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How did the era of the micro-trend also become the golden age of archival fashion? GRACE CAIN discovers the ways in which leading luxury brands have taken inspiration from their vast back catalogues

IN MY SCHOOL YEARBOOK, I was given the (arguably niche) title of ‘Most Likely to Open a Vintage Fashion Shop’. At the time, I wasn’t sure if this was a compliment or if I was the butt of a slightly weird joke. Either way, it did not deter me from my love of all things timeworn – whether it’s an unlabelled 1960s shift dress tucked away in the corner of a market or an intricately beaded 1920s Chanel gown sparkling behind glass at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Much like a painting or a feat of architecture, clothes tell stories about the way we live – and in an era of breakneck micro-trends, taking a moment to look back at some of those stories feels more important than ever before.

In 2024, fashion archives are a hot commodity. Aside from the individuals who are doing what I never did and making serious money sourcing and selling vintage fashion online, designers seem to be prizing legacy more than ever before. Perhaps this is partly down to the fact that the past decade or so has seen fashion finally start to receive the same cultural recognition as other forms of design. Blockbuster exhibitions – such as the sell-out *Gabrielle Chanel. Fashion Manifesto* at the V&A, which ran from September 2023 to March this year – are evidence of the widespread interest in the history of fashion, and a wake-up call to brands and designers about the importance of preserving your own work.

Of course, many luxury houses with rich heritages have been doing this for years. Dior began collating its historic couture pieces, accessories and more in 1985 under the guidance of curator Soizic Pfaff. She continued to head a small team in building the (now extensive) private archive until her retirement two years ago. Other houses take a more public approach, with museums dedicated to their own history. Indeed, Yves Saint Laurent has two – one in Paris, the other in Marrakech.

Designer Azzedine Alaïa was famously obsessed with conserving both his own work and that of other major figures in 20th-century fashion lore. A quote from the late designer on the Fondation Azzedine Alaïa website reads: “When I see beautiful clothes, I want to keep them, preserve them... clothes, like architecture and art, reflect an era.” As well as 8,000-plus historical pieces by the likes of Paul Poiret and Elsa Schiaparelli, the foundation’s collection today encompasses around 22,000 pieces of clothing and accessories from the more than five decades of Alaïa’s own career. And that has proved an invaluable resource for current creative director Pieter Mulier, who has been much lauded for his ability to pay homage to the legend of the house’s founder, while also exploring his own creative vision. His Summer/Fall 2024 collection was created using a single merino wool yarn, reinvented in

different guises with the same textile and knitwear suppliers who have worked with Alaïa for four decades.

Further proof of the perpetual relevance of brand archives can be

found on the autumn catwalks. For her debut at Chloé earlier this year, creative director Chemena Kamali delved into Karl Lagerfeld’s term at the helm during the 1970s, as well as looking to the fluid silhouettes and elegantly relaxed blouses beloved of visionary founder Gaby Aghion. Similarly, in what turned out to be her penultimate collection for Chanel, Virginie Viard looked to a pivotal place and time in the maison’s origin story: the seaside town of Deauville, where Gabrielle Chanel opened her hat shop and honed her visionary style. “It’s where it all began... the story is very close to my heart,” wrote Viard in the show notes. So in a world where designer tenures at luxury fashion houses feel increasingly short-lived, archives have taken on a new significance in helping maintain a sense of stability via creative continuity.

“Designers seem to be prizing LEGACY more than EVER before”



Clockwise from above: Vintage Schiaparelli – the Fondation Azzedine Alaïa keeps an archive of thousands of historical pieces by the late designer (and many others); Kendall Jenner wears vintage Alexander McQueen for Givenchy at the 2024 Met Gala; 1950s and ‘60s actor and sex symbol Mylène Demongeot models in Paris for the presentation of the 1955 Dior collection; Naomi Campbell takes to the catwalk to showcase Azzedine Alaïa’s Spring/Summer 1992 creations



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Archival fashion is not only a source of inspiration for new designs, but a viable choice itself. Seeing a celebrity make their way down the red carpet in a vintage outfit used to be a rare phenomenon, but in recent years it has become a new norm. In 2024, the Costume Institute’s annual fashion exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was entirely in line with this recent tendency towards the retro, with *Sleeping Beauties: Reawakening Fashion* focusing on items in the museum’s collections that are now too delicate to be worn again. At the accompanying Met Gala, the theme, ‘The Garden of Time’ (named after the JG Ballard short story of the same name), felt, then, like a direct invitation for attendees to embrace the power of the fashion archive – and they did not disappoint. Highlights included Kendall Jenner donning a gown by Alexander McQueen for Givenchy from the AW99 collection that had never actually been worn (it had only ever appeared on a mannequin) and Emily Ratajkowski in Versace AW01.

Elsewhere on the Met Gala red carpet, there were also plenty of looks that – while not old themselves – were directly influenced by a brand’s past collection. Take Alexander McQueen designer Seán McGirr’s custom look for Lana Del Rey, which directly referenced McQueen’s famous AW06 collection ‘The Widows of Culloden’; or Nicole Kidman’s Balenciaga gown, a contemporary recreation of a flamenco-inspired design worn by model Dorian Leigh in Richard Avedon’s famous shoot for the April 1951 edition of *Harper’s Bazaar*.

Cynics would argue that this new boom is nothing more than an opportunity for celebrities to prove their cultural capital – with an element of IYKYK appeal thrown in. But maybe that’s unfair. Maybe this is all just part of the wider movement towards a greater appreciation and understanding of vintage fashion and how it influences the trends of today (and tomorrow). Back when I was named ‘Most Likely to Open a Vintage Fashion Shop’, I felt like it was an interest no-one else around me shared. Now I see how wrong I was. □