

Fur holding its own despite a recession

FASHION HOMME, FEMME

CHRIS COOK

NEW YORK — Despite the fact that animal lovers and other environmental "hardliners" have been protesting the wearing of fur coats for years, they are still here and they will be here, as a combined statement of fashion and luxury, for the foreseeable future.

The pressure has been intense at times: Wearers have been sprayed with paint, protests have been organized and there have been countless angry confrontations, not to mention all manner of letters to magazine and newspaper editors vehemently condemning those who wear fur.

It's true that because of public opinion many designers have got wind of the message that it is better to leave the fur where it rightly belongs — on the animals themselves — so they have taken to using synthetic fur instead of the real thing.

The threat of animal rights campaigners, while still valid in many cities around the world, is not so much of a worry to designers — or people wearing fur coats — now as in years past, and much less so in Japan.

"Animal rights groups are not as militant now as they were a few years ago," New York fur designer Jerry Sorbara asserted, which perhaps accounts for the many fur coats seen on the streets around Fifth Avenue and Broadway at the time of this interview.

Japanese women, while apparently less inclined to wear furs, are in fact one of the biggest buyers; if you look around the hotels and department stores you'll find plenty of fur shops to supply the market.

But despite bad publicity and not-so-rosy economic times, the industry is surviv-

"Our bread and butter is regular mink, and American skins are the finest in the world. My son visits markets in Russia, Canada and in Scandinavia.

"I put a limit on the price I will pay for a skin but sometimes I'll go over the top to acquire the best — for example, I recently bought the best wild mink skins from the Mackenzie River area in Canada."

While it is becoming more popular for men to wear furs, Sorbara says that it is still unusual.

"We don't depend on men for our business, and we only sell about 12 units (full-length coats) a year. But we are selling more raincoats, which are lined with nutria or coyote."

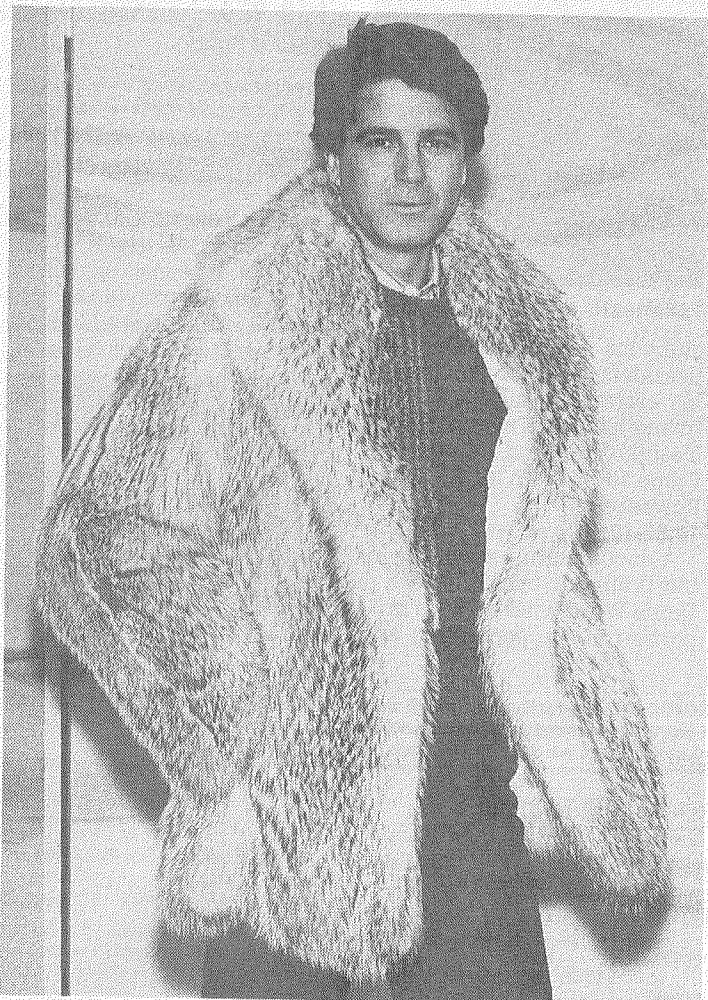
"Car coats are also quite popular, as are mink blouses with elastic waistbands," he said.

For some years Sorbara worked with the Japanese market, but the economy changed and with it the very market he was selling to. So Sorbara, astute as he is, changed with it.

He's slowly making inroads into the Japanese market again. Last year his son and daughter attended the international fur trade show in Ikebukuro, and in March Sorbara will be represented at the New York Furrier Exhibition here.

Although Sorbara is an established name in the U.S., it will be a long, hard road for him on this side of the Pacific.

The value of Japan's retail market in furs between April 1991 and March 1992 is estimated at ¥180 billion. While Sorbara's business is literally only a drop in the ocean, the fact that the ocean is called Japan is significant for this one New York designer.



A MAN'S THREE-QUARTER badger jacket by Jerry Sorbara.

