

Style goes back to the future

'None of us here are much interested in trends or brand names.'

This is a secret, so don't go around telling everyone. You know that little tweed jacket you picked up the other day from a leading chain store? You could have bought an even cheaper but much higher quality one in a cramped shop on a side street near the Pompidou Centre in Paris. The only disadvantage is that you may not have been the first to wear it.

'I've had them all in here,' says Aldo, manager of the vintage-clothing emporium Vertiges, on Rue Saint Martin. 'Designers from H&M, Gap, Zara. . . and bigger names still. Sometimes they tell me what they're after. Other times they come incognito, but I can tell what they're up to from the way they handle the clothes and take notes, and from what they buy.'

What they are looking for is the rare, ephemeral thing that Vertiges has in spades: inspiration. The narrow, musty, under-lit store, which makes no concessions to brand experiences or even rudimentary interior design (the general ambience is somewhere between cavern and attic) is a treasure-trove of second-hand finds. Aldo himself is a walking advertisement for the place. On the day I interview him, he is

wearing an army-issue green parka with fur collar over an American university sweater and tartan trousers. Pointed shoes in patent leather complete the ensemble.

‘The first piece of clothing I ever bought was second-hand,’ says Aldo. ‘In those days, mind you, I didn’t have the choice. But it became a habit and after a while I didn’t see the point of changing. This way, you get something that’s original *and* cheap. Where’s the problem?’

The search for originality – combined with a growing distrust of global brands – has driven a worldwide increase in demand for vintage clothes. Ironically, the brands have interpreted this as a desire to re-create the past, hence the race to emulate classic cuts and colours, and to develop high-performance modern versions of old-fashioned fabrics.

‘Even new clothes are being sold as “vintage” now,’ snorts Aldo. ‘I can tell you one thing – clothes like that won’t be hanging on these railings in 40 years’ time. They’ll have fallen apart long before.’

Students and nonconformists have been sifting through racks of old clothes for years. The terminology changes – in the hands of fashion editors, ‘second-hand’ became ‘retro’, which then became ‘vintage’ – but the pleasure of unearthing a treasure for a song remains the same. (Technically, I’m told, ‘vintage’ refers to pre-war clothing, although the term has come to mean garments made between the 1920s and the 1980s – anything before that is ‘antique’.)

Long before they became acceptable fashion wear, second-hand clothes were simply the dress of the poor. In the 18th and 19th centuries, clothing markets like London’s Petticoat Lane sold cast-off items to the needy. These were often bought for the fabric – considered far more precious than the garments themselves – which was reworked into ‘new’ clothes for husbands and children. ‘Rag and bone men’, those dealers in second-hand clothes and bric-a-brac who now seem like mythological figures, would travel from street to street scavenging for unwanted items. Jumble sales, car boot sales, charity shops and the vintage market did away with the need for such middle-men.

Today, used clothes that aren’t resold in Europe and the United States often make it to developing countries in the form of donations. Others are sold in bulk to the ‘flocking’ industry and shredded to be turned into filler for insulation and furniture padding. Reclaimed wool can be mixed with new fibres to make low-cost fabrics. The UK’s Textile Recycling Association, however, states that up to 40 per cent of ‘post-consumer textiles’ are worn again.

Aldo says, ‘In Europe, the business first began to thrive between the wars. Rich Americans who’d been waiting out the Prohibition in Paris started going home, and a lot of them would sell half their clothes to reduce the weight of their luggage. Then, after the war, there was army surplus.’

In the 1950s, European teenagers wanted to get their hands on original American jeans. Over the years, this evolved into an obsession with retro Americana which, in Italy, would inspire a young man named Renzo Rosso to start a company called Diesel. Aldo says that the pop music and film industries, with their constant recycling of styles and frequent recourse to nostalgia, have always helped the second-hand market along. ‘In the 1980s, everybody was after collectible American jeans, especially Levi’s. Then the Japanese started making new jeans that looked second-hand, using advanced manufacturing techniques. It was really excellent work – sometimes even I couldn’t tell the difference.’

But the innovation also killed off the second-hand jeans market. ‘In any case, most of the American stuff gets sold straight to Japan now, either in bulk or on the web. We don’t get a sniff at it. That isn’t a problem, because the latest vintage trend is about old European designer clothing: while we used to go to the States to look for authentic American jeans, now they come here to look for original Chanel jackets.’

FROM THRIFT TO VINTAGE

Back in the days of Petticoat Lane, a wealthy person would never have dreamed of wearing second-hand clothing; and, of course, wearing a new garment that *looked* as if it was old would have been the ultimate in foolishness. Until the late 20th century, fashions were passed down from rich to poor. More recently, though, fashions have moved in the opposite direction, with disaffected urban youth sparking trends that are reinterpreted by designers and sold to wealthier, more privileged customers. This shift may partially explain the fascination with ‘vintage’, previously the domain of the imaginative underpaid.

Another factor may have been the creation of a magazine called *Cheap Date* in New York at the end of the 1990s. Its founders, Kira Joliffe and Bay Garnett, became the poster children for vintage; or ‘thrifting’, as they called it. Originally an anti-fashion magazine,

thumbing its nose at the establishment, *Cheap Date* evolved into an alternative to mainstream glossies, attracting the attention of stylists, models and designers. Sophie Dahl, Karen Elson and Erin O'Connor have all appeared on its pages.

Co-founder Joliffe told *The Observer* that *Cheap Date* had begun 'as a magazine about thrifting for people who are into clothes and style but are really fed up. Fashion magazines have taken the fun out of fashion. It's now about commerce, not the love of clothes'. In the same piece, Garnett commented, 'If you succumb to the feeling of constant wanting and needing that comes from a Prada ad, there's never an end to it.' ('Why Prada is passé – and cheap is chic', 22 February 2004.)

Although it began in New York, *Cheap Date*, like its editors, had a very British aesthetic. The Brits have always had an edgy, eccentric, faintly grungy sense of style that makes them expert 'thrifters'. The concept is much newer in other parts of Europe, as Aldo confirms: 'Until recently, an Italian wouldn't have been seen dead in a piece of second-hand clothing. Even the French were snooty about it. But now they've all joined in the game.'

The economy inevitably played a part. The years of recession that followed 9/11 made even the wealthiest consumers a little more cost-conscious. Sarah Gray Miller, who launched a magazine called *Budget Living* in 2002, said, 'The logo mania of the late 90s is over now. There is something vaguely obscene – and not a little dumb – about spending hundreds of pounds on a designer handbag that everybody thinks is a fake from your local street market anyway. The word "luxury" has become so overused it has become completely meaningless. For the intelligent consumer it simply means overpriced and over-hyped. The new trend towards thrifty shopping is as much about being ahead of the curve as it is about saving money.' ('The drift to thrift', *The Observer*, 13 October 2002.)

That's one reason why vintage might hang around: what started out as an attempt to save pennies has become a statement of intelligence and personal taste. At the vanguard of that change is Cameron Silver, founder of the Decades store in Los Angeles. Silver specializes in what might be termed 'designer vintage', selling his clothes out of a cool and clean space that has nothing in common with flea markets or thrift stores. His customers include Nicole Kidman, Cameron Diaz and Renée Zellweger, as well as film companies in search of authentic

items. 'I want all my clients to look like movie stars,' he says. (*'Une journée avec Cameron Silver'*, *Elle*, 6 September 2004.)

Silver started out as a cabaret singer, and it was during his tours that he began buying second-hand pieces. 'It wasn't always a glamorous life – quite often I'd find myself staying in pretty seedy places. So I'd go out walking. That's when I started visiting vintage fashion boutiques. I've always been interested in the history of fashion.'

Pretty soon, Silver had a wardrobe full of vintage items. With the touring life beginning to pall, he decided to open a store. 'I used the last few shows to round up some more forgotten treasures. I'd say to the audience, "If you've got any Pucci from the 1970s, come and see me after the show!"'

The store was discovered by Richard Buckley, editor of *Vogue Hommes International*, who spread the word. It was a fortuitous meeting, but it also shows that Silver has a keen eye. One of the most appealing aspects of vintage for fashion snobs is that not everyone has a talent for spotting decent pieces. This is clearly Silver's gift. He has since opened a branch of Decades in Barney's department store, New York. And he has helped to push vintage into the mainstream.

Increasingly, department stores are selling vintage pieces alongside contemporary designers. Bloomingdale's and Henri Bendel in New York both stock vintage. The Version Originale space in the basement of the Galeries Lafayette in Paris has a section devoted to the category, as does Topshop in London. And there is a new generation of independent outlets that sell second-hand in chic spaces. Lyell, in New York's Nolita, features original 1940s wallpaper and original pieces alongside 'vintage-inspired' designs.

The alert reader might have noted that the trend has started to cancel out its original purpose, with shoppers now being convinced by retailers to spend a great deal of money on items that are not even new. Why not go to charity shops and flea markets, where the same pieces can be found at a fraction of the price? For those with more money but little time, the benefit of upmarket thrift is that the collection has been pre-curated: they don't have to rummage through piles of crummy clothing in the hope of coming up with something fabulous.

British clothing brand Oasis took the theory to its logical conclusion with a line called New Vintage. This limited-edition range was based on one-off vintage finds, sourced in flea markets like Clignancourt on

the outskirts of Paris and used as templates for mass-market products. Nadia Jones, the label's design director, explained the concept to *The Times*: 'We know our girl likes the idea of vintage because she sees Hollywood stars and Kate Moss wearing it. But she either doesn't know where to get it, or can't be bothered to search for it. So we do it in her dress size with no holes or stains.' ('Rags to Riches', 13 March 2004.) There can be no better example of the way fashion brands turn subcultural trends into marketing opportunities.

Not all vintage fans are such pushovers. Some neophyte thrifters have become as passionate about their hobby as the founders of *Cheap Date*. The names of brands such as Biba and designers such as Ossie Clark and Zandra Rhodes can be heard on the lips of those far too young to remember them the first time around. The web has become a fertile hunting ground – although there must be constant virtual battles between collectors and contemporary designers in search of an inspirational fix.

The brands' co-option of vintage has meant that collectors, archivists and 'thriftling' experts like Bay Garnett have seen their careers transformed. Mark and Cleo Butterfield, who run an operation called C20 Vintage Fashion, keep their huge collection of clothes in Devon. They list among their clients Topshop, Oasis, a clutch of Hollywood celebrity stylists, and Marc Jacobs. Their website boasts of 'an archive of thousands of pieces, individually chosen for their design features, available for hire as *inspirational vintage garments* [my italics] to design professionals' (www.c20vintagefashion.co.uk).

Butterfield told *The Times*, 'The market has totally changed... Old-style vintage collectors loved how things were made, and bought accordingly. Our celebrity clients now buy one-off vintage items in the same way as women used to buy couture – because they want to look fabulous and genuine.'

THE POLITICS OF NOSTALGIA

Although brands have done their best to get in on the act, the vintage phenomenon may have disturbing repercussions for them. For one thing, it shows that consumers are rebelling against high prices and mass production. For another, it was initially driven by word-of-mouth and alternative media, rather than conventional marketing. Indeed, one

of the points of wearing an authentic vintage item is to prove you are not a 'victim' of marketing.

The trend is a global one. In Tokyo, a district called Nakameguro has become a 'vintage chic' oasis. Formerly edgy and working class, 'Nakame' can be compared to London's Shoreditch or New York's Meat Packing District – but it has a more underground ambience than either. The Meguro waterway, which divides the district in two and forms the backbone of this laid-back shopping area, was once vile and polluted. But since a government spruce-up, the river has become popular with strollers. This in turn has attracted entrepreneurs and small businesses. Shop fronts have been kept deliberately unobtrusive. In keeping with the emerging doctrine that status should be acquired rather than purchased, the best places are reserved for those who spend time looking for them.

Although brands such as Starbucks and APC have inevitably begun moving in, there is little sign as yet that they are forcing out the independent cafés and thrift shops that crowd the area. One resident sums up the situation: 'None of us here are much interested in trends or brand names. We dance to our own music.' ('Snobbishly vintage in a Tokyo hot spot', *International Herald Tribune*, 4 January 2005.)

The quote underlines the theory that 'vintage' is an attitude rather than a style of dress. It's a rejection of 'exclusive' yet global brands, an affirmation that cheap and unusual is better than expensive and everywhere – and a message to marketers that the fashion consumer of the future will be harder to snare.

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Conclusion

‘The best marketing in the world comes down to a person standing in front of a mirror.’

The words ‘fashion’ and ‘marketing’ are virtually interchangeable. Yet a fashion brand cannot expect to thrive on marketing alone. Consumers, happily, just aren’t that dumb. Jean-Jacques Picart, the Parisian fashion consultant, told me, ‘Over the years I’ve advised many brands, and if there is one thing that I am absolutely sure of, it’s that you can’t lie. You can bluff, you can rearrange the truth, but you can’t cheat. Marketing can persuade a customer to push open the door of a shop, but if the clothes they find inside it are ugly, they will leave. Today, a product at any level must achieve the correct balance between price, quality, creativity, and wearability. If one of these factors is below par, the customer will not be fooled. The best marketing in the world comes down to a person standing in front of a mirror.’

Marketers often talk about the need to ‘educate’ consumers. The word they are actually searching for is ‘persuade’ – or, perhaps, ‘convince’ – but the process of education sounds less intrusive. None the less, consumers are educated. In interview after interview, advertising executives have told me that consumers are highly sophisticated; that they can decode marketing so swiftly and effectively that if the message is not presented in a subtle and elegant manner, it actually damages the brand.

Fashion consumers, I would argue, are the most sophisticated of the lot. Fashion already relies on a complex array of barely perceptible signs

and symbols – the width of a lapel, the height of a boot – so the imagery behind it cannot afford to be primitive. Today's best fashion advertising barely resembles advertising at all. The most effective marketing campaigns are carried out under the radar, their targets unaware of the ruse until it is too late – or so appreciative of its shrewdness that they agree to accept the come-on.

Consumers have gotten wise, and they've become demanding. If fashion was ever a great swindle – with clothes sold for four times their value just because of a label – that is less and less the case. Every shopper has become a fashion professional. They are beginning to resemble those who work in the industry. Throughout my interviews with the people who package fashion, one thing struck me: none of them were particularly fashionable. They were often stylish, but there was never the slightest hint of the victim about them. They wore discreetly elegant clothes, or T-shirts and jeans. They understood the system so perfectly that they refused to get caught up in it. Increasingly, their target market thinks the same way. The designer Alber Elbaz says, 'I think the expression of a free and democratic beauty will progressively supplant the hegemony of trends.'

But this, too, is a trend. And there are others. I wouldn't have the temerity to claim they are definitive, but below are eight developments which, I believe, will have a dramatic impact on fashion brands.

THE CONSUMER AS STYLIST

The days when consumers were loyal to brands are long gone. Nobody wants to be decked from head to toe in clothes from the same source – especially if they are smothered in logos. Small 'curated' stores selling unusual but multiple brands – along with other lifestyle accoutrements – will become more common. Shoppers are increasingly drawn to environments that resemble markets rather than brand shrines. The emergence of 'fast-fashion' brands such as Zara, H&M and Mango has been driven by a demand for trendy, disposable items that can be mixed with expensive, classic pieces. Consumers don't just buy designer, or chain store, or vintage – they buy all three, and throw them together in a style that is uniquely personal.

REACTIVITY AND PERSONALIZATION

In their new guise as stylists, consumers are pushing for more choice and a faster turnover of products. Fabrics and designs are becoming more innovative, even at the lower end of the market. The quest for originality is also prompting the return of couture and personal tailoring – but in a more democratic form. This could also be termed ‘the egg factor’. When packets of instant cake mix were first introduced, home cooks regarded them with suspicion. But when the formula was altered so that cooks were required to ‘add one egg’, they started to sell. People like being part of the creative process. If mainstream fashion retailers can establish a similar situation, it could be a powerful marketing tool.

CHOICE FATIGUE

New brands will have to work ever harder to win the loyalty of consumers. Younger shoppers zap from one brand to another, playing them off in terms of quality and price. Thanks to the web, they are better informed than ever before – and they certainly won’t be fooled by advertising. Older, wealthier consumers may be loyal to a smaller clutch of brands. For that group, trustworthiness and authenticity will be key.

‘SMART’ CLOTHING

The appearance of ‘faux vintage’ clothes that paid homage to the past was driven, ironically, by cutting-edge fabric design that brought a new suppleness and practicality to tweed. Consumers will continue to demand better-behaved clothes: easily washable, iron-free, light enough to pack in a suitcase and arrive at their destination without a wrinkle. Budget airlines have seen to it that we’re travelling more – and we want to look good when we arrive. The development of ‘smart’ materials will provide clothes that can react to their environment, changing colour or density, springing back into shape after being rolled into a ball. Fabric that can store data is not far off. Performance is likely to become a brand component.

BRANDING VIA BUILDINGS

In the rich west, shopping is no longer a functional task. It is a form of entertainment akin to going to a cinema, a show, or even an art gallery. Brands are responding by creating spaces that have more in common with museums or theme parks than traditional stores. These branded environments have become destinations – they are on the list of places to visit when you arrive in an unfamiliar city. If brands insist on a strategy of marketing via architecture, in order to hurdle advertising clutter and distance themselves from cut-price stores, they must provide rich and rewarding experiences.

HYBRID SHOPPING

One thing is certain: people still like shopping. In his 2006 book *The Long Tail*, author Chris Anderson suggested that 138 million Americans shop at Wal-Mart each week – almost half the population – making it the single most unifying force in the United States today. The internet has not supplanted the desire to pop out to the shops. In fact, after being first fearful of online shopping, and then embracing it, consumers are now becoming blasé about it. The time when consumers buy literally everything online is unlikely to come. While Nordic consumers are the keenest online shoppers, those in countries like Italy and Spain – with their sunny weather and focus on family and community – prefer to go out. This realization is reflected by the number of dotcom companies that are setting up bricks-and-mortar outlets for after-sales and service: the Apple stores being the perfect example. We will also see a rise in ‘hybrid stores’ like those offered by Ralph Lauren in New York and London, which give customers the chance to buy clothes electronically via touch-sensitive store windows.

NOMADIC DESIGNERS

Of course, not all designers can afford branded stores – or find the perfect distribution outlets. A third way is emerging, however. One brand to embrace the nomadic ideal is Clemens en August, a Munich-based fashion brand founded by Alexander Brenninkmeijer. (He is related to the Brenninkmeijer brothers, who founded the original C&A in the

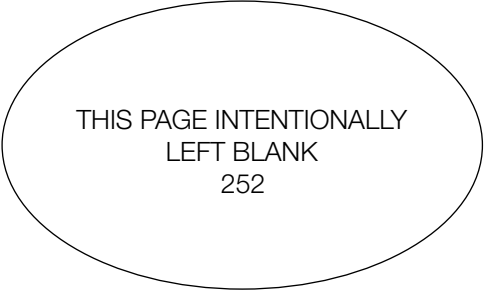
19th century – by selling textiles to farmers.) As he could afford neither a shop nor a catwalk show, Brenninkmeijer decided to become the 21st century equivalent of an itinerant salesman. But rather than going door-to-door selling stockings or ties, he would take his entire collection on the road. Each season, the collection tours Europe, setting up shop in appropriate venues. You have to sign up to the Clemens en August website (www.clemens-en-august.com) to find out when the collection is coming to town, and where you can go and check it out. For those who prefer a more traditional look, how about an itinerant Savile Row-trained tailor? Originally employed by Anderson & Sheppard, top notch cutter Thomas Mahon still keeps an office on the Row, but these days he spends more time at his workshop in Cumbria, where he lives. Clients can make an appointment to get measured up in London, but he also regularly visits Paris, Brussels, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco and even Sydney. He lets the faithful know when he'll be in town through his website, English Cut (www.englishcut.com)

THE END OF AGE

I find myself becoming increasingly irritated with forms that plonk me brusquely into an age bracket. It usually happens when I'm subscribing to a website. Am I aged between 25 and 35? No, I am bloody well not – thanks for reminding me. But, these days, what does that tell anyone? Age has ceased to function as a reference point for marketers. These days, a 36-year-old is just as likely to be a single DJ with a skateboard as a 25-year-old is likely to be married with two children. Mothers shop alongside daughters; fathers wear the same brand of jeans as sons. This is likely to affect the way the youth-obsessed fashion industry communicates with its customers. The trend-tracking organization Style-Vision already refers to 'mood marketing', suggesting that demographics are dead.

So there you go – as I said, it is not a definitive list. A few of the predictions may be wide of the mark, but as I shamelessly plundered them from some of the leading names in the fashion business, I'm expecting a reasonable degree of accuracy. The main problem, of course, is that this is a book about fashion.

Tomorrow, everything will have changed.



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