

January 30, 2005

SPENDING

Clothes With Lots of Style and a Little History, Too

By COELI CARR

DIANA COSTALES, a collector of vintage clothing, loves to describe a find at an estate sale shortly after she moved to Albuquerque seven years ago: five women's suits from the 1940's - "some very dressy, some pretty casual," she said.

"But what was so amazing about them was they were all perfect, hanging in dry-cleaner bags," Ms. Costales added. "There wasn't a button missing, not a thread pulled, not a stain. It was like time forgot them." Hard to forget, however, was the price: just \$2 apiece.

"Half of it's the hunt, and the other half's finding that really great deal," said Ms. Costales, a stay-at-home mother and manager of investment property.

These days, the growing popularity of collecting and wearing vintage clothing has made those \$2 deals harder to come by, as shoppers become as knowledgeable about top designers as retailers and wholesalers. "Some vintage shop owners, if they're going to the same estate sales, won't share information because you, the shopper, are their competition," said Ms. Costales, who gave the \$2 suits to her older sister.

The business of vintage clothing has changed considerably since the late 1960's, when small shops popped up to accommodate young buyers looking for fashion alternatives, said Doris Raymond, the owner of The Way We Wore, a store in Los Angeles. When she opened her first store, in 1981 in San Francisco, most people who wore vintage clothes bought them at thrift shops, which often received donations from estates. The treasures and the ordinary from those donations all went to the thrift shops' racks. Now, many thrift shops have specialists who pull out the best offerings before they hit the floor.

"I have not been in a thrift shop in probably eight years," Ms. Raymond said. "I rely on people who find the good stuff, so they come to me with 300 things to choose from that have been picked with quality in mind."

Not all old garments qualify as vintage clothing worth buying. Ms. Raymond says the term befits clothing that symbolizes an entire decade or era, like Audrey Hepburn's classic sheath dress by Givenchy from the 1950's, or the Chanel look championed by Jackie Kennedy in the 60's.

Patrick Michael Hughes, who teaches a course on the cultural history of clothing at the Parsons School of Design in New York, said vintage clothing was revered and desired for one reason. "It really comes down to silhouette - primarily the shape and look - that is very, very conscious of the body and of construction," he said, citing the cut of a jacket's shoulder or sleeve. "It's rooted in a vocabulary that today's clothing is not."

Mr. Hughes says the collectible articles of the future will still be from top designers - like Dior, Valentino, Balenciaga, Yves Saint Laurent and Halston.

Louis Webre, vice president for marketing and media at Doyle New York, an auction house, said that over the last four years, more people were participating in its spring and fall "Couture, Textiles and Accessories" auctions, which include vintage clothing.

The event that steered vintage couture sales in a new direction, creating a huge upswing in auction attendance, he said, was the 2001 Academy Awards. Julia Roberts attended the ceremonies in a vintage Valentino dress, while Renée Zellweger arrived in a canary yellow chiffon number, circa 1950, by Jean Dessès. A stylist had bought the Dessès dress at a Doyle auction for a bid "in the four figures," although Mr. Webre said that vintage couture "can cost you well into the five figures."

Rachel Zoe Rosenzweig, a Los Angeles stylist, found a one-shouldered orange Valentino dress from the 1970's that Jennifer Garner, one of her clients, wore to the 2004 Academy Awards.

"For some actresses, high-end vintage evokes an idea of old Hollywood, because their idols and fashion icons were wearing those very designers these celebrities want to wear now," Ms. Rosenzweig said. Sometimes, she noted, these gowns are on loan from the archives of designers. But actresses often buy their own gowns from high-end vintage boutiques.

The clothing, she added, doesn't have to be expensive. "I have gotten evening gowns for myself and my clients that have been under \$100 that look as if they cost several thousand dollars - but they don't have a designer name in them," she said.

Some stores tend to carry only designer names. Resurrection, a vintage clothing retailer with stores in Los Angeles and Lower Manhattan, was recently the benefactor of Norma Kamali's entire archive from the late 1960's through the 90's. "We sold hundreds of pieces of Norma Kamali, way beyond our expectations," said Katy Rodriguez, the store's co-owner. The prices ranged from \$150 into the thousands.

On the other hand, Foley & Corinna, a Lower East Side vintage retailer, prefers items costing \$100 or less. "You'll walk into a party, you'll be the only one wearing the top and, if you spill a glass of wine on it, you won't be heartbroken," said Anna Corinna, a co-owner.

Andrea Linett, creative director of Lucky, the shopping magazine, who has been a buyer of vintage clothing since high school, says that it is tough to have a eureka moment in a thrift shop without having a sense of fashion history. "You have to have references," she said. That knowledge allows thrift-store shoppers to spot signature styles of designers. Without that knowledge, she said, a shopper may be better off going to a retailer that has already edited down the stock.

SOME people buy vintage clothing for its investment potential, but the mystique holds sway for many.

Victoria Moran, author of "Younger by the Day: 365 Ways to Rejuvenate Your Body and Revitalize Your Spirit" (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), cherishes a gift she received from her mother: a 1964 jacketed summer dress by Diane von Furstenberg. "There is something about the way it moves," she said. "It has a bias-cut skirt. It fits like second skin. I wear it in the summer when I feel it's necessary to light up a room." For Ms. Moran, vintage clothing plays up womanliness, rather than girlishness, an assessment with which Katherine Sansone, a longtime vintage clothing consumer, concurs.

Ms. Sansone, owner of a public relations company in Oakland, Calif., is also the older sister of Ms. Costales, who gave her those \$2 suits. "Three are business suits, and I wear them all the time," she said, adding that the garments have been named according to the spirit they exude - the "Andrews Sisters," the "Sailor," the "Cocktail Hour," the "Joan Crawford" and the "Time for Biz."

"There's a sense of elegance, sophistication and femininity about all the clothes," said Ms. Sansone, who still finds bargains but says the searching has become competitive because people know there is money to be made in vintage clothing. "When you wear them, you feel better, in the way they fit and the way they feel." The "Biz" suit, however, is the ultimate showstopper. "People say that when I wear it, I have a bit more sass in my walk," she said. "And I do."



Katherine Sansone for The New York Times
Katherine Sansone of Oakland, Calif., has given names to several vintage suits that her sister bought for \$2 each at an estate sale. She is wearing the "Time for Biz" suit.