities near and dear to Bonnington's heart: Berkshire Humane Society, Community Access to the Arts, WAM Theatre, Berkshire Art Center, and Ventfort Hall.

In Bonnington's Pittsfield space, she and Rasmussen have rows of garment racks ready for their BerkChique! debut. The windowsills are lined with drawers bursting with jewelry and accessories. A rainbow of mannequins cap the racks, each decked out in an original ensemble of Bonnington and Rasmussen's imagination.

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With infectious energy and joy around clothes, it's easy to see why shoppers show up to BerkChique! just for some time with Bonnington. She says the number one question she hears at the sale is, "I love this, but where would I wear it?" And her answer always is, "How about your living room!" Her ultimate goal for each BerkChique! event is to encourage people to step outside of their comfort zone. "I'm energized by it because clothes really can be transformational," she says. "You can see yourself in a different light. Get a couple of things that really just make you feel like Marlene Dietrich or Marilyn Monroe."

Rasmussen agrees. "People have these ideas about themselves, 'Well I don't wear that.' It's too ruffly, it's too masculine, it's too feminine, it's too something. Instead of thinking, 'I could put this on, and I could be somebody else today.'"

Bonnington doesn't spend too much time worrying about where she will wear any of the items she collects. One of her favorite things to say is "The occasion will

arise." And in a way that feels serendipitous, the occasion always does seem to do just that. She tells of a San Francisco vacation with her partner, David Schecker, where an opera costume sale became an unexpected part of the trip. Not knowing what she would do with an opera costume at the time didn't stop Bonnington from purchasing one. Lo and behold! The next gala held by IS183 (now Berkshire Art Center) was "Rock the Opera!"

For someone who firmly believes that clothes can be an avenue for self-transformation, Bonnington's approach to fashion is the hook that BerkChique! can hang its hat on. "I dress for fun! I have one goal in life, and it's to have fun every day. I think that silliness is highly underrated," says Bonnington with a smile. Labels and trends aside, BerkChique! is more than a shopping experience; it's a celebration of community, compassion, and self-expression, an object lesson in feeling good, having fun, and making others smile. ■

## The Sale

BerkChique! will be held from April 26 to 28 at Ventfort Hall, 104 Walker St., Lenox. "First Dibs" Party & Presale Friday is April 26, 5:30–8:30 p.m. Admission is \$100 for earlier VIP shopping at 5:30, and \$25 for general shopping at 6:30. The sale continues Saturday, April 27, 10–4, and Sunday, April 28, 10–2. Admission is free on Saturday and Sunday. To make donations prior to the sale, go to [berkchique.org](http://berkchique.org) to schedule a pickup, or else drop off items at Ventfort Hall from 11–3, Monday to Thursday.

## Shopping Tips

Come early to BerkChique! The best time to shop is Friday's 1st hour "First Dibs" event.

Dress comfortably and in "easy-to-change" clothing, like leggings.

Wear slip-on shoes.

Wear a bra you would plan on wearing with a more formal look.

Slips are provided by BerkChique! upon request.



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## One's Moral Compass

"Each According to the Dictates of His Own Conscience" is written large on Norman Rockwell's painting, *Freedom of Worship*, which was inspired by Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address, in which he outlined four essential human rights:

Freedom of Speech.  
Freedom from Want.  
Freedom of Worship.  
Freedom from Fear.

One's own conscience informs our moral judgments. And those judgments largely color our world view—they guide us in our ethical decisions and our actions.

What do these nine words "Each According to the Dictates of His Own Conscience" mean to you, and how does your moral compass inform your actions?

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