Copyright
Carolyn Jean Babula
2002
Abstract

Re-Collecting the Past: Fashion, Wardrobe, and Memory

by

Carolyn Jean Babula

An ethnographic look at different segments of the vintage clothing and used clothing markets in order to understand the practices of people who sell, purchase, collect, keep, display in museums, and auction used clothes of varying quality and desirability. That the unprecedented popularity and widespread acceptance occurred concomitant with the end of the millennium may not be coincidental. Rather, it may be a manifestation of what might be understood as millennial angst, where people were anxious about the future and needed tangible reminders of their own past or an imagined, ostensibly safer era. Having old clothes that they have saved in their closets or purchasing something similar to what they had in their youths that is either an original vintage piece or a vintage-inspired reproduction is a way for them to find safe haven in pleasant memories and reveries. In this way, collections of clothing that are in a museum, in a fashion designer’s seasonal collection, or in one’s wardrobe can be seen as repositories of memory where each garment comprises one part of a larger narrative about the past.
Acknowledgements

I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with so many phenomenal people who have greatly influenced my work, and would like to thank them here individually.

First, I would like to thank Carole Conway, Maureen McGovern, Patricia Socha, and Mary Raffaniello at (Sidley Austin) Brown & Wood, for ensuring that I had steady and gainful employment for the past three years, which essentially funded my research for and writing of this dissertation. Without their graciousness, trust, friendship, and understanding, I would not have been able to fund or conduct my research as efficiently as I did. I am proud to have been a part of the Firm and to have been able to help as much as I could and did through a very trying merger and in the months after the collapse of the World Trade Center. The subsequent tragedy two weeks after I left our offices for the last time at One World Trade Center, in addition to the loss of my cousin, Lieutenant Daniel O’Callaghan of the New York Fire Department, has made an indelible impression in my memory of my experiences there and has profoundly informed this research in ways I never imagined.

I would also like to thank Dr. Fred Myers, Chair of the Department of Anthropology and his assistant, Jennie Tichenor, at New York University for so kindly allowing me to be (at the request of George Marcus) a Research Affiliate. This afforded me access to NYU’s Bobst Library among other privileges, which proved absolutely invaluable to the research.

It goes without saying that the project would be nothing but vapid speculation without the kindness of all those who agreed to be interviewed either in person, by phone or by email. I would like to acknowledge the following individuals who contributed so greatly to my understanding of the fashion industry, the inner workings of auction houses and costume departments at prominent art museums, and educating me about the nitty gritty of the rag trade as it existed many years ago compared to how it functions today: Andy, proprietor of Andy’s Chee-Pees, Peter Arnold, Esq., Executive Director of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, Carole Atkin, proprietor of Stella Dallas, Paul Beahan at Resurrection, Los Angeles, Marcella
Burfoot, Manager of Antique Boutique, Elisa Casas, proprietor of The 1909 Company, Maureen Disimile, manager at Alice Underground, Tiffany Dubin, Marila Gackowski Von Achmatowicz, Julie Gilhart at Barneys New York, Mark Haddawy, proprietor of Resurrection, Betty Halbreich at Bergdorf Goodman, Corey Harris at What Comes Around Goes Around, Karen Tranberg Hansen, Professor, Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University, Jane Hegland, Professor, Department of Family and Consumer Services at New Mexico State University, Patty Hughes from Seventh on Sixth, Marianna Klaiman former Director of Fashion at Sotheby's, Harold Koda, Curator of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ellen Koenigsberg at Crocodile, Delanee Koppersmith proprietor of Cobblestones, Rene Lewis, Alice and Ronald Lindholm, proprietors of Right to the Moon Alice, Phyllis Magidson, Curator of the Museum Costume Collection at the City Museum of New York, Jack Markus proprietor of Cheap Jack's Vintage Clothing, Patricia Mears, Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts, Costumes and Textiles at The Brooklyn Museum, Lenore Newman, proprietor of Patina, Marion Ress, Jan Reeder at Doyle New York, Katy Rodriguez, proprietor of Resurrection, Dan Samson at Barneys New York, Andrea Siegel, Cameron Silver, proprietor of Decades, Inc., Valerie Steele, Curator at The Fashion Institute of Technology, Lauren Sweder at What Comes Around Goes Around, Keni Valenti, Justin Vogel from Atomic Passion, Seth Weisser proprietor of What Comes Around Goes Around, and Laura Wills, proprietor of Screaming Mimi's.

My deepest gratitude goes to George Marcus, James Faubian, Hannah Landecker, and Jean-Joseph Goux for agreeing to be on my committee and assisting me through this harrowing process. I would, however, like to make special mention that without Jim's foresight and brilliance in so many things, and his friendship, the job of researching and writing this dissertation would have been a complete and utter nightmare. Indeed, it was he who suggested that instead of continuing with a project in which I had a modicum of excitement, that I should do something about which I was passionate and because I was "a fashion maven." Whether or not I ever did or could live up to that glorious title, those words would ring in my ears and make me
smile even after the most gruesome fieldwork experience, let alone the most horrendous moments of writing-up.

Thanks also to all of family and my friends at Rice and beyond, for their immeasurable support and confidence in me throughout this endeavor. I especially would like to thank Monica Aliano, Christopher Alt, the Anderson family, Tatiana Bajuk, Jae Chung, Kevin DeBell, W.R. Dull, Jennifer Hamilton, Kelly Hands, Laura Helper, Jim Kotulka, Jim and Jennifer Lee, Hannah MacDonald, Christiana Moss, the Nuzzi family, Brian Oakes, the O’Callaghan family, Amy Placas, Kris Peterson, Jeff Prybolsky, Brian Riedel, Michael Rubenstein, the Smith families, Jacob Speaks, Carole Speranza, Julie Taylor, Jill Twardowski, Faith Ward, Kathleen Ward, Marybeth Ward, and Jack Ward.

Needless to say, without the love and support of my parents, I would never have muddled through. I refer not only to their rescuing me from my roach infested 250 square foot apartment in Soho, and their subsequent renovation of the basement which was to become my home for many months while doing fieldwork, but for all the years of emotional support throughout this prolonged academic undertaking. I remember when people would ask the inevitable question of what I was going to do with degree when I was done and the answer was not clear, they would advise me not to let my parent’s know because they thought that they would be upset. Yet, my parent’s, I think, would only be upset if I was doing something that did not make me happy and for that I am so grateful. I would also like to thank my mom for being as close to a research assistant as one could hope to have—her editorial comments and her eagle eye for any article in any magazine that merely mentioned the word “vintage” were clipped and cited just in case they might be useful. Her discoveries in publications as varied as The Walking Magazine and Victoria showed me how truly ubiquitous the vintage fashion has become in recent years.

I can’t imagine what this process would have been like without the loving and constant support of Matthew Nuzzi. If I had been on my own, the writing would have been so very difficult and lonely. He kept me grounded and has a knack for saying just the right thing to get
me motivated and keep me on track. I know that I was impossibly irrational in the time leading up to the dissertation defense, which made his help and love all the more appreciated. He is like an angel.
# Table of Contents

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................................................. III

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ............................................................................................................................... V

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** ................................................................................................................................. IX

**LIST OF FIGURES** ......................................................................................................................................... X

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................. 1

- Multi-Sited Ethnography at Home .................................................................................................................. 8
- Piecing It All Together .................................................................................................................................... 13
- Being Frivolous ............................................................................................................................................ 15
- The Power of Memory .................................................................................................................................... 23
- Fads and Trends ............................................................................................................................................ 35
- Conclusions ................................................................................................................................................... 37

**CHAPTER TWO: FOUNDATIONS** .................................................................................................................. 41

- Fin de Siècle Ideologies .................................................................................................................................. 42
- Fashion Historicism at the Fin de Siècle ......................................................................................................... 52
- Cyclical and Rapid Changes in Sartorial Fashion .......................................................................................... 55

**CHAPTER THREE: (HI)STORIES OF THE SECOND-HAND CLOTHING MARKET** ...................................... 66

- Getting the Goods: Rag (Wear)houses, Pickers and Luck .......................................................................... 84
- Why Is Vintage in Vogue? ............................................................................................................................. 88
- Who Is Buying and Wearing Vintage? .......................................................................................................... 107

**CHAPTER FOUR: COLLECTING: MUSEUM COLLECTIONS AND “IMPORTANT” PERSONAL COLLECTIONS** .... 112

- Longing for the Past ...................................................................................................................................... 112
- Vintage—A Post-Modern Strategy of Anachronistic Juxtaposition .............................................................. 136
- Collectors: Public and Private ....................................................................................................................... 139
- Museum Exhibitions ..................................................................................................................................... 153

**CHAPTER FIVE: (IN)VESTING** .................................................................................................................... 164

- In-Vesting in Stock ....................................................................................................................................... 166
- Auction Houses: Collections and Investments ............................................................................................ 168
- Investing in the Future .................................................................................................................................. 181
- A “Fictio” of Millennial Sartorial Fashion .................................................................................................... 194

**CHAPTER SIX: (RE)COLLECTING: UNPACKING NARRATIVES FROM THE CLOSET** ......................... 202

- The Things They Carry: Using Clothes to Trigger Memories ....................................................................... 205
- Some Things Are Better Left in the Past: Contagion and Somber Memories ............................................. 216
- Closets ......................................................................................................................................................... 223
- Conclusions .................................................................................................................................................. 229

**CHAPTER SEVEN: THE FUTURE OF VINTAGE** .............................................................................................. 232

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** .......................................................................................................................................... 239
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 1.1</td>
<td>VIVA LAS VEGAS PROGRAM, 2001</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 1.2</td>
<td>ADVERTISEMENT FOR MEMORY IMPROVEMENT BOOK</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 1.3</td>
<td>ADVERTISEMENTS FOR ARICEPT®</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 3.1</td>
<td>NORMA KAMAL'S BOUTIQUE</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 3.2</td>
<td>URBAN RENEWAL TAG, URBAN OUTFITTERS</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 3.3</td>
<td>TIFFANY DUBIN PHOTOGRAPHED IN HER BOUTIQUE AT HENRI BENDEL</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 3.4</td>
<td>FOUR WOMEN ONE OUTFIT</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 4.1</td>
<td>KENAR “HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN” ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 4.2</td>
<td>ISSEY MIYAKE RETROSPECTIVE</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 5.1</td>
<td>“Oscar’s Greenroom” in the New Yorker</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 5.2</td>
<td>COVER OF DOYLE NEW YORK SPRING 2001 COUTURE AND TEXTILES CATALOG</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 5.3</td>
<td>KAIKIK WONG/ NICOLAS GHESQUIERE’S CREATIONS</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 5.4</td>
<td>DIANE VON FURSTENBERG, THE SECOND TIME AROUND</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 6.1</td>
<td>OUT OF THE CLOSET</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 6.2</td>
<td>MY LIFE IN SKIRTS</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 6.3</td>
<td>“IT'S BRILLIANT CAREER”</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 6.4</td>
<td>CATHY’S CLOSET</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One: Introduction

At a bustling Houston café where I had gone expressly not to think about designing a dissertation project, I did. I never frequent cafés because I tend to eavesdrop on other people's conversations while pretending to read and never get any work done. Yet, an acquaintance from the English department at Rice convinced me to go to a café with him to relax and take my mind off the fact that I could not seem to come up with a feasible, or interesting, or culturally relevant, or rigorous dissertation topic that had to do with fashion—the vast topic I have chosen to explore. I brought a couple of magazines that had precious little academic merit and resigned myself to the fact that I would have an especially unproductive afternoon.

However, while reading Harper's Magazine, I came across an excerpt from an essay by Charles Baxter entitled “The Shame of Forgetting in the Information Age” (1999b). In this essay, Baxter talks about the anxiety related to being forgetful in contemporary American culture and the business of memory. He himself was inspired by his recently deceased brother's inability to remember anything, conflated with a recollection of sitting in a restaurant where he eavesdropped on a conversation between two women at an adjacent table:

'How much memory have you got?' one of them asked the other.
'I don't know.'
'You don't know?' the first one asked. 'You don't know how much memory you have? Didn't you ask the salesman?' (Baxter 1999b: 28).

Clearly, these women were not discussing their own cognitive ability, but their computer hard drives. How many times have I felt foolish when I myself have been asked that question and do not know the answer? This is for many, apparently, a crucial piece of information to know, like one's license plate number which I also have not bothered to commit to memory. Indeed, people's increasing phobia about forgetting manifests in everyday conversations and exchanges. Baxter wisely observes:

In an information age, forgetfulness is a sign of debility and incompetence. It is taken as weakness, an emblem of losing one's grip. For anyone who works with
quantities of data, a single note of forgetfulness can sound like a death knell. To remember, is to triumph over loss and death; to forget is to form a partnership with oblivion (Baxter 1999b: 29).

For me, Baxter’s remarks were quite astute. But more, they made an inexplicable connection in my mind between the fear of current trends in fashion and other popular cultural phenomena. In the contemporary United States, people of all age groups and cultural backgrounds are concerned about memory—the fear of losing one’s memory and subsequent efforts to maintain or increase one’s memory. Bouts of forgetfulness and slips of memory spawn jocular comments that the person is having “another senior moment,” or the person must have “early-onset Alzheimer’s,” if not a display of frustration and embarrassment at not being able to remember something. Post-It® Notes are a vastly popular as a means by which people can remember all the little things they were afraid of forgetting—a modern-day string-around-the-finger reminder. In literature in the 1990s, there was an influx of memoirs in which people narrated their lives and bared their souls to ensure that they and their most personal memories would be documented and thereby always remembered. It occurred to me, too, that there were noticeably more advertisements about mineral supplements for improving memory. Significantly more medical news reports were broadcast announcing the latest research on Alzheimer’s disease, the possible causes of the disease, drug testing for possible cures, and ways to alter one’s day-to-day habits in order to stave off the ravages of this degenerative affliction.¹ Last, in terms of scholarship, post-modern theorists and cultural critics such as Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard have long concerned themselves with what is called a crisis of historicity, couched in discussions of the threat of losing an authentic past and memory.

I relate all of these ideas to the cultural significance of clothes and the preponderance of “vintage” clothing as a legitimate fashion alternative in the last decades of the twentieth century and the nascent years of the twenty-first century. I argue also that the fashion industry to a large

¹ Perhaps not coincidentally, the attention given to Alzheimer’s became more public soon after it was reported that former President Reagan was diagnosed with the disease and quickly went into seclusion with his wife on his ranch in California. This revelation
extent plays a part in recalling the past through the seasonal creations of fashion designers who incorporate styles from different eras in order to create something ostensibly completely new. In this way, sartorial fashion can be seen as a paradigm for modern culture. This might be trooped as a manifestation of nostalgia through the ascension of kitsch or a re-valorization of the past, which intimates a generalized societal recollection of the past. However, the integration of styles from previous decades can also function as a trigger for memories on an individual level as well as a revisioning of the past. In this way, people might create what they think the past ought to have been like in some kind of utopian imaginary where things were more simple and life was easy. I argue that clothes are repositories of memory. Further, seen as a collection, one’s wardrobe holds myriad recollections of past happenings and can recreate one’s life through narrative.

Why has memory become such a hot-bed of discussion in the contemporary United States? What is the relationship between this common anxiety about memory and the possibility of its loss and fashion? Do people collect memories through garments or use garments to remind themselves of the past? How do people working in the fashion industry as designers, retailers, fashion historians, journalists, auctioneers, personal shoppers, or as curators of textile and costume collections utilize memory either in the creative process of designing a seasonal collection, or in mounting clothing collections for museum exhibitions, or in analyzing and writing about current trends in fashion?

The proliferation of vintage clothing stores and people scouring thrift stores may not be entirely related to cost efficiency as has been purported, as much as it permits it wearers and collectors to relive the past through garments that remind people of another era. Furthermore, events such as the auctioning of Princess Diana's gowns and Natasha Richardson's auction of gowns worn by actresses attending the Academy Awards also evidence the notion that clothes harbor memories either from events or from those who have worn them. Monica Lewinsky’s conveniently helped to explain his apparent inability to recollect anything having to do with the Iran Contra Affair, among other lapses of memory.
infamous navy blue dress from the Gap certainly had many stories to tell and played a seminal role in President Clinton's impeachment trial. Some museums make a point of collecting garments not because of their designer label or the quality of their construction, but more because of the individuals who have worn them. This is true in many museum collections, such as the City Museum of New York and the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., where they house the clothes of First Ladies in the United States.

Celebrity need not be the only characteristic that lends power to a garment. Personal experiences in the acquisition of clothes and the narratives that accompany the addition of clothes to one's wardrobe, such as wedding dresses, to college sweatshirts and letterman jackets, a relative's old cardigan sweater, and even pairs of socks, undergarments, neck ties and old T-shirts, can be equally, if not more powerful, triggers of memory. The idea of collecting clothes that have lost their functional purpose, and remain in closets and drawers because the bond between them and their owners is too hard to break is too important not to be discussed. Indeed, when people I met in the course of the fieldwork politely asked about the nature of my project, they would share a story about a pair of socks or a shirt or some comparable article of clothing that they always wore for a race, or for a concert performance, or for something where they felt that they needed extra luck. Clothes become saturated with meaning and can even act as a kind of talisman that is only evident to or understood by the owner of the garment being kept.

I followed the interest in memory retention and the resurgence of nostalgia in its sartorial manifestations in seemingly incommensurate sites in the fashion industry in New York City and where vintage has extended itself via media promotion, television and film. I explored its circulation in clothing design and production, through shopping practices, in retail and advertising, and in museum collections. I chose New York City because it is a mecca for people in the fashion industry--in design, production, retail, education, and museums which have extensive costume collections. New York City, more than any other city I could think of, provides a vast array of possibilities for both "informants" and sites for this particular research in
order to bring this poly-vocal and multi-sited ethnographic research project to fruition. In these multiple loci in New York City, I was able to engage in conversations with people who deal with these issues on a daily basis, particularly when it comes to collecting and re-collecting, acquiring and de-acquisitioning the sartorial past.

Other cities do come to mind that might also have served as adequate field sites for this research. Some European cities, such as Paris, are virtually synonymous with fashion, yet they did not seem appropriate for the kind of trends I observed emerging in the United States. Many of the proprietors of vintage stores who I interviewed (Newman 2001; Silver 2001; Valenti 2001; Weiser 2001; Wills 2001) said that they did some of their shopping in Europe, but nothing really compared to what treasures could be had in the United States. Lenore Newman, owner of Patina, a lovely vintage boutique in SoHo shared her own shopping experiences in Europe:

I was there years ago, in Paris and London. In Paris, there is a place that just now has Courrèges. Then I found a vintage store there that was dark, dank, and things were just mushed in together. The owner was this heavy woman and she smoked. Everything was just crushed together. And I found something there, although I had to fumigate it. So that was my experience in Paris. In Madrid, on the other hand, they have a huge flea market and on one of the side streets I found a vintage store that was like an old junk shop. London has always appreciated and loved that whole look. London is a good place to shop. Much better quality.

(Interview with Lenore Newman 2001: personal communication)

Tokyo is also known to have a large customer base for vintage clothing, and Laura Wills, owner of Screaming Mimi’s in New York also has had a shop there for over 15 years (Wills 2001). There, vintage was appreciated and respected unlike anywhere else. Ms. Wills shared with me that in Tokyo, there were style posses who loved all vintage except pieces from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. They especially loved things having to do with American pop culture like Elvis and James Dean. As a result, Japanese tourists kept many vintage boutiques afloat because they purchased a tremendous amount when their own country was flush:
The Japanese and the vintage clothing business are the biggest customers who come in here as far as foreign customers. They buy vintage T-shirts, anything 50s from skirts to blouses... The Japanese customers are really into that vintage American look. I mean, after the war, who knows what Japan was going through after the war, but maybe they were identifying with that time after the war? Because when I was in California, that is when I started seeing a lot of Japanese customers get into this who vintage big-E Levis. Big-E is Levis vintage jeans. Levis came out with this line in the early years, up until the early 60s where the E in the back of the jean was a capital E. So that shows that it's a really good old pair. And a lot of rockabillies will buy these because they are authentic old Levis. And the Japanese started buying them up like crazy and all of a sudden they went from being $29 to like $2,000 because they were gone. And they wanted the old style, the old fit and the old dye which they don't make anymore and the Japanese customer was buying up the denim like crazy. And then all of a sudden we couldn't find it anymore and if we do find it, we sell them for $300.

(Interview with Maureen Disimile, Manager, Alice Underground, 2001)

But in the late 70s and early 80s, stores like ours, myself and a few other people here, survived on the boom in Japan—the Japanese buyer. They would come in and spend huge amounts of money. I mean there were times when you could just shut down and go home for the week.

(Interview with Andy, owner of Andy's Chee-Pees Antique Clothing, NYC, 2001)

There are people from France that come over, I just got an email from a woman from Japan today. We get a lot of Japanese customers... People from Europe love American vintage. It's very different than European vintage. They are looking for different things all the time. Like my Japanese customer, she buys traditional vintage clothing. The best quality, mostly 50s and early 60s. Lilli Ann, cashmere, poodle bags, very traditional good high end vintage clothing—high end as far as style. Beaded and embroidered sweaters. Things that really have a vintage look.

(Interview with Alice Lindholm, co-owner, Right to the Moon Alice, 2001)

This seems to speak for a great deal of the vintage movement abroad. At the fourth annual Viva Las Vegas Rockabilly weekend in April, 2001—a rockabilly convention organized by Tom Ingram, a British expatriate living in Los Angeles—people come from more than twenty different countries who dressed to the nines in “authentic” clothes, make-up, and pomade from the 1940s and the 1950s. At the convention which takes place at the Gold Coast Hotel in Las Vegas, there is a Shifters car show, swing and jive dance contests, dance lessons, a large vintage clothing fair in the ballroom of another host hotel, and live bands from England, Australia and the United States that play from morning to night in a huge ballroom. (See Figure 1.1) Interestingly, the three couples who placed and won in the jive competition were all from Japan and England,
leaving the American contestants in the dust. Thus, vintage clothing may be very popular indeed in Europe and Asia, but the things in which they are interested to a great extent, are American.

![Figure 1.1 – Viva Las Vegas Program, 2001](image)

Although there was in fact a good representation of different nations at the convention, the vast majority of the attendees were from the West Coast, particularly from Los Angeles. It is not surprising that Los Angeles also has a great many high-end vintage clothing boutiques, such as Lily et Cie which specializes in gowns from the 1920s and 1930s, Decades, and Resurrection. These shops are frequented by stylists and celebrities who have helped to make vintage fashion as well-respected as other formal-wear. According to Paul Beahan (2001), a sales associate with whom I spoke at the Los Angeles branch of Resurrection (whose original and very tony boutique opened in 1996 in New York City), the people in Los Angeles who wear vintage, other than movie stars and rock stars, wear it head-to-toe. It is not just as fashion option but a lifestyle choice that flavors their home décor, the cars they drive, and the clubs they frequent for music and dancing. These factors made Los Angeles an attractive site for this research because it seems to be almost a style subculture there. However, compared to New York City, Los Angeles has
never been known as the fashion capital of the United States. This still made New York seem to
be a much more interesting field-site, especially to make it coherently multi-sited.

In addition, as Phyllis Magidson, the Curator of the Museum Costume Collection at the
Museum of the City of New York told me, “The truth of the matter is that New York City has
always been the most high fashion city perhaps because women here spend more money on
clothing than in any other city—other than Paris” (Magidson personal communication 2001). In
any event, there were myriad reasons to conduct the field research in New York City and my
findings and experiences there filled my research needs beyond my most hopeful expectations.

As a project created through a multi-sited research imaginary, I had to “dislocate…from
the strong traditional filiation to just one group of subjects among whom fieldwork is done and
instead…place [myself] within and between groups” (Marcus 1998: 20). Although Marcus refers
here to moral ambiguities when conducting fieldwork using multi-sited strategies, it is true that
there are multiple groups who may not initially appear to have any connection with each other but
are woven together in ways that they themselves do not even know.

In addition to my own observations, practices, and interviews with people in different
arenas of the fashion industry, I also traced the interweaving of these phenomena in contemporary
popular culture in magazines and newspapers. This was very useful for seeing the prevalence of
vintage clothes in popular writing as fashion, as a successful sector of the retail industry, as
objects deemed worthy of collecting and auctioning at prominent auction houses, and as a means
of individuation in contemporary society via personal adornment.

*Multi-Sited Ethnography at Home*

It was really only after I was in the “field” and reread George Marcus’ “Introduction” to
*Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (1998), that I realized that I am in many ways an
incarnation of what Marcus summarizes in this chapter about ethnographers practicing multi-sited
ethnographic fieldwork. As Marcus states, “[t]hinking in terms of multi-sited research provokes
an entirely different set of problems that not only go to the heart of adopting ethnography as
practices of fieldwork and writing to new conditions of work, but challenge orientations that
underlie this entire research process that has been so emblematic for anthropology” (Marcus
1998: 3). Studying for two years at SUNY Buffalo working on a Master’s degree in
Anthropology, I constantly found myself being hindered from doing the things that I wanted to do
because they were not deemed feasible. I was encouraged to study gender construction in a South
Amerindian village, but dissuaded from a project I was considering about temporary workers in
New York City. The temp project was essentially “multi-sited” which is most likely the reason
why it was not supported or encouraged by the faculty at Buffalo, although that term was never
used. For my professors at Buffalo, the projects I was entertaining were not traditional or
practical. It was also thought that I would not get funded nor would I be ensured a career once
the project was completed. Given their lack of enthusiasm, I could see that if I did what I wanted
to do, it would be difficult to write and defend the dissertation. I would have had to negotiate
with my professors to create a dissertation research project (and an ethnography) that reflected
new kinds of research concerns for which the standard model would no longer apply (Marcus
1998: 11). For the faculty at Buffalo, deviating from that standard model was hardly negotiable.

When I left Buffalo for Rice, it took some time to allow myself to pursue the things about
which I was truly passionate. There is a stigma attached not only to doing research on subjects
that are not only domestic, but may not appear to have import for the betterment of society or to
broaden the breadth of cultural understanding. The license to do so is owed to the encouragement
of James Faubion who urged me to create a project that dealt with fashion which he knew was a
topic that consumed me. However, there is a danger of being self-indulgent and not being
objective in the course of the research. As Marcus comments, “ethnography that begins with the
self is suspect as leading to a kind of digression from the proper subject of research—the Other”
(Marcus 1998: 15).

I first became part of the couture and upscale fashion industry at the age of sixteen when
I worked at Bergdorf Goodman, a unique and posh clothing store in Manhattan. Having had that
exposure and growing up in New York City where personal appearance is not something to take lightly, I began to follow fashion more closely and spent my college years scavenging at Goodwill and Salvation Army stores creating outfits at little cost in the name of fashion. I had indeed been part of and deeply influenced by fashion for many years and never really considered that I could apply my accrued knowledge and my genuine interest in the topic to my doctoral research.

It can be argued that, in fact, the “extended exploration to existing affinities between the ethnographer and the subject of study is indeed one of the most powerful and interesting ways to motivate a research design” (Marcus 1998: 15). Although Marcus acknowledges that self-indulgence might be problematic, “fully exploring the personal dimensions of a project,” as I do in this dissertation, should not diminish the strength of the project (Marcus 15: 1998). Andrea Siegel, author of Open and Clothéd: For the Passionate Clothes Lover (1999), concurs. She informed me that she only wrote—and could only write—about the things about which she was most passionate, like clothes, Aikido, and a forthcoming project about her father (Siegel 2001: personal communication). Otherwise, her writing was joyless. It is in fact difficult to take what was a fascination and making it into a scholarly enterprise. But as Marcus points out, “the projection of these affinities from the realm of the more personal to the delineation of more generic social-cultural problems and issues is the key move which gives a project substance and force, and also more legitimacy in the mainstream tradition of social science writing” (Marcus 15: 1998). However, as much as I loved reading the literature on fashion, poring over fashion magazines, and talking to people who made their living in fashion, I felt that I was precipitously close to making what I loved into a chore, as can frequently happen when one makes one’s hobby one’s job.

I also had concerns about situating the project in the city in which I was raised and had been employed for many years; in making the familiar unfamiliar and all of those other anthropological fieldwork tropes. While self-discovery in the context of “reflexive forms of
analysis and writing” when doing doctoral research is allowed, there still has to be a distinctive “Other” (Marcus 1998: 21). Although it seems that it is less problematic for students from other countries studying in the United States to go back to their native countries to do research, it is not always so for American students to go back to their hometowns to do research on who might be seen as their neighbors. What assuaged my anxieties was that although I was in Manhattan and knew the streets and how to get from here to there with the ease and acumen of a native, I visited places where I had never been and encountered people who were part of a world vastly different from my own and whose New York experience has never been, and probably never will be, mine.

New York City is a place that is unique in so many ways, where one can be part of so many different communities and so many different social and cultural activities that are banded together by the snaking subway line traversing its five boroughs. Indeed, many people were astonished to find they had no personal connection to any of the thousands of people lost in the World Trade Center, even though they had lived in New York their whole lives. In this way, one can be a “native” of New York, but can never have the same experience as their neighbor.

Conducting fieldwork at home made fieldwork easy in many ways, but it also opened up a plethora of other issues that would not have existed if I had gone where I knew no one at all. On one hand, being “home” meant no culture shock and familiarizing myself with the environs. Learning the culture. Language was a non-issue. There were many times in my two years of living and doing fieldwork in my own city, however, that I wished that I was on an island or in a small village in the middle of nowhere conducting my field research in a more traditional setting. I easily became subsumed in family crises and celebrations alike. Although many anthropologists go into the field and feel lonely, there were many times when I wished I had solitude and could concentrate on the project without interruption.

I also faced the stigma that Marcus mentions that many American anthropologists have when “producing their first fieldwork inside the United States, among English speakers” (Marcus 1998: 15). I had already met with this resistance in Buffalo. It was also deemed to be strike
against an application for funding as many funding agencies are conservative and desirous of more traditional fieldwork projects abroad. Without funding, I had to work full-time to pay my exorbitant rent and for the high cost of living in New York City.

One attempt I made to combine research and employment was a stint at Barneys New York where I was hired in December, 1999, for the holiday season as an “expeditor”—a fancy job title for being the dressing room attendant and clothing rack tidier. Because the concierge “saw promise” in me, I was promoted to “hostess,” where I directed confused customers and answered questions about the whereabouts of any and all merchandise in the store. After working there for a period of time and getting to know some of the people in upper management who knew I was in school and working on a Ph.D., I was asked to present and discuss my observations from the hostess desk which was situated quite literally at the epicenter of the building. I had been doing ad hoc consulting on customer relations and satisfaction and the Senior Vice President of Stores thought that sharing this knowledge would be of great benefit to managers throughout the store. When my immediate supervisors in concierge services and store management felt their status was threatened, I was let go the evening before I was supposed to give the presentation for what they cited as “lack of enthusiasm for the position.” Although the job did not quite live up to its promise, it was an interesting interlude in terms of the research, and I did meet a number of people who agreed to be interviewed whose viewpoints greatly enhanced this project.

Having been fired, I no longer had the day-to-day interaction with those in the fashion industry that might have counted as the most traditional kind of anthropological research—participant observation. But in the context of my project, it simply wasn’t feasible unless I was to spend many years in the field, interning at museums or interning at auction houses and so forth. I resorted to gainful employment as a Human Resources administrative assistant at a large international corporate law firm located at the World Trade Center where I worked full-time and then as a freelance consultant where I could work hourly, albeit well more than 40 hours per week.
This “freedom” actually also afforded me the opportunity to work as a volunteer for New York Fashion Week in February, 2001. Fashion Week is the bi-annual event in the tents at Bryant Park in Manhattan where many American designers show their Spring and Fall collections. The week-long experience shed light on parts of the fashion industry to which I had no prior exposure—and to which many other people (other than buyers, celebrities, socialites, and the fashion press) have no exposure since the shows are so heavily guarded.²

More importantly, it became clear that one needs a significant degree of flexibility to succeed in multi-sited field research.³ It would have been near to impossible to participate as a volunteer at the shows, do library research, arrange and conduct interviews, and do my work at the Firm unless my time was free and I did not have a rigid work schedule. This is clearly par for the course for a multi-sited project.

Multi-sited ethnography for my first time out in the field was quite a challenge, yet one that was worthwhile. Multi-sited ethnography allows for a creative spirit to reign and for the research to be intriguing, not only for the anthropologist, but for the people participating in the research, and also for the readers of the resulting ethnography. Indeed, it was inspiring for me that those individuals whom I approached to be a part of the project, were, for the most part, excited to be included in what was deemed to be an interesting and timely project. What was also inspiring was the interconnectivity between the people I interviewed where there were no clear connections at all.

*Piecing It All Together*

It should be relatively clear by now that this is not the kind of fieldwork or subject matter that can result in an ethnography that proves one particular argument and thoroughly explains

---

² The shows are nearly impossible to enter unless one has tickets. I believe that this was always true, but the security became more stringent after some socialites and fashion editors were splashed with red paint during a show by activists from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals who were protesting the use of fur in some of the fashion collections. Post September 11, it was my understanding that volunteers were no longer accepted at all.

³ This brings to mind Emily Martin's *Flexible Bodies* (1994). Emily Martin briefly discusses how notions of flexibility have permeated and become ubiquitous in contemporary American culture as a measure of strength and a main ingredient for the success of any endeavor.
social and cultural behaviors and phenomena in a traditional sort of way. It is more important to me to be able to make observations of what is going on in American society and culture at the end of the twentieth century—the fin de siècle—in terms of fashion, memory, and collecting. Debora Silverman’s book, Selling Culture: Bloomingdale’s, Diana Vreeland, and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan’s America (1986), is an excellent model for this kind of study, although it can hardly be deemed an anthropological work. Hers is an analysis of trends in New York City, temporally contextualized in the 1980s, which straddles the worlds of politics, fashion, the art world, the retail industry, and those socialites, elites, and fashion mavens who comprise New York’s upper class. She writes, “[t]his book is not intended as a definitive or exhaustive project, but as a discrete cultural reading to stimulate thought and discussion, to isolate themes and issues that have risen to prominence” (D. Silverman 1986: xiv). What is exceptional about Silverman’s research is that when these themes and issues were occurring and events where they were most vividly seen came and went, there never seemed to be any notice of their interconnectedness. All of the interplay between different actors in fashion, museums, retail and, high society and politics seemed quite normal and went unquestioned by people in and around New York City.

I find myself in very much the same situation where many different things are happening at once all over New York City and in the United States, having to do with politics, culture, medical research, the literary world, fashion, high art and high society. Nor do I have any false hope of coming to a definitive conclusion about the reasons why these certain trends and interests are all coming to the fore at the same time and if there is indeed any tangible relationship between them. Nevertheless, it is interesting to sketch them out and piece them together like a giant patchwork or like an ensemble that can be mixed and matched to create something entirely new each time it is put together, but whose parts remain very much independent of each other. This is represented throughout the dissertation by text boxes trimmed with rick-rack as if cut with a pair of pinking shears. Here, each person’s voice, each journalist’s writings, each fashion maven’s
comments can stand alone. But, when they are put together, these comments create a rather pregnant view of the topic at hand.

What will become evident throughout this research is that my interviews with people who may or may not know of each other, or who may or may not seem to have any connection to each other, in addition to academic and popular writing, are indeed related. There is a great deal of overlap and interconnectivity that lends a considerable degree of power to the sketch that is being created. More, it might even be said to be part of a virtual community in which everyone’s interests in fashion and the past are similar, but they all play very different roles and have different goals.

Being Frivolous

In addition to being sensitive to the stigma of doing fieldwork not only on domestic soil, but in my “hometown” while my colleagues went off to Africa, the Mediterranean, Asia, and Canada to study politics, AIDS, business, indigenous law, and the disenfranchised, there was also a sense that I had taken on a topic that was fluffier than most. Even though Alfred Kroeber and other anthropologists have done some research on fashion and textiles, fashion has not been given much respect in the academy, or in many social or cultural arenas, either as a topic of study or as something that was worthy of any sort of temporal or monetary investment. In the wake of the

---

4 Prior to the 1980s, little research was done on fashion in the field of anthropology outside of the realm of body adornment and now “native” clothes themselves as part of their survival techniques given their climes and the materials available to them. Anthropology’s focus was primarily on peoples in non-Western cultures and dress was attended to under the heading of “body adornment,” which was frequently looked at through the lens of structuralism and semiotics (Seeger 1975). One might presume this was because it was not acknowledged as a valid field of study. One attempt to fill the lacuna in anthropological literature with regard to clothing is The Fabrics of Culture (1979) which includes an analyses of symbolic and aesthetic aspects of clothing, ceremonial costume, the effects of imperialism, colonialism and modernization on patterns of dress, and the production, distribution and consumption of clothing.

Since the 1980s, however, there has been a significant amount of innovative writing devoted to clothes in a number of disciplines, in addition to myriad monographs about fashion designers themselves who have made their mark on the industry and design. In the field of anthropology, this was especially true.

Textile manufacture continued to be a point of interest, with a quasi-Marxist/feminist twist. For example, Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider co-edited a volume entitled Cloth and Human Experience (1989) which deals with wealth and poverty, textile manufacture, identity politics, gender and sexuality, division of labor, large and small scale non-Western societies. Weiner’s subsequent publication, Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping/While-Giving, accuses many anthropologists of not properly focusing on possessions which may be highly valued if they are produced by or associated with women in some way. Rather, when investigating economic issues, particularly in terms of reciprocity and exchange in “primitive” societies, anthropologists have tended to focus on “hard” items, such as shells, gem, precious metals and human bones to name a few (1992: 3). However, Weiner notes that “soft” items, such as cloth, are also imbued with economic and social value.

One of the most fashion forward books to be published in anthropological literature is Dorinne Kondo’s About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater (1997). For Kondo, fashion and theatrical productions are not only intimately related to the performance of Japanese-ness, but is fundamentally political and gendered:
events of September 11, 2001, nothing seemed more frivolous than fashion let alone an academic analysis of fashion—a sentiment that echoed throughout the fashion community as New York was just kicking off its Fall Fashion Week in the tents at Bryant Park. Fashion journalism following the events of the Eleventh could not help using that day as a reference for what was happening in the fashion industry and how deeply affected American designers in particular were following the tragedy:

Following the terrorist attacks, the same words and concepts that were once celebrated so lavishly turned up as pejorative terms: ostentation, frivolity, luxury, chic. Who needs those? "It seemed so frighteningly fateful that everything happened during Fashion Week," the designer Cynthia Rowley remarked last week. "It was like a call to attention that the glamour, the celebrity, the fame and the hype had gotten out of control. Our priorities were wrong."

What were those priorities? Were they to sign on to a system that, as the designer John Bartlett recently said, "has gotten distorted to the point where all we've been seeing are the megadesigners and megamodels and everyone's ambition is to be mega?" Or is it equally possible that the expectations many people in fashion hold were already pointing toward simpler, more straightforward aims, fueled by traditional dreams?

(Guy Trebay 2001b: C24)

Among the hundreds in fashion's militia who filed into the Marc Jacobs show on Monday night were those who vividly recalled the eeriness surrounding the designer's last presentation. Mr. Jacobs offered his spring 2002 collection on the night of Sept. 10. For some in the fashion pack, the show that had Monica Lewinsky in the front row, and the crowded party that followed it, became the most immediate symbol of the excess and self-interest that characterized habits before the attacks. At least one woman who made the tiring exit from Mr. Jacobs event at the Hudson River piers that night would lose her husband in the morning.

(Ginia Bellafante 2002c: B10)

Five months ago, the hierophants of fashion could scarcely have predicted what women would want to wear in the aftermath of Sept. 11. The frivolous, the highfalutin, were clearly out. On the other hand, did anyone in the industry really expect to drum up excitement for the chaste, the earnest and the cutely cozy?

(Cathy Horyn 2002: B10)

Studying fashion... becomes an intervention that seeks to widen the spaces in the academy for what counts as legitimate academic inquiry and for what counts as political. Popular or mass culture is still viewed with considerable suspicion in some circles, and fashion, in particular, still indexes the frivolous. On the plane of gender... fashion both defines woman as object, requiring our interest in the aesthetic production of ourselves as gendered subjects in order to be fully woman, while at the same time condemning fashion as a trivial occupation for silly girls. Such a stance presupposes some invisible moral space beyond fashion, thereby ignoring the ways we all create our identities through clothing and gesture, and masking the fact there is no outside the fashion industry. The notion of fashion as frivolous also indexes a particular positioning vis-à-vis the "masses" (Kondo 1997: 106).

Importantly, Kondo not only anticipates the denigration of her colleagues for taking on a topic such as fashion, but justifies its study by making it political.
Why bother with fashion at all, or with matters of style this spring? Our country has been traumatized. War rages in a distant, harrowing land. Many here still mourn. Nothing seems the same. In the aftermath of September 11, there is an implicit feeling that concerning oneself with issues of style seems at best, frivolous, at worst insensitive, in light of the human loss, suffering and economic recession.

( Francesca Stanfill 2002: 154)

Writing for Town & Country, Francesca Stanfill specifically defended fashion in these trying times (Stanfill 2002: 154-155). She argued that the import of fashion, especially in recent times of struggle was evidenced most poignantly when Afganistan’s Mazar-e-Sharif was freed from Taliban rule and women shed their burkhas as one step towards resuming their lives before Taliban occupation (Stanfill 2002: 154). More, she rejected the “schism between pleasure and seriousness, between beauty and intelligence” (Stanfill 2002: 155). She argued quite effectively that fashion and its accoutrements can be an escape from sadness and a life-affirming hedge against darkness (Stanfill 2002: 155). Furthermore, because the collapse of the World Trade Center had been the focus of the attacks more than the attack on the Pentagon and the flight that crashed in Pennsylvania, the fact that fashion struggled in the months after September 11 further attests to the belief that fashion’s stronghold is indubitably New York City.

I, too, take issue with the notion that the pursuit of a topic such as fashion is frequently thought to be trivial or unworthy of scholarly research. Elizabeth Wilson, who has made her academic career in the study of fashion, writes, “[b]ecause fashion has been constantly denigrated, the serious study of fashion has repeatedly had to justify itself. Almost every fashion writer, whether journalist or art historian, insists anew on the importance of fashion both as cultural barometer and as expressive art form” (Wilson 1985: 47). It is true that many people who have taken fashion as their subject of study inevitably take great pains in the introductions to their books to explain precisely why fashion is worthy of academic attention. It is always assumed that the reader/audience believes that clothes are frivolous and that people interested in them lack intelligence and substance:
Clothes are never a frivolity: they always mean something.  
(James Laver quoted in Tobias 2000: 9)

Some excuse may seem to be necessary for adding to the already considerable body of literature devoted to the history of costume. The bibliography of the subject is enormous, and some at least of the works included in it should spare those who concern themselves with women's dress from the charge of frivolity.  
(James Laver 1937: 5)

Vain trifles as they seem, clothes... change our view of the world and the world's view of us.  
(Virginia Woolf quoted in Tobias 2000: 169)

The major deficiencies in the conventional sociological treatment [of fashion] are easily noted—a failure to observe and appreciate the wide range of operation of fashion; a false assumption that fashion has only trivial and peripheral significance; a mistaken idea that fashion falls in the area of the abnormal and irrational and this is our of the mainstream of human group life; and, finally a misunderstanding of the nature of fashion.  
(Blumer 1969: 275)

Today, while there is surely no agreement that fashion is equal to art, nor should there be, the leading and prevailing tastes assert that fashion is culturally important... Ambiguously balanced between art, design, and popular culture, fashion is at least something one dares to speak of.  
(Martin and Koda 1992: 18-19)

That fashion marks a terra incognita for some academics was vividly brought home to me when I discussed with various colleagues my intentions to bring together essays on fashion and theater in a single book. Some were completely nonplussed. "What do fashion and theater have to do with each other?" they mused. Another common variation on a theme went something like this: "Theater is definitely interesting, but fashion..."  
(Dorinne Kondo 1997: 15)

I think clothes were meant to be fun, to be frivolous, to decorate ourselves.  
(Tiffany Dubin 2001: personal communication)

Rumors of the demise of fashion, like that of irony, may have been greatly exaggerated. Very few things, it would seem, are more life affirming than a hunger for frivolity.  
(Guy Trebay 2001d: A22)

Those in the academy who give noticeable attention to their own infatuation with fashion are looked at askance. In her self-deprecating article entitled "Fear of Fashion: An Art Historian's Battle with Repressed Desire," Elizabeth Hayt talked about her own challenges as an
art historian whose focus is fashion and the prejudices she encountered for being interested in something so "frivolous" (Hayt 1998: 3). This issue was brought to the fore for many of us who indulge our interests in fashion and appearance in a seminal article that was popular among many (female) academics who have always harbored guilt for being attracted to fashion. Elaine Showalter, a (feminist) English professor at Princeton, wrote about her love of clothes and shopping in relation to her academic career: "I can remember what I wore to my Ph.D. orals (little white Courrèges boots) as well as the questions I aced... For years, I've been trying to make the life of the mind coexist with the day at the mall and to sneak the femme back into feminist" (Showalter 1997: 86). The published responses to Showalter's article were staggering. There was a collective sigh of relief and chest-swelling pride among those who were also feminists and/or academics who were frustrated by their inability to express themselves sartorially without somehow compromising their legitimacy as true to feminism or the academy (Vogue 1998a: 116-122).

Those individuals I interviewed who have made their mark on fashion either in terms of curatorship, in the haughty world of auction houses, or in the academy, also expressed their dismay at having been shunned and overlooked in terms of funding and respect by those in decision-making positions in their respective museums and houses.
VS: The first term I was in graduate school at Yale, a classmate of mine gave a talk on different historical interpretations of the Victorian corset and it was just like a light bulb went on, and I realized that you could study the history of fashion the way that you studied any other kind of cultural history, or art history and it was a completely wide open field because when I went to the library I could see that almost all the books on the history of fashion that had been written were just garbage and so it was kind of immensely liberating for a graduate student—most of my colleagues were desperately looking for one sort of crappy little artist that they could work on who hadn’t been done before—and with fashion, the whole field was wide open.

CJB: So you are an art historian?

VS: A cultural historian.

CJB: And from there, did you find any opposition from dissertation committee for doing fashion as something that was folly?

VS: Yes, there was a lot of contempt. My thesis advisor was supportive enough so that I just sort of barreled ahead and did it. But sure there was a lot of opposition. It was seen as being a totally frivolous topic.

(Interview with Valerie Steele, Acting Director, Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, 2001)

All the small departments at auction houses are pretty much services because you only really make money from the big sales, from the multi-million dollar sales... So they approved the department and announced I was starting a fashion department, but they never gave me a budget because the second in command didn’t like the idea of a fashion department. They thought fashion was frivolous. So, here I was with a department. The outside world was complimenting me. The reality was I couldn’t buy a book without getting prior approval. In fact, I once bought a book on Schiaparelli and my boss at the time said, “You know you need prior approval”...Those were the kinds of restrictions.

(Interview with Tiffany Dubin, Founder of the now defunct Fashion department at Sotheby’s 2001)

I think that costume collections have had the same problems from the earliest times in that people still view costume as a secondary curatorial collection. They view it as old clothing. The IRS views it as old clothing. Even the Met, despite all of the successes that have been mounted by the Costume Institute starting with Mrs. Vreeland’s Ballenciaga exhibition, the first time that that collection has come out of the basement was with the Jackie exhibition. It creates a very interesting future situation because now it is precedented that they can fill galleries upstairs. And not just fill them, but absolutely pack them. That exhibit has completely taken care of the deficit of the museum.

(Interview with Phyllis Magidson, Curator, Costume Collection, Museum of the City of New York 2001)

And there is a disparity between this curatorial department and other curatorial departments historically. With costume studies, until recently, you get people with really patchy backgrounds, like mine. I think that when you look at the people who are costume curators, they have rag-tag academic backgrounds. It isn’t as if you can go to Harvard and go to the FOG or go to NYU and get a degree. You can go to FIT, but that’s clearly not Stanford or UVA. On the other hand, we create a huge visitorship. And, as contemporary art theory has evolved, it has allowed for the recognition of certain arts that never were considered arts before. And then too, one art critic’s criticism of the Armani exhibit was, “Why Armani instead of someone like Vivienne Westwood?” And this suggests that unless it’s somebody that looks artsy or gimmicky...because no fashion person, social historian economist would say that Vivienne Westwood is on the
The dismissal of fashion also manifests in the storage, office and exhibition space allotted to those departments in museums and auction as affirmed by Harold Koda, Curator-in-Charge at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Phyllis Magidson at the City Museum of New York and Jan Reeder at Doyle New York. Although these plans were postponed after September 11, 2001, Phyllis Magidson’s space was going to be made even smaller when former Mayor Giuliani planned to move the whole museum to the old Tweed Courthouse close to City Hall. Giuliani began a building renovation project only to find that the floors were not made strongly enough to hold much weight. Because of this, he was going to move the City Museum into this space, but there had been no consideration given to how a museum ought to be designed. As a result, Magidson was going to have to put a great deal of her collection in a storage space across the Hudson River in New Jersey—an inordinate inconvenience for day-to-day research. It should also be noted that it was only on December 10, 1992, that the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was given its own permanent exhibit space—in the cellar of the museum. Jan Reeder’s closet-like space at Doyle New York that serves as both her storage space and her office makes the space for fashion and textiles at the Met seem palatial.

Mr. Koda confirms the lack of respect for clothes and clothing collections by patrons from his experience at the Met:

When you walk through a clothing gallery, [people] are much more noisy than other galleries because people feel a sense of authority over clothing which they don’t in other galleries, so therefore they don’t have to whisper. They can say, “Oh, who would wear that?” whereas if they went into medieval galleries, they wouldn’t say anything. Instead they just reverentially pass them by. But in costume galleries it’s different and it’s because we all wear clothing and so feel that we are authorities... And that’s the reason we have glass cases because I remember seeing an 18th Century
Especially interesting about Koda's observations is not only the difference in demeanor between visitors to the Costume Institute and other galleries in the museum, but also how these differences between art historians are generated at the level of degree granting institutions. These differences extend into art criticism as evidenced by the reactions to Koda's Armani exhibit at the Guggenheim, for which he was the guest curator. But what is also interesting is Koda's excitement about the shift in sentiment for collections like couture and textiles and its newfound respectability like other forms of art:

"There is a convergence of art and fashion these days that points up their underlying similarities. Fashion, like art, can reinvest the world with depth and beauty. Fashion shares with art the power to express the moment. They are both transformative, casting spells in much the same way as, to pick a seasonal analogy, those old-fashioned, pre-global-warming snowfalls could enchant the drabbest city street."

(Kate Betts, former editor of Harper's Bazaar, 2000: 48)

"The creative part of fashion has always worked alongside the creative forces that have defined and colored a decade, an era. Like art, fashion is a manifestation of the times—of its psychological, social, political, virtual existence."

(Irene Sharaff, costume designer, quoted in Tobias 2000: 90)

Indeed, clothing can be a manifestation of cultural phenomena. In general, many fashion scholars think that dress can fulfill a number of social, aesthetic and psychological functions (Wilson 1985: 3). For example, Allison Lurie sees clothes as a kind of non-verbal language that can express hidden and largely unconscious aspects of individual and group psyche (Wilson 1985: 57). For Jonathan Friedman who wrote about the importance of clothing in places like southern Congo, clothing in not merely a symbol of wealth or status, nor does the power of life-source inherent in some garments come from the cosmos (Friedman 1991: 157). Rather, "[i]t is his force...does not represent anything. It is! Dressing elegantly is hooking into the cosmic scheme"
(Friedman 1991: 157). Thus, just like any other manifestation of a cultural norm, clothes can be very telling of individuation, and collectively, what may be happening in a culture at large.

The Power of Memory

I believe that without memories there is no life, and that our memories should be of happy times.

(Lee Radziwill, Happy Times, 2000: 7)

Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action, without it, we are nothing.

(Luis Buñuel quoted in Brison 1999: 39)

Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable.

(Ann-Marie MacDonald, Fall on Your Knees, 1996: 255)

Memory is an incredibly important ability that in recent years, given the amount of attention it receives, seems to be more and more difficult to retain. Attributed to the craziness of modern life and the fact that people are living longer than they used to, remembering things in either the short-term or the long-term has become a topic of concern for many. As a result, books such as The Memory Cure: The Safe, Scientifically Proven Breakthrough That Can Slow, Halt, Or Even Reverse Age-Related Memory Loss (Crook and Adderly 1998), The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers (Schacter 2002), and How You Too Can Develop A Razor-Sharp Mind and a Steel-Trap Memory have been published in surprising numbers. (See Figure 1.2)
It is worth noting that the book shown above can not only help to improve your mind and memory, but can extend your life and help you have better sex! These concerns about memory (and other bodily functions that are purportedly related) are evidenced in other more popular venues as well. In an article entitled, ‘What’s my name, again?’: More magazine asked five women to share their most embarrassing memory lapses (Schurmanberger 2001: 72). These women, all successful in their respective fields, share their memory lapses, including one woman’s admission that she was introducing herself to an artist and forgot her own name. In this way, the article is meant to make women who are not famous or at the top of their field believe that they are not alone in their assumed increasingly failing memory.

As David Shenk, author of The Forgetting: Alzheimer’s Portrait of an Epidemic, states:

'It seems to me that every decision I make, every person I know, every thought I have is built on top of previous experience. Of course, it is not literally built on the experience since the experience is gone. It’s what I retain of that experience…They are reactions and memories and a record of our experience. They shape how we see the world, shape ourselves and what our goals are in life (Roach 2002: F5).

Thus, for people who can no longer remember, their life’s experience is literally gone, causing ungodly anxiety for the person with memory loss and for those who care for them. 
Moreover, films have also featured themes of memory and forgetting to a seemingly unprecedented degree. For example, the 2001 release of the thriller “Memento” brought the topic of memory and the chaos of memory loss to the fore as the main character, who suffers from chronic short term memory loss attempts to find the murderer of his wife by leaving himself notes and tattoos himself with messages so that he can remember the things he has discovered which are significant to his investigation. Moreover, films such as Hirokazu Kore-Eda’s trilogy about his grandfather’s death from Alzheimer’s disease are noteworthy about the power of memory the tragedy of losing it. Mr. Kore-eda, explores his belief that memory is the very essence of humanity in his films (Rich 1999: 11). The premise of his film, “After Life,” for example, is that when people die, they find themselves in a half-way station in which they are told that they must take one memory of their life on earth with them for the rest of eternity while the rest of their memories on earth will be forgotten. Kore-eda became fascinated with the fragility of memory when he watched his grandfather gradually lose his lucidity and memory in his old age. As noted in an article about the topic of memory being discussed filmically:

“The movies play out a forgetfulness that has permeated the culture in recent years...Though it is a conventional plot device, this forgetting offers a window on broader fantasies and anxieties...Identity became fluid as anyone who has ever gone into a chat room knows. Memory could be erased with the stroke of a computer key. The movies play off this...amnesia, creating stories around it. Amnesia is the flip side of nostalgia. Instead of wallowing in an idealized past, the movies present the past as forever out of reach beyond the power to recollect...For all this, the traumas of the season have exposed the limits of amnesia. It’s easy to wish to forget the events of Sept. 11. But this is a trap: memory is probably what everyone needs right now. However painful the associations, a knowledge of the past—of history and language—became more valuable than ever.”


“Pharmafoods” and “nutraceuticals,” otherwise referred to as designer foods or functional foods, are part of a growing class of food purported to assist in preventative health, from anything from preventing cancer to increasing brain function, including improving memory (Neporent

---

5 Kore-eda is also interested in the cross-cultural differences in thinking of memory stating: “The Japanese, after all, at the end of every year, have a bonenkai, literally, a year-forgetting party, in which all the events of that year are put aside (Rich 1999: 19). In American culture, such a party is unimaginable because here, “memory can be malleable or marketable, exposed on daytime television or sold on the memoir circuit, rewritten or restored, but never discarded” (Rich 1999: 19).
1999). These include vitamin-fortified Gummy Bears, herb-sprayed crackers and soft drinks enhanced with antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. Ginkgo Biloba Rings are popped potato-corn snacks coated with the herb ginkgo biloba (Neporent 1999). The manufacturer of these rings, Robert American Gourmet, says ginkgo biloba boosts memory and alertness by stimulating circulation to the brain (Neporent 1999). Although there is some scientific evidence suggesting that ginkgo biloba may indeed improve memory for those with impaired blood flow to the brain, there is little data regarding its effect in healthy people (Neporent 1999). Last, Brain Gum made by Comtrad Industries, contains LECl-PS, a powerful nutrient that allegedly works faster and more effectively than Gingko Biloba to boost the brain’s metabolism and its ability to process information. It is thought that Brain Gum ($59.95 for 144 pieces of gum) can improve cognitive function if taken consistently. Specifically, chewing the gum will improve name and face recognition, maintaining concentration, learning and remembering information and recalling locations of frequently misplaced objects.

Caregivers for those who have lost the ability to remember and who cannot care for themselves as a result, have sought the aid of architects and environmental psychologists to see if they could contribute any of their knowledge and skills to this cause (Baldwin 2002: F1-F7). They have been “charged with creating settings that serve not only patients and their families” (Baldwin 2002: F1-F7). One of the ironies of the disease or disability of memory loss is that people who cannot remember what they had for lunch or what they were doing just moments before, can often recollect much of their lives decades earlier (Baldwin 2002: F1-F7). With this in mind, designers of senior care centers “are relying on settings laden with nostalgic cues, hoping to get patients talking in what are called reminiscence groups” (Baldwin 2002: F1-F7).

Yet memory, whether one is ill or healthy, old or young, is understood to be inherently false. Issues having to do with false memories have become more a part of popular discussion, perhaps because they are becoming an integral part of criminal cases. In some instances, people who have recovered memory of abuse have brought cases to court in order to punish the alleged
abuser (Oxenhandler 2001) and in others, DNA evidence has proven what attorneys have long
known—that that eyewitness memory can be fragile and malleable (Talbot 2001; Tereschchuk
2001). Thus, there have been many analyses of “false memory syndrome” and “so-called
recovered memories” (Brody 2000) and “memory misattribution” (Hayes 2001). Some
researchers claim to have found a biological reason for why people who saw the same event often
have different memories if it years thereafter (Blakeslee 2000). Other studies have been
conducted in order to determine how memory is developed in the womb (O’Neil 2000) and in the
extremely quiet phases of sleep (Blakeslee 2000).

Other researchers have determined that other dietary and environmental factors affect
memory or increasing or preventing the onset of Alzheimer’s disease, and other medical
discoveries, which are laid out below in what has been termed a *fictio*. The inspiration for
assembling these scientific revelations as a *fictio* comes from James Faubion’s article “Figuring
David Koresh” where he cleverly and creatively wove different tabloid writings together into one
comprehensive narrative (Faubion 1999):

In recent years, medical and other empirical research has uncovered many of the possible causes or warning
signs of Alzheimer’s disease, and subsequently, possible ways of preventing it. For one week in July, 2000, the largest
gathering ever of researchers, doctors and advocates came together for the World Alzheimer Congress held in
Washington, D.C. in order to exchange information and network in an attempt to understand this debilitating disease
(Rowland 2000a). They estimate that approximately 12 million people worldwide are afflicted, including 4 million in
the United States. Among other things, the researchers spoke of advances in research towards creating a vaccine, and
testing drug compounds which are supposed to be effective against memory loss. Researchers from around the world
have focused their attention on detecting the early symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease...Their mission is given
increased urgency by projections of the disorder’s spread. More than 22 million people worldwide will be affected
by Alzheimer’s disease by 2025, researchers estimate (Rowland 2000)... During the conference, “validation therapy”
was promoted as a means of easing the stress that the patients and caregivers have when dealing with the disease (Firfer
2000). Here, when a disoriented patient is talking nonsense, it is suggested that the caregiver just allow the patient to
do so as if they were making perfect sense in order to increase the enjoyment of the patient’s life. Moreover,
California medical scientists, who were working to delay and prevent Alzheimer’s disease, reported their discovery
of a means to detect early brain malfunctioning before onset of serious memory loss and other symptoms of the
disease...[T]he researchers said they combined genetic testing with electronic brain scans to measure preliminary
deterioration of brain tissue (Rowland 2000c).

Other researchers told the World Alzheimer’s Congress that they suspect an Alzheimer’s gene may be
located on Chromosome 10 (Rowland 2000g). The discovery of a possible genetic link to Alzheimer's disease could lead to more and better treatments for the devastating illness (Rowland 2000g). This is, perhaps, one of the most important discoveries that has been made overall. In fact, two genes common among late-onset Alzheimer's victims have been identified... This is an especially important discovery because most research concentrates on the rare early-onset forms of Alzheimer's that strikes middle-aged patients. However, a staggering 90 percent of Alzheimer's patients in the United States suffer from late-onset Alzheimer's, meaning they developed the disease after age 60 (Schiavone 1998).

Scientists say they have also identified an enzyme linked to the production of protein plaques in the brain associated with Alzheimer's disease... The plaques are thought to kill neurons, causing the neurological degeneration found in Alzheimer's patients (Reuters 1999).

Diet has been seen to play a large part in the possible prevention of the disease. For example, after a comparison of the national diets of eleven countries, it was discovered that those with high fat diets had a higher percentage of people diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease as compared to those with low-fat diets (Rowland 1997). According to a new study by scientists in the Netherlands, middle-aged and elderly people who took anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen or naproxen for at least two years were apparently protected from Alzheimer's disease... Their likelihood of getting Alzheimer's dementia was one-sixth that of people who did not take the drugs (Kofata 2001). In addition, Reuters reports that elderly people who fear their memory is beginning to slip might do well to have a bowl of barley or a plate of potatoes at their next meal... A recent study found that after an overnight fast, individuals performed better on memory tests after they consumed 50 grams of carbohydrate—nearly a cup of barley or just over one cup of mashed potatoes—than they did after consuming a sugar-laden drink (Reuters 2001). And, if you've been a little forgetful lately, you may want to boost your intake of carrots, sweet potatoes and other vitamin-A rich foods. Researchers... have provided the first evidence that vitamin A affects brain cell activity in the region associated with learning and memory (Harper's Bazaar 1999: 124). All of these dietary changes might help to increase your memory in some capacity.

Some research has shown that lifestyle can also be a factor for those either succumbing to Alzheimer's, or remaining lucid in their later years from some kind of dementia. For example, researchers found that those who exercised regularly throughout life were less likely to have contracted the brain-deteriorating disease than those who were inactive (Hinman 1998). However, it is pointed out that former President Ronald Reagan by all accounts led a very active life and yet he succumbed to the disease, but perhaps he would have gotten the disease earlier in his life if had not been as active (Hinman 1998). In an experiment called the Nun Study, is considered by experts on aging to be one of the most innovative efforts to answer questions about who gets Alzheimer's disease and why... Their research has shown that folic acid may help stave off Alzheimer's disease (Belluck 2001). Moreover, investigators studying the effects of stress on memory have found that the neurons needed for memory shrink in responses to high levels of stress hormones (Carroll 2000: F7). Therefore, they propose that age-related memory loss, may be a result, of bad genes and a hard life. Other new research suggests family size and where a person is raised may be linked to an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease... A patient's childhood environment may set the stage for the degenerative brain disorder (Rowland 2000a).

Researchers are increasingly convinced that the hormone estrogen could play a key role in maintaining and perhaps even improving memory... Using MRIs... researchers found that women taking estrogen show significantly more activity in brain areas associated with memory than women on a placebo (Kalb 1999: 50). Researchers have found estrogen is not effective as a treatment for Alzheimer's disease in women... Scientists call
the findings disappointing, especially in light of other, smaller studies showing estrogen effective in slowing the onset of symptoms such as memory loss, and even possible as a prevention of the disease. However, the study's authors recommended further research into estrogen as a preventative treatment (Rowland 2000b). In addition to estrogen, nonsteroid anti-inflammatory drugs have also been suggested as ways to treat or delay the symptoms of Alzheimer's (Rowland 2000e).

As a result of these findings, many drugs are being developed and tested. A new drug from Germany moderates physical and mental disabilities of patients with later-stage Alzheimer's disease... During six months of testing, the drug enabled patients to dress themselves better, to bathe themselves better and to perform a variety of other functions in an improved fashion... Patients... also showed improvement in awareness and judgment (Rowland 2000e). Studies are underway to determine if memory loss can be delayed by doses of Vitamin E, the federally approved drug called “Aricept”... In fact, three drugs have been approved to treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's (Rowland 2000e).

Fear of Alzheimer's disease is overwhelming for many people and the numbers of people who are afflicted with the disease grows every year as the elderly population continues to age. 6 Best-selling novels such as The Corrections (Franzen 2001) have brought Alzheimer's even further to the fore because one of the central characters is stricken with the disease. According to the Alzheimer's Association, four million Americans have Alzheimer's” (Baldwin 2002: F1-F7). Furthermore, “[m]any millions more have dementia resulting from strokes, Parkinson's and other illnesses, making serious memory loss one of the driving fears of the baby boom generation” (Baldwin 2002: F1-F7). According to Edward Truschke, president of the Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer's disease is a worldwide epidemic (Associated Press 2000). He asserts that if a cure is not found, more than 22 million people will have this disease in twenty five years (Associated Press 2000). Using her father, President Ronald Reagan, Maureen Reagan testified before the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on health to urge them to increase federal spending on Alzheimer's research, using her father as an example of someone whose life was destroyed by the disease. “ 'When it takes hold,' she said, 'it follows its own course of destruction, frequently ravaging not only its direct victim, but also the care givers and loved ones along with it' ” (Associated Press 2000). Soon thereafter, when President Clinton announced a
$50 million research program to advance the early diagnosis and investigate the possible prevention of Alzheimer’s, Jonathan Kozol, the famous investigator of educational injustice in the United States wrote a critique of the Medicare and the Medicaid systems in the United States (Kozol 2000). Using his father’s experience with Alzheimer’s disease as his example of how the current systems are inadequate, he notes that “Medicare only provides long-term care for the elderly for a mere 100 days and only after a medical emergency. Medicaid cannot underwrite the costs of long-term care unless the family has first exhausted all of its savings, which would mean leaving the healthy spouses of the afflicted indigent” (Kozol 2000).

In 1996, in a full-page ad in The New York Times, the New York City Chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association sponsored “A Week to Remember Alzheimer’s” (New York Times 1996: B16). They offer support and counseling for the victims of the disease and for their families and caretakers. They also offer services such as “Safe Return” to locate people with Alzheimer’s in case they wander away and become lost and are too disoriented to know who they are or where they love (New York Times Magazine 2000; New York Times Magazine 2001). In addition, they attempt to educate people about the treatments available for people with mild to moderate Alzheimer’s and tips for people in the beginning stages of the disease to improve their memory. And, the American Medical Association introduced a guide to help physicians diagnose and treat dementia because the number of people growing older and becoming impaired is increasing more than ever before” (Candiotti 1999).

Advertisements for Aricept®, (See Figure 1.3) a drug thought to slow the effects of the disease when diagnosed in its early stages, feature touching photos of a woman staring worriedly into the distance as if she is disconcerted, confused silver haired couples clutching onto each other.

---

6 On the other hand, one journalist, writing for The New York Times Magazine wrote that in fact, Alzheimer’s was a blessing for her mother who had suffered from depression her whole life and with Alzheimer’s, had let go all her anxieties. In her dementia, she was also blissfully unaware of her husband’s death. Thus, in a way, the disease had set her free (Gettinger 1999: 68).
Figure 1.3 – Advertisements for Aricept®

Such ads are placed in magazines as diverse as The New York Times Magazine, cooking magazines like Cooking Light, and decorating magazines like Country Living. Another advertisement for a diet supplement called “Senior-Moment” shows a woman in her 40s or 50s holding a phone to one ear and raising her other hand to the sky as if she was just reminded that she had forgotten to do something. The by-line for this product is “You don’t have to be a senior to need Senior Moment,” and is promoted as the next generation in memory enhancement.

Moreover, several memoirs have been published about the lives of people afflicted with Alzheimer’s. In a memoir entitled An Elegy for Iris about his wife, Iris Murdoch, John Oliver Bayley writes about the with guilt, frustration, anger and deep sadness associated with the disease for both the patient and the caregivers. (Interestingly, this memoir was made into the Academy Award nominated film Iris.) Iris Murdoch, a well-known novelist and philosopher began to

---

Notes:
1. It is obviously impossible for a victim of Alzheimer’s to write a memoir since their memories are slipping. So in fact, the memoirs are really more about the caregivers and observers, not the victims themselves. On the other hand, Bill Ayers, former leader of the infamous Weatherman who wrote a memoir which might be challenged by those who are still living who have a different memory of what happened is quite right to say he had written a memoir—not a history (Reeves 2001: 21). “It’s a story of one person and should be read as a story. Reading it as anything else is a distorted reading. Memoirs are not records of events they are memories” (Reeves
exhibit symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease in 1994 before passing away in 1999. Bayley writes about one instance where he meets a woman whose spouse also had Alzheimer’s. She comments: “Like being chained to a corpse, isn’t it?” (Bayley 1999: 48). Thinking back on this statement, he notes that indeed it is not only like being chained to a corpse, but to a corpse that complains (Bayley 1999: 76). Alzheimer’s is fraught with anxiety, especially when some sufferers remain torturously conscious of their deteriorating mental state. More, the drugs available to Alzheimer’s patients are not as great as they are made out to be because, once the fog of Alzheimer’s lifts, the patient is utterly terrified. He suggests that a one substitute for losing one’s memory to Alzheimer’s is routine which helps to reduce the victim’s anxiety to some degree. As time passes, anxiety levels increase because the conventional shape of time is gone. In his heart-wrenching account, he reveals the insidiousness of the disease on one so talented, intelligent, and witty. He watched his wife of 40 years watch “Teletubbies” on television and completely lose her identity. Narratives such as these, available not only in print but in filmic versions as well, only further instill fear into people already afraid of losing their memories to Alzheimer’s disease.

The title of another essay is quite telling: “Death in Slow Motion: A Descent into Alzheimer’s” (Cooney 2001). What is especially interesting with regard to this research is that the clothing of the author’s mother figure prominently in her experience. When the author and her boyfriend realize that they are unable to care for her mother on their own and make preparations to take her to an assisted care facility, she had to go through her mother’s wardrobe to decide what should go and what should be kept:

The freight of sentiment at the sight of certain articles of clothing threatened to overwhelm me: a frayed cuff on one of her sweaters, artfully rolled to conceal the hole; a shirt she loved and wore for years, now stained and grubby. All signs of her slippage and my failure. She was, and still is a snappy dresser. Even depressed and demented, she always puts together a jaunty outfit every morning. It just kills me (Cooney 2001: 55-56).
While other memoirs and narratives having to do with wardrobes will be discussed further in Chapter Six, it is appropriate to mention this essay here because its true focus is how best to deal with the disease and those stricken with it. After reading the article, one is not sure whose decent it is to which the author refers—her mother’s or her own.

The academic community has also participated in discussions of memory. Vincent Crapanzano takes up the issue of memory and history in his article “The Postmodern Crisis: Discourse, Parody, Memory” (Crapanzano 1991). Here, he is concerned with “putative discursive changes associated with post-modernism and with their relationship to memory understood as a structural precipitate of any dialogical engagement in which a change of perspective, or the illusion of a change of perspective, occurs” (Crapanzano 1991: 431).

Following the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Crapanzano notes that memory must be formed (Crapanzano 1991: 442). For Gadamer, memory should not merely be understood as a talent or a capacity (Gadamer 1997: 15):

> Whoever uses his memory as a mere faculty—and any ‘technique’ of memory is such a use—does not yet possess it as something that is absolutely his own...One has a memory for some things, and not for others; one wants to preserve one thing in memory and banish another. It is time to rescue the phenomenon of memory from being regarded merely as a psychological faculty and see it as an essential element of the finite historical being of man (Gadamer 1997: 15-16).

Crapanzano suggests that what happens to memory affects history (Crapanzano 1991: 443). He points out that people try desperately to preserve—and pass on—the memory of events through memorial and narrative documentation such that they become a part of our personal and collective rhetoric (Crapanzano 1991: 443). Yet, at the end of the day, we are really only left with versions of truth “and the certainty of the artifice of our documentation, commemoration, and memorialization” (Crapanzano 1991: 443). In other words, memory is malleable and selective, and is constantly in flux, not statically preserved. It can be manipulated and revised by outside social influences and by events in the present. In terms of any object, as in a piece of clothing, the actual garment may remain the same, but all that surrounds the object may have
changed and is always in the process of transformation. In that sense, then, the object changes according to how it is contextualized.

For Maurice Halbwachs and others, memory is reproduced, not recalled. Memory is understood as an action, as in the act of telling a story (Pierre Janet in Brison 1999: 39). For Halbwachs, people normally acquire their memories in society. How we recollect things is through other people—family friends and society in general. Other people force you to reproduce and reconstruct your memories by asking you questions about the past. “One cannot, in fact, think about the events of one’s past without discoursing upon them. But to discourse upon something means to connect within a single system of ideas as those of our circle” (Halbwachs 1992 51). Halbwachs also notes that when you encounter an object or something from your childhood, it causes a recurrence of memories. Just by thinking about the past, “we believe that we can recall the mental state in which we found ourselves at that time” (Halbwachs 1992: 46).

Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, editors of *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (1999), define cultural memory “as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one” (Bal et al. 1999: vii). Cultural memorization, therefore, is an activity occurring in the present where the past is not specifically defined and is described again and again, often realized in the form of narrative. Bal writes that narrative memories, even if they are of seemingly insignificant events, “differ from routine or habitual memories in that they are affectively colored, surrounded by an emotional aura that…makes them memorable. Often, the string of events that composes a narrative (and narratable) memory offers high and low accents, foreground and background, precipatory and climactic events” (Bal 1999: viiii). Marianne Hirsch writes about what she terms *postmemory* in terms of the relationship of the children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to their parents’ experiences:

The triangulation of looking [back to one’s own childhood], figured by the superimposition of images from disparate moments of personal and public history, is in itself an act of memory—not individual, but cultural memory. It reveals memory to be an act in the present on the part of a subject who

Here, the memories are not their own, and are powerful in their own right because of what one has projected, invested and created in the memory (Hirsch 1999: 8).

Fads and Trends

When fashions change frequently and run the gambit in terms of hem length, color, tie widths, collar widths, lapel styles, and fabric, purchases of clothes from season to season are affected by a plurality of influences resulting in a seemingly collective transformation of taste. Howard Blumer also addresses this phenomenon (1969):

The transformation of taste, of collective taste, results without question from the diversity of experience that occurs in social interaction in a complex moving world. It leads, in turn, to an unwitting groping for suitable forms of expression, in an effort to move in a direction which is consonant with the movement of modern life in general (Blumer 1969: 282).

The fact that second-hand clothes have come into their own is due to those features of consumerism which are characteristic of contemporary society, which gauge the success of a commodity, and to which many commodities owe their very existence (McRobbie 1988: 29). This has to do with the consumption patterns of shoppers buying second-hand clothes and also, the observations and retail skills of shop owners who can supply the kinds of clothes that are, or in their estimation, should be considered fashionable again (McRobbie 1988: 29). In fact, the demand for second hand clothes across the board emerges as a result of a wide variety of social practices, not just as a means to satisfy human needs or because consumers passively wait for the next new thing to be advertised and provided in a department store or the mall.

In “Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods” (1986) anthropologist Grant McCracken argues that things are important because they carry cultural meaning. If they are consumer goods they are in transit and thus cultural meaning is constantly in circulation. He specifically analyzes “the fashion system...as an instrument of meaning movement” which frequently creates new cultural
meaning for the items in circulation. This happens through a variety of opinion leaders both
distant, in terms of the class rank and on the margins of society, such as “hippies, punks or gays”
(1986: 76) as well as from fashion journalists and social observers (1986: 77). The cultural
meaning of the objects transfers itself to the consumer through ritual which “is an opportunity to
affirm, evoke, assign, or revise the conventional symbols and meanings of the cultural order”
(McCracken 1986: 78). Importantly, he describes a divestment ritual in which in one way or
another, people who are parting with their goods make some sort of attempt to erase the meaning
that might be associated with that object, indicating specifically, clothing. For him, “What looks
like superstition is, in fact, an implicit knowledge of the moveable quality of meaning with which
the goods are invested” (McCracken 1986: 80).

It is important to make a distinction between “fads” and “trends.” What has been called
“the vintage craze” may be seen as merely a fad, but in fact, vintage has a long history in fashion.
Blumer asserts that fads have no historical continuity and spring up independent of other prior
fashions (Blumer 1969: 283). Thus, vintage should be viewed as a trend—indeed, a trend with a
history and a positive future. At the time he was writing, fashion trends were a “highly important
yet much neglected object of study” (Blumer 1969: 283). Trends “signify a convergence and a
marshalling of collective taste in a given direction and thus pertain to one of the most significant
yet obscure features in group life” (Blumer 1969: 283). I seek to uncover some of the possible
reasons that vintage clothing has become so popular among so many people, in so many different
parts of the United States (and in the world, as well), and in such a wide array of social and
economic classes.

Tiffany Dubin, who might be seen as a liaison between the vastly different worlds of high
society, fashion, retail, and publishing, is deeply invested in secondhand shopping practices.
Although she claims to be uncomfortable with the title “vintage,” she co-authored a book which
assured her positioning as a primary actor in the popularity and legitimization of used clothes is
entitled *Vintage Style:*
Well, I hate the word vintage—even though it’s in the title—because it’s not about vintage, it’s about recognizing quality or what works for you no matter where it’s from or what the price point and having enough confidence to mix it in your everyday life. Vintage doesn’t have to be costumey. If a blouse is beautifully made and looks amazing on you it’s going to look just as good in 20 years, in 30 years, or 40 years, so it’s more just learning to be a savvy shopper, to be honest. You opt not being dictated to by labels which were getting style secure so what I tried to do was show real people wearing them—wearing vintage mixed with modern clothes in real life situations—because they had had this stereotype of being so costumey. So I was trying to break the stereotype—that was the goal.

(Interview with Tiffany Dubin, 2001)

Vintage is a category of clothing not meant for the average person who throws on an outfit in the morning. Rather, vintage is for the precocious shopper or fashion maven. Vintage is seen as a challenge—but a challenge that allows one to express their individuality and make an investment in clothes that will last beyond any particular fashion season.

Conclusions

Fashion’s ubiquity makes it a naturalized part of everyday life (Finkelstein 1996: 103). This makes sartorial trends excellent fodder for studying other cultural phenomenon. Fashion can be and often is analyzed through oversimplified social theory (for example, as a rebellious expression against the social order), through psychological analysis, through the lens of economic theory with regard to consumption practices, via identity politics, through art theory where the clothes and the ways in which they are worn are seen as aesthetic expressions, or by using feminist theory to ascertain whether clothes either liberate or subjugate women. Vintage clothing offers a conflation of all of these theories set in historical context that might leave one more satisfied than relying on one or the other and “mediates both individual and collective identities and desires” (Hansen 2000: 248). Using clothing collections such as one’s wardrobe, museum collections, and contemporary designer collections as a vehicle to explore the conversations and anxieties that people have about memory in the late twentieth century is an interesting addition to the anthropology of fashion. By marrying the discourses of memory and memory loss to sartorial fashion trends, contemporary fashion collections, and people’s relationships to their wardrobes, this research will go beyond production and consumption analyses, critiques of capitalism, and
the polarization of men and women with regard to their interest in fashion. How used clothes are circulated within the United States, their increasing popularity and place among mainstream fashions, and how this sartorial phenomenon might relate to fin de siècle anxieties will be a major part of this research.

Issues having to do with basic consumption practices must be taken into account on some level because they are in fact telling about many things other than a commodity market. As Karen Tranberg Hansen notes in her own ethnographic study of used clothes exported from the United States to Zambia:

Because consumption concerns what people do with things and how things fit into their lives, the issue of agency, rather than the relentless hand of the market, comes to the fore. In this view, consumption is about how people use things and how cultural beliefs and practices shape the appropriation of such things, with consequences for the wider contexts of their lives (Hansen 2000: 14).

Hansen’s work is supported by the research conducted by New York Times journalist, George Packer, who followed the circulation of one shirt from the apartment of a woman who cleaned out her drawers and donated the garments to a local thrift shop. The shirt was graded in a Brooklyn rag warehouse, exported to Uganda in a bale with hundreds of other shirts, and finally purchased by an elderly Ugandan man. Packer writes that “Americans buy clothes in disposable quantities—$165 billion worth” in 2001 alone (Packer 2002: 54). We run out of storage space, or put on weight, or tire of them, we put them in trash bags and bring them to a thrift store or charitable organization for its next run as a consumer good (Packer 2002: 54-55). Because of this, it is thought that there will always be a need for secondhand clothing because used clothing is the only way for people in poor nations to have “quality clothing” (Packer 2002: 56). In keeping with Hansen’s concern with how things figure differently into people’s lives and cultures and economies, Packer believes that the rejected clothing from the United States somehow looks

---

8 Daniel Miller’s Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach (1994) is an excellent example of how studying mass consumption ethnographically might be a way to better understand many other aspects of a particular culture through material goods.
better in Africa, due to the necessary magic of human effort and human desire (Packer 2002: 57). Thus, the circulation of used clothes and associated consumption practices is an extraordinarily tale of commerce, international trade, and the interaction between radically different cultures.

This research will further an understanding of how fashion functions in remarkable ways in modern society. Blumer claims that:

fashion serves to detach the grip of the past in a moving world...The significance of this release from the restraint of the past should not be minimized. To meet a moving and changing world requires freedom to move in different directions. Detachment from the hold of the past is not a small contribution to the achievement of such freedom. In the areas of this operation fashion facilitates that contribution. In this sense there is virtue to applying the derogatory accusations of being “old-fashioned,” “outmoded,” “Backward,” and “out-of-date” (Blumer 1969: 289).

On one hand, Blumer is quite right in thinking that fashion is one way in which people propel themselves forward or at least to live comfortably in the present. This is most obviously evidenced by the way in which those in fashion might describe clothes or stores as “fashion forward,” indicating that those wearing the clothes are modern—even avant garde. On the other hand, many fashion forward stores, such as Barneys New York and myriad downtown boutiques carry vintage clothes and wearing these vestiges of the past can also be seen as contemporary and avant garde. Thus, contrary to Blumer’s theories from forty years ago, adhering to and resurrecting the past, sartorially or otherwise, does not necessarily mean that one is not in vogue, but rather, is very much keeping with the times. One place where this dichotomy can be seen is in a photo spread in City magazine where vintage clothes are worn by models who inhabit a minimalist space decorated with furniture that is also minimalist, but vintage in style (City 2001). Thus, this fashion forward magazine for the young and funky set in New York City offers a pictorial how-to-be-part-of-the-trendy-New-York-fashion-set by mixing vintage clothes with

---

9 However, Muslim West Africa and Muslim Somalia are more resistant to Western clothes (Packer 2002: 57). Some argue that the deluge of Western clothes into the African continent “plays its part in telling Africans that their own things are worthless, that Africans can do nothing for themselves” (Packer 2002: 58). As Hansen also points out, the African people who purchase and wear these clothes do so in a way morphs their sartorial culture, not usurps it. Yet, it is clear that not all changes due to Western influence are benign. Packer admits that in the end, that particular T-shirt that he had followed from Manhattan to Uganda was purchased because the old man who bought it saw Packer, an America white man (mzungu), touch it, therefore making it more desirable.
modernist furniture. Pastiche, so crucial to what has been defined as post modernity, is yet
another aspect of the legitimization and popularity of vintage that will be explored in this
research. Such an admixture of styles and things emblematic of a variety of former eras as
exemplified by not only the fashion spread in City, but as seen not only on fashion runways, but
in design studios, in contemporary advertising campaigns, on television, as heard in the sampling
technology in contemporary music, and evidenced on restaurant and bar menus that feature
“classics” like fondue, lobster thermidor, or cosmopolitans. The vintage clothing trend can be
seen as a manifestation of pastiche and retro mode, a crisis of historicity, in addition to the
confusion and angst that are all characteristic of post modernity.
Chapter Two: Foundations

SECOND HAND ROSE

Father had a business, strictly second hand
Ev'rything from toothpicks to a Baby Grand.
Stuff in our apartment came from Father's store,
Even things I'm wearing, someone wore before.
It's no wonder that I feel abused:
I've never had a thing that ain't been used!

I'm wearing second hand hats, second hand clothes,
That's why they call me Second Hand Rose.
Even the piano in the parlor,
Father bought for ten cents on the dollar!
Second hand pearls, I'm wearing second hand curls,
I've never had a single thing that's new!
Even Jake the plumber, he's the man I adore,
He had the nerve to tell me he's been married before!
Ev'ry one knows that I'm just Second Hand Rose
From Second Avenue!
Each one in the fam'ly Kicks the whole day long
Ev'ryone's disgusted, ev'rything is wrong.

Second handed doggie, second handed cat,
Second handed welcome, second handed mat.
I think Father's head is made of wood:
He brings home lots of things that ain't no good.

I'm wearing second hand shoes, second hand hose,
All the girls hand me their second hand beaux!
Even my pajamas, when I dons 'em,
Have somebody else's 'nitials on 'em.
Second hand rings, I'm sick of second hand things,
I never get what other gurrlies do!
Once while strolling thru the Ritz a girl got my goat
She nudged her friend, and said "Oh look! There's my old fur coat!"
Ev'ry one knows that I'm just Second Hand Rose
From Second Avenue!

Words by Grant Clarke and Music by James Hanley (1921)
Introduced by Comedienne Fanny Brice (1891-1951) in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1921
(http://www.melodylane.net/secondhand.html)

Tracy Tolkien, currently one of the most renowned proprietors of vintage clothing in
London, has stated, "It seems the days of 'Second Hand Rose' are long gone now and women
who could easily afford to buy the kind of new designer clothes that most of us can only dream
about are instead choosing vintage" (Tolkien 2000: 7). I contextualize the popularity of vintage
and vintage stylings in a fin de siècle moment where clothes are a tangible and an almost carnal
way of remembering the past, whether real or imagined. Here, objects which are idealized or
nostalgic from past eras can “become powerful symbols by which we may listen to the past and hear it confer its imagined virtues upon us” (Belk 1988: 150).

First, I provide a brief overview of historians’ notions about people’s alleged anxious reactions to the fin de siècle throughout recorded history. I argue that people tend to emphasize an idyllic past and treasure objects in which they find comfort—in this case, clothing. I agree with one cultural historian who writes, “when despair and uncertainty about the future cast their shadow on the present, only a selective, debris-free, past remain[s] as a potential anchor for personal and group stability and identity” (Spitzer 1999: 101). Here, people romanticize the past in uncertain times in order to assuage their anxieties about the present and the future. Next, I narrate the evolution of people’s thinking about the circularity of fashion and the role of used clothes over the years. I also discuss how and why second-hand clothes have come to be so highly valued in the last decades of the twentieth century and continue to be a popular and legitimate sartorial alternative in the twenty-first century. I will also provide a glimpse of those who have participated in various aspects of the industry in order to better understand the history of the trend and how it is perpetuated, legitimated and popularized.

_Fin de Siècle Ideologies_

It would be hard to argue that the hype about the coming of a new millennium in the year 2000, frequently referred to as “Y2K,” was isolated to a select group of people who had given significant thought to the end times. At every level of American society, and internationally as well, the anticipation leading to the new millennium and what would happen in the minutes, hours, and years thereafter was unprecedented. Richard Martin wrote, “What we are coming to for 2001 bespeaks not only a different fashion, but even more demonstrably a wholly different _Weltanschauung_” (Wolf and Schlachter 1999: xiv).

As the millennium approached, Westerners prepared for the end of our century further in advance than in any other century. This led to exaggerated expectations that had been nurtured by literary and artistic imaginations from previous centuries (Schwartz 1990: 11; Kleinhenz and
LeMoine 1999: 3). It is important to remember, too, that the year 2000 was “only the second time since Christ [that] history [was] in a 90s decade that precedes a new millennium” (Kyle 1998: 15). Indeed, thoughts about the end of an era and the possibilities of what the future had to offer occurred much earlier than the 1990s. Memorably, Stanley Kubrick put forth his own thoughts and speculations about the coming of the new millennium in 1968 when he made 2001: A Space Odyssey. Don DeLillo’s White Noise (1984) eerily mirrors some of my own observations about the ideas, practices, behaviors and collective anxiety and dread in the United States as we approached the end of the millennium.1 Prince released the song “1999” in 1983 with the refrain, “Tonight we’re gonna party like it’s 1999.” For many, it seemed like such a long time before they would witness the end of the twentieth century and the dawning of a new age.

People throughout the United States felt that the New Year’s celebration of the year 2000 would be, at the very least, different from any other. Whether or not people expected all computer systems to shut down in some sort of Y2K catastrophe—that all electricity would be cut off, that elevators would plummet to the ground in a computer-related glitch, that all ATM machines would be out of order, that stock market trading would come to a screeching halt, or that some fringe/radical religious group or political group (or both) would take that opportunity to bring about their own vision of what the end of the world should be—it was undeniable that there was something in the air for that New Year’s celebration that spoke to the fear of some kind of disruption to life as they knew it. In New York City, subway service was suspended for all trains travelling under Times Square for its New Year’s celebration and city blocks were closed to vehicular traffic for at least ten to fifteen blocks radiating out from Times Square. People stocked up on bottled water and canned goods, put fresh batteries in their flashlights, and filled their cars

---

1 A theme that is especially poignant in terms of this research is that Jack Gladney, whenever he is confronted by his own imminent death, embarks on a cleaning binge, cleaning out the attic, closets and the basement, in an apparent attempt to rid himself of reminders of his own failings and his own mortality—what he calls an “overburdening weight” (DeLillo 1984: 262). More, his wife, Babette, suffers from some sort of memory loss, which either precipitates her use of an experimental drug or is an effect of this medication. She is told by the inventor of the pharmaceutical, Dyfar, that her memory loss is a desperate attempt to counteract her fear of death (DeLillo 1984: 202). Although she subconsciously was able to forget a great many things, she was not able to put her fears of her own death to rest. These themes of anxiety about the coming of the end, memory loss and either holding onto material goods because of
with gas "just in case." Concomitant with this fear of the unknown when the clock struck midnight and we embarked on a journey in the new millennium was unbelievable fanfare and tchotchkes galore emblazoned with "2000" or "Y2K" which were sold by street-vendors profiting handsomely on the sales of their timely wares: T-shirts, ski hats, baseball caps, and oversized sunglasses where the two center zeroes in "2000" serve as eyeholes, and crystal champagne flutes engraved with "2000," just to name a few. Fireworks displays in major cities throughout the world tried to best each other with their brilliance. All of a sudden, everything had a millennial connection and was marketed as such: M&M candies declared themselves the "official candy of the millennium." A luxury hotel situated prominently next to the former World Trade Center complex was named the "Millennium Hilton." George Marcus writes that had Ethnography Through Thick and Thin (1998) been published in 2001, for instance, it "would never have enjoyed...this contextualization within a construction of self-consciously heightened sense of historic temporality" (Marcus 1998: 25). It has also been suggested that "the rash of fashion writing and theorizing in the 1980s and 1990s could be attributed vaguely to fin de siècle spirit; in the late nineteenth century, such spirit led to decorative excesses that proclaimed the favoring of form and appearance over content, glossing over cultural and societal anxieties much as fashion (regarded so often as an insubstantial surface) is said to do" (Lehmann 2000: xv). Overall, there was a palpable expectation of hope, fear and change unlike ever before.

Anxiety about the fin de siècle is our "cultural inheritance" which "has set us up to expect the end of a century to be the end of an era, the new century to initiate a new age" (Schwartz 1990: 10). Indeed, the beginning of a new millennium "is one of those artificial constructs that have no particular relation to cosmic time but have an amazingly strong resonance in Western society" (Kleinhenz and LeMoine 1999: 21). One might successfully argue that the Y2K hype was nothing more than a marketing ploy and an excuse to plan festivities to top all others. There

the memories they hold or conversely, purging oneself of the same, are also themes that will be discussed in subsequent chapters of this research.
is certainly nothing natural about the end of a century and beginning of a new one, although a century has become salient as a way to gauge the passing of time. As Thomas Mann wrote, “Time has no divisions to mark its passage, there is never a thunder-storm or glare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or year. Even when a new century begins it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols” (Martin 1999: xiv). In short:

Confusion about the meaning of the millennium is an enduring feature of Western civilisation, and the predictable reawakening of interest in the subject during the 1990s has done little to clear it up. Most people are aware that there is more to the millennium than the mere passing of 1,000 years. They do not need to be told that the crossing of such a barrier has psychological ramifications, and they may already feel mild twinges of the anxiety and excitement which the media has dubbed ‘Pre-Millennial Tension’ (Thompson 1996: xi).

This tension, caused in great part by the end of 2000 and the beginning of 2001, was felt across all segments of society, globally and locally, and is a significant as a manifestation of post-modernity.

It is commonly thought that as the year 999 neared its end a sense of fatalism seized Europe and people panic-stricken (Schwartz 1990; Thompson 1996: 323-324). However, nothing in the historical record proves that there was a ‘panic terror’ at the end of the first millennium.

Nevertheless, the sentiment and legend about fin de siècle anxieties remain:

As usual, we come to our end of century as others have come to theirs – convinced of exhaustion, extreme peril, exorbitant risk, explosive transformation. This fin de siècle, like those before it, is the last gasp, the critical moment, the overture to a new age... At century’s end we are inevitably host to an oxymoronic time: the best and the worst, the most desperate and the most exultant; the most constrained and the most chaotic (Schwartz 1990: 9).

However, there is still a huge difference between a general consciousness of living in the last decades of a period of history and a conviction that the last age itself is about to end. During those decades preceding the millennium among all ranks of society apocalyptic thinking of one
kind or another, conflated with expectations of radical change and a sense of hope for positive change, abound in both religious life and in the public domain.²

The coming of the new millennium raised anxieties about the end of the world and resulted in a rise of millenarian movements. While Ronald Reagan was president in the 1980s, he commented, "You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon and I find myself wondering if we're the generation that is going to see that come about...believe me, they certainly describe what we're going through" (Kyle 1998: 17; Schwartz 1990: 11). We can also observe expressions of exaggerated doom in the 1982 rhetoric of economist Thomas G. Gies who stated: "Revolutionary changes in technology and human values have pushed us to either the brink of doom or the threshold of the greatest Golden Age the world has ever known" (Schwartz 1990: 12).

Frederic Jameson, one of the foremost thinkers on post-modernity, remarked:

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.): taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism (Jameson 1984: 53).

The end of this or that in post-modernity also signals what he calls the "waning of affect" which does not have to be seen pejoratively, but rather as something liberatory (Jameson 1984: 64). That Jameson, one of the foremost theorists and cultural critics on post-modernity, should make the connection between this pre-millennial anxiety and a period of time so loaded with meaning and implication is especially interesting to this research.

In conjunction with this sense that things are coming to an end is what has been called a crisis in historicity. Here, subjects are unable to organize the past and the future into some kind

² Significantly, the attacks on September 11, 2001 are seen as a belated millennial indication—a fraction of what so many people expected to happen nearly two years before. In an article in The New York Times, Kevin Sack wrote, "As with the approach of the year 2000, the Sept. 11 attacks have invigorated the apocalyptic brand of theology embraced by many Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists, who view the collapse of the World Trade Center towers as the latest harbinger of the end times" (Sack 2001). Thus, although the many people who believed that some grand tragedy would occur at the end of the twentieth century and were relieved when nothing, in fact, did happen, their anxiety has been reignited since the attacks.
of coherent experience (Jameson 1984: 71). Thus, the “cultural productions” of these confused individuals come out as randomly heterogeneous heaps of cultural fragments (Jameson 1984: 71). However we choose to call this phenomenon, it is important to recognize that the ways in which we understand and remember the past and read history as it has been written, has been turned on its head. Nothing is quite as sure as it may have appeared some years ago. This may have spurred the confusion, unease, and agitation, and it was feared that this would also incite millenarian groups to act more than at other times in the historical record. (Jameson’s observation that postmodernism can be understood in terms of some kind of radical break with the past--where things that were formerly accepted are no longer relevant--will be taken up at greater length below.)

Millennial groups are often linked with Christianity. Different categories of Christian groups have been defined which, in contemporary times, saw signs of the end:

Some are called apocalyptic groups, because they base their predictions on the apocalyptic literature of the Bible. Some groups are called adventist groups because they emphasize the second advent of coming of Christ which is associated with the end time. Others are known as millenarian groups because they expect a period of earthly paradise known as the millennium after the destruction of the of the present world order, a central concern being the transformation of the earth (St. Clair 1992: 5).

Generally, millennials expect changes in the world order to occur in increments of one thousand years, beginning with the arbitrarily chosen and presumed date of the birth of Christ and the concomitant beginning of our now secular calendar.

To be sure, there is a relationship between the foundation of apocalypticism and a secular collective anxiety that occurs at the close of a century, both of which are predictably amplified at the close of a millennium. Regardless of religious belief or ethnic background, it can be argued that anyone in the West who had access to the media knew that as the year 2000 approached there was a heightened sense of anxiety--a sense of both foreboding and anticipation that something loomed large on the horizon. Paul Tillich, a German Protestant theologian, believes that anxiety extends itself to society in general “if the accustomed structures of meaning, power, belief and
order disintegrate” (Thompson 1996: 323). According to this theory, people become especially prone to anxiety if there is rapid societal change which makes people feel particularly disoriented (Thompson 1996: 323).

Schwartz also comments on the unprecedented sense of risk of things that threaten one’s well-being that entered into every aspect of life (Schwartz 1990: 243). As a result, apocalyptic rhetoric can also be used “to alert people to the need for action to address various pressing human concerns: environmental pollution, ethnic strife, family violence, drug abuse, and a host of other societal ills that today we fear and whose solution we can only dimly imagine” (Kleinhenz and LeMoine 1999: 4-5). One medical illness that has garnered much media attention because of its increasing epidemic proportions is Alzheimer’s disease. It has not only become a crisis for the individuals afflicted and their families but also a topic of national governmental interest, in part because of the devastating effects on large segments of the population and its societal and financial implications.

It has also been suggested that there are more cases of multiple personality disorder due to the “janiformity of centuries’ ends” (Schwartz 1990: 210). Whether this diagnosis is “elicited through suggestion, manufactured under hypnosis, or fabricated by talented thespians, multiple personality is an especial artifact of this century’s end” (Schwartz 1990: 216). Dutch historian J.H. van den Berg noticed the sudden concern with plural existences during the 1790s and the 1890s and also “called attention to Hegel’s fin de siècle observations on estrangement and Durkheim’s observations, a fin de siècle later, on anomie and normlessness” (Schwartz 1990: 217). According to his observances, multiple personalities have been recurring with such virulence at this century’s end because of the loss of generational continuity, a harsh distancing between parents and child, and between maturity and childhood (Schwartz 1990: 218-218). One might argue that Alzheimer’s disease is the equally unsettling embodiment of this disjunction, when adults are no longer really adults and must wear diapers and be cared for as if they were infants.
As contemporary Americans approached the millennium, their anxieties were focused in part on fears of losing the past, both collective and individual. My assertion is that anxieties about forgetting the past, losing memories, are assuaged by finding ways of retrieving and preserving memories in a variety of ways, including nostalgia. Of course, not everyone concurs with this assessment of the popularity of vintage or the recollection of older designs in contemporary garb. Two of the more prominent commentators on fashion and many of the people who have been in the business for many years clearly disagree:

Oh, I don’t think that the popularity of vintage has much of anything to do with nostalgia. I think that’s profoundly mistaken. When you start to see vintage get popular in the late 60s, then there is a kind of romantic, hippy-ish anti-fashion ethos where there were fantasies about long ago and far away. But as it’s grown in popularity and become really a major theme in fashion, everyone is buying and looking at vintage designers, everyone. I think that it is more like a sampling of styles of the past. Most people who wear vintage from a particular period, young people, know absolutely nothing about the period that it came from, so the last thing in mind is nostalgia. It’s just a kind of visual reference point. Sometimes, though, they are trying to recreate a particular period look, like when swing dancing was popular and everyone consciously dressed up to look like they were from the period of swing dance, but most of the time, it’s more like sampling styles and they don’t really have any references associated with it… I certainly don’t think that it is a millennial thing… I just don’t really see that nostalgic search for a safe past being a dominant theme in the growing popularity of retro. I would say definitely sometimes you will find that being a theme in fashion in general including possibly some retro pick-up—with Christian Dior and the whole “New Look” which is the kind of belle époque fantasy—but I don’t think the security that people are looking for in clothes has much most of the time to do with an idea particular period being safer. It’s only because when coming at it as an historian, I never fail to be amazed at the absolute absence of any historical knowledge, I mean especially among fashion people. I mean it’s like, I remember once someone in Paris, didn’t know that Paris had been occupied by Nazis. They might associate images, movies, fashion photos—it’s really just a visual referencing. They really have no idea how old anything is. Some people are different. I mean someone like Karl Lagerfeld is very cultivated and there is obviously a lot more going on when he is using references to the past but someone like Marc Jacobs, forget it.”

(Interview with Valerie Steele, Acting Director, Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, 2001)

But do you think that that is a condition of the end of the century? Because one of the things about clothing, if one has the opportunity, many people, perhaps not so obsessively as others, but clothing is such an intimate part of one’s life that… I know my father had his wedding suit, his army uniform, you know, very significant clothing that he would never wear but he kept, and my mother had her coming-out dress, she had a graduation thing from high school that she kept, kimonos that she had when she was young, that I am not sure that that is related to the millennium. You know, there has always been, but in a very different way, a market of consumption of reuse of clothing but it was a from the top down kind of situation where something extraordinary would be turned over to the first maid who then turned it over to the lower staff and slowly the piece would fall apart until it was just rags. So there was always a
condition for reuse and I think that you are right in that the vintage clothing business is something relatively new but it begins in the 1960s. So, there are a lot of different mechanisms at work that a prime reason that vintage clothing has interest is that a clothing object becomes fetishized so that it holds all of the potency of the original period, the original conditions of its wearing. But in addition to that, it’s less expensive, or it used to be, I mean that market has changed, but it used to be less expensive, it as outside the fashion system, one could manifest one’s marginalization from that whole establishment of a consumer system by wearing used clothing. And I think that there was that kind of political agenda that informed it before. Perhaps that’s less so now. But when I see people still in the East Village or in Little Italy, obviously it wouldn’t be attractive if it didn’t have the connotation of some moment of the past.

On the other hand, some of it is just purely formal. They are just taking different looks and it looks cool and it fits. I mean you can see that it’s not so studied the way things are put together. I don’t think that if someone is putting on an 80s jacket with big shoulder and really low-rise bell-bottoms, that they are saying, “I am manifesting the post-modern condition. I am looking at the 80s as when I had my first childhood…” You know I don’t know if that’s an argument to say that that limits it but I do think that you have to address it because buying used clothing it not... you know, what you are seeing now that might help your argument is you’re seeing people who don’t have to buy used clothing, buying used clothing. But again, I think that for that crowd, when it’s someone like Chloe Sevigny, what she’s doing is that she saying that “My taste is better than anyone’s taste and therefore I can rummage contemporary fashion collections, past collections and I’m still going to be cool” I think that’s what’s motivating her, not any kind of importing into her life a kind of comforting condition. I don’t think that’s it.

(Interview with Harold Koda, Curator-in-Charge at the Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001)

I don’t think [nostalgia] plays too heavily into it. I think it’s more fashion driven than nostalgia driven. I think nostalgia is driving more like collectable stuff versus wearable stuff, like lunchboxes or record albums versus clothing.

(Interview with Seth Weisser, co-owner of What Comes Around Goes Around, NYC, 2001)

People always say that their mother had this or this reminds me of this or that or the other thing. I think that that adds to the reason that they buy it, but I don’t think that prompts them to buy it. Because most of the time that people come into your booth and say that they remember their grandmother wearing it, as much fun as it is to say that, they would never consider wearing that dress. I think that wearing vintage clothing is a style choice that you have inside of you. So I don't think that it prompts people to wear it. I think that it prompts people to look at it and talk about it. I think it prompts people to be interested in maybe going to a show, but I think you have to want the clothing before that emotion sets in. That emotion can add to it, once you’ve decided you like vintage clothing... but I don’t think that’s the driving factor.

(Interview with Alice Lindholm, co-owner of Right to the Moon Alice, Cooks Falls, NY, 2001)

I think that certainly there is an element of nostalgia. I mean there is an element of nostalgia which is why I am interested in it. But I don’t think though that that is the major element for why people are interested in vintage clothing. I think it might be 70% of why people do this. I think it is an appreciation of the past and the quality and the workmanship and the artistry that has gone into clothing in the past. I don’t think that people want to go around looking like they are out of the 1950s or that they are out of the 1920s. I think that they want to create their own
I maintain that one way in which people hold on to the past or to memories is to keep garments of their own or from past eras that can be brought forth into the future as a means of assuaging any anxieties about what the new millennium might bring. Keeping tangible reminders of the past such as garments that may have personal significance or are styled to recall a meaningful era, especially in what might be deemed uncertain times like the fin de siècle, is not uncommon. Indeed, “[t]he end of any period of time, whether a century or a millennium, raises questions about both the past and the future. In our ever-present, we set up signposts that recreate our memories of the past and address present concerns for the future” (Kleinhenz and LeMoine 1999: 21). These signposts can be clothes.

It is particularly poignant to hear what some individuals who are invested in vintage clothing have to say about why they and their customers have an affinity from clothes for times gone by:

"Our clothes continue to reflect our anxieties and how we try to cope with them... How we express this in what we choose to wear will provide future historians with clues as to what we considered were the basic realities and how we attempted to reclaim them."

(Stella Blum, former Curator of Costumes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC 1977: 6)

"Historicism is proving its succinct utility and its distressing sense when one despairs of anything feeling new or different."

(Richard Martin in Wolf and Schlachter 1999: xx)

"Vintage-inspired clothes ’remind us of who we are and, worn well, of where we’re headed. But most of all, they make us appear unique... And why are designers so in love with it at the moment? I think it’s because of a lingering millennial reflectiveness. As a new century begins, they are still in the process of sorting out the last one: the looks that worked, the techniques and silhouettes to bring forward. It’s about nostalgia too..."

(Anna Wintour, Letter from the Editor, Vogue, 2000: 74)
Look around. We are in the midst of a cultural love-affair with objects and designs that reflect back to another (simpler?) time. It’s on the television, it’s incorporated into automobile designs, electronics packaging, etc., etc., and we see it in clothing and appearance styles.

(Jane Hegland, Ph.D., Clothing, Textiles, and Fashion Merchandising, New Mexico State University, 2001)

I think it’s also people who are into that look or into that feeling, they are into it because it makes them feel good, makes them feel different, brings them to another time. And I think that coming into 2000, you know, the new millennium?... And I think it’s more like a comfort thing also. It’s a comfort time. Maybe you go back to that. Maybe you feel like, “Oh, I like that look of the 40s. It was such a cool time.” I don’t know maybe it’s something from another life. I don’t know. But that could be it also.

(Interview with Maureen Disimile, Manager at Alice Underground [vintage clothing], NYC, 2001)

DK: And also, if you see old movies, I think that there was more of a standard way of dressing years ago. You know, you would never step foot out of the house if you didn’t have a hat and gloves on and even at a baseball game, women were dressed this way and men had suits on. If you go to a baseball game today, people are hanging out there in t-shirts and shorts. So, I just love how even that aspect of life seems to be that much more respectful. And I think people feel differently when they are dressed that way. There are people who come in who are dressed in vintage head to toe and that takes effort, but they look wonderful... I can look at an old movie or an old magazine and I just think that everything was so charming. I think a lot of people attach themselves to the fact that things were simpler then. It just seems like it was a better life. And today, I don’t know, everything is so rushed, and there is so little free time. There used to be a time when the phone rang in here and it was for me, but now there are so many people with cell phones... I want to go back. I think it was good then.

CJB: Do you think a lot of your customers do too?

DK: I think so.

CJB: Well, in my project, I am trying to say that maybe there is a connection between why people are so taken with vintage clothing now and the new millennium. What do you think?

DK: I think that you might have something there. You know, with the whole 2000, 2001, with the whole space odyssey, the future. To me, I really relate to the 30s and 40s, I don’t like the future.

(Interview with Delanie Koppersmith, Proprietor of Cobblestones [Vintage Clothing] NYC, 2001)

*Fashion Historicism at the Fin de Siècle*

For some, the advent of the twenty-first century was frightening. Perhaps, surrounding themselves with familiar things from the past helped them as they moved forward into the future. Objects can incorporate pleasant memories from the past into the present to embolden people to forge ahead. The relationship between a certain unease about the past, present and/or the future, and fashion—sartorial and any other kind of fashion—has been well-documented in the last decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, many writers have questioned why there seems to be
such a strong nostalgic determination to live in the past. Maurice Halbwachs, for instance, writes that "there is a kind of retrospective mirage by which a great number of us persuade ourselves that the world of today has less color and is less interesting than it was in the past, in particular, regarding out childhood and youth" (Halbwachs 1992: 48).

For David Lowenthal, author of *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985), people’s current anxiety hails from uncertainties of the past which “makes us all the more anxious to validate that things were as reputed. To gain assurance that yesterday was as substantial as today we saturate ourselves with bygone reliquary details, reaffirming memory and history in tangible format” (Lowenthal 1985: 191). Other scholars and journalists, however, believe problems in the present and the fear of the unforeseen future is the cause for their apprehensions and a desire to revisit the past. More and more women post-9/11 sought to restore antique wedding gowns, for example (Molishever 2002: 11). When the 65 year old Yves Saint Laurent was asked to explain his seemingly sudden retirement in 2002, he replied, “Because we live in a world of disorder and decadence” (Bellafante 2002b: B10). Of course, being 65 years of age would be enough of a reason for anyone to retire, but it is interesting that his reason was decidedly because the future seemed uncertain and it was time to focus on things other than work. Following are comments that link a return to retro fashions with contemporary angst:

> Fear of the new and the unknown is another of the factors that heighten resistance to fashion change. A certain security is afforded by styles that are familiar, and most people refrain from buying anything which is startlingly new or daringly different for fear of being ridiculed. Primitive and uneducated peoples often attach a symbolic significance to particular designs or styles, and to discard the old is to risk the possible evils and misfortunes that may accompany the new and unproven. To depart from the sure and the safe way of doing things requires an adventurous spirit and courage sans peur.

(Marilyn Horn, *The Second Skin: An Interdisciplinary Study of Clothing*, 1968: 99)

> The economy is in a slump...; the collective impulse is once again back to nature, in the food we eat and the shampoo we buy, in front-page alarm about the future of the planet; disillusionment with the government is epidemic.

(Holly Brubach, fashion writer for *The New York Times* writing in the 1970’s, 1999: 78)
Fashions of the past continue to recur, not so much for love of their details and lines as for the security blanket that they provide in these times of terrible confusion.

(Kennedy Fraser, fashion writer for The New Yorker writing in the 1970’s, 1981: 240)

These so-called extremists among us are often pushing the envelope in search of authentic feeling, something real amid the tide of commercialism and fakeness.

(Katherine Betts re: people who dress in avant garde clothes, Vogue 1999: 225)

Loss of faith in the future has produced a culture which can only look backwards and re-examine key moments of its own recent history with a sentimental gloss and a soft focus lens. The gap opened up by this absence is filled instead with cultural bric-a-brac and with old images recycled and reintroduced into circulation as pastiche.

(Angela McRobbie, author of Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses 1988: 40)

More or less everywhere, people are complaining that they are not understood, that they are not listened to, that they cannot express themselves. Anemic social relations, difficulty understanding one another, a feeling that people talk only about themselves and do not listen to one another, all these are characteristic features of the final age of fashion, of the formidable thrust of individualist existences and aspirations.

(Gilles Lipovetsky, author of The Empire of Fashion, 1994: 240)

The present and the future seem to have little to commend them. Harsh realities (economic, ecological, viral, political, social, cultural) bear down on us... Unable and unwilling to face up to the future, seeking something authentic, we turn back upon a mythologized past.

(Ted Polhemus, author of Style Surfing: what to wear in the 3rd millennium, 1996: 81)

We are, most of us, anonymous cogs in a huge city machine. Less than 4% of the U.S. population live on family farms now, down from 30% in 1920. Once, many Americans earned their livings by putting their hands in the earth and making it produce and grow; now most don’t. Disconnected from the sense of accomplishment that comes from creating something real, people find identifying substance more difficult. Instead they reach for dreamlike alternatives of TV, style, and entertainment. Fashion, style, glamour and advertising appeal to a yearning that know no rules or boundaries, an endlessly beating heart of wanting... The powerful energy of that hunger in all of us, can be rechannelled, disciplined and used. To emerge from the fantasy, we must identify and satisfy our hungers in an enduring and comforting way.

(Andrea Siegel, author of Open and Clothed 1999: 26)

Even before September 11, The Daily Show, hosted by Jon Stewart, warned that we were approaching the "nostalgia vortex." Pop culture had ransacked so much of the past that it was forced to aid the future for nostalgia, creating a potential rupture in the space-time continuum that could send everything spinning into a black hole. When the present is so fraught and the future appears to dangle on a loose hinge, nostalgia is no longer an innocent indulgence but a dangerous distraction, like driving with one’s eyes on the rearview mirror.

(James Wolcott, in an article about American culture post-September 11, 2001: 165)
After a difficult autumn, we’re craving home cooking and old friends—and we’re seeking simplicity in our wardrobes too. It is not coincidence that much of what we’re drawn to brings to mind the bohemian earthiness of the sixties—another time in which the world was looking for uncomplicated innocence.

(Vogue 2001b: 245)

What feels right and looks even better in less-than-feel-good times? Clothes that are nostalgic but not retro, revealing but not risqué. For spring 2002, the personal is fashionable. The appeal of this spring’s deliberately homespun garments is that they do not simply tickle our seventies funny bone or indulge our fetish for vintage. They offer something that’s much subtler and, in these special times, much more important: a sensory reminder of home, hearth, embroidery hoops, craft cupboards—of, in other words, mother, grandmother, childhood security. What’s provoked is a nostalgia of a completely different order from the retro impulse, which is all about connecting to a collective and cultural past rather than to one’s personal history. Of course, John Galliano’s patchworked argyle cardigan or Chloe’s charm-bracelet sandals may not send you scurrying down memory lane, but they can function as a means to retrieve moods buried by years of fashion sophistication.

(Sally Singer, “Speak, memory.” Vogue 2002: 40-41)

Although it is thought that fear of change makes people cling to things from their past, it has also been suggested that “[t]he more a society displays symptoms of overstrained nerves caused by external stimuli,... the more quickly fashion will have to mutate...., as the progressing desensitization will make ever greater stimulation necessary to successfully differentiate among groups” (Lehmann 2000: 173). Fashion styles in the last century have indeed changed much more frequently in recent decades than ever before, which is one reason why fashion has been so greatly denigrated. It seems that no sooner is something in fashion than it is already out of fashion.

Cyclicality and Rapid Changes in Sartorial Fashion

Fashion relies on the past to evoke its future only in retrospect.

(Lehmann 2000: 97)

How to know when the times they are a-changin’? Look for the woman who’s slipped a pair of trousers under a frock. She was there in the sixties and seventies, rejecting the soulless bourgeois separates of the West in favor of shalwar kameezes, djellaba ensembles, and other Eastern basics. She returned in the early nineties, swigging coffee in Seattle in a romantic slip dress, with ratty cords peeking out and a flannel shirt at the waist. Now, for spring 2002, (when we are all too aware that the times they have a-changed), she’s back, and designers are ready for the revolution.

(Irini Arakas, Tracing a Trend Over and Over Again. Vogue, p. 364)
Many scholars of fashion have tried to ascertain why fashion changes cyclically and so rapidly. Interestingly, fashion journalist Kate Betts was invited to Princeton University to give a lecture as to why fashion changes so rapidly to an electrical engineering class called "Managing Innovation" where Betts was asked to explain the fast-moving innovations in sartorial fashion to students studying theoretical guidelines for fast-moving technical innovations (Betts 2002: 1). Students asked polite but pointed questions that made Ms. Betts realize that there is no good or logical reason why fashions change as quickly as they do. One student noted that there was not much product innovation, as much as marketing made it seem as if there is (Betts 2002: 10). When another student asked point-blank what in fact causes innovations in fashion, Betts could think of nothing more complicated than changes in the weather. She replied, "We change clothes not because we want to surf the Net faster or read e-mail on a cell phone. It's about improving functionality. It's a way of feeling, an esthetic" (Betts 2002: 10). Changes in fashion are seemingly inexplicable, although this has hardly stopped theorists from attempting to find a reason.

Contemporary styles do seem to change at a rapid pace and what was fashionable one season is outdated by the next, forcing any self-respecting follower of fashion to purchase the latest trends. However, if fashions stay in style for a significant period of time, it is presumed that people will be less inclined to buy new clothes. Yet, this assumption is problematic because, as Marion Ress told me, today clothes are not made to last and styles change too fast (Ress 2000: personal communication). Contemporary clothes that may be timeless in terms of style are simply not made as well as they used to be or might be. As a result, they have to be replaced, thus perpetuating purchase cycles, but not necessarily fashion cycles.

It has also been argued that "[t]he economic logic of fashion depends on making the old-fashioned look absurd" (John Berger quoted in Tobias 2000: 85). George B. Sproles supports this perspective in a collection of essays entitled Perspectives of Fashion (1981) concerning how fashions arise, become popular and eventually wane. Here, when people refuse to discard clothes
that have gone out of fashion, scientific methods for predicting and calculating fashion cycles are skewed dramatically.

When people dress in clothes that are old-fashioned or out of fashion, they are "out of step with the times" (Horn 1968: 96). Interestingly, this holds true even when people claim that you can wear anything from any era. To the discerning eye, some clothes simply are no longer fashionable. Even different kinds of vintage clothes go in and out of contemporary fashion. In other words, clothes from the 1920s could be popular for a season, but then succumb to clothes from the 1940s, and so forth. Yet, the "necessity of discarding a garment—not because it has outlived its usefulness but because it has outlived the fashion—implies a senseless economic waste" (Horn 1968: 96).

The relationship between fashion and upper class distinction, about which Georg Simmel (1904) so famously wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century, has been cited as a primary reason for why fashion changes so frequently. Indeed, "[c]hanges in income and population statistics have a rather obvious relationship to economic activity, but clothing consumption patterns are also affected by a variety of non-economic trends such as education, lifestyle, the consumers' general mood, and changing values" (Horn 1968: 410). In Simmel's theory, the poorer classes imitate the upper classes' sartorial style. When the poor achieve the look that the wealthy have made fashionable, the upper classes create a new style to emulate in order to differentiate themselves all over again. Therefore, when a particular fashion becomes quite popular, it goes to its doom. Although fashion thrives on change in order to maintain class distinctions, Simmel admits that some fashion always exists and is immortal. He asserts that while fashion is constantly changing, it does so economically (Simmel 1904 in Levine 1971: 320). Here, as soon as some older style has been sufficiently forgotten, fashion returns to the past for inspiration (Simmel 1904 in Levine 1971: 320). Simmel's observations about changes in fashion styles were very influential both for his focus on fashion as a topic of social and cultural importance and also for understanding fashion as a vivid marker of class divisions and relations.
Thorstein Veblen also subscribed to the belief that fashion, wealth and class are closely linked, as described extensively in The Theory of the Leisure Class (1912). He addressed the issue of ever-changing fashions in terms of his analysis of upper class distinction through conspicuous consumption. For Veblen:

the function of dress as an evidence of ability to pay does not end with simply showing that the wearer consumes valuable goods in excess of what is required for physical comfort. Simple conspicuous waste of goods is effective and gratifying as far as it goes; it is good prima facie evidence of pecuniary success, and consequently, prima facie evidence of social worth. But dress has subtler and more far-reaching possibilities than this crude, first-hand evidence of wasteful consumption only. If, in addition to showing that the wearer can afford to consume freely and uneconomically, it can also be shown in the same stroke that he or she is not under the necessity of earning a livelihood, the evidence of social worth is enhanced in a very considerable degree. Our dress, therefore, in order to serve its purpose effectually, should not only be expensive, but it should also make plain to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive labour (Veblen 1912: 169-170).

Thus, fashion can be a crucial component in class distinction. Having the most expensive faddish items, such as a highly coveted pocket book like the "Fendi baguette" that is recognizable as being from a particular season and a particular designer, and known to be anywhere from several hundred dollars to over one thousand dollars (which puts it out of the financial reach of most) is one example of how Veblen’s ideas still work today. That purse will be very fashionable for one season, and a fashion faux pas in the next season as a newer faddish item such as the "Prada bowling bag" comes into vogue. This is unrealistic for most people who want to be au courant, but simply cannot afford these sorts of luxuries and purchase simpler less expensive bags which are not that easily identifiable and can last for more than one season.3

3Simmel and Veblen greatly influenced the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu, who also wrote about social class, taste, and class distinction in the twentieth century. As Bourdieu wrote in Distinction (1994), "The working classes make a realistic or, one might say, functionalist use of clothing. Looking for substance and function, rather than form, they seek 'value for money' and choose what will 'last'... unlike the middle classes who have a degree of anxiety about external appearances, both sartorial and cosmetic, at least outside and at work" (Bourdieu 1994: 200-201). With regard to vintage clothing trend among the upper classes at the end of the twentieth Century, Bourdieu might argue that the wealthy are so comfortable in their own social status and have such "cultural capital" that they can purchase their clothes used and at thrift stores and risk looking unkempt and poor without the stigma that one who is poor and needs to shop at a thrift store might experience. However, this is no longer really the case since so many vintage clothing stores have opened and sell used clothes at high prices. Moreover, because of the tremendous popularity of vintage, it is a much more daunting task to find good prices and/or good bargains without spending a lot of time shopping. Thus, we circle back to Veblen’s theories of the leisure class where women wear clothes that indicate that they do not need to work hard for their livelihood.
Moreover, "[d]ress must not only be conspicuously expensive and inconvenient; it must at the same time be up to date" (Veblen 1912: 172). Given the passage of six or more years, our finest fashions often strike us as grotesque, if not unsightly. Our fleeting attachment to whatever happens to be the latest style rests on more than aesthetics (Veblen 1912: 178). Thus, fashions do not go out of style because the clothes themselves physically wear out, but because we come to believe that what we once regarded as beautiful fashion design has become passé.

In the time of Simmel and Veblen, there was no agreement about how changes in fashion occur, or how one style becomes the imperative requirement for dress in any particular season. Nearly one century later, how these things are determined is still something of a hegemonic mystery. However, it is generally agreed that "[i]n any age, there are some forces at work that tend to restrict or impede fashion change while other factors serve to stimulate or accelerate such change. The rate of change in any given period of history is dependent upon the balance that exists between these two sets of force" (Horn 1968: 96). James Laver made special note of this manifestation of class distinction and a timeline of fashion cyclicality in his seminal book *Taste and Fashion From the French Revolution Until Today* (1937):
The breakdown of the social hierarchy leaves every woman...free to dress as well as she can afford, with the result that the only possible superiority is the slight one of cut or material, or the short one of adopting a new fashion a little sooner than her neighbors...Fashion, in a word, filters steadily down the social scale. The actual garments which express it become less and less adequate, owing to the use of poorer material and because they are less skillfully made. A fashion very quickly becomes dowdy, and this is sufficient to induce women who can afford it to change it as quickly as possible. After awhile, it becomes worse than dowdy: it becomes hideous. And this may be confirmed by the simple process of showing to any woman a photograph of the dress which she herself wore ten years before.

In fact, the following list might be established. The same costume will be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Time After Dress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indecent</td>
<td>10 years before its time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shameless</td>
<td>5 &quot; &quot; &quot; &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outré (daring)</td>
<td>1 year &quot; &quot; &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowdy</td>
<td>1 year after its time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hideous</td>
<td>10 years after its time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridiculous</td>
<td>20 &quot; &quot; &quot; &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amusing</td>
<td>30 &quot; &quot; &quot; &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quaint</td>
<td>50 &quot; &quot; &quot; &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charming</td>
<td>70 &quot; &quot; &quot; &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic</td>
<td>100 &quot; &quot; &quot; &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>150 &quot; &quot; &quot; &quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(James Laver 1937: 254-255)

Laver's well-known and oft-referenced chart is important not only because it takes into consideration the financial capabilities of women who acquire new garments and fashions that distinguish them from their less affluent neighbors, season by fashion season, but also because of his attention to decadal and cyclical increments in which clothes are considered fashionable, have fallen out of fashion, and when they might be valued again at some point in the future.

Agnes Brooks Young, a contemporary of Laver, who wrote *Recurring Cycles of Fashion: 1760-1937*, argues that the "controlling factor in changes in women's dress is that all women desire to wear each year dresses which are sufficiently different from those of last year so as to be unmistakably recognizable by the initiated as being of the latest mode, and yet at the same time neither identical with those other women, nor so different as to be undesirably conspicuous" (Young 1937: 4). Fashion is a continuous and slow-moving process where there are innumerable, but slight variations of the previous style. The changes must be both fluid and rapid in order to outmode the fashions from the year before, but "it must be sufficiently slow to prevent the leaders from outdistancing their followers" (Young 1937: 4-5). Thus, in 1937, if there were many
different styles co-existing or being presented from one year to the next, fashion, as it was then perceived and understood, could not endure (Young 1937: 6).

Evelyn Brannon uses James Laver’s chart in her book Fashion Forecasting (2000) in order to illustrate several theories for the recurrence of fashion ideas in contemporary designs. Following Laver, Brannon writes that “[a]s a style or a look or lifestyle moves further into the past, it becomes a candidate for revival because the perception of it changes... Whatever is selected for revival tends to be something nostalgic or a campy novelty or some guilty pleasure that is currently forbidden” (Brannon 2000: 100). She specifically notes that in the latter part of the twentieth century, fashion designers “seemed to raid fashion’s closet for inspiration (Brannon 2000: 98). Indeed, styles from every decade were seen on the runways and in department stores which can be seen as a part of historic continuity marked by the continual recurrence of symbols, styles and elements of decoration that had been neglected for a period or time and became ripe for revival (Brannon 2000: 98). Nostalgia plays an important role in the revival of sartorial styles in the latter half of the twentieth century as yet another manifestation of post modernity. This will be discussed in Chapter Four.

At present, cycles go much more quickly than the fifty year increment Laver suggested as the age when a garment might first be deemed “quaint.” Clothes that have come back into vogue (which are now categorized as “vintage”) now need only be about five or ten years old. This is also telling of the greater frequency with which fashions change since the beginning of the twentieth century. As Herbert Blumer noted:

the key to the understanding of fashion is given in the simple words, “being in fashion.” These words signify an area of life which is caught in movement—movement from an out-moded past toward a dim, uncertain, but exploitable immediate future. In this passage, the need of the present is to be in march with the time. The fashion mechanism is the response to this need. These simple observations point to the social role of fashion—a role which would state abstractly to be that of enabling and aiding collective adjustment to and in a moving world of divergent possibilities (Blumer 1969: 289).
Indeed, for Blumer, changes in fashion are linked to changes in the world. One must attempt to keep up with fashion, as one must keep up with other changes in culture and society.

Interestingly, Lipovetsky is quite right to point out that in the last decades of the twentieth century, “[w]hen all lengths and widths are possible, when multitudes of styles go side by side, when vintage clothing is in style, when looking old-fashioned might be the height of fashion, it becomes difficult indeed to be categorically unfashionable” (Lipovetsky 1994: 119).

Brannon proposes that perhaps one reason why fashion has been and continues to be recycled throughout history could be labeled the “Theory of Shifting Erogenous Zones.” Here, different parts of women’s bodies are either emphasized or revealed by clothes during different historical periods and fashion therefore changes when a different part of the anatomy is emphasized (Brannon 2000: 98-99). This echoes the remarks made by Harold Koda at the Metropolitan Museum of Art who took special note of the changing emphasis on different parts of the body over time, but also the glorification of different body types as related to accompanying changes in sartorial fashion (Koda 2001: personal communication):

You know if you live long enough... You know, as I said, things don’t go back to really exactly what it was. But there is an aesthetic that’s really predicated on the forms of models really, you know, their bodies, which is a kind of lithe 18, early 20s kind of body that is not like the 80s body that was toned and more Amazon-like. It’s a very different kind of thing so that look really harks back to the late 60s through the 70s. So the bodies themselves are like that so once you put clothing on them, the clothing also looks 1970s no matter how much the designer has avoided a direct reference to that.

(Harold Koda 2001: personal communication)

The veracity of these comments were evidenced most clearly in his subsequent exhibition in 2002 entitled “Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed.” As written in the museum’s description of the exhibit:

This exhibition will offer a unique opportunity to see fashion as the practice of some of the most extreme strategies to conform to shifting concepts of the physical ideal. Various zones of the body—neck, shoulders, bust, waist, hips, and feet—have been constricted, padded, truncated, or extended through subtle visual adjustments of proportion, less subtle prosthesis, and often deliberate physical deformation.
Although this was not the primary focus of the show, it was clear from the clothes that were displayed that the cyclicity of clothes is indubitably related to fashion design over time and across cultures.

Jean Baudrillard writes as if fashion has agency and makes conscious decisions about how to go forth based on what it has made "past." For him:

Fashion is always rétro, but always on the basis of the abolition of the passé (the past): the spectral death and resurrection of forms. Its proper actuality (its "up-to-dateness", its "relevance") is not a reference to the present, but an immediate and total recycling. Paradoxically, fashion is the inactual (the 'out-of-date', the irrelevant') (Baudrillard 1993: 88).

Thus it is only when fashion "cobbles together, from one year to the next, what 'has been'" that fashion can move forward (Baudrillard 1993: 89).

As Guy Trebay, fashion writer for The New York Times, noted, one of the most frequently uttered observation about fashion is "what goes around comes around (and then keeps going, and coming, etc.)" (Trebay 2000b: B9). According to a vintage store-owner Trebay interviewed, the vintage market has grown increasingly discerning over the four decades he and his brother had been in business (Trebay 2000c). These proprietors are hardly alone in their observations. There has been much discussion having to do with the cyclicality of fashion in current popular literature that acknowledges the continuous reference to recognizable styles from the past.

Tiffany Dubin adds another dimension to the return of certain styles again and again over time by suggesting that only good things come back into fashion-- the great, flattering, classic styles from every decade never really go away at all. Because design details from six different decades can coexist beautifully in a single season, 'retro' no longer has any meaning and 'vintage' is only a matter of age. "If a garment is well preserved, well designed, and well made, it can continue its life in any decade" (Dubin and Berman 2000: 9). It is especially interesting,
therefore, to look at fashion writing from the early part of the twentieth century in order to have a
clearer picture of how much and how quickly fashion has changed.4

The cyclical nature of fashion in current critiques of designers and the lines they put out
season after season using vintage as a safety net, has led many to assert that designers have
nothing else to invent and are stylistically bankrupt. As Kennedy Fraser wrote in 1970 for her
column in The New Yorker entitled “Retro: A Reprise”:

You can’t fake innovation indefinitely, any more that you can revive k. I
revivals, view irony ironically, or camp up camp. There won’t be anything of the
seventies to revive. From this distance, the sixties—or, at least, the latter part of
them—seem to represent the last period when fashion spoke with a kind of
common voice (Fraser 1981: 241).

What makes her insights so interesting is that thirty years later, fashions from the 1960s and the
1970s are having their heyday once again, despite her skepticism that these there would not be
anything left to revive.

In the past, fashion designers have been criticized for radically changing styles on a
whim, and dictating fashion for their own personal and financial gain. This has been most
commonly reduced to complaints launched at designers for raising and lowering hemlines so
frequently in recent decades (although, currently, any length skirt is considered fashionable). Ted
Polhemus comments that “what is really remarkable is the extraordinary extent to which fashion
exists and moves ‘forward’ by recycling itself. Remarkable because, in doing so, it defines itself
as anti-fashion—blatantly undermining its intrinsic message of perpetual novelty and progress”
(Polhemus 1996: 76). In this fatalistic worldview, it is frequently said that fashion is dead and

---

4 Anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber was also interested in the periodicity in fashion as a cultural pattern. He completed his
observations of eight different measurements or dimensions of dress over a period of 76 years, from 1844-1919 (Kroeber 1919).
Having tallied his results of the measurements over this period of time he determined that no one person could be held responsible for
the changing shifts in the lengths and widths of skirts or the depth of a neckline because the recurrence of those styles did not occur
during the span of one’s life. Later, Kroeber published another study with Jane Richardson (1940). In this research, they measured
the lengths and widths of skirts or dresses, waistlines, and décolletage over a period of three centuries (1940). Here, there was no
consideration of what was happening in culture or society at the same times that the dimensions were shifting, but simply the
 provision of pages and pages of measurements and graphs. These studies actually inspired other studies by anthropologists thereafter,
such as John and Elizabeth Lowe’s application of mathematical formulations to analyze stylistic changes in women’s fashion to show
that it is “stochastic and probabilistic in nature and [that] it is in stable equilibrium” (Lowe and Lowe 1982: 521).
everything has already been done. Indeed, as James Wolcott wrote in an article in reaction to the events of September 11:

Fashion’s been over, not as a business or a pictorial romp down the runway but as a creative force and sophisticated ideal. Purveying everything from heroin chic to anal-porn chic, the trashier, trendier designs have kissed off elegance to run with the jaded tattooed. (Fashion’s also been whirlpooling in the nostalgia vortex, recycling the Belle Époque, the Pink Panther look, and the Madonna 80s at tedious intervals.)... Fashion has become extravagantly bored with itself, which is both its downfall and possible salvation.

(James Wolcott 2001: 169)

A challenging aspect of the cyclical nature of fashion for the consumer is seeing one’s past as a nightmarish present. I attribute to bell bottoms the anguish and anxiety of adolescence. As fashion moved into a narrower hem, I matured into adulthood. When bell bottoms appeared again in the early 1990s, I felt, “Oh God, my youth haunting me.”

(Andrea Siegel, author of Open and Clothed, 1999: 23)

One of the [unofficial] theories of fashion is that if you wore a style the first time around, chances are you won’t consider it as an option when it cycles back around. (As a personal example, in the 1970s I wore the wide-legged jeans we called “elephant pants.” Been there, done that. I have no interest in that style today...]

(Jane Hegland, Ph.D., Clothing, Textiles, and Fashion Merchandising, New Mexico State University, 2001)

It’s funny because one side of it is that people who’ve lived through this era, like people who grew up in the 60s and 70s, they always used to say that if you lived through it, don’t wear it. You should stay away or go back earlier so when the 70s first got popular, we had a very hard time dealing with it because we were teenagers and we wore it ourselves. And so now we say, “Oh, hate that stuff, I gave it all away.” But now, you become accustomed to it. For the younger people you for whom it’s new, it’s completely great looking stuff unlike what there is today. So there’s those two attitudes towards it, and everything is moving so much faster now. I mean even the 80s are being recycled. For younger people, it’s novel and popular.

(Interview with Lenore Newman, proprietor of Patina, NYC, 2001)

Careful what you throw away. Some of those outdated clothes you can’t believe you ever wore are highly valuable. In fact, chic vintage clothing stores bank on them... These [clothes] are most popular with women in the 20s who were mere babies when they were popular the first time around. But some older women—who wore the stuff in their teens—are revisiting the period too. “There used to be an assumption in the vintage clothing business that if you were old enough to wear something the first time it was popular, you wouldn’t want to wear it when it came around again, said Katie Rodriguez, who owns Resurrection, a vintage store with outposts in the East Village, Nolita and Henri Bendel. “I don’t think that holds true anymore. When women wear things they’ve worn before, they just reinterpret them a bit.”

Chapter Three: (Hi)stories of the Second-Hand Clothing Market

Vintage is readily available and it's just the boost your wardrobe needs to make it more versatile and individual... Once funky and low-budget—the province of starved design and drama students—the vintage world is going mainstream... The new market is all about classic cuts, timeless fabrics—the beautiful shapes that appear again and again throughout the 20th century. The quality and detailing of these non-couture, readily available vintage clothes will come as a startling revelation. Only the most expensive garments made today can touch them. (Tiffany Dubin and Ann F. Berman, Vintage Style, 2000: 8-9)

It has become obvious to anyone with an eye towards fashion in the last few decades that vintage clothing has become a seminal part of sartorial fashion's vernacular. What is so interesting is that vintage is not only popular for rebellious youth as it once was, but the popularity of the trend has spread to all parts of society, regardless of societal or cultural categorizations—from fashionistas in major urban centers to middle class homemakers in the mid-west to Hollywood stars. In an article laying out ten rules for “The New American Dress Code” as determined by a panel of women that spanned both age and geography in the United States, vintage dressing figures prominently as “Rule 7: Wear vintage, but don’t be precious about it” (Singer 2002b: 149).

Second-hand clothing has a long history on both sides of the Atlantic. How vintage has come to enjoy its enormous popularity at the end of the twentieth century is a dramatic turn of events for the industry. In the pages that follow, I will recount several different (hi)stories which I collected from proprietors of a wide array of vintage clothing boutiques—some collective observations, some personal narratives and all, interestingly, very much alike. They are not just analyses or historical accounts of the industry, but are stories. (A larger discussion about the role of narratives when talking about the preponderance of memoirs in American publishing and the recent fascination with exposing the contents of people’s closets in fashion and other popular women’s magazines can be found in Chapter Six).

---

1 It is interesting to note, however, that “[i]t’s ... issue this caution: Do not get suckered by the current commercialization of secondhand” (Singer 2002b: 149). The panel suggests that vintage should be fun and a challenge, citing the advent of designers like Imitation of Christ who put themselves on the fashion map in part by taking clothes found at thrift stores, embellishing them slightly, and charging an exorbitant price. The panelists seemingly deem this aspect of the trend wasteful and
Although there is a great deal of literature on the history of textiles and fashion, and monographs about fashion designers (much more written in the last few decades than ever before), little work has been done on second-hand clothes, especially in the United States. More scholarship seems to have been done concerning the history and role of second-hand clothing in the United Kingdom. According to Elizabeth Wilson, a prominent fashion historian, clothing made in the mid-Victorian era was expected to last longer than one might expect even the most expensive clothing made today (Wilson 1989: 38). And, they were quite expensive. In the eighteenth century in particular, "[a] wardrobe could be the equivalent to a savings account; articles of clothing were commonly used as a ready source of cash in emergencies" (Lemire 1997: 145). Indeed, if middle-class women had difficulty buying clothing because of their expense, women in the lower echelons of society could not afford to do so at all. As a result, garments of varying quality entered into the secondhand market when servants, who acquired the clothes from those for whom they worked, used them to barter for things like travel expenses or for yet another garment (Wilson 1989: 38; Lemire 1997: 2). While some maids would wear the hand-me-downs, most often they would re-sell them (Wilson 1989: 38). It was at this time that the second-hand clothing industry began to flourish.

Because poor people managed to acquire clothes of the wealthy with greater ease, Wilson notes that there was a "socially confusing appearance of the London populace" (Wilson 1989:

---

2 In the volume, *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* (1965), Geitel Winakor and Marcella Martin noted that there was a dearth of research on the "demand for used clothing relative to new clothing, or about the effect of used-clothing purchases on the clothing consumption of families" (Roach and Eicher 1965: 105-110). Thus, they studied a small community in Iowa and determined that used clothing was indeed important to the clothing consumption for some families. Other studies of used clothing focus on the sale of clothes at personal sales (such as garage sales) versus at permanent stores and the possible psychological reasons why some clothes sell better than others, such as those clothes that might be worn close to the body versus outer garments, and what kinds of clothes are purchased by different groups: male versus female, married versus single, etc. (O'Reilly et al. 1984). However, the gist of such studies is economic in nature as a means of determining how used clothing functions within a larger economy, rather than how it functions as a part of American fashion and popular culture.

3 This is apparently still a good method of attaining good quality clothes for resale or reuse. During my interview with Keni Valenti, fashion designer and proprietor of Keni Valenti Retro Couture in New York City, and a tour of his loft space chock full of high-end vintage garb, he told me, "I scored [this Halston stage outfit for Liza Minnelli] from a worker. The workers are good people to hit. Maids... I mean, a lot of people who approach me worked... There are a lot of celebrity clothes in here that were given to the workers" (Valenti 2001: personal communication).
40). Here, both classes of people were essentially wearing the same clothes and it was sometimes hard to tell the difference between the servants and their employers.

Charitable organizations began to distribute used clothing both locally and nationally, especially to rural areas where people had no access to clothing markets (Wilson 1989: 41). As the second market expanded on British soil, there started to be "an extensive export trade in second-hand men's clothing to Europe, South Africa and North and South America" (Wilson 1989: 40). The export of second-hand clothes continues today in the United States and other nations that have a lot of excess. Karen Tranberg Hansen’s ethnographic work, *Salalula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (1998), addresses the international trade of second-hand clothes that still continues today. Donated by Westerners to charitable organizations (such as The Salvation Army or The Goodwill Industries in the United States) these garments are received in places like Hansen's field-site in Zambia, and are popularly sold in local markets.4

In the 1950s, charitable organizations began emphasizing their stores instead of just distributing goods to the poor (Hansen 2000: 11). At the same time, predecessors of the hippies—the 'beats' of the early 1950s—also looked for ways to bypass the world of ready-made clothing by wearing fur coats, satin dresses and silk blouses of the 1930s and 1940s found in the rummage sales of New York (McRobbie 1988: 34). The clothes worn by the beats "issued a strong sexual challenge to the spick and span gingham-clad domesticity of the moment " (McRobbie 1988: 34). Likewise, second-hand clothes were attractive to the hippies several years later in the late 1960s, not only as a means for individuation, but also for political and economic reasons. This was only the beginning of a much more powerful sartorial movement that is often attributed to a certain segment of youth culture known as hippies.5 Indeed, there is a consensus among the few fashion historians who pay any attention to the second-hand market that the 1960s is the time when

---

4 It is interesting to note that "at present, the charitable organizations are the largest single source of the garments that fuel today's multibillion-dollar-a-year international trade in secondhand clothing" (Hansen 2000: 11).

5 Angela McRobbie goes so far as to attribute the climax of its popularity with the release of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album (McRobbie 1988: 25).
second-hand clothes became not only a valid sartorial category, but started to become more mainstream, in a kind of subversive way.

Admittedly, the idea that vintage clothing is a form of rebellion is curious. It might just be that these consumers are wearing what their parents may have worn. As Jane Hegland asks, "Can a person be truly rebellious when wearing the same sorts of styles worn by that person's parents?" (Hegland 2001: personal communication). Regarding the hippies, Kennedy Fraser wrote, "If even the symbolic costume of rebellious energy is not just a revival of a revival, the rebellion looks anemic indeed" (Fraser 1981: 242). Yet, most fashion historians and store owners agree that the hippy movement, rebellious or not, was crucial to the popularity of what was starting to be called vintage or retro clothes (not secondhand) on both sides of the Atlantic. In the 1960s and early 1970s, hippies were not really wearing what their parents wore in their youth, but rather skipped a generation—or several generations and borrowed from cultures that were deemed authentic and not contaminated by the ugliness of capitalism. The youth from that period of time "rejected the reality of the present even more enthusiastically than did their spiritual ancestors, the romantic bohemians of the 19th century. And not since the French Revolution had the rejection of a way of life, of 'established' authority, been so clearly marked in dress and appearance. Like rag pickers, the young dressed in scraps from any period and any society but their own" (Batterbury and Batterbury 1977: 370).

Assuming that not all hippies were poor themselves, some critics have asked whether their habit of rummaging through jumble sales and playing with the idea of looking poor did not patronise and belittle those who had no choice other than to wear used clothes (McRobbie 1988: 27). Here, the hippy's pension for secondhand clothes might be seen as an unintended act of class condescension (McRobbie 1988: 27).6

---

6 We are reminded here of the writings of Simmel, Veblen, and Pierre Bourdieu as discussed earlier. Thus, it might be deduced that not wearing secondhand clothes out of necessity but to reinforce one's elevated social status can indeed be seen as yet another obvious and obnoxious display of class distinction.
On the other hand, Valerie Steele writes that the hippies simply rejected contemporary fashion in a quest for authenticity:

The modern industrial world seemed to them corrupt, but surely 'authenticity' could be found in the past or in other civilizations. The romanticism of the hippy worldview naturally led them to adopt certain evocative garments, such as the fringed leather skirts and beaded headbands of the American Indians. Two basic styles were particularly significant: the ethnic look and the romantic-pastoral look. (Valerie Steele 1997: 74)

The hippies favored anything from Edwardian lace and what are commonly called "Victorian whites," to 1930s bias-cut satin evening gowns (Tolkien 2000: 80). "Attics were scoured for Granny's stiff laces, crinolines, and even her wire-rimmed glasses, as well as Grandfather's army uniform" (Batterbury and Batterbury 1977: 370). Other garments that were popular were "antique lace petticoats, pure silk blouses, crepe dresses, velvet skirts and pure wool 1940s-styled coats. In each case these conjured up a time when the old craft values still prevailed and when one person saw through his or her production from start to finish" (McRobbie 1988: 34). The desire for "for lace, long skirts, and a lavish assortment of old silk scarves, beads and hats, antique prints and shrunken Fair Isle sweaters had seemed to represent the creation not only of a lost past but also some more "natural"...communal life." (Wilson 1989: 194).

This new look in fashion came as something of a shock to the hippies' parents who had grown up in the midst of World War II and relished all the wonders of victory and a booming post-war economy after years of rations and grief. In the years immediately after World War II, the black markets for clothing which had been created as a response to war rations gave way to fleamarkets. In London, the flea markets were filled with depressing discarded goods:

For the generation whose memories had not been blunted altogether by the dizzy rise of post-war consumerism, markets for old clothes and jumble sales in the 1960s remained a terrifying reminder of the stigma of poverty, the shame of ill-fitting clothing, and the fear of disease through infestation, rather like buying a second-hand bed. Hippy preferences for old fur coats, crepe dresses and army great-coats, shocked the older generation for precisely this reason. But they were not acquired merely for their shock value. Those items favored by the hippies reflected an interest in pure, natural and authentic fabrics and a repudiation of the man-made synthetic materials found in high street fashion (McRobbie 1988: 34).
It is especially interesting to note that then, like today, entrepreneurs began to copy, mass-produce, and sell certain garments (Steele 1997: 74).

A perfect example of this entrepreneurial spirit was evidenced in a small expose entitled "Jeanealogy" in The New York Times Magazine, which depicted the evolution of embellished denim from the late 1960's to the late 1990's. Here, the author attempts to discover the origins of trends in the late 20th century since they no longer emanate from the runways (Finnerty 1999: 64). For example, embellished jeans were handmade and were a hallmark of the hippie generation. In the following decades, embellished jeans were mass produced by machine and sold in department stores concluding in the 1990's where these jeans span the apparel market. Embellished jeans designed by Tom Ford of Gucci could be purchased, for example, for $3,500, while they could also be purchased at Kmart for approximately $20.

On both sides of the Atlantic from the late 1960s onwards, small second-hand shops brought together under one roof all the clothes for which people used to have to scour in fleamarkets and at jumble sales (McRobbie 1988: 35). In the United States, however, during the 1960s and 1970s, charitable organizations such as Goodwill and Salvation Army dominated the secondhand clothing retail scene (Hansen 2000: 11). There were also a number of stores which dealt in high fashion used clothing. For example, a three-story boutique in New York called 'Encore,' which had another store in Washington, D.C., was a place where the wealthy resold or consigned their designer clothing for about one-third of the original retail price (Horn 1968: 363). One could find a $1,000 de la Renta for $333, for instance. Disposing of clothes in this manner was more financially attractive than merely receiving a tax deduction for contributions of clothing to the Salvation Army (Horn 1968: 363). Moreover, people with sewing talents could find garments of excellent quality, which could be tailored to conform to the current fashions (Horn 1968: 423).
Marianna Klaiman shared her own observations from these nascent decades of the mainstreaming of vintage clothing in New York City, which interestingly address the aesthetic or romantic draw of vintage clothing in the 1980s, versus a more fin de siècle sentiment associated with vintage clothing’s popularity:

I think the reason that vintage fashion first started being collected and looked at was in the 70s because at that point, you had a post-hippie revolution where a lot of the hippies would go to the thrift shop and pick up the Edwardian dresses or the funky clothes and wear them because it was inexpensive and it made them stand out from the crowd. Prior to that, wearing vintage fashion was something nobody did. You don’t even read about it, you don’t even hear about it, it just wasn’t something that was in society. But it’s really the hippie and post-hippie that then you start to see vintage fashion books. Harriet Love was an early dealer in New York, she wrote this book called “Vintage Chic” and it was like, “Buy your suits from the 40s, they are beautifully cut, you can wear them. She was one of these pioneers with a lot of other dealers here in New York. There was another shop called Victoria Falls at that time...Alice Underground. There were a few shops like that that started in the 70s. Also, you had the bicentennial here in America. People were looking back at historic fashion and people were getting dressed up in 18th-Century pieces. So, there was more of a popularization of vintage fashion and actually wearing it. Prior to that, you still had of course people that collected, but those were the historic collectors. Maybe they were collecting 18th century, or maybe sort of Asian textiles or special types of embroideries or beadwork. There were people at that point collecting but it wasn’t popularized. So I really see that as the era when you first see it. Then, in the 70s, it became quite costume. It was like, if you want to dress Victorian, you wore everything Victorian. And you looked like an Edwardian woman. You looked like someone from the 40s. It was more the total look and either you wore vintage fashion and were an eccentric or you didn’t. And that kind of died out in the 80s, I mean there was still always a crowd that was wearing the vintage fashion.

(Interview with Mariana Klaiman, Fashion Specialist at Sotheby’s, 2001)

Ted Polhemus also observes that in the 1980s numbers of people began to turn their sights to the past (Polhemus 1996: 67). For many people belonging to subcultures in the United Kingdom, such as the New Romantics and the Rockabillies, dressing for the future meant dressing in the past. Here, “the only real battle was that between straight retroism and Post-Modern possibility: the former undisguised historicism, the latter striving to remix the past to come up with a ‘new’ result” (Polhemus 1996: 71). To a greater extent, it is this post-modern possibility that has remained with us:

People have always looked back. What is unique about the New Romantics and their heirs is the fact that there were young people lurking in the shadow of history—specifically, the history of youth culture itself. Back in the 1950s and the 1960s, as everyone knows, if those who were young looked back, it was only
in anger, with a curled lip of disdain. Yesterday was the time of one’s parents—the time when everyone was uptight and inhibited. Tomorrow we would show them a brave new world. Post-Punk, however, with everything done that could be done,...with only the ‘No Future’ future beckoning, the only way forward for youth was into reverse (Polhemus 1996: 71).

This kind of rebellion is reminiscent of people in the spotlight, such as the outrageous rock star Marilyn Manson, who quite purposefully decided to ally himself with the Republican party. Such a move seems so very unlikely and unhip yet that makes him so much more outrageous—pushing the envelope by going backwards.

Also during the 1980s, secondhand clothing stores operating on a for-profit basis began to open at an unprecedented rate and were frequented by people from all levels of society. Importantly, the names of these stores rarely featured words like “used,” “secondhand,” or “thrift.” Rather, they targeted young professionals who wanted “high-quality clothes at modest prices or young people keen on retro or vintage fashion, punk, and rave styles” (McRobbie 1989):

In the past 20 years, the vintage-clothing market has undergone marked changes, catering of late to a fashion elite that is hungry to signal that it has acquired something that other people haven’t and can’t. Through the 1980’s, the market was fueled by sales of 50’s bowling shirts, 40’s floral housewife dresses and jackets once worn by gas stations attendants—working-class clothes from which college students could forge iconic wardrobes for very little money (Ginia Bellafante, The New York Times, 2000: 1-6)

In a period spanning forty years, from when the hippies made used clothes popular in the 1960s to present, people of all ages have come to appreciate and wear vintage clothing as a matter of course. The accounts of individuals who were at the fore of this movement in retail explaining how they became involved in the vintage clothing market in the 1980s are crucial for understanding the trajectory of the vintage clothing market, from people who have only just entered the business or, conversely, have been in the business since its nascent beginnings.

For example, Cameron Silver, owner of Decades, Inc. in Los Angeles, despite the store’s tremendous clout and popularity among the jet set of Hollywood, has only been doing retail in

---

1. Elizabeth Wilson writes that in the United Kingdom the situation was slightly different. “Second-hand clothes are no longer an expression of choice, but an unwelcome necessity. For, as poverty and unemployment have increased, so have second-hand shops.
vintage clothing for four years (Silver 2001: personal communication). As he told me, he opened his own vintage boutique because he himself could not shop for vintage in an environment that he felt was suitably modern and friendly. Mr. Silver was approached by Barneys New York to open a boutique in their Madison Avenue store on the third floor. This means that his “gently worn” vintage pieces are prominently displayed with clothes of comparable price points and popularity. At present, his vintage clothes are in league with the likes of Prada and Hermès, both of which have a huge following among the wealthiest, most stylish women, and using Mr. Silver’s word, the most “sophisticated” in New York City.

On the other hand, Laura Wills, owner of Screaming Mimi’s, a vintage clothing boutique in New York City (and former stylist to Cindi Lauper), has been in business of vintage clothing since 1978. She opened her original location in Tokyo in 1986 and has had her boutique on Lafayette Street in New York City for eight years. According to Ms Wills, vintage was appreciated and respected in Tokyo unlike anywhere else. She describes “style posse’s” in Tokyo who made up Tokyo’s youth and who especially loved everything having to do with American pop culture. In her experience, fashions from the 1940s were fashionable in the 1970s and the music and rockabilly fashions from the 1950s were also popular. At that time, Ms. Wills had much more “arty and edgier clients” and women would also wear men’s vintage suits and ties. The punk movement also helped vintage become popular in the 1980s. Ms. Wills’ experiences and insights are reflected in the accounts of some of her competitors in New York City:

> When I began in this business in 1965, the only thing that could be said about vintage clothing was that it was old and used that you had a be a little weird or theatrical to buy it, let alone wear it on days other than Halloween. Today every fashion-conscious woman and man has probably bought at least one old piece and worn it as evening or everyday clothing. In recent years vintage apparel has become a unique style of dress of people without a huge fashion allowance. And many with thousands of dollars to spend still find that the only time anyone else looks at them at a party is when they have on a special find from their favorite vintage-clothing shop. My first customers seventeen years ago were young actresses and artists with very little money, theatrical taste, and very low clothing budgets... As more antique-clothing store opened during the seventies and were written up in fashion magazines, the

No longer, though, is it such fun to search the rails for a genuine 1940s suit. Antique markets still have their little boutiques, but now the tweed suits and the silk blouses [are expensive]” (Wilson 1989: 206).
public became more aware of vintage clothing. They tested the water by buying a scarf or an accessory. The cost at this time was still minimal... When vintage clothes first began being sold by a few shops in the late sixties, you could have the pick of the Victorian blouse rack, for example, in perfect condition and for very little money... Finding old clothes is not the cheap thrill it used to be in the sixties. No more thrift-shop bargains and native flea-market dealers... no more auctions where you can find ‘everything in this box, for the lucky lady who sews at home, ten dollars.’ The message is out: Old clothes are not the same as secondhand clothes. They are fashion. They are collectible. Like antiques, they’re being sold in shops across the United States and in Europe; they’re even being auctioned at Christie’s East and Sotheby’s. Today, when the price of a decent new wardrobe practically requires a second mortgage on your house, antique clothing still costs less than comparable new clothes. And vintage clothes are much more accessible today in shops, auctions, flea markets, even some department stores, than they were ten years ago.


I started around 27 years ago, in the mid-seventies. And I started because I was a young kid. I came out of the Army. I was in Vietnam, and I was in the dry cleaning industry. After 6 months of managing a dry cleaners, we had a problem. A lot of people didn’t pick up their clothes... And there was so much clothing that I suggested to the owner that we open up a store to just sell the merchandise. So, I opened up a store and I took the merchandise from them. This was on First Avenue in New York. And everything was sold in a couple of weeks. I realized that we didn’t have what the public demanded. The stuff that I was getting from the cleaning was really modern clothing... So I started to recreate merchandise. I was the first one to start with the 3/4 length jackets for women. I took old coats and cut them up and put on zippers. So that’s how it started. I went from regular used clothing I got from the cleaners and got into vintage. And I had no idea what vintage was. I learned from the customer.

(Interview with Jack Markus, Cheap Jack’s Vintage Clothing, NYC 2001)

CJB: What made you get into “antique” clothing?

A: For the love for the clothes. The love for the history of the clothes. Number 2, I was involved with clothes when I was 14. I worked for a manufacturer in Israel... And so basically I learned a lot about cutting the material and sewing and clothing. And then my father wanted me to get into a better trade than that and wanted me to be a diamond cutter. So I cut diamonds for a few years then we left the country and came here. And basically I went right into the market and went right into the garment center and I was a salesman. The only thing is my English wasn’t that good... And then I decided to open up my own place.

CJB: But why would you choose to open a store for antique clothing?

A: For one simple reason. I did not like going to the manufacturers. I didn’t like their mentality, their mannerisms, their devious ways of doing things. I didn’t like their system. They were shylocks. These are loan sharks. It was nasty, the garment center at that time and maybe today it is just as bad... So I saw a little store here in the East Village called the Naked Grape in the early 60s and I walked in and I said you know what, this is pretty cool. I liked the people. They are kind of laid back and relaxed. Women were coming in and trying on clothes — whether the curtain is open or closed, they couldn’t care less, and it was like free love and all that... I had three stores at one time but I closed them all down because the landlords are all pigs... In the beginning, no matter what price anyone had for vintage, I was going to go below. Then there was a shop on St. Mark’s Place called The Late Show which in reality
was the $3 shop. But that made me realize that I could not stay in business because everything that people wanted, they wanted to pay $3, but I couldn’t sell everything for $3...First I’m on St. Mark’s Place, the heart of the East Village and believe it or not, first I didn’t know where to get the goodies. My niece gave me all of her old clothing. This is a JAP now we’re talking about. I mean a brat. And that was the test. The store was just about open, I was painting it myself. I opened the store on July 7, 1977—7/7/77. And I’m on a huge ladder as I’m painting and the hookers off the corner on 9th Street and Third Avenue were coming in to get hot pants and cut off denim and I didn’t even have the electricity turned on yet and they were coming in and trying them on and it was an indication that if you want to get vintage clothing in the city of New York, this was the place to get it. I mean, there were a couple of places uptown but they were expensive. I mean they were more like little boutiques—consignment, or they would come down to us and buy a piece or two and then bring them up there and quadruple the price because the people up there who shop up there have more money.

(Interview with Andy, owner of Andy’s Chee-Pees Antique Clothing, NYC. 2001)

I think it started when I realized that the only life to have was an artistic life. And that happened when I was quite young—like 7 or 8. I was raised by my mom and my aunts. My mother was old to have me and she was the youngest of a large number of females. And they were much older than her. So my experience was being around people who were from a generation or two before me. The average age was 65, more or less. So I learned to sew as a matter of course...So, there were all these aunts of mine and one of them was a floozy and they were school teachers and they were all so eccentric and all of them dressed to the hilt. And that’s why I can look at any one part of a garment and I know the blouse and the shoes and the hat that goes with it because I can think of all my aunts and what they would have worn. So, I had a good chance to see the kinds of things they accumulated and that was a big advantage for me...I went to art and design high school, and then I went to Pratt and I was crazy for sewing and making things, so then I graduated from college and I got a Masters degree in art education...But I still continued to be crazy for sewing and I started to collect antique sewing books...I got a store and I lived in it and while I did that I ended up working in a movie as an actress for a certain amount of time and when that dried up I just put a sign on the store and it said “All Kinds of Sewing.” And I had an old machine and a little sleeve board I put up a curtain and a year or so later I started making custom clothes for people and a year or so after that I was discovered because I started specializing in small sizes and was discovered by a small-size Madison Avenue boutique. So, I ended up making an alliance with them and was written up in some magazine and Sally Field was wearing my clothes...And I always knew about the vintage clothing business because when I was young and innocent, right after I started my “All Kinds of Sewing” business, I was discovered by some marvelous, eccentric Jewish crooks. A family. And they were lovable people. They were big flamboyant Jewish people. And they made a deal with me. They were rag dealers and I was going to develop patterns based on some very esoteric bomber jackets that they had in their collection. And that was in 1972 or 1973. So I copied them and then, even though I knew that they were crooks, I also knew that this was a big opportunity for me as a young person where I could be completely in charge and be forced to go to a lot of different places and I had to learn how to grade...And this was in Brooklyn. And everything that we made was going to be made out of used denim out of the rags, which was very abundant at that time, not like now. And fur lining, which was very abundant. We bought 100,000 pounds of fur at a shot...it was the olden days, you don’t even know what it was like. So I could see that and understand it. And they told me to go into Manhattan and go to the garment district and hire some furriers because we had bought a fur machine. We went to one place and they showed me how to thread. Then we went to another place and they showed me some of the tricks. Then he
takes me to another place where he figures we’re going to buy it and we buy it and take it back and the two guys take it in and I must have spent the next five hours sewing... And I was proud of that because even though they cheated me, it was a big opportunity. I also learned a lot of different ways that you can get cheated which is very valuable... So that’s how I learned all about the rag business and all the while, I still had my store and I started doing the denim skirt trick for people, when you take a pair of jeans and turn it into a skirt. And that’s really what started me making the custom clothes for people. And I started buying my denim from a store down there where there was this guy and we were in love with each other and he started helping me get vintage clothes for the store. And I would make him shirts out of antique fabric and he would find magic pieces of fabric like a gathered skirt, black background with spools of thread floating in space in brilliant colors—out-of-this-world fabric. He would find me all kinds of magic stuff and I would make him magic shirts, like reversible shirts... At one point, I changed my store around, filled it up with vintage clothing and then it was a little bit rough so I hired someone to work in the store and I worked in the industry for a while... as a pattern-maker. After 6 months I was the head pattern maker... and in all this time I still had the store... Once the store became vintage clothing, then I named it Stella Dallas. Stella Dallas is a very famous melodramatic movie—like a soap opera movie and it actually became a soap opera in the 50s—the most famous soap opera on radio. And every woman at the time that school let out would listen to Stella Dallas. The movie is about a poor girl who gets married to a rich guy but it turns out that they are incompatible. But they have a daughter. So she is a great mom, but she is coarse and it is hinted that she is carrying on with somebody... When her daughter is at college age, her mother is on the college campus looking for her daughter wearing a 40s suit, a 40s hat, a 40s fur runner, and then she comes upon Laura in the soda shop, and she overhears someone tell her daughter that a weird eccentric woman was looking for her. At that moment, Stella Dallas realizes that she has to remove herself from her daughter’s life if she is to be happy... So that’s why we named the store Stella Dallas. And Stella Dallas sounds good... That was before Barbara Streisand and Bette Midler were creating their vintage looks. And why were they doing it? Like, they couldn’t afford to play the game the same way everyone else did so they played the game using their brains and their talent rather than their money. They were the first people to popularize wearing it because back then, if you admitted that you bought something from a thrift store it was like a shame. That’s the transition in the late 60s and then that sort of parallels the development of the hippies. When I was just going to college. So Barbara Streisand and Bette Midler were the first people on the horizon, were the first people who did it, admitted it and created outlandish and pointed looks. They were wearing 40s dresses, long velvet coats... Like in the early 70s... like today, if you wanted to buy a beautiful 40s rayon dress, you could definitely get it. Then, it was like buffalo hides. They were just so abundant that people cut them up and made blouses with one part this and one part that, it was just so abundant. 1940s ties--People would take 20 of them and make a skirt—on the bias sometimes. Really cool. People would make outfits that never existed before.

(Interview with Carol Atkin, owner of Stella Dallas, NYC, 2001)

Basically I got into the vintage market because of the niche aspect, in that no one was doing it with a sense of fashion. People were selling used clothing but it was just that—used clothing and it wasn’t vintage and it wasn’t presented as a fashion statement. I was into vintage clothing with my partner Gerard and there wasn’t really a good outlet for us to get our stuff.

(Interview with Seth Weisser, Co-Owner of What Comes Around Goes Around, NYC, 2001)
I always wore vintage clothes. In college, in the late 60s and early 70s, I didn’t like anything new. I just didn’t. So I used to go to all the vintage shops and the Salvation Armies and the thrift places and I remember getting a 1940s nightgown... And I enjoyed shopping that way. My uncle was in the rag business so-to-speak. The rag warehouses. A lot of stores, a lot of people who sell for quantity, like the T-shirts, they get them from rag warehouses which are huge huge buildings throughout the U.S. that collect tonnage of clothing. Like the Salvation Army or Goodwill or those places, they have stuff that is out on their floor for a month. They get new stuff and have to get rid of the old. They bale it up and then they sell it by the pound. So rag warehouses buy it by the pound and then they have big conveyor belts and they break it down and this goes to South America and this goes to Africa and all of it gets used, and there is a vintage department because vintage pays so much more than any other grade. So, my uncle worked in one of those places. He was like a broker for one of those warehouses. So I was always exposed to those quantities of underground items, like pea coats and U.S. Navy 13-button pants, and it was just always available and I always wore it. And for many years, my husband and I were in the theater. And we always wore costumes, we always wore vintage and so it was always interesting to me. And then my husband had an accident and he couldn’t do anything. So, to try to get his spirits up, we went shopping and we started buying stuff. And we just bought stuff that was appealing, we bought a lot of different things. And then we set up at 26th Street because we had a loft on 27th Street and we lived down there. And one thing led to another. I mean, we were still living on our earnings in the theater and this was just a hobby. And out of everything that we sold, it seemed that the clothing was what we were best at. And then when we decided that we didn’t want to live in the city anymore, we started our business full-time and for many many years in our business, we didn’t do what everybody else did. We didn’t have a store in the East Village, and didn’t do the big shows. We set up a college campus tour. We took 18 colleges and universities and we would do it with student activities groups and they would get a percentage of whatever we would make so they would be funded and we would make our living that way. But that was a lot of work! But we enjoyed doing it. We went as far as Chicago... But it was very exhausting... So aside from the fact that we were getting older, we stopped going to college campuses. You know you get a feeling. You walk onto a college campus and there is an excitement there? And like they can’t wait for you to put everything out? And it’s just fun for everybody and at some point there was a turning point and that is just not there anymore. I mean when you bring it down a level to a mass-availability, we’d get kids on campus who wanted flannel shirts. But they could get it anywhere. Cheap! Anywhere! If you were willing to go to a thrift shop, you could get it there. If were willing to go to Salvation Army you could get it there. If you were willing to go to Costco, you could get it there. It just depends on where you would shop.

(Interview with Alice Lindholm, Right to the Moon Alice, Cooks Falls, NY, 2001)

We didn’t start out as a clothing store. We opened about 10 years ago next door and we sold furniture and knickknacks, basically like atomic age kitsch stuff, like abstract lamp shades and stuff. We didn’t start selling clothing and that was basically dictated by the raise in our rent and everything. Because clothing is just more lucrative than furniture. Yeah, because people will only buy one couch but they will buy 20 pairs of shoes. There are people that come in here and buy a pair of shoes at least once a week. See, Gigi and I are both compulsive shoppers. It’s really how we got into doing this in the first place. I mean, vintage clothing is just something else to shop for. When I was in college I lived in a dorm in Ohio and when I got there I was so miserable and I spent a lot of time in my room and one day a bunch of kids of kids were going to the thrift store and I tagged along. And I started buying a lot of stuff and I put it into a storage space for the summer and then when I came back, instead of going back to the storage
space which was a pain in the ass, I just went back to the thrift store and I got more stuff. By the time I finally got expelled from college, I had this huge storage space filled with junk and I filled up a truck and I brought it back here but it was so expensive to store it and I kept shopping for my bedroom at home. Then I met Gi who was living in NJ at the time and she told me about these great thrift stores in NJ... She has been collecting shit since she was a little kid. She grew up next to a flea market, and she has been collecting stuff since she was 8 years old. So her parents’ basement and attic are full of stuff. She’s an insane collector. Much much crazier than I am. She is a packrat. So, we started selling at the flea market because we accumulated too much stuff and when we started living together, it was just too much. This is about 12 years ago. So we were selling stuff at the flea market for about a year and it started raining every Sunday for 5 our of 7 Sundays one summer and I thought that it was crazy and so we quit our jobs and opened up a store and our rent was only $650 a month and selling at the flea market was $90/week and you have to pay rain or shine. So, the amount of extra days that we could stay open with the store... I mean I had never thought about doing anything before and then I thought that anyone could open up a store. It doesn’t matter how cold it is or how rainy it is and people always need to find stuff. And then we realized that it was a drag to have to deliver furniture, up the stairs and stuff, it was no fun. But you never have to deliver a blouse. You never have to deliver a pair of shoes.

(Interview with Justin, co-owner of Atomic Passion, NYC, 2001)

MD: I've been in the vintage clothing business since 1980. I used to work at Canal Jeans, and I was hired to start out in the vintage department. I always liked vintage clothing as a young girl, so I thought that it would be a cool job and I worked there for a couple of years and then I left there because the woman that I worked with opened Alice Underground so I came over here. And the first store opened in 1984 and that was uptown on 78th and Columbus Avenue. It was all vintage clothing. Nothing really second-hand which it seems that now it is mostly second-hand clothing coming in... But then I worked for Alice Underground for 3 years and then I went out to California and I worked at a store called American Rag and I stayed there for about 6 years and then I came back and in that time, this downtown store had opened so this downtown store has been here about 15 years and I have seen a lot of different changes... I was behind the scenes. I was the picker, the grader, buyer... A grader is when you get a bunch of clothing, you go through them and grade it into different grades. Like a number 'one' grade would be like a perfect piece. A number two would be maybe something that has a few little things wrong with it. A number three would be like bin, trash, no good. We might take it apart and keep the zipper or something. I was just 24 years old then and everything I wore was vintage and it was like head-to-toe vintage and it was affordable and it was there. You could find it. You could dress up in 60s or you could dress up in 50s. That was the scene at that time because the heavy punk thing was coming in and people were dressing that way that was different instead of dressing in the usual department store clothes. So people I hung out with in the 80s, in Manhattan anyway, were into vintage heavily and you could find the stuff... People I was hanging out with were either dressing that way constantly all the time or dressing that way to go out at night like wearing a 60s cocktail dress with stiletto heels or something that just had its own style because there was the punk movement and the new wave movement and my husband at the time was a musician so that whole scene, we were all in it. And everyone around us was dressed like that. It was very cool...

CJB: What was it like when you were working in California?

MD: No, California was more western. When I went out to CA, I got into a more Western look, like rockabilly look. And also vintage cowboy boots, denim, blue jeans, like the big-E Levis and just that fit, the really dark blue
denim look. And I felt really comfortable with that look for me because at that point I was getting older, and I was married, and I was going to have a baby, so I had to leave that stuff over there and just move on... But the store I worked at, there were a lot of young girls who were totally into the rockabilly look and the scene with Betty Page haircuts and the whole look. Whereas here, that whole look was almost done with. That whole new wave thing was almost over. Because the 80s look that is so in now, I was nowhere near that look. I mean that look was for Guido girls out in Queens and New Jersey... And the ones that were really trying to look cool, they were just trying too hard. They looked really trashy with the acid wash and all that. And then in California, they were into the vintage also, but a different feeling of it and then I moved back here and things were happening where people were into the 1970s look. And I had grown up with that look and I was not going there. I did it once, never again. And that is still pretty big. I mean, everyone who comes in here usually buys 70s stuff or even 80s stuff now that we are getting in and the really old vintage stuff, like the turn of the century styles and the 20s and 30s and 40s, since we don’t find it anymore you get a customer in here who is into that look and buy that piece... it’s just that the average customer now wants 70s look or 80s look.

(Interview with Maureen Disimile, Manager, Alice Underground, NYC, 2001)

Well, actually, when I first started my store, which was in 1981, the reason I started it was because my mother had always collected things and her dream was always to have a store and growing up in this neighborhood [in the East Village]. Well, I went away for about a year and a half and when I came back, I had no real career in mind and I had seen how the neighborhood had changed. There used to be a lot of Polish people, a lot of older people, and then when I came back there were a lot of younger people. And when I first started my store, I had less clothing and I had more what you’d call tchotchkes you know, dishware and linens and things like that. And over the years, I realized that my interest was more in the clothing and of course, vintage clothing was more and more expensive and so at some point a few years back, I changed the focus from glassware to clothing because there was more of an interest in it and women were more likely to buy a hat and gloves and shoes than dishes and candlesticks.

(Interview with Delanee Koppersmith, proprietor of Cobblestones [vintage clothing], NYC, 2001)

This business is about 4 years old, but I have been shopping at thrift stores since I was a kid. I had a handful of things my whole life, like maybe a rack full of stuff, of women’s garments, because my mom used to take me, when I was a kid, near the 59th Street Bridge, there were great thrift stores in the 60s. And in the 60s, and I guess in the 50s, too, thrift stores were not considered a place to go to because of illness and who would want to wear somebody else’s clothes. People would be really horrified. So to even walk into one of those places was really risky that you might get diseases. You know, this is what they would say. So my mom used to get her Chanel suits for like $3. This is when they were selling clothing that they thought, who would really want somebody’s old clothes? You know nobody really collected clothing then. Clothing really didn’t really start getting expensive or collectible until the 90s. Then the market just went nuts. I think because there is a lack of good things in the market to buy so the baby boomers were growing up and wanted to look like their parents. You know the market in terms of design—all these McDonalds type fashions. You know, McDonalds, Wendys, Burger King, it’s very like a fast-food industry. And two companies kind of own it all and then the young creative people and there are many of them I’m sure across the world could never get anywhere because there is a politics of fashion... This was an accident. This is not something that I really wanted to do. After the Japanese stopped, and I said I would never get into fashion again, I
decided to paint. That’s what I really wanted to do, I wanted to be an artist because all of my peers when I was a kid had become famous artists—like Keith Haring and Andy Warhol. Those were people I hung out when I was a kid and they all were super famous… But I was badly involved with drugs at the time, but I was meeting people and they were just loving me because I am like this legend from New York and I have this underground following and they all know me from years back—the older people anyway and they wanted to help me but again, it was really political, probably more political than the fashion industry… So I just needed to make some money. So here I am painting from about 1990 to about 1994 and really messed up on drugs and I couldn’t work and I was on welfare and the welfare department only gives you enough money to live. So I needed to get out of this rut so I went into rehab and I got cleaned up and then I got out and needed to make money but I couldn’t work 9-5 because I had this whole life of never working 9-5 so I figured let me go into my apartment and I had a lot of great stuff there and I brought it to the flea market and I set up a booth and what’s easier to carry—a dress or a chair? And I was getting the same amount of money for the dress as I was getting for the chair. So I called up what little people were left—who were still living from my earlier days and I asked them if they had any clothes in their closets from the 70s. So friends of mine were giving me stuff and I cut them in for the money. Then it started snowballing. Meeting people like stylists and designers at the flea market and from there I had to stop and get realistic and I realized that it was really a business so I took this loft. But I really didn’t want to do it. But it’s so easy for me that I don’t have to think about it because it is all so natural to me. So it’s not a struggle and I have met the most interesting people doing this and now I think I want to become a designer again. That’s my newest thing now.

(Interview with Keni Valenti, fashion designer and proprietor of Keni Valenti Retro Couture, NYC, 2001)

Perhaps it is because of the enormous success of up-scale resale stores such as these that true thrift store chains such as Goodwill and Salvation Army have stepped up to the plate and made their stores more attractive. They, too, saw an increase in their business, so much so that their success warranted front-page coverage in the business section in The New York Times (Kaufman 2000):

Secondhand stores, once the passion of an eccentric minority, are becoming a mainstream activity. In addition to the determined scavengers who have long hunted for vintage dresses and side tables at flea markets, some consumers are now looking to the resale industry as a cheaper way to buy everything from computers to designer jeans to Sub-Zero refrigerators… In recent years, businesses ranging from tiny thrift stores to giant non-profit charities to pawn shops have upgraded store design, layout and organization of goods. Goodwill Industries International, for example, has added coffee bars to a half-dozen stores and has begun putting couches in its used-book areas so customers can loll about.

(Kaufman 2000: C1-C23)

In addition to the beautification of thrift stores and the proliferation of vintage clothing boutiques around the country, particularly in urban centers like New York and Los Angeles, other means of acquiring vintage clothing have cropped up to satisfy the seemingly ever-growing demand for
quality vintage goods. For example, Madeline Meyerowitz, a former Manhattanite with an intense fondness for fashion, followed her boyfriend to St. Louis. There, she discovered to her dismay that there was no place for her to buy vintage clothing and was provoked to create a website specializing in high-end vintage clothing for other die-hard fashionistas who were in the same sartorial predicament (Comita 2001: 248). Meyerowitz founded Enokiworld.com, an online vintage clothing business. Having been in the business for two years, her site gets two million hits per month and does caters to everyone from Hollywood actresses, to fashion stylists, to fashionistas, to housewives” (Marech 2001: 4).

Michelle Slatalla, a freelance writer, wrote about buying the kind of clothes that would give her an incentive for getting out of her pajamas in the morning, since she did her work at home. After weighing her options with Dr. Jane Hegland, a professor of fashion merchandising at New Mexico State University, they mutually agreed that perhaps what she needed was “a vintage dress, a well-sewn vestige of an earlier era that would clearly label [her] as an individual of superior taste” (Slatalla 2000: G4). Since she did not know where to shop for vintage or even what to look for, she did a search on Google.com and came up with 92,400 hits (Slatalla 2000: G4).

The internet has become crucial for those dealers and store owners in the vintage clothing retail market. Ebay.com (simply called “Ebay”), the ubiquitous online auctioneer, is a great resource for finding vintage. It has been embraced by fashion followers who either collect specific designers or who cannot find quality items in their hometowns. If store-owners do not get a lot of traffic in their boutiques, they have the added the sometimes very lucrative option of selling some of their pieces either on own sites or on Ebay. In the reverse, many boutique proprietors also use Ebay to increment their own stock of merchandise instead of employing pickers or going to rag warehouses to re-stock. Auction houses such as Sotheby’s and Doyle New York now use their web-sites either to have online auctions or to promote their costume and
textile sales with photos of every piece in a block (Klaiman 2001: personal communication; Reeder 2001: personal communication).8

It should be noted that vintage garments are now sold at “top-shelf designer shops” (See Figure 3.1) (Wolff 2002: 21):

![Figure 3.1: Norma Kamali's Boutique](image)

That vintage clothing is trendy is not breaking news; hipsters and the style elite have been parading around in decades-old Levi's and extinct Pucci dresses for years. However, it used to be that if you wanted time-honored duds, you had to visit indie boutiques and thrift stores, usually below 14th Street. Today, walk into any number of the city's brand-name prime retailers, and hanging alongside the new, you’ll find an impressive selection of the old. Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, Kenneth Cole, Tommy Hilfiger, and many other bigwigs from who we expect Great New Things are suddenly giving premium rack space to bygone garb. Vintage, it appears, has gone corporate. (Wolff 2002: 21)

Prada, known primarily as a fashion forward brand, has also cowed to the overwhelming interest in all things vintage. In an article regarding the long-awaited grand opening of the Prada store in SoHo in New York City, Ginia Bellafante and Guy Trebay question the financial stability of the company and the enormous expenditure for such an elaborate boutique given the global economic

---

8 Sotheby’s hired Cesar Padilla and Radford Brown to be their preferred dealer/associate, while they are also the proprietors of the tony vintage clothing store, Cherry, in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Thus, Brown and Padilla had the best of both worlds. They shopped internationally for goods for their own boutique that specializes in clothing from the 1970s. However, when they found
downturn in 2001. Although Mr. Bertelli and Ms. Prada, the owners of the Prada label, claim that their brand is still vital and relevant, it is curious that they would sell clothes from just a few (and perhaps more influential) seasons ago alongside their current collections in their brand new landmark boutique.

Getting the Goods: Rag (Wear)houses, Pickers and Luck

Investigating the vintage clothing industry and becoming familiar with the plethora of stores and boutiques around the country beg questions such as: “Where do all the clothes come from?” and “How do the store owners replenish their stock and create and maintain their niche?” For thrift stores such as Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries, it is obvious that their stock is maintained by donations from people cleaning out their own closets or the drawers of a deceased relative. Needless to say, they are not tremendously picky about what they put on their sale floors, despite any beautification that the store may have undertaken. Conversely, Rita Watnick, granddaughter of the designer of the renowned Lilli Ann line in the 1940s (which itself has its own loyal following among those who collect vintage), reveals that one of her secrets for having such an astounding stockpile of vintage which will ensure her boutique’s success for years to come is to put “her best new clothes into storage until they are aged to perfection” (Harper’s Bazaar 2001: 170).

How does one actively seek out second-hand clothing that is not only of good quality, but also undamaged, and moreover, in style (again)? Many store-owners hire people known as pickers to assist them in finding vintage clothes and other objects. Frequently, pickers will travel off the beaten path and visit thrift stores and estate sales because the supplies in and around urban centers have grown scarce. Indeed, there is a growing dearth of vintage clothing because of its growing popularity. Following are accounts of some boutique owners who shared with me (albeit sometimes reluctantly) their (secret) methods of finding garments:

---

pieces that are of a particular quality, are known to sell well on the internet, and would not be appropriate for their store, they can still profit by selling those clothes via their relationship with Sotheby’s.
We have a warehouse where we get a lot of clothing and we also get stuff from estates and different dealers like ourselves who bring us stuff and also Barbara, my boss, goes to Brookfield and big flea markets also.

(Interview with Maureen Disimile, Manager, Alice Underground, NYC, 2001)

The demand for Levi's was huge, even then. Remember that when tweed coats were in style in the 80s, we used to knock off a thousand coats a week. On a Saturday, 250 or 300 coats. The owner of Antique Boutique came to me and made me an offer to come to his warehouse to buy from him and not to go to this other particular warehouse where I am buying because I used to clean that guy out and I said to him, "Harvey, the 25 or 30 coats that you are offering me are going out in an hour." It was different times. The competition was different in those times... We had a war last week in the warehouse where 10 people stood by the conveyor belts, and the clothes are coming by, a woman was standing there for two hours and didn't take a thing. But in the meantime, I had a full barrel already. Another man already had filled up a barrel. We both went to the owner of the company and said "Get her out of here. We don't want her here," because if she takes that one special piece away from us it's not fair. I'm buying 500 pounds worth of clothes and she is going to buy 3 pounds. There have been certain measures taken already to change that.

(Interview with Andy, owner of Andy's Chee-Pees Antique Clothing, NYC, 2001)

We get all of our stuff from a million places because we have been in the business for 20 years. And we are incredibly reliable and loyal. And so if we buy from somebody, we always give them a fair price and we always pay as we go. We never ask for credit. And we are always very predictable like if there is a certain warehouse, they will know that we will come in and we will spend a certain amount every single time we go in and absolutely be no trouble at all. And it's just because that is the way that we would like to be treated. Just like everything else. There are a lot of very disgusting people that are in the business that will cut your heart out. We had one dealer who put sugar in our gas tank because he was jealous of the business and destroyed our truck. And he did it to a whole bunch of other people as well. There are really despicable people in this industry like everywhere else. I try to keep myself a little bit separate from the mainstream because I don't want to be influenced by what everyone else is doing and feel that that's what I have to do. And so living up here, which is not the reason why we live up here, I keep an eye on fashion and I talk to people and I listen and I look at the economic times and I see what's coming and then I go into a warehouse and I neutralize myself and when I pull, it's totally instinct... So we get it from rag warehouses, a few, not too many, and they have changed dramatically. And we never get first pick at these places. Even though we are loyal to them, they are not necessarily loyal to us. They save a certain amount that we absolutely have to have. It used to be that you would go in vintage and you would put it on a scale and it would be by the pound and you would buy it. And it's not like that anymore. You go in, everything is graded already, and when you pick things out it's by the piece and it's not cheap... We have pickers as well. In fact this Wednesday, I am going up to one of my pickers who just bought a 30 foot truck, filled to the teeth with 60s and 70s clothes. She says there was no room in the truck. That is a lot of clothing... This is a very funny story. My trunk right now is filled with the absolute last bits of this. There was a man and a woman—husband and wife—who had a costume rental business somewhere in the Carolinas or something like that. And they got divorced and in the settlement they were forced to divide everything from the business. So she took half of the inventory, the lesser half I'm sure, and gave it to him. It was a very acrimonious divorce. So, to be spiteful, he took it. He took two tractor trailer loads and for some reason it ended up in the East
Hampton airport—these two tractor trailer loads of clothing—tons and tons of clothing. And he left. So in the rain and the snow and the heat and the cold and they tried to track him down so he would claim it and nothing happened so it went to the dump. So it goes to the dump in East Hampton and you have never seen a dump like this. This is a dump that’s really like a Salvation Army. It’s separated into categories—people throw out amazing things there. And there were pickers and there is a section for appliances, there is a section for clothing and there is a section for furniture...And people make a living because it is the Hamptons! So this one picker is at the dump everyday and the guy called her and she probably feeds like 200 cats a day and she just has an alternative life and she doesn’t seem unhappy and they pop open a container and once she started picking, then other people started picking and there were tons of people and mounds of clothing and she filled up two trucks of her own with this stuff and this other person I know, took a bunch and went to 26th Street and just sold it and so what they considered to be the best things—the condition of these things were not great because things would on hangers with pins and you would pull and things would rip and so I was working on this play so she called and said that she had all these 1940s suits and so we went to her house and she had about 200 suits from which I was able to take about 14 but the rest were all just destroyed. And my husband went back the next day and he got all these amazing suits and jackets, all left over from this dump at the dump. And these things had never been out because they didn’t understand the men’s clothes and they didn’t know who to sell it to or how to price it. It was just sitting. Files and piles of stuff...So anyway, we know this woman in Utica and she gets into a lot of houses up there and it is not a wealthy area, but for film, the stuff is good because it is general merchandise. Like she will get a lot of dead stock.

(Interview with Alice Lindholm, co-owner of Right to the Moon Alice, Cooks Falls, NY, 2001)

People sell me stuff, I shop online now, I go to flea markets, I go to shawls, I go out of town, I go to stores, like smaller stores that aren’t that expensive in New Jersey and stuff. I don’t need to do much travelling now though because of the internet. I would have considered doing that years ago but I usually got people sending me big boxes of stuff and now I can see the pictures first that they send to me on the internet, and it’s a lot easier, but it takes up a lot of my time.

(Interview with Elisa Casas, owner of 1909 Vintage, NYC, 2001)

SW: Basically, my partners and I have traveled the country for more than eight years, road tripping, flying to places and developing relationships with dealers around the country to find things for the store.

and there wasn’t really a good outlet for us to get our stuff...[U]sually we go to other stores and dealers because we are looking for specialized stuff. I mean, thrift stores you can get lucky from time to time but more often than not, for the kinds of things that we are looking for, it’s better to go to a dealer. Or we buy from pickers. We have pickers in 20 states throughout the country.

CJB: So you just tell the pickers that you are interested in jeans or whatever and then they look for that specifically?

SW: Yes, but the designer stuff does not come from the picker network, but from more established stores throughout the country and internationally.

(Interview with Seth Weisser, What Comes Around Goes Around, NYC, 2001)

It’s hard. I have people pick for me, but at the purchase moment, I am the one who picks...Years ago, when the business wasn’t as popular, there were also accumulated bales. Thousand pound bales that just sat around for 20 or
30 years and sometimes I would buy a whole bale and I would say, "Oh my God! Look at this gorgeous stuff!" and it has been sitting in storage for almost 40 years and so I would open it up and I would find 20s and 30s. Today, they’re not available. That’s why when you look at the 20s and 30s, they will be 5 times more expensive and the quality and availability are not there anymore... But I’m sure that there are some stores that make quality. You pay a lot more for it today. The material that they use today is totally different. They mix the fibers today with nylon because the public likes it to stretch. And that nylon or dacron or polyester, is not good combination for the survival of the garment. The clothes that are made of natural fibers will survive if they’re taken care of.

(Interview with Jack Markus, Cheap Jack’s Vintage Clothing, NYC, 2001)

Yes, well, I have been doing this for so long. I’ve come to know a lot of older people and I might have bought something from Mrs. Goldstein for instance, years ago, and then her neighbors, you know, they were cleaning out their closets, or moving and they know that they have some value now and she knows she could use the money and she knows that she’s never going to wear them again, so I get a lot of things that way, through private people, you know?

(Interview with Delanee Koppersmith, owner of Cobblestones, NYC, 2001)

[When I first opened the store,] I didn’t work a full week and went two mornings a week to go, what we call, picking. Now I work much more in the store because I make things out of things. Because you can’t get much anymore and I have to beat the system. It’s very hard to get very nice stuff. So, like today, I bought a really good lounge lizard jacket. It’s charcoal gray with pink corduroy, one of those really cool 50s things in beautiful condition... What I go for is the 40s and 50s. I’m looking for things that people can wear right now that are in great condition and not costumey whatsoever. I specialize in women’s clothing. I don’t want to sell designers—I don’t want to get into that because I think that it is a phony issue. Like you could find a Claire McCordell and it could be the stupidest dress in the entire world and to get into that speaks of snobbism and it’s a false god because I sell the highest quality possible. The best fabrics in really good condition, excellent sewing... Then, everything was so abundant. And there was a transition phase there. I really started buying vintage clothing when I was in college, so that is like, in 1963. I saw it and understood that it was great and for $10 you could come home with three shopping bags loaded with stuff. I still have jewelry that I bought on those expeditions that’s great... Like when I was working for that Jewish family, the level of the rags and the consistency of just finding... When I used to go picking, one thing that I would buy out of let’s say 40 to 80 pounds would be enough to pay for the trip. Completely. And now I have to fight for every single thing that I get. I have to fight so hard and some of the people that you have to deal with are blech. Sometimes I have to travel. But everything changes. Like now my problems are over. I found this wonderful wonderful place in Ohio untouched, under a rock. [Ms. Atkin talks about how Andy from Andy’s Chee-Pees hates her more than anyone else in the business in New York because of their run-ins at the Rag Warehouses]. Sometimes we cross over in the things that we want. We are all in competition for the leather coats and for cool shirts for guys and certain shaped coats for girls. But if it’s a cross-over, they would help them and they would help me. It’s sort of fun, even though it’s work.

(Interview with Carol Atkin, owner of Stella Dallas, NYC, 2001)

“We get a lot of our clothes through private appointments,” said [Cesar Padilla, co-owner of Cherry, a high end vintage clothing store in Manhattan] adding that Cherry handles all the incoming fashion properties for Sotheby’s.
"The women in New York City are insane about letting go of things. They hold onto clothes for sentimental reasons or something, and then they just get to the point where they have to clean everything out and they'll call and sell them to us."


Acquiring clothes, therefore, runs the gamut from those who actively (and sometimes desperately) look for quality vintage clothing by hiring pickers, to combing the internet, to going in person to rag warehouses, to going to estate sales, to those store-owners who are sought out by people wanting to rid themselves of their clothes. As with anything, it seems that once a boutique or store has gained a reputation and has a certain following, they do not need to do as much work as those store owners who are in the middle of the road. Then again, Maureen Disimile's experience at Alice Underground is somewhat incongruous. That store, which has been in business for years and years and is situated in a prominent location in SoHo, is a mainstay in the New York vintage clothing market. That Alice Underground is having trouble maintaining a stock of good quality garments, and the questionable successes of other stores of that ilk and all in the same neighborhood, such as Andy's Chee-Pees, Cheap Jack's and Antique Boutique, at first seems surprising. In fact, however, I think that it speaks to yet another shift in the industry—one in which stores that may once have had a tremendous following and an indisputable reputation decades ago, cannot hold a match to the selection and cache of the newer boutiques. The desire for a different kind of vintage and a different kind of shopping experience, it appears, has made some of these stores verge on obsolescence and has elevated others.

*Why is Vintage in Vogue?*

Actors from many different segments of the vintage clothing market all have their own ideas about the influx of vintage clothing into mainstream fashion. As discussed above, only two decades ago "[t]he vintage world was still a tiny place inhabited by a handful of pioneering retailers and the arty clientele—often women in the fine or performing arts who were anxious to set themselves apart from the common horde" (Dubin and Berman 2000: 9). Now vintage is
worn by people across a great spectrum of class and culture and the theories for why this is so vary quite a bit. Vintage is no longer simply about buying clothes that were owned and worn by someone else in order to save money. It is also not for people who claim to have no interest in fashion or in being fashionable. There are myriad reasons that are interrelated for why this trend has resurfaced to such a great extent in recent years, in addition to my own assertion that it is related to fin de siècle angst.

Some people believe that the popularity of vintage is a reaction to the mass production of clothes and the need for people to express themselves. Most of the styles in stores today look remarkably similar, despite the brand or the price. Thus, it is argued that people wear vintage as a way to make themselves stand out in a crowd and show how creative you are. “It’s about having what nobody else can have—about looking wonderful while not looking like everybody else” (Dubin and Berman 2000: 13). While in the 1990s people were obsessed with brandishing designer labels, it is thought that at the beginning of the new millennium, people are more concerned with authenticity (Wolff 2002). Not only is it “cooler” to say that you are wearing vintage, there is little chance that you will appear at the same social function or tony café wearing the same jacket as the woman at the next table (Wolff 2002: 22). Rita Watnick, concurs that, “There’s a magic about wearing something that nobody else has” (Harper’s Bazaar 2001: 170).

Tracy Tolkien attributes the popularity of vintage to a certain kind of free-will that accompanies buying vintage as opposed to purchasing shoddily-made, mass-produced clothes in fashions dictated to the populace by designers which allows you to dress the way you want to dress (Tolkien 2000: 8). To the discerning fashion eye, wearing contemporary clothes cannot compare to clothes made decades ago. “When you wear vintage, the shape of the garment may look much like the modern version, but the eye registers the difference—the draping, the fit, the hang simply cannot be duplicated” (Dubin and Berman 2000: 13). As for the vintage boutiques themselves, they, too, aspire to make themselves as distinct from the Gap or Banana Republic as
possible. Some boutique owners consciously sprinkle in a bit of nostalgia in order to achieve this goal (Wolff 2002: 22).

In addition to not wanting to wear what other women are wearing at various functions, some women also do not want to be seen or photographed wearing the same dress or outfit more than once. For instance, J. Maskrey, the woman who is responsible for England’s stick-on crystal craze was featured in one of Vogue’s “Closet Cases” reveals that she goes to a lot of parties and cannot wear the same dress again and again. She comments, “Luckily, David Brockman, who owns Honeymoon Antiques on Avenue B in New York, finds me plenty of vintage eveningwear. I tell him what I’m looking for each season...and he collects it for me. When I’m in New York, every two months or so, I stop by and buy it all up” (Comita 2001: 404).

Another reason vintage has become so desirable is said to be because the glorious influential days of the really great designers seem to have passed (Dolan 1995: iv). Because the clothes they designed and the charm and glamour of those times is gone, the clothes that represent those eras have become highly attractive to us (Dolan 1995: iv). As Maryanne Dolan states in the introduction to her identification and value guide, “We ever cherish the mysterious past and that is what vintage high fashion represents...Ah, the good old days” (Dolan 1995: iv).

The current mass production of clothes designed and produced by chain stores such as the Gap who caught on to the vintage craze and now draw on fashions from previous decades, may, in fact, impact the desirability of vintage because it may no longer seem unique:

(W)ith the growth of stores like the Gap and Old Navy in the 90’s, and the widespread availability of inexpensive khakis, pedal pushers, and shift dresses that are inspired by the old ones (the Gap’s current line is called ‘1968’), many purveyors of vintage clothes have had to rethink their strategy. They began offering rarified and more costly merchandise.

(Ginia Bellafante 2000: 1-6)
While fashion currently trades on the nostalgia boom, it also, more specially, reworks the already recycled goods found in the street markets. It produces new and much more expensive versions of these originals often in poor quality fabrics and attempts to sell these styles, on an unprecedented scale, to a wider section of the population than those who wander round the ragmarkets.

(Angela McRobbie 1988: 28)

In this way, contemporary clothing collections--both those of high end designers and those of the sorts of chain stores that exist in every town in the nation--and vintage clothing collections seemingly hidden in nooks and crannies all over the country have heavily influenced each other, and satisfied the demand by fashion followers of all sorts for clothes that recall previous eras.

Lynn Hirschberg argues that one cannot escape the copy-cat nature of people in fashion who all want to wear what is deemed fashionable and, in fact, do not want to stand out in a crowd. In her estimation, the “mainstreaming of vintage has more to do with brand names than style” (Hirschberg 2000: 479). For instance, if fashion aficionados and/or fans learn that a certain actress is wearing vintage Pucci, then everyone wants to wear Pucci. The result of this pattern has been that prices have gone up considerably for name brand vintage clothes, such as Pucci, and they are becoming harder and harder to find. Of course, many of the designers from the past that are now coveted by the fashion-set were not inexpensive the first time around.

The idea that wearing vintage is an important way for women to distinguish themselves from other women predominates as one of the most important reasons for the widespread acceptance of vintage. Even The Ladies Home Journal, a publication not typically regarded as a harbinger of the most current fashions, reported: “Call it a triumph of taste over excess—vintage clothing is hot...The trend reflects the growing confidence American women feel in putting together a wardrobe...Vintage retailers say women enjoy a shopping foray that allows them to be creative” (Ladies Home Journal 2001: 19). Hence, the idea that vintage allows men and women alike the opportunity to wear clothes that demonstrate their creative abilities to put together
interesting outfits that extend beyond what is displayed in the windows of popular clothing stores.

The retail chain, Urban Outfitters, whose clothing and household items are meant for a young, hip crowd, has also realized the role of individuation as related to vintage garments. (See Figure 3.2)

Figure 3.2 – Urban Renewal Tag, Urban Outfitters

One of their recent lines called Urban Renewal is not only “inspired” by vintage clothing, but is actually fashioned out of parts of used clothes. Here, they either resell used clothes under this label, especially old T-shirts, old flannel shirts, old polo-styled shirts, and western shirts, but in some cases, they have dismantled old clothes, presumably taking the sleeves or panels that are not stained or ripped, and sewn them together to make a new shirt entirely. In this way, they are selling not just an original “vintage” shirt, but one that truly unique because each and every garment is completely one-of-a-kind.

* Hirschberg’s article about the rise of vintage made quite an impression on Vogue’s readers. One reader wrote in a letter to the editor, “Lynn Hirschberg’s article “The New Old Thing” [September 2000] really moved me, because it shows how quickly people will follow new trends. I am an admirer of vintage, and I appreciate the story and mystery behind a particular item. I have never owned a piece of vintage clothing because I go to school and do no work, but I am glad to see I am not the only one who cherishes and understands it” (Harper’s Bazaar 2000: 68).
Kaja Silverman takes the idea that vintage is a way to express one's individuality one step further. She argues that vintage is a sartorial manifestation of the conflation of efforts towards individuation and the ideals of feminism, "and one that is fundamentally irreconcilable with fashion" (Silverman 1986: 150). Dorrine Kondo agrees that fashion is "a highly fraught arena for discussion of cultural politics and pleasure. The moral indignation on all sides regarding questions of clothing and cosmetics, the disciplines and punishments surround ideals of beauty, clearly index a (barely acknowledged) preoccupation with fashion, appearance and, bodily surfaces" (Kondo 1997: 14). As for vintage clothing in particular, Silverman writes that the elements of vintage clothing "connote not only a generalized 'oldness,' but a specific moment in the (social) history of clothing" (K. Silverman 1986: 150). In this way, the person wearing vintage becomes "part of a complex network of cultural and historical references" (K. Silverman 1986: 150). Moreover, mixing objects from different periods of time maximizes "their radical and transformative potential" (K. Silverman 1986: 151):

Thrift-shop dressing recycles fashion's waste, exploiting the use value that remains in discarded but often scarcely-worn clothing. Because it establishes a dialogue between the present-day wearers of that clothing and its original wearers, retro also provides a means of salvaging the images that have traditionally sustained female subjectivity, images that have been consigned to the waste-basket not only by fashion, but by 'orthodox' feminism. In other words, vintage clothing makes it possible for certain of those images to 'live on' in a different form, much as postmodern architecture does with earlier architectural styles or even with the material fragments of extinct buildings. It is thus a highly visible way of acknowledging that its wearer's identity has been shaped by decades of representational activity, and that no cultural project can ever 'start from zero' (K. Silverman 1986: 151).

Clearly, reference to the past is not as straightforward as Silverman suggests here. When women wear vintage clothing from the 1940s and 1950s, for example, they call to mind images of women who actually lived through those times—perhaps including images of domesticity, subservience to their husbands, and careers as housewives. Thus, wearing the styles from those earlier periods when women's roles and place in society were dramatically different from what they are today
brings these positive changes to the status of women to the fore, but only through their re-contextualization.¹⁰

Angela McRobbie argues that the attempts to understand what she calls “retro-style” “have all taken as their starting point that accelerating tendency in the 1980s to ransack history for key items of dress, in a seemingly eclectic and haphazard manner. Some [scholars] have seen this as part of the current vogue for nostalgia while others have interpreted it as a way of bringing history into an otherwise ahistorical present” (McRobbie 1988: 23). McRobbie, on the other hand, wants to “suggest that second-hand style or ‘vintage dress’ must be seen within the broader context of post-war subcultural history [and look at] the existence of an entrepreneurial infrastructure within these youth cultures and to the opportunities which second-hand style has offered young people, at a time of recession, for participating in the fashion scene” (McRobbie 1988: 23-24). In this post-war period, most of the youth subcultures have “relied on second-hand clothes found in jumble sales and ragmarkets as the raw material for the creation of style” (McRobbie 1988: 24). Thus, for her, the rise of vintage had to do primarily with young people’s economic savvy while still attending to their need and desire to carve out their own individual style.

As mentioned before, quality has also become a compelling reason for why vintage has become so popular. Talbots, the chain of clothing stores most associated with a sophisticated, classic, and conservative woman—not one to follow a trend as much as prefer to replace the navy blue blazer with gold buttons that goes with everything that might be showing some wear after some years of use—perhaps not so surprisingly has also joined in support of the legitimization of vintage:

¹⁰ Blau takes special note of Kaja Silverman’s theories about retro as the “salvation of subjectivity in the midst of uncertainty.” (Blau 1999: 188-189). He argues that in 1999 there is a “permeation of clothes by pastness, not only as vintage or thrift-shop buying, but at every level of couture” which has been so commodified, it should be apparent by now that the thrift shop has become a seminal part of the fashion system, and not just a trend (Blau 1999: 188-189). He writes: “Retro may not be exactly last year’s fashion, nor exactly this year’s fashion, though next year’s fashion is even in the conceiving so suffused with pastness that retro turns out to be, whatever the fragments or waste, more than a passing instance of the multifarious thing” (Blau 1999: 190).
In fashion today, longevity and quality are as important as comfort. Women appreciate clothing with lasting appeal updated with an unexpected twist or historical reference. This season, classic pieces reflecting a vintage inspiration are key. Vintage touches include botanical, toile and paisley patterns shown in skirts, pants and dresses. Another historical trend plays tribute to the collegiate looks first popularized in the 1950s...Marked by vibrant colors and vivid patterns, classic fashion offers the perfect mix of old, new and now.

(Flier from Talbots, 2001)

Because Talbots has always prided themselves on classic garments, and geared their ware to women who themselves lived through the 1950s and who nostalgically recall those classic cuts and fabrics, it makes perfect sense that they would seek to partake in its popularity. In this way, too, consistent customers of Talbots might feel special for having stood by their traditional garb that now is having a comeback—to be fashionable in the clothes in which they feel comfortable, and still be able to have the quality that they cherish in their garments.

Many women subscribe to this nostalgic longing for another time that honored getting dressed “properly” in clothes that are both flattering and appropriate for any occasion:

There is something very civilized about dressing the way women dressed in the Jackie/Audrey/Liz 60's. If you look at photos of these women from that period and then you compare them with photos of well-dressed women from the 80's or 90's, the earlier pictures have a breezy polish and style that is sorely missing in the later shots. In the last 20 years, most women have opted for the slouch...There is no sense of joy in putting on an outfit together. There is no sense of occasion.

(Lynn Hirschberg 1999: 93)

I think that there was more of a standard way of dressing years ago. You know, you would never step foot out of the house if you didn't have a hat and gloves on and even at a baseball game, women were dressed this way and men had suits on. If you go to a baseball game today, people are hanging out there in t-shirts and shorts. So, I just love how even that aspect of life seems to be that much more respectful. And I think people feel differently when they are dressed that way. There are people who come in who are dressed in vintage head to toe and that takes effort, but they look wonderful.

(Interview with Delanee Koppersmith, proprietor of Cobblestones, 2001)

The events of September 11 also have had an impact on how women in New York are shopping, their renewed interest in the clothes already in their closets and their interest in “vintage.” Guy Trebay reports that women around the city are not spending money on new
clothes because they are not only concerned about money, but because it also did not seem quite right to be outwardly concerned with keeping up with the latest fashions:

Soon after the terrorist attacks, Barbara Heizer started mining her closet. “I found myself saying, ‘What do I need that for, I’ve already got so much?’” Ms. Heizer, a freelance editor and writer, said... Ms. Heizer wore a pair of decade-old Manolo Blahnik equestrian-style boots, a “very old” but revamped Donna motorcycle jacket and a 1996 Chanel dress. For some time now, she explained, so-called vintage clothes have seemed to her “much cooler than anything coming out in the stores”

(Guy Trebay 2001c)

It seems unlikely that these extraordinary events influenced the vintage market in the sense that people were suddenly influenced to shop for used garments similar to those that are already in their closets. It is interesting to note from this account, however, that a 1996 Chanel dress is called “vintage” and that outdated clothes are not only considered fashionable, but also to some extent, politically correct. It would have been considered gauche in New York to dress in the latest seasonal collections. This might be considered another aspect of a fin de siècle attitude—a hesitation or incapacity to embrace the present. In fully developed form, this might amount either to nostalgic longing and mourning or to a Romantic flight into the past. In practice, however, there is a blurring and blending of the Romantic with the post-modern/avant gardist.

Another influence for the popularity of vintage is the music industry, in addition to other facets of the entertainment industry emanating from the West Coast. Stars do not want to look like their colleagues when they are out on the town (Van Meter 1999: 294). Wearing vintage is an easy way to wear something special. According to Paul Beahan, an employee at the Los Angeles branch of Resurrection, another tony vintage clothing store (whose original showroom opened in 1996 in New York City) believes that popular music and rock-and-roll stars have been major contributors to the popularity of vintage (Beahan 2001: personal communication). For Mr.

---

11 Elaine Mack, a personal shopper at Bergdorf Goodman in Manhattan stated that after September 11, many of her “clients were uncomfortable with the idea of shopping or are still uncomfortable...But most people who called wanted to hear that it was O.K. to shop...On the day after the attacks, a lot of people came in here who didn’t have appointments, but didn’t want to be alone...They
Beahan, at least on the West Coast, the prevalence of vintage is connected to a love of the music made from 1966 though 1974, as well as bands like Nirvana who were at the fore of the grunge movement.

There is a clear relationship between these grunge bands in the 1990s and the number of young people throughout the United States, especially on college campuses, who went to thrift stores en masse to buy used flannel shirts and old corduroy jeans, as Kurt Cobain and his peers did in many popular music videos. 12 "Grunge began as a cheap vernacular style, a part of Seattle youth culture, associated with bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam. Characterized by loose, layered clothes, such as checked flannel shirts, long loose dresses, and heavy boots, grunge looked as though hippies and punks had merged their wardrobes" (Steele 1997: 145). Soon fashion periodicals started commenting on and promoting the look, and "[r]eaders were urged to adopt a 'street fashion that mixes rough-and-tumble work clothes with waifish thrift-shop finery.' For those not accustomed to wearing second-hand clothes, a few instructions were in order. Just take a retro-style floral dress (by Ralph Lauren or Calvin Klein) and accessorize it with Doc Marten boots, long underwear, a flannel checked shirt (you can cut the sleeves off) and a big stretched out sweater" (Steele 1997: 145). Soon thereafter, these looks were copied by designers like Marc Jacobs, Gianni Versace, and Dolce and Gabbana.

The accounts of people who have been in the vintage market for many years are meaningful and important for understanding the widespread interest in vintage clothing. Their accounts attribute the popularity of vintage in part to the disenchantment with fashions in chain stores such as Banana Republic and the Gap, the names of which prevail as exemplars of retail manufacturers who have outlets in nearly every town and city in the United States. 13 The fact that

---

12 Kurt Cobain, perhaps most especially because of his own bitter life's struggles and tragic suicide, was said to have defined and addressed the angst of a generation—a generation perhaps not coincidentally reaching maturity at the fin de siècle.

13 It should be noted, however, that while many designers are criticized for their lack of creativity, as illustrated by the clothes sold at stores like The Gap and Banana Republic, it has also been argued that some designers have found freedom because these large franchise stores that have made functional similar looking clothes so ubiquitous. Thus, large clothing chains have actually allowed
the stores are so ubiquitous (and indeed have a significant following) indicates that many people in America are wearing the same clothes and, therefore, look quite similar to each other stylistically. Their nostalgic, even romantic stories also reveal the unanimous belief that garments made today are of poorer quality than those made even thirty years ago, having to do not only with mass production, but also having to do with fabrics that are cheaply made or are synthetic rather than made of natural fiber. Cost less frequently emerges as a rationale for buying vintage than one might initially assume, owing to its reclassification as more than just “used” clothing:

"There are a variety of advantages in buying used clothing. Your limits are usually marked by your taste, not your finances. You can get the pleasures of worn-in garments without the guilt of knowing the manufacturer has used toxic chemicals or strip-mined to create the worn-in effect."

(Andrea Siegel 1999: 282)

There have been other times [when vintage was big]. I mean, in the late 60s, early 70s, vintage was very big. It wasn’t maybe collectible the way it is now, but, the hippies started wearing it, they started wearing the Victorian whites and that kind of thing, but there were other times when it was popular. I don’t think it’s going to go away. I don’t think it’s a trend. I think it’s just like a realization. That people are saying that this is okay. I am going to wear used clothing. A lot of people can’t get by that. It’s just used clothing and that’s weird. Why would you do that unless you were poor? But I think it’s becoming more and more acceptable and I can see that some women might not be as interested in buying vintage clothing but buying vintage bags. You know, it waxes and wanes. I always wonder when people say that the economy is bad. Well, my business is not dictated by the economy because when people can’t afford more expensive clothing, it’s not that they don’t buy clothing, it’s just that they will come here instead of spending $900 on a Prada skirt. Maybe that’s the reason that woman wanted the vintage skirt. I think that there is just a very different perception of it now so I don’t think it’s going anywhere.

(Interview with Elisa Casas, proprietor of 1909 Vintage, 2001)

I think people are sick of Banana Republic or the Gap and in order to have some sense of individuality, you have to do something different. If you wear a contemporary outfit and have a vintage handbag. It’s like being anti-Kate Spade. People love vintage handbags. Or you buy a jacket. You can have modern clothing and you have a vintage jacket...I started buying [vintage] in the late 70s, early 80s and then there were stores dedicated to it and there were a lot of clothes from the 30s and 40s. And since my mother had a dress shop, I could appreciate the way that things were made. And then in the 70s when my parents sold the store and [designers] started making garments out of just two pieces of fabric sewn together and started charging hundreds of dollars, I just rebelled against that. And that’s designers to become disengaged from having to design clothes that people actually have to wear. Without this restriction, other designers can be more creative than they would have to be otherwise.
when I started to appreciate the workmanship of older clothing. And that’s how I got into vintage. It’s only in the past two years that vintage has had such a high profile and it’s only because actresses started wearing it that it became more acceptable and now it’s even in the fashion magazines...And the quality of the clothing! Young people have no clue because it’s just not part of their experience. But when I pick up a vintage suit or jacket, I can tell if it’s a good suit by looking at the lining. Whether it’s a synthetic or whether it’s a crepe and beautifully done. And the button-holes, the bound button-holes. But I’m not really sure if the young people are really looking for that. I don’t know if that is something that that part of the market appreciates because if it’s not in your experience, then I don’t know if that is something that you would know to look for. But certainly people who grew up with that appreciate that feature of vintage clothing.

(Interview with Lenore Newman, Proprietor of Patina [vintage clothing], NYC, 2001)

People are tired of wearing the regular designer fashions of the moment. People are individuals, especially today. It’s unbelievable. Every department store has a store nationwide. Every chain has a store, nationwide. Every small town has the same stores now and so everyone in the nation is wearing the same thing. For someone who is going to be different, where is he going to go? Like in here, I have merchandise from the 1800s to the 1980s now because the 80s now is in demand. People who come in here are people who want to look different. People who are conscious of quality because the merchandise before the 70s did not have the technology of mixing the fiber. It was pure cottons, it was pure silks, it was pure wools and pure everything. So the quality and the workmanship on the old stuff is a thousand percent better than today. Today you go to a store and you buy a wonderful top, a men’s shirt for $28-$35. Very reasonable...You go to any of the chain stores and if you look at the labels you can see “cold water wash, warm tumble dry” and the wording is so small and the reason that they say it is to protect themselves because if you wash it in warm water or hot water, and you put in the dryer on regular heat like you used to be able to, everything will shrink and be out of shape. So even though it’s cheap, there is a reason behind it. The garment made today does not last the time because of the quality of the workmanship and the purity of the fiber. So there is that point of view, as far as kids coming in here.

(Interview with Jack Markus, Cheap Jack’s Vintage Clothing, NYC 2001)
Obviously, it’s grown since the 1970s, but it’s not something which is... let me see how to put it. In the late 60s or early 70s, there was a much more romantic idea attached to vintage and it starts to become desirable sometimes for evocative reasons. Since then, vintage has become an enormous, enormous business and more and more people are buying vintage clothes at all levels. It is no longer particularly a cheap option, which was always part of its appeal as well, now that’s getting, with good vintage it’s at least as expensive as new clothes. But, fashion has increasingly since the 70s no longer moved in a trajectory but rather sort of fragmented into a lot of different style tribes so you can sample from different period looks from the past and put them together with something that congruent with the look now, so if you a kind of streamlined minimalism of the fashion 90s, you can pick up certain things like Halston from the 70s which fit in with that look and which designers in the 90s like Tom Ford are flagrantly copying anyway, and so you can get it probably still for less than a Gucci and also better made than a Gucci, which is another reason why people who are interested in fashion frequently go for vintage clothes, because even fairly new from the past tend to be much much better made. So you are doing it for a variety of different sort of style, quality, economic, fashion reasons.

(Interview with Valerie Steele, Acting Director, Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology, 2001)

I almost think [vintage is] too trendy right now. I think they are buying it because magazines are telling them to buy it. I think it’s just the latest trend. I think that the people that were buying it when I started the department actually really loved the objects and got excited about them. I mean, I’m a little over the vintage moment. I mean anything that’s great, I love, but it’s almost gotten too trendy. The prices have gotten too ridiculous and as for people saying that there is no more stuff left, the things you don’t find are the labels that are trendy at the moment, but if you know and really love clothes, you really do find things because there are some amazing designers from department stores in America. I mean I just found a blouse the other day, Sophia Saks, Sophie Gimbel’s, first American designer. So I think if you buy not to rehawk it, there’s always stuff. There are so many under-appreciated designers.

(Interview with Tiffany Dubin, author of Vintage Style, 2001)

What’s new? I mean there really isn’t anything that’s new. There was an article last week, I think in WWD, about how brands like Lacoste and even Levis and all these other major companies are going back to their archives... because there is such a demand for it. And the demand is because people want good quality, they want stuff to last, they want to look good and they don’t want to look like everybody else... [And] the quality is better in the clothing. The workmanship, how it was made, the fact that it is better than the average clothing that you find at the Gap or whatever, but they will try to knock it off next season with their line of it...

(Interview with Maureen Disimile, Manager, Alice Underground, NYC, 2001)

Then, in the mid-90s to late 90s when Tiffany [Dubin] started the fashion department here in New York, and you also had, like, Christies did the Princess Diana sale, you had some sort of resurgence of an interest in vintage fashion. But now, it was like, well, don’t look costumey and you have to look like an entire Edwardian woman like you did in the 70s, now it’s one piece of vintage. Take a vintage blouse. Or, wear some vintage shoes with your contemporary clothing. And jazz it up. Be a little bit different. Carry a vintage bag that nobody’s gonna have, and then you look a little different than everybody else, so that it came out of the realm of having to be very costume and wear the whole look to just having one piece of vintage. A vintage scarf or something. And now, that’s been really sustained from
that period of the 90s to today. You could pick up any magazine, like In Style magazine, you can see here's Julia Roberts wearing a vintage Valentino...but still, that was a dress from the 80s. You can see in any current fashion magazine that somewhere, somebody is going to be wearing vintage. And I think that's going to just stay. I think that's just now, women and men too, they can do vintage accessories in fashion that they can wear and they can get away with it because Tiffany, for who she was, was really groundbreaking in the fact that she introduced it as being fun and chic and not old clothes and not like, "Eww, I couldn't carry or wear anything that anyone else wore. I wouldn't like that." She changed the face of that because of who she was. You know, a person in New York society, very well known, her social milieu, able to have those people say, "Wow, that's fun to carry a Pucci bag and it's the only Pucci bag like this." So, that's kind of the trend that I see now, and I thinks it's always now going to be an appreciation to view vintage that way... I mean you can look at a Norman Norell dress and they are beautifully made. The fabrics are gorgeous. They still can be dry cleaned and dry cleaned and they look great. I think what you're still going to find is that in the 40s, 50s and 60s, more every-day clothing is better made. Now our every-day clothing is not as well made. Maybe this kind of every-day, like what I am wearing today, no one is going to want this in 10 years, but in 10 years they are going to want Vivienne Westwood from the 90s. They are going to want a Galliano.

Some of the over-the-top pieces. There are still going to be people who want to collect, even, 10 years from now, the Dior saddle, the bag that looks like...you know, even the Prada bowling bag in 10 years is probably going to be collected because Prada is going to be on to something else and doing something else and is not going to revisit that bowling bag most likely and people are going to be like, "Oh, wow, I got the original Prada bowling." There are only a certain amount of them that the company is going to make so who knows? So maybe there are going to be those iconographic things that we look at now and say, "Ugh, everybody bought one of those then," but 10 years from now everyone who did buy one of those is going to take it out of their closet and it's going to be cool. It's funny because it's always hard to reflect back. I've got a kind of conscious memory of the 60s and I'm thinking, "What did anybody want from the 60s, when you're living it?" But then all of a sudden, it's like the mod stuff, the Day-Glo, the Pierre Cardin, I mean all that great stuff from the 60s. When you're in the middle of it, you weren't seeing it--anything that was going to be rare--because everybody was wearing it then.

(Interview with Marianna Klaiman, Fashion Specialist at Sotheby's, 2001)

Well, I think that it was marketed. And Tiffany Dubin started that auction at Sotheby's and made it really cool for people to wear vintage clothing who used to think that it was just used clothing. It's like everything else in society. There are some people who are comfortable with themselves and they are willing to go out in a limb and then there are some people who want to be told what's cool. And I think that [Tiffany] really did a lot... We sell to a lot of people who will buy a Prada skirt and a vintage jacket to wear with it. Which is what Tiffany Dubin is really telling people to do. I think when people dress head to toe vintage they look a little ridiculous. I think what they are doing is they are saying, "Look at me. I'm so special." Which is fine because people certainly do that when they wear $20,000 designer dresses as well. But, the point of clothing is to complement a person not to be a person... I think that people buy vintage because contemporary clothes don't fit them. I have lots of customers who cannot wear contemporary clothing. It is just not made for them... Even I find problems with contemporary clothing because if you have a small waist and a broader butt, all the pants are cut for a boy cut. They are all cut a little low and then they are straight and my shape needs different proportions so it is very hard for me to find contemporary pants. Whereas if I take a pair of 1940s, what I call Katherine Hepburn pants, every pair will look good on me and they are flattering. Women with big breasts and a little waist and big hips cannot wear clothing today. But they can wear 1950s clothing.
Suzanne Vega buys all her clothes from me. She looks great in 50s clothes. She put on this little nothing dress and she looked darling in it. After she had her baby, her figure changed and it wasn’t so easy for her to find stuff for her concerts and she was at a loss and she loves wearing vintage but she will mix and match. So I think that lots of people wear vintage clothing because it fits them better... [And as for quality,] there is no comparison. Even my dry cleaner says, “It is a pleasure to do your things.” He says that people bring in very expensive contemporary clothing and the facing shrivels up and shrinks and the buttons fall off all the time. They are just not sewn on well. I have a navy blue suit that is so well made that if I bought it today, it would have to be worth $3,000. It would have to be because it is so well made and the material is so phenomenal. Even in the 60s, things made in Hong Kong, things that were kind of mass produced even though they were hand made, there is astounding detail work. Astounding. And there is a big difference. A vintage cashmere sweater. I mean, I’m not talking about the really good ones. Like, a Ralph Lauren cashmere sweater I’m sure is very good quality, but they are really expensive. And it’s true that you can buy cashmere for $69, but it looks like $69 cashmere. But a Pringle or a Dalton—they are just beautiful pieces... I am not accumulative. I keep very very little. But there are some times that I have a hard time parting with something that is so unusual or unique. I have to look at it for an extra minute before I can say “Be on your way!” I think that you can get good quality today, but you have to pay for it.

(Interview with Alice Lindholm, co-owner of Right to the Moon Alice, Cooks Falls, NY, 2001)

The big magazines, like *Vogue*, *Bazaar* and *Elle*, and plus the movie stars and whatnot, they made vintage clothing more acceptable. But of course, for years and years and years, there was a core of people who just really liked it. And plus I think today, especially from what I can see in the stores, you know, vintage clothing has a lot more character, it’s better made and it’s more fun. And it lasts longer than even things that you would buy new today. You know they wear it and I guess it’s not made well and you know the way trends are today—in today, out tomorrow—you know, vintage clothing is classic and whatever era it’s from, it’s always going to be nice... Sometimes I go shopping and it seems to me that the clothes nowadays are made for 15 year-old girls who have no figure whatsoever and I think that is a big difference from years ago when women would shop because there were all sorts of things that were attractive and elegant and lovely and you know, women of an older age group today can’t buy a decent slip or underwear that isn’t like this big [indicates bikini undergarments]. And today, the whole market seems to be geared to young people who are tiny and thin and miniscule and also they buy these things, wear them a few times and then they fall apart and it doesn’t matter to them that much because they are already on to the next new thing... There are people who come in who are dressed in vintage head to toe and that takes effort, but they look wonderful. And I’ve seen so many things. So many people come in here and then sometimes, someone will walk in wearing something I have never seen before, and I think, wow, that’s really nice. I think people who wear vintage and like vintage, I think they just love it. I don’t think it’s anything about trying to impress other people or whatever, I just think that they love it.

(Interview with Delanee Koppersmith, proprietor of Cobblestones, NYC, 2001)

Yeah, some people just like vintage, some people do it because it’s less expensive. One woman came in here and she obviously had a lot of money. She was looking for one of those 50s skirts. She had two daughters. She liked this Prada skirt that she saw, you know, one of those full circle skirts and her daughters were like, don’t spend $900 for that skirt, go to a vintage store and get a real nice vintage one and so she came in and bought a couple of skirts. I
mean, she was a person that I never would have expected to buy vintage but she came in here with a specific thing
that she was looking for. And the truth of the matter is that I don’t think that vintage is so popular, I think it’s that
designers are ripping it off so much. I mean, why should I go pay all this money for designer clothing when I can get
the real thing for a few dollars.

(Interview with Elisa Casas, proprietor of 1909 Vintage, NYC, 2001)

I think people buy stuff and they don’t know why they are buying it. People who are wearing vintage clothing at this
point are the same people who were wearing Gap eight years ago when everyone in the world was wearing Gap
clothes. People are buying vintage because they saw it in a magazine or because they saw a store advertised in a
magazine and then they know that it is a store they are supposed to be at and they know that they have to buy
something.

(Interview with Justin, Atomic Passion, NYC, 2001)

If someone asked me what I thought of the Gap, I would say that it is for people who don’t know how to dress. So if
you go to the Gap or Banana Republic, they really only have like 10 or 20 pairs of pants, as many tops and a couple of
jackets, over and over and over and you know that you will be okay if you buy any one of them. The person who
shops vintage has to be able to create an outfit. Like when vintage was written up in Vogue and Bazaar, all kinds of
people came, like matrons from [Long Island] who were size 14 and 16. And they hadn’t a clue how to go about
doing this and you can’t tell them. They would come in and just look around and think, “Wow, this is vintage, but
how do you play it?” They don’t know. So the persons who want to do this...may have grown up in such a way that
they know that clothing is an art...Nowhere in the history of humankind have people dressed as badly as they dress
here. It doesn’t flatter anyone, it doesn’t look good, it is made out of horrible quality fabric, and I know this is the
way the world is, but I think I will go my own way and I think that the people who come to my store, they want to
have something that is theirs alone and that they are not one of a million people wearing that exact blouse on that
exact day. They want to create an outfit. They want to have something that touches the past. Not necessarily their
own past—a past that they might like to have. It’s a force of creativity that some people have and some people don’t.
I’m not making a value judgement either way because there are some people who are concentrated on being a scientist
or being a financial broker and that expression isn’t important to them. But yet the decorative impulse is part of
humankind. It’s part of our hard wiring. And I always wonder, “When did the dullness start?” and it started,
arguably, during the French Revolution where if you were caught dressing fancy on the shirt, you would be
guillotined. So suddenly for the first time in history, men had to not be the most spectacular ones. It’s hard for us to
imagine but until that time, men were the most decorative in every way. The biggest jabots, the finest laces, the well-
turned ankles with stuffed stockings to show off their muscles if they didn’t have them. I mean, the quality of these
things cannot be overstated. All those stockings were knit by poor people exquisitely out of silk...I think that when
you look at what you can buy in a store and the fabrics are wool and poly with their machine-made buttonholes,
appliquéd lining, they are dreary. I don’t know how much your eye needs to be trained, but it absolutely looks like
crap. And you see a good condition old thing that is wool with a good lining and a bound buttonhole, and a funny
button, there is just no comparison. You go down the escalator at Macy’s for instance, each store at different price
point sells the exact same thing and every year it is 5 colors and if you want another color, that’s too bad. It’s just
gross. So I think that one of the reasons that people are going to vintage is that it’s really the end. And otherwise we
are all just relegated to wearing front back and sleeves for the rest of our lives. But not me. I’ve got boxes of things that are things that I like and when I need them I cut them down and make them my size. Like today I bought an old lady black dress. And it’s my dream because of my aunts, because I want to have one of those sharp, really beautiful dresses like them.

(Interview with Carol Atkin, owner of Stella Dallas, NYC, 2001)

"I think it’s a reflection of what is going on culturally," said Jessica McClintock, who began her career in 1969 with the Gunne Sax line, which is still sold in department stores. "When I first started making the dresses, people were interested in a return to nature and romance, and I think that’s where we are again now, after years of very cold businesslike dressing."


These experts’ accounts all draw from their various personal experiences and observations which greatly influenced their opinions. Each person in his or her own way unintentionally touch upon issues having to do with post-modernity, nostalgia, and romanticism, contextualized in a fin de siècle moment. For example, Valerie Steele quite astutely assesses the trajectory of the popularity of vintage from the 1970s. However, as she stated at another point in our conversation, she rejects the idea that the phases of the trajectory have anything to do with the fin de siècle. I would argue that they are indeed attitudinally fin de siècle. As a result, with the advent of a new millennium, it might be argued that perhaps Marianna Klaiman is incorrect in saying that the popularity of vintage clothing is here to stay. There may be some reason to doubt this idea since fin de siècle attitudes typically give way in the face of another (neo-classicism). For example, there might be a designer (or group of designers such as the avant garde group As Four) that might be about to introduce a new collection that could markedly change fashion as did a designer such as Coco Chanel in the first half of the twentieth century.

Significant throughout the interviews, as evidenced to some degree in the above accounts, are the contributions of Tiffany Dubin and her profound influence on the legitimization of vintage clothing. (See Figure 3.3) She is hailed time and again as the person who has made vintage what it is today and might be seen as what Malcolm Gladwell calls a “connector” in his book The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference (2000). This is a person who
straddles many different parts of the social spectrum and with a certain degree of charisma and know-how, consciously or unconsciously can cause something to “tip.” Here, something passes a certain point in popularity and is no longer just a random practice. It has blossomed into a full-fledged trend.

![Figure 3.3 – Tiffany Dubin Photographed in Her Boutique at Henri Bendel](Tien Ellen. “At Bendel’s, Wall-to-Wall Yesteryear” in The New York Times, September 30, 2001. Styles, p. 3]

What is interesting here is not only that one person, albeit a socialite with a considerable degree of clout, could have such an enormous effect on an entire segment of the fashion industry, but also that she is unwittingly very much a part of the avant-gardist post-modern group of actors participating in whatever way in this sartorial vintage movement. This is in part due to her work at Sotheby’s where she founded the fashion department, her position among the elite in New York City, the fact that her stepfather was an (in)famous executive at Sotheby’s, and the publication of her book, *Vintage Style* (2000). This book is nothing more than an instructional manual for people of her social ilk on how to buy vintage, how to care for it, and where to find it. More, Ms. Dubin called upon her high-powered friends, such as Hamish Bowles, to pose in outfits of her choosing in order to demonstrate how to make vintage work with one’s contemporary wardrobe in what might be called, pastiche. Interestingly, *Harriet Love’s Guide to Vintage Chic* (1982), which also offers many photographs of old and new clothing worn together and offers suggestions as to how to mix and match eras and styles, precedes Dubin’s book by
twenty years but never received the same attention or brought vintage into the mainstream in the same manner as Dubin's comparable effort. One might argue that because Dubin's work was published precisely at the crux of two millennia, people were more ready to accept or embrace vintage clothes into their wardrobes, as they looked back at the past while moving forward into the future.

Carol Atkin seems to heroize customers she deems to be especially creative. These are the customers who come into her boutique with the intention of creating an outfit that not only touches the past, but necessarily individualizes them because no one else will be wearing the same shirt or the same skirt or whatever garment they purchase because all of the garments are unique. It is important to recognize her glorification of the individual who is able to achieve what Frederic Jameson would call an "aesthetic representation of our own current experience" which he proposes is typical of consumer capitalism in post-modernity (Jameson 1983: 117). This assumption of an inability of people to deal with time and history in an aesthetic context, and the thrill that is evidenced when individual clients are able to be imaginative, is remarked upon by other proprietors in my conversations with them. Indeed, "[t]he vagary, the change of stylistics without substance—that is, without any awareness of the past—is simply chic, whereas the creation of style based on an idea (or a remembrance) of underlying aesthetics requires extraordinary efforts" (Lehmann 2000: 15). Thus, creativity and the concomitant effort for individuation is architypically Romantic and, therefore, fits this post-modern profile.14

Jessica McClintock's comments regarding the renewed interest in what the article calls an "old-school brand" such as her own Gunne Sax line, which remained popular well through the 1980s, are particularly poignant. In fact, I myself remember wearing her dresses both to my Confirmation ceremony and to my Junior Spring Dance in high school, too. Her dresses, indeed

---

14 At The New York Vintage Fashion and Antique Textile Show held at The New Yorker hotel in Manhattan February 1, 2002, I commented to one vendor that she had cornered the market on cute blouses—none of the other forty some-odd vendors had nearly as nice or as large of a selection as she did. Her response to my compliment was that they did not sell very well at her boutique in contrast to dresses which sold rapidly. Her opinion was that it was easier for the average consumer of vintage garments to buy a dress because they did not have to mix and match—they could "just throw on a dress and go."
her frocks, call to mind the costumes like those worn on Little House in the Prairie, are embellished with lace and ruffles, and can be seen as a reinvention of Victorian Whites more authentically than even Laura Ashley's, another designer from the same era. Laura Ashley also recalled the simplicity and romantic femininity of Victorian clothing with her overpriced cotton calico garments and petticoats. Interestingly, Gunne Sax and Laura Ashley refer to English women in the Victorian era or to pioneering women in America in the 1800s, but also refer to the 1980s in America when those fashions came into vogue again.

Who is Buying and Wearing Vintage?

Vintage clothing has been given enormous attention in numerous women's magazines and newspapers. All over the United States, shopping and purchasing practices have been altered by the promotion of vintage clothing as a legitimate fashion alternative. It seems that 'thrift shopping' or seeking out that one piece of vintage that suits you, has "developed a new cachet, providing a pastime for vintage junkies/connoisseurs who are on the lookout for rare finds" (Hansen 2000: 12). Victoria Magazine entreats its readers to listen in on the thrill and the secrets of the hunt in an article entitled "It's Smart to Shop Thrift," where "[t]hree women with style—all wearing fabulous second-hand or vintage clothes—get together...to share fashion adventures" (Kennedy 2001: 27):

I've always tried to find clothes that look old even if they aren't...It's almost like finding little bits of the past that belong to you...And I don't really like shopping in conventional stores. To see racks and racks of exactly the same things doesn't appeal to me. At least at thrift shops, everything is one of a kind. And they're often better made. 

(Peggy Kennedy 2001: 27)

This is one example of a magazine meant for conservative, middle class women which has noted the rise of vintage, that the clothes are unique and enable one to be creative in assembling their ensembles. Moreover, it is noted that the quality of the garments is unmatched by those typically found in department stores. These are all themes that we have already encountered as pointing to why vintage is so popular and accepted as a real part of sartorial fashion.
Other magazines whose primary readership is also comprised of middle aged, conservative women, have also addressed the vintage craze. For example, More magazine frequently runs a column where they take one outfit and put it on four different women in order to elicit their reactions to the ensemble and to the style that typically has a theme. In March, 2001, More dressed four women, all in their early 40s, in a Pucci dress, a Courrèges coat and vintage accessories to investigate the appeal of mint-condition “vintage designer duds.” (See Figure 3.4)

![Four Women One Outfit](image)

**Figure 3.4 – Four Women One Outfit**  

When asked about their feelings about their vintage get-ups, the four women are quoted respectively: “This has really opened my eyes about vintage, since I usually love following the newest fashion trends”; “Clothes with a nostalgic value have an appealing ‘energy.’ Previously owned fashion has a history”; “I’ve been buying in thrift shops since I was a teenager in Seattle,
but I like to mix old with new pieces”; “I’ve never been attracted to vintage—retro or period
clothes just don’t have appeal for me. I’m very classic” (More 2001a: 42). Again, small
publications such as this are enormously telling of the pervasiveness of vintage and its
legitimization as a proper fashion trend. In addition, it contradicts the insinuation that vintage is
merely a passing fad and affirms, à la Tiffany Dubin et al, that mixing vintage pieces and
contemporary fashions is an interesting and valid fashion choice.

The main difference between many years ago and today is that vintage junkies and
connoisseurs are no longer just rebellious teenagers or theatrical types, but people in the upper
echelons of society. London’s best-dressed “It” girls know their vintage shopping, as noted in W
Magazine (Kerwin 2001a: 172), and Lauren Bush, the niece of President George W. and a
fledgling model, who wore vintage couture Dior to her debutante ball in Paris in 2000, is quoted
as saying, “Wearing vintage couture was the most incredible feeling—a dream come true”
(Richards 2001: 126). The upper classes also have created their own version of a Tupperware
party by turning to vintage. Harper’s Bazaar reports on the opening of one’s closet to share with
one’s society friends—for a fee:

Call it the fashionista’s happy hour. The vintage sale has emerged as New York society’s new cocktail party. When
Claudia and Vanessa von Bismark decided to sell their late grandmother’s remarkable Pucci and Courrèges-filled
wardrobe, friends Tiffany Dubin, Casey Johnson, and Lisa Heiden rushed over with their checkbooks for canapés and
champagne. Downtown, a few weeks earlier, writer Lithe Sebesta sipped red wine while friends snapped up her
trendy thrift-store finds.

(Harper’s Bazaar 2001: 52)

It is clear from events such as these that many barriers have been broken now that women from
high society are deigning to go to another woman’s home and actually purchase their cast-offs,
even if they are couture or high-end designer pieces.

Some reports indicate that perhaps people do not have to be part of the upper crust in
order to take part in high-end vintage, but may spend money on old clothes as if they are wealthy.
Some people pay exorbitant amounts of money for vintage that may not initially appear to have the cachet of a vintage Pucci piece, but are equal in both monetary and cultural value:

Like so many shoppers, Yō Murata was happy when he found that perfect pair of blue jeans: Comfortable yet classic, broken-in, but sturdy. And the price was right—Only $2,500. 'I wanted to buy ones like I used to wear as a teenager,' the 44-year-old fast-food franchise owner explained. 'Because they bring back memories of my good old days.' A vintage-jeans craze in Tokyo has given rise to about 100 boutiques catering to connoisseurs of faded denim and old-style copper rivets. And the demand has pushed prices up to levels normally associated with haute couture. Murata's purchase was two years ago, and he regards it as a great buy. These days, a pair of the same vintage jeans—Levi's, circa 1950—fetch around $5,000.


Here, the jeans, and Levi's jeans in particular, are deemed precious and priced accordingly, because of their rarity and their high quality. They are thought to be sturdier and have a nicer color than other jeans and, for many, garments like these Levi's are worth the extraordinary prices paid for them. What is also important to note in this article is the fact that for this man, the garment triggers memories of his past. This increases the value of the jeans for him in a very particular way.

Many fashion journalists have also started to make a special point of noting where and for whom vintage clothing has played a part in the creation of their style and fashion sensibility. In one issue where this was especially evidenced, Vogue interviewed what they termed "Women of Style"—one famous woman representing each generation. Still merely a teenager, Elizabeth Jagger's wardrobe is sprinkled with clothes from the 1970s, made and worn before she was born in 1984. Her closet holds garments that she pillaged from her father's costume closet, including a pair of pants that were Keith Richards'. She describes her closet as a "little fantasy land" of clothes from different eras, especially the seventies. "I prefer so much how people used to dress then—I think that was so great" (Woods 2001: 218). Next, Kate Moss, in her 20s, is not only deemed to be her own best stylist but to have embodied and been at the forefront of a movement that emerged at the close of the eighties and for which being young and looking broke seemed glamorous (Skyes 2001):
Sigourney Weaver, now in her 50s, remembers the early seventies when she was studying at Yale Drama School. Because she refused to take money from her parents, she worked odd jobs to make ends meet, and purchased her clothes from thrift stores. Apparently, this manner of dressing was not well received by her fellow students, her parents, or her professors. "They really hated it," she says. Her drama teachers at Yale would have preferred that she dress like a bourgeois leading lady...She considered having posters made of herself that read: I GOT MY CLOTHES AT SALVATION ARMY!" (Van Meter 2001: 257-260).

These three accounts are from women who range in age, but who share fame, fortune, and continuous public exposure and have all (at one time or another) incorporated vintage into her wardrobe. Each in her own way has made vintage part of her style identity. For Jagger, the specific pieces of vintage in her wardrobe speaks to her rock-star genealogy and how the clothes are emblematic of her family’s role as rock star royalty in our music and entertainment culture. For Moss, the clothes speak to her less than stellar beginnings and her meteoric rise to be one of the top super-models of our time. Moreover, the clothes have become part of her iconography as a fashion maven and trendsetter—she truly stands alone in terms of her physical looks and sartorial style. Sigourney Weaver’s dalliance in wearing used clothes while at Yale speaks to the subversive aspect of wearing vintage as she went against the more conservative grain of New Haven, Connecticut. The reporting of these three “women of style,” in addition to numerous cases of other famous and fashionably important women who are reported to wear vintage, further validates it as a legitimate contemporary fashion choice.
Chapter Four: Collecting: Museum Collections and "Important" Personal Collections

Longing for the Past

In recent years, the practice of collecting has been given a great deal of attention in a wide array of cultural arenas. This is evidenced, for example, by the extraordinary success of programs such as Antiques Roadshow on Public Broadcasting Stations throughout the United States, where people from all across the country bring objects they believe have value—whether sentimental or monetary—to a convention center located in an urban center. There, their objects are appraised by expert representatives from well-regarded auction houses, the most exciting of which are televised for the rest of America for seemingly educational purposes. Moreover, The Incurable Collector on the Arts & Entertainment Network, hosted by television star John Larroquette, helps collectors hone their collecting skills, as well as their display techniques, and hosts people who have collections deemed especially interesting or curious.\footnote{Interestingly, I have watched episodes in which Mr. Larroquette interviews Jan Reeder from Doyle New York, Marianna Klaiman from Sotheby's New York and Cameron Silver of Decades Vintage Couture—three of the people that I spoke with regarding this research.} Ebay, and the internet in general, also play an important role in people’s ability to quite easily find the objects they desire to complete their collections.

Martha Stewart also has had a huge impact on the collecting practices of her fans and followers, where as an avid collector herself of many different kinds of objects, she shares her collections with her viewers and readers. In this way, she educates her audience about how to find the objects and approximate prices so that they, too, might become collectors of comparable objects. Included in the tenth anniversary issue of Martha Stewart Living was a retrospective of her featured collections. One contributing author wrote that the last decade of the twentieth century was the “decade of the flea market, ten years that seemed to empty every attic in America. Nobody thinks of anything as junk anymore. Everything is collected. Everybody is a collector” (Karch 2001: 175). But what are some of the reasons that people make a point of
declaring themselves collectors of any kind of ephemera—from antique furniture, to Pez candy dispensers, to china and glassware, to old toy train sets, to vintage clothes? Collecting vintage clothing can usefully be seen as participating in the aesthetics of the postmodern, which itself can be seen as an aesthetics of the fin-de-siècle. This aesthetic has a connection to, although it can not be reduced to, a nostalgic clinging to the past. Nostalgia frequently signifies weakness and indulgence, but it is questionable how insidious or harmful nostalgia really is. I argue that in this period of time and uncertainty, clothing that is kept or collected can provide some degree of comfort, both viscerally and emotionally.

Collecting has also become a popular topic of curiosity, study and discussion in the academy. Many scholars seem to be interested in the numerous reasons why people across great social and cultural divides all seem compelled to collect something at one point or another in their lives. It is thought that people need to express or affirm their identity through possessing meaningful objects, or that people collect as a means to assuage “the fear of annihilation of our current histories” (La Branche quoted in Belk 1988: 159). Other theories have to do with the idea that a collection offers an opportunity for investment, or the desire to learn or become expert about something of special interest via the material objects associated with that subject. For example, an overwhelming attraction to a 2002 exhibit at the Texas Museum of Fine Arts and a high volume of calls for a sale at Sotheby’s of one ninety of collector’s flags is attributed to aesthetics, historical interest and the inspirational nature of the flags for many people, (or some combination of the three) (Murphy 2002: nytimes.com). The wide-spread interest was also thought to be “the result of patriotic fervor generated by the events of Sept. 11” (Murphy 2002: nytimes.com). The more cynical analysts assert that collections satisfy the need to control. Often, various rationales for collecting are not mutually exclusive, whether the collection has great monetary value or sentimental value, regardless of the provenance of the objects or the class or status of the collector, making each collection unique and the reasons for amassing objects of whatever kind quite fluid.
Contrary to the beliefs of many, Gilles Lipovetsky argues that people do not collect anything anymore. Instead he believes that people in this era are constantly ridding themselves of everything that they own in what he calls a culture of disposal:

Under the regime of use value, we no longer become attached to things; we readily trade in our houses, our cars, or our furniture. The age that imparts social sanctity to merchandise is an age in which people part from their objects without pain. We no longer love things for themselves or for the social status they confer, but for the services they render, for the pleasures they provide, for a perfectly exchangeable use value... What we own we will replace; the more objects become our prostheses, the less we care about them. Our relation to things stems from an abstract, paradoxically disembodied love. How can we continue to talk about alienation at a time when, far from being dispossessed by objects, individuals are dispossessing themselves of objects? The more consumerism advances, the more objects become disenchanted means, mere instruments: so it goes, as the democratization of the material world proceeds (Lipovetsky 1994: 147-148).

I disagree with Lipovetsky’s assertion that the more objects become our prostheses, the less we care about them. Rather, I would argue that when objects take on the role of an extension of the self, the more important they become to one’s self-expression and individuation. While it is certainly true that people in contemporary society tend more often than not to discard things that they no longer want, I believe that this really depends on the kinds of things that are deemed disposable. For one, many things are not made as well as they once were—from clothing to toys to cars to furniture—and become worn and useless or at the very least, unpresentable and therefore, disposable. Moreover, fashions and styles in all sorts of decorative arts and design in the latter half of the twentieth century seem to have changed more frequently than ever before and thus do not maintain their popularity and fall out of vogue in a blink of an eye. I believe that the urge to retain things that have sentimental value or to collect things that have no use value (such as a souvenir) is much stronger and a different matter altogether.

Lipovetsky virtually stands alone in thinking that collecting is no longer a worthwhile undertaking, or something that interests people in post-modernity. One of the most influential theories among many for why people collect is that it has become seminal to one’s identity. For example, Susan Stewart writes that “[t]he ultimate term in the series that marks the collection is
the 'self,' the articulation of the collector's own 'identity'" (Stewart 1993: 162). Moreover, Frederic Jameson's work is important for understanding why material objects, especially when they are contextualized in a very particular way, or, conversely, decontextualized or recontextualized—as they often are in a collection. In this way, collections can be seen as cultural or personal signifiers. Jameson's work draws on the writings of Jacques Lacan, to treat the consequences of the breakdown of a signifying chain conflated with some kind of temporal discontinuity. This breakdown in temporality (as might be experienced with something as climactic as the coming of a new century, or indeed, a new millennium) releases the past in the present, a release instigated by a memory triggered by some kind of material signifier (Jameson 1991: 27). For the purposes of this research, I suggest that garments that are in a collection of some sort are powerful material signifiers that can trigger memories and transport one through time and space.

Jan Reeder, Textile and Couture specialist at Doyle New York sums up people's attachment to things, specifically in the context of the clothes she acquires and subsequently auctions:

This is a very personal thing that we do and I treat it personally because clothes are personal and there are a lot of memories attached to them and clothes that people save generally are the ones that have memories attached to them. Or that people have spent a lot of money on. People do have a lot of stories or memories attached to their clothes and they are often shared with me and I have respect for that and also, especially, if the clothes belonged to someone's mother, for instance, or someone else who was dear who had died; it's more personal than a piece of furniture or a painting which are commodities. But clothing is part of a person's identity, an expression of who they are. So sometimes people want their names used and want that kind of public acknowledgement of what they owned because they are proud of it. And they want other people to know that these things were in their possession and others do not want that at all and that is their personal decision... Sometimes in some families, it is a burden to get rid of stuff and the person is not dear. I mean there is a whole range. You know how families can be and there are also differences among family members about what to do. Sometimes people aren't always sentimental about these things at all, but many are. It is a case by case situation.

(Interview with Jan Reeder 2001)

In one way or another, clothes are harbingers of memories—either good or bad. These memories are significant in the fate of the garments as to whether or they are kept or whether they are
purged by those having to deal with their possessions or the possessions of another. Moreover, people tend not to part with clothes if they spent a lot of money on them. In this way, they do not want their investment to go to waste, nor do they want to feel guilty about spending a lot of money on something typically deemed worthless or frivolous. Conversely, they might spend a lot of money on clothes in the hope that the clothes will increase in value.

Betty Halbreich, who has made a name for herself as the creator of the personal shopping department at Bergdorf Goodman, has an interesting take on the idea of collecting clothing because they might trigger memories or have sentimental attachment. She agrees that clothes can be a reminder of one’s past and might evoke particular memories, but she thinks that this wrong, even when it comes to the things in her own closet:

I look at things and think, “Oh, I wore that and I had a terrible time,” or “Oh, I wore that and I had great time” or I remember when I bought it and punished myself for spending too much money… Yes, I think we do go down memory lane and that’s why so much gets stuck in backs of closets. Or, “I’m too heavy… I was so nice and thin when I wore it. I’m going to get thin again and get back into it”… never… you don’t. Yes, I think clothes do have a memory attached. I don’t believe they should because I think they are only a possession of adornment. Intellectually, I think there are more important things in life. But that’s intellectually. That’s not to say that I wouldn’t. You know, I’ve got a sweater in my drawer that I think I’ve had for 50 years. A little beaded sweater. I have some Pucci dresses. Now I have a younger sister that I love dearly and she was a size 2-4. And I must have been a 2-4 then, and I gave it to her. Now that’s like giving… worth a lot of whatever today… I mean that’s a lot in the overall scheme of things. I wanted her to have it, and that’s wonderful, but that’s rare. That you have something that’s kept that’s of worth, number one. Also, it just becomes encumbering. Where do you store all of this? Most people live in one bedroom or two bedroom apartments… Where do you store all of this? You have to have the luxury of being sentimental and I don’t chose to be. First of all I won’t work. I mean the basic scenario is that I work with it here all day long and know what its worth is. But the sentimentality—and I’ve given away some beautiful things in my life. I don’t give handbags away because I can contain them in a drawer—evening handbags. I have a drawer full of evening handbags. Those I will not give away. They don’t take up much space. Clothes I can’t… Shoes, I’ve started to, but now I can’t get my feet into them, so I give those away. I don’t want to be a clothing collector. I collect other things. I mean, I’ve got lots of china. I think you become a collector of many things. And, I’ve lived in the same apartment all these years, so I have collections. If I have one owl, I wind up with 10 owls. But I don’t want to collect clothes.

(Halbreich 2001: personal communication)

Interestingly, Ms. Halbreich collects alligator and lizard handbags and things simply because they would be too expensive. However, she loves her handbags and it is convenient for her to keep
them. Ms. Halbreich is highly pragmatic in this regard. Sentimentality and nostalgia are not legitimate motives for keeping clothes—indulging in such thing is a weakness.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton’s study, The Meaning of Things (1981), is an attempt at an empirical analysis of the relationship between people and things. They believe that men and women create themselves through their interactions with the material world. Thus, “the things that surround us are inseparable from who we are” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 16). “When a thing ‘means something’ to someone, it is interpreted in the context of past experiences, either consciously or unconsciously” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 21), which may or may not be a pleasurable memory. For example, one Hollywood stylist is quoted as saying that she still wears “clothes just like the ones my parents bought for me when I was a little girl… [I] always loved corduroys, jeans, and sailor pants” (Lirnander 2000: 358). Clearly, there is something comfortable and pleasing about these clothes and the memories of her childhood that they evoke that makes her seek out these garments and wear them in her adult life.

Edie Vanderbilt, the great-great-great granddaughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt began a clothing line based on her own memories of her childhood and what important people in her life wore. On her website, ediememories.com, she explains that her exclusive collection is inspired by vivid memories of growing up among women who were ahead of their time. For her, these memories come to life in each garment and she shares these stories with her consumers.²

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton interviewed a sampling of “typical” American families, analyzed the objects the owners claimed were of utmost significance to them, and questioned these individuals about their interactions with these objects. Several of the categories of household objects noted for being especially important included furniture, visual art, photographs, and musical instruments because of the memories they evoked. For instance, one man interviewed “invited the interviewer into the basement family room from where he carefully
unpacked a trombone. It turned out that he had played it in college, and for the middle-aged lawyer, it epitomized a life of freedom and spontaneity on which he looked back with nostalgia. Even now, when depressed or overwhelmed with responsibilities, he would retire to the basement and blow the old trombone” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 73). The authors argue that in recalling memories and repeating actions related to these memories, such as when the man plays the trombone he played in college, “the past experiences that used to define the selves of these people are again activated and recreated in the present” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 112). Thus memories triggered by objects that have significance in one’s life at a particular point in time can assist in organizing one’s life story, and therein, one’s sense of self. More, the cultivation of objects that kindle memories of the past further prove that there is a unique and intrinsic quality to that object as it relates to the self and the experiences that make up the self.\(^3\)

Werner Muensterberger, in his article “The Quest for Possessions” (2001), believes that “there is an emotional link between collecting and fulfilling earlier needs and cravings” (Muensterberger 2001: 67). He writes that, “[t]he wish or longing to own or possess an object points to a person’s deep-rooted though totally unconscious need to be and remain—and I mean this literally—in touch...[A]ll collecting is a symbolic endeavor to keep in touch, because with loved objects nearby, one need not dread being alone” (Muensterberger 2001: 67).

Muensterberger cites anxiety about abandonment, especially that which is a hold-over from problems during one’s childhood, such as being separated from a caregiver, as another reason why people collect. They turn to objects to keep those anxious feelings at bay (Muensterberger

\(^2\) Conversely, an object could recall a disturbing experience for someone just as easily as it could a romanticized nostalgic reverie.

\(^3\) In The Meaning of Dress, projects are suggested to investigate sartorial behavior. One offering is to talk to an older person about old photos and saved clothes to “explore how dress reflects the lifespan of an individual” (Damhoret al. 1999: 335). Drawing their influence from Belk and Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton who, each in their own way, talk about how the past is integral to who we are and our possessions store memories of the past. Dress is a part of that and can trigger memories which the authors remind the reader are a “valuable part of self-history and social history” (Damhore et al. 1999: 336). “You will learn how dress is a window to the self and the past and how dress reflects the lifespan of the individual. The interview might make you want to save for your own future collection” (Damhore et al. 1999: 336).
2001: 68). As such, collections "root their owners in their cultural environment, allow them to 'keep in touch,' and prevent that destabilizing sense of loneliness" (Muensterberger 2001: 69).

Although Muensterberger asserts that "inherited objects have rarely the same emotional resonance as those self-chosen, found, or discovered" (Muensterberger 2001: 67), I would argue that collecting clothes that are either one's own or those that once belonged to someone important in one's life is an excellent example of how collecting can stave feeling of abandonment and loneliness. How often do we hear that people who have lost someone special to them through death have a hard time cleaning out that person's closets? Many profiles written in The New York Times' tribute to victims of the World Trade Center attack called "Portraits of Grief," and other related articles, indicate that the widows and children sleep with the clothes of their lost spouse or parent—the objects which seem to retain in a very special and irreplaceable way some vestige of the person now gone. For example, "Lisa Aversano, whose father, Louis F. Aversano Jr., of Manalapan, N.J., died on Sept. 11, said that she had not yet been able to open his closet, afraid of the memories that might come pouring out. She does sleep in his T-shirts, but those articles, of course, are now contaminated with her hair and skin" (Chen 2002: nytimes.com). In another article about someone dealing with the loss of a loved one, The New York Times reported that "[e]ach day of her grim new career, Edie Lutnick shows up for work wearing a sweater that belonged to her brother Gary, who died on Sept. 11...[S]he plainly does not care that the sweaters in her work wardrobe are much too big; they fit like a bear hug from Gary. A phantom hug" (Finn 2002: nytimes.com). These two examples only barely reveal the remarkably poignant attachment people have to garments. This notion that clothing can be imbued with the essence of a person will be further discussed in the contexts of closets, auction houses, and later in this chapter with regard to museum acquisitions.

Significantly, Walter Benjamin was struck by the power of the memories that rushed forth when he unpacked the books from his library. Here, Benjamin writes, in his 1931 essay entitled "Unpacking My Library," that with every touch of his books, a "chaos of memories" is
unleashed (Schaffner 2001: 33). It has been said that the “pleasure [Benjamin’s] collection unleashes has little to do with its contents... No, the relationship between collector and object is based on memories of a first encounter, a city, a dealer, a transaction, a touch” (Schaffner 2001: 33). For Benjamin, owning objects, especially those that comprise a collection so closely related to his personal and social identity as an intellectual, is exemplary one of the most intimate relationships that one can have with objects because of what they represent and recall for the owner.

Susan Stewart is a proponent of the theory that collections are a way to maintain order and control, a point also suggested by Lipovetsky despite his argument against collecting. Lipovetsky does admit that “[w]e keep only that part of the past that is convenient for us, only what is not in flagrant contradiction to modern values, personal taste, and conscience” group (Lipovetsky 1994: 231). This accounts for the fact that people do, in fact, collect miscellany, whether or not it is deemed useful. In this way, Lipovetsky can account for the accumulation of goods from the past, although it is clear that he does not abide by the belief that the collections are rooted in nostalgia. Instead, the things that are kept are merely a means to individuate. For Lipovetsky, the maintenance of a collection, or of things from the past, has less to do with sentimentality as it has to do with controlling the perception of self by others by setting oneself apart from others through the unique material objects that he or she possesses.4

The drive to control lies in the process and need to complete a collection, or, at least, to make advances towards completion. Even the practice of displaying that collection in a particular manner is a way for this need to be manifest and be sated. “The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world” (Stewart 1999: 152). Importantly, this is a world that the collector creates that lives outside of the “real” world.
Many people commit a great deal of time and energy in developing a collection, and as a result, a collection may be seen as more a part of one’s self than are isolated consumption items” (Belk 1988: 154). Indeed, it would be counterintuitive to obtain a collection in toto. Rather, it must be acquired in a serial manner which strengthens its narrative and increases the yearning by prolonging the time in which the collection ought to be completed (Stewart 1993: 166). Each piece of the collection has its own history that meshes with other objects making the collection more coherent and intriguing. In terms of one's wardrobe, for instance, purchasing an entire collection from one designer does not have the same resonance, as purchasing one garment at a time—finding clothes on sale, or at vintage stores, or splurging on one extravagant piece from a designer collection, or inheriting clothes from a relative. The sum total of these various garments comprise not only a wardrobe of things to wear from season to season, or to store in a closet for posterity, but also the signposts of a personal historical trajectory—of a life story.

Stewart also writes that the process of purchasing objects that comprise a collection is a manifestation of people’s need to satisfy a desire for authenticity in post-modernity:

Within the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic subject become critical. As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. ‘Authentic’ experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience… In this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and a lack of significance. The experience of the object lies outside the body’s experience—it is saturated with meanings that will never be fully revealed to us (Stewart 1993: 133).

Disaffection with the present, in a time that is deemed too chaotic to control or too confusing to thoroughly understand, is an additional catalyst for the spawning of many different kinds of collections. In this way, a person can create experiences that she herself knows to be “real” and can recall these experiences with objects that call to mind that event. Souvenirs are a prime

4 From a different perspective, Maryanne Dolan, who compiled a price guide for vintage clothes, writes: “Fortunately for us, many people refuse to discard anything and it is to them that we owe a large debt of gratitude for much of our older clothing. In most cases, since these people bothered to save it, they also took care of it (Dolan 1995: vi).
example of this kind of collectible and fit into what Jameson has called a "culture of the simulacrum" in post-modernity (Jameson 1991: 18). Using Plato's concept of the simulacrum—an identical copy for which no original exists or has ever existed—as a point of departure, Jameson asserts that simulacra can only exist when the use value for objects has been effaced. Moreover, he believes that nostalgia is triggered most especially by these sorts of material reminders of the past.

Souvenirs are a specific kind of object that people collect in order to recall a variety of happenings. Put together, these otherwise random objects can create a specific sort of narrative of a life experience:

The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only 'behind,' spiraling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future (Stewart 1999: 135).

Thus, a souvenir is the material embodiment of a very special kind of memory of the past—a past thought about wistfully and perhaps romantically. Interestingly, when Marion Ress invited me on a tour of her 3 huge walk-in closets in her apartment in Manhattan, she uncovered many garments that she remembered purchasing on different trips abroad with her husband. In fact, their practice was to make the clothes that she bought in London or Paris her souvenir of the trip.

In contrast to the souvenir, "[t]he collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection" (Stewart 1999: 151). "In the souvenir, the object is made magical; in the collection, the mode of production is made magical... The souvenir magically transports us to the scene of origin, but the collection is magically and serially transported to the scene of acquisition" (Stewart 1999: 165). The souvenir can appear to offer a kind of authenticity not otherwise found in contemporary times. In this way, nostalgia has come to be understood as an element of post-modernity.
Much has been written about nostalgia; much of what has been written has been pejorative. Nostalgia literally translates as “home ache” or homesickness. It was first thought of as a medical problem to describe the “emotional phenomenon primarily associated at the time with exiles and displaced soldiers languishing from home” (Spitzer 1999: 90). Physicians observed that the symptoms of nostalgia could be triggered by the sounds, tastes, smells and sights that reminded individuals of the homes that they left behind (Spitzer 1999: 90). Actually returning to their home or homeland, however, was restorative. Now, nostalgia is reproached by many social critics for being a betrayal of history by sentimentalists, and a rejection of reality in the present. “For Raymond Williams, it was an opiate with dysfunctional consequences, enticing people to take refuge in an idealized past while avoiding a critical examination of and engagement with their present” (Spitzer 1999: 91). “As such, nostalgia induced acceptance of the status quo and impeded social change” (Spitzer 1999: 91). Last, Susan Stewart writes:

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in that lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality (Stewart 1993: 23).

In sum, nostalgia “has often been criticized as unproductive, escapist, and sentimental. It is considered regressive, romanticizing, the temporal equivalent of tourism and the search for the picturesque” (Bal 1999: xi).

Popularly, nostalgia has not escaped criticism, especially by those whom subscribe to the idea that nostalgia is inherently problematic. As written through one of Don DeLillo’s characters in White Noise, “[n]ostalgia is a product of dissatisfaction and rage. It’s a settling of grievances between the present and the past. The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence. War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard-pressed to say something good about their country” (DeLillo 1984: 258). For Kennedy Fraser, former fashion writer for The
**New Yorker**, the “most dispiriting aspect of nostalgia… is that the successive waves of it have come from precisely the group that society depends on to push its culture blindly forward—the young and the avant garde” (Fraser 1981: 242). Indubitably, nostalgia is a powerful force in popular culture and Kennedy is quite right to point out that it is indeed the fashionistas and the increasingly influential youth culture of the United States who, especially at the end of the twentieth century, embraced the past in a wide variety of arenas.

Richard Martin picks up on this affinity for retro among youths and reiterates the idea that these fashions can only be attractive to those who have not already lived through the fashions the first time around:

> [T]he layers of history are always important to the young for whom some exploration through a remembered and not-personally-remembered past is an important exercise. So often in fashion… one only would want to revive the taste of the 1960s or 1970s if he or she didn’t live through the polyesters, paper dresses, and peacock revolutions. In the concept of style tribes, generations make a big difference, but in the bigger business of fashion it is hard to see that designers who are mere historicists are able to engender the patronage of anyone other than the young, those least likely to afford fashion’s prices. Fashion cannot be counted in chronology or achronology alone (Richard Martin in Wolf and Schlachter 1999: xxii).

Nostalgia seems to be more attractive to young people who have no actual memory of the time of the object being romanticized nostalgically.

Indeed, nostalgic memories are often considered to be false, imagined, created for a purpose that cannot be productive or healthy:

> [T]he all-out effort to raise the status of comfort good is a sentimental fraud, swaddled in a thick layer of pretense and nostalgia, a very bad combination… It’s no accident that the rise of comfort food coincides with the demographics of the baby boom. Just as the children of postwar America were starting to have their own children, they became seized with an intense nostalgia for the cultural signs and symbols that surrounded them in the 1950’s. Who can blame them? The 1950’s were an era of peace, stability and low inflation. (William Grimes, *The New York Times*, 2001: F6)

I’m not one for nostalgia. I cringe at the thought of anything coming back. Bring on the new. Even if it is a derivative, a sampling of yesterday rearranged for today, a contemporary take on the past is preferable to worshipful reverence for times gone by. For most people, the past is a comfort zone they would rather revisit than contemplate.
the uncertainty that lies ahead. Like recovered memory, nostalgia is selective and dubious, leaving us wondering if the past happened at all, at least the way we think it did.

(David Hershkovits, "Mags for the Memories: Remembrance of Things Stored," 2001: 110)

Nostalgia is dangerous because it can turn into melancholy. My memories give me great pleasure, enormous nourishment, whatever strength I have. And, the more that time passes, the more precious these memories become. Doing this project has served as a reminder that one should never take fame seriously—and that one should never throw anything out!

(Amy Fine Collins, review of Happy Times by Lee Radziwell, 2001: 265)

Given these examples from a variety of popular cultural arenas, nostalgia is not something to be glorified or indulged in because it can be dangerous and indicate a certain personal weakness. William Grimes, the esteemed food critic for The New York Times notes that those who experienced something the first time around are not immune to embracing it again. Grimes covered the comeback of comfort food in New York restaurants, including one restaurant which literally puts Swanson TV dinners on its menu. What is interesting is not only that something so denigrated as a frozen dinner should make a comeback in popular culture in New York City, but more that Grimes attributes this newfound popularity to the sense of comfort that such things offer in less than stable times. Likewise, in his article about rediscovering boxes of old magazines from the 1980s, David Hershkovits shares Grimes’ disdain for the practice of finding comfort in nostalgia. On the other hand, while Amy Fine Collins’ warns of waxing nostalgic because of the danger of seemingly happy emotions turning to melancholy, she does admit that the memories themselves are precious. Thus, Radziwell’s popular book of photos depicting her fondest memories with her sister, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and the rest of the Kennedy family, both in and out of the White House shows what seem to be the halcyon days of “Camelot.” However in hindsight, one knows that tragedy ensued and things were not as glorious behind-the-scenes, as they appeared in photos.

Frederic Jameson found cinema to be an exemplary way to discuss the role of nostalgia in post-modernity. Jameson likens the emergence of simulacra in the twentieth century to what the
French refer to in film as “the mode rétro” (Jameson 1991: 19). Jameson is not satisfied with the polysemous word “nostalgia” for such fascination with the past, yet he believes that it is useful for directing our attention to what is a culturally far more generalized manifestation of this phenomenon in art, architecture and film (Jameson 1984: 66). For Jameson, “[n]ostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation” (Jameson 1991: 19). It can be reasoned that the same desperate attempt to harness the past would apply to a different vehicle of nostalgia—clothes made to look like the garments of yesteryear. Yet Angela McRobbie suggests contra Jameson that “it might be argued that these styles are neither nostalgic in essence nor without depth. Nostalgia indicates a desire to recreate the past faithfully, and to wallow in such mythical representations. Nostalgia also suggests an attempt at period accuracy, as in costume drama. While both of these are true...they are certainly not apparent in contemporary secondhand style. This style is marked out rather by a knowingness, a willful anarchy and an irrepressible optimism, as indicated by colour, exaggeration, humour and disavowal of the conventions of adult dress” (McRobbie 1988: 41-42).

Thus, not all writers are so quick to deride the power of a return to the past. Rather, they speak of the phenomenon almost fondly. Indeed, the quality of being able to escape from the present is seen as a virtue, not a defect. This makes possible creative inspiration and can be used as a creative tool of adjustment and can help to ease cultural uprootedness and a sense of alienation. Consider an article about Linda Evangelista’s return to her career as a supermodel after many years of “retirement,” Talk magazine notes that “Everything Old is New Again” (Sifton 2001: 43). Concomitant with Evangelista’s return to the catwalk, “Michael Jackson is releasing a new record and Depeche Mode is on tour. Everyone’s drinking and smoking again...and wearing Sergio Valenti jeans. In New York there are people break dancing in the subways and, at restaurants, ordering quiche. History is repeating itself, sure as
sunrise—nostalgia with a decidedly modern fizz” (Sifton 2001: 43). Tiffany Dubin, commenting on her latest vintage venture—a posh vintage home furnishings boutique in Henri Bendel on Fifth Avenue in New York City—believes that “[j]ust as people seek out vintage clothing to express their personal style, vintage pieces can personalize a living space” (Tien 2001: 3). She haunts eBay and flea markets for “items with personality, nostalgia, a story” (Tien 2001: 3). Furthermore, a Japanese electronics company carries a fantastically successful line called “Nostalgia” which features things like retro radios with the curves of the 1930s whole others have chrome-plated grilles like radios from the 1950s, and simple knobs for tuning (Hafner 2002: A38). It appears that consumers who are increasingly disgruntled with digital controls that are too complicated to program, rendering most equipment useless, are finding refuge in these nostalgic products (Hafner 2002: A1-A38).

Of course, nostalgia has manifested in sartorial style as well. Elizabeth Wilson, pondering whether or not retro fashions were part of this Postmodern age, notes that pastiche and retro-chic were among the most important trends of the early to mid-seventies and were already noticeable in the 1960s with hippy fashions (Wilson 1989: 194).

For Richard Martin, late curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, television and to a lesser extent, the movies of the past fifty years or so are media through which fashions of the earlier part of the century came to the fore in the latter decades of the twentieth century. These images are being constantly recycled before our eyes as people channel-surf, especially for those with cable access to channels such as Nickelodeon which allow us to view shows such as The Mary Tyler Moore Show or The Brady Bunch and its “time-capsule of dress” (Martin in Wolf and Schlachter 1999: xx). “Nearly fifty years of fashion are in constant use in the world of the channel surfer and keep reappearing as options, all but displaced from their original time” (Martin in Wolf and Schlachter 1999: xx).

A case in point about how television might influence and feed the nostalgic urges of younger generations is illustrated in an article about young female Manhattanites buying clothes
for the upcoming school year (Bellafante 2002f: nytimes.com). One owner of a downtown
children’s clothing store notes that clothes reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s are flying out of
the store (Bellafante 2002f: nytimes.com):

In her view, young people are experiencing a mediated nostalgia for a period in history that for them
might as well be the age of King George III, in large part because of the television. So the taste for fur
trimmings and other hippie-like elements comes not just from the filtering down of bohemina trends seen
on the runway, but…from “That 70’s Show” and the retro programming on Nickelodeon.

(Belafante 2002f: nytimes.com)

Thus, Richard Martin was prescient in his ability to see how influential television programming is
on fashion and fashion trends. It makes sense that children and adolescents would be
dramatically influenced since they seem to use television more and more as a form of
entertainment. It is also interesting that these retro programs have retained their grip on society
and continue to make it worthwhile for many different stations to replay these shows from
decades ago. Nostalgia for this kind of programming perpetuates the appreciation and desire for
the clothes like those worn in the shows.

In another cross-over between music and sartorial fashion, Simon Reynolds reports on
the revival of electro-pop which is comparable to new wave music of the 1980s and the clothes
that accompany it:

It was probably inevitable. The pop music and fashion industries depend on recycling their own history, and the retro
styles of the 1960’s and 70’s has been strip-mined to the point of exhaustion. Anyway, pop cult revivalists tend to
arrive punctually after roughly 20 years—just long enough for a period to acquire the charm of remoteness. In the
80’s themselves, rock groups like R.E.M. and Jesus and Mary Chain harked back to the Velvet Underground and the
Byrds of the 60’s. So, in the 00’s, the 80’s have returned right on time….At nightspots like Berliniasburg in the
Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, they’re adopting new wave fashion with its asymmetrical haircuts, skinny ties
worn over T-shirts, and studded belts and bracelets—and they’re doing so in a spirit that curiously mingles irony with
admiration. Two tendencies coalesce in revivals like this one. In one, people who were young during the period
being celebrated reach middle age and experience pangs for the styles of their youth. In the other, a new generation
was in its infancy. So the 80’s revival is driven in part by pure nostalgia and also by the more intriguing notion of
nostalgia for something never lived through.

(Reynolds 2002: 1)
What is so compelling in Mr. Reynold's report is not only his acknowledgement of the powerful role of nostalgia in the revival of 80s music and the fashions popular at that time, but also his accounting of the cyclical period of time that it took for this trend to reassert itself. Moreover, although Reynolds does not define it as such, his mention of the mingling of irony with admiration brings to the fore once again the idea that this coalescence of many different styles from many different ages that all seem to quote the other, is post-modernism in its purest sense. Last, it is also worth pointing out Reynold's special mention of the seeming polar opposition of those interested in these various retro movements—those who lived through it and those who remember it more on a collective plane.

Museums have also assisted in promoting this nostalgic look to the sartorial past, by mounting shows such as "Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years" in 2001. Pamela Clark Keogh, editor of Town & Country Magazine, noted that it would "introduce a whole new generation, born well after 1963, to Jackie" (Keogh 2001: 82):

[Interview with Harold Koda, Keogh 2001: 82]

People will view the exhibit with a certain kind of nostalgia. Even people my age, who were growing up them, will have an imprecise and murky image of the Kennedy presidency, and a lot of their memories need to be refreshed. And then there are going to be people who were born much later, after Camelot. They don't have any actual memories of Jackie—just what they may have read or heard. This show will be a real eye-opener for them.

It is interesting that people would feel a sense of nostalgia for Jackie vis-à-vis her clothes which were mounted next to photos of her wearing them at different state and international functions during the brief but apparently glorious era when she was in the White House known as Camelot. Elizabeth Wilson suggests that retro clothes create a myth, or many myths about the past and even sometimes about a mythic America (Wilson 1989: 195). Interestingly, soon after George W. Bush was elected president in 2000 made people recall earlier, more conservative (better?!?) times, which was reflected in their similarly conservative or preppy dress (Colman 2001: 261). The preppy look from the 1980s returned with a vengeance, featuring Lily Pulitzer dresses,
Lacoste shirts, Whale Belts and rugby shirts. The *New York Times* reported that when the Bush’s were voted back into the White House, there was a “full-blown 1980's redux, with logo handbags (actually, logo everything) designer dresses, big hair, furs and Park Avenue princesses” (Norwich 2000b: 3). It seemed logical that this revival of clothes associated with the 1980s and a return to the wealth and luxury evidenced in that decade was linked to the last time that there was a Republican president. If clothes that simply imitate the fashions from other times can trigger memories and forgotten feeling and emotions, the authentic and original clothes, especially those of a fashion icon like Jackie O, might be even more intense in terms of their nostalgic power.

Jan Reeder’s comments regarding the success of the Jacqueline Kennedy exhibit point out the role of nostalgia in the success of the exhibit:

I think that there is an element of nostalgia for the Kennedy years and the lines were enormous. There were an enormous amount of people for that exhibition because again, that exhibition is really a social history I feel. I think that Hamish [Bowles] did a wonderful job with a difficult assignment because the clothes themselves were not great clothes, if you forget about the provenance for a minute. They are not couture clothes, they are second tier clothing. And you know, she got fine dress-makers to make copies of the couture and were much less expensive. It had so much more to do with her presence and her sense of herself and the way she moved and the way she knew all the time that she was being watched. It all had to do with that—with her self-presentation and her aura and her sense of style. So, all that social history was included in the presentation of the clothes to make it an interesting and a nostalgic exhibition.

(Interview with Jan Reeder 2001)

While giving a tour of the “Our New Clothes” exhibit at the Met, Polly Mellon commented that the clothes act as “memory springboards” (Musto 1999: 2). Likewise, at the recent White House Years exhibit, Jackie’s clothes also acted as memory springboards, recalling memories of an era in American history known as “Camelot.” Moreover, Ms. Reeder makes specific mention that the clothes are not couture, but the kinds of clothes that many women of the time were wearing. Thus, as Ms. Reeder points out, the collection on display was not necessarily important because

---

5 It should be remembered that the “bible of all things prep, The Official Preppy Handbook, which first hit bookstores and best-seller lists back in 1980, is remembered as a dead-on how-to—from manners and mores to merchandise—for upwardly mobile young Reaganites” (Colman 2001: 261).
the clothes themselves were important, but because Jackie wore them while she lived in the White House as the First Lady, at a crucial point in American history.

Tiffany Dubin also found the power of nostalgia to be an important element in the success of one of her first auctions at Sotheby’s for her officially founded fashion department. Having grown up in couture houses in Paris where her mother had been a buyer, Ms. Dubin exploited her network of couturier friends in Europe and the people to whom they sold gowns. Dubin collected gowns from some of the most wealthy and socially elite women in the world for a charitable auction sponsored by Sotheby’s entitled “Paris à la Mode: Haute Couture.” She agreed that because the garments were worn by people like Catherine Deneuve, they were imbued with the essence of the women who wore the gowns which helped augment the value of the garments on the auction block. Ms. Dubin told me, “That first sale was all about nostalgia—“the great women of style” (Dubin 2001: personal communication). However, she realized after the first sale “that people really didn’t give a shit [about nostalgia]. They basically wanted a fun sexy dress that had the look of the moment but was one-of-a-kind” (Dubin 2001: personal communication). Thus, she geared the themes of ensuing sales to satisfy the demand for fun vintage goods that emphasized fashion forward fashion pieces that were in fact vintage goods.

Elizabeth Wilson asserts that this obsession with pastiche or ’nostalgia mode’ is related to the break down of haute couture in the 1960s and 1970s, which was marked, more or less, by a single predominant style. This also played a part in Dubin’s success since most of those gowns were couture. However, in the 1980s and beyond, one style alone could not dominate. In response, there is something of a “fantasy culture” which seemingly draws on nostalgia for such times (Wilson 1985: 172).

Even though fashions are never revived exactly the same in either form or mixed with the same accessories, or are even meant for use for the same kind of occasion, the styles that are revived are recognizably from another era (Brannon 2000: 98):
The 1950s were first revived in the early 1970s...Not revived were the political upheavals, bomb tests, and civil rights issues that had plagued the decade. Instead the revival concentrated on the fun of Hula-Hoops, rock ‘n’ roll, early Elvis, and the return to classic looks in fashion. Bits and pieces of the 1950s continue to be revived. In their turn, the 1970s were revived in the 1990s...At the end of the 1990s, it was possible to sample many eras from super-wide bell-bottoms reminiscent of the 1970s to clam-diggers and capri pants, signature looks for the late 1950s (Brannon 2000: 100-101).

Thus, fashions may be replicated from different time periods but frequently it is only a romanticized version of the events from those eras that are recalled and promoted for contemporary consumption.

Prior to her return to the runway, Ms. Evangelista appeared in an advertising campaign for Kenar which depicts her with a stereotypically perfect family in an array of scenes where she is a model housewife and mother from the 1950s, as evidenced by the style of her eyeglasses and the home and kitchen décor. (See Figure 4.1) Contrary to her real-life personality where she was once quoted as saying that she would not get out of bed for a photo-shoot earning less than $10,000, here Ms. Evangelista happily vacuums, bakes, chats on the phone, and works as a telephone operator, while still looking conservatively crisp and prim in her Kenar clothing:
Figure 4.1 – Kenar “Happy Days are Here Again” Advertising Campaign  
[Found in *Vogue*, September, 1998]

This apparent nostalgic look towards “happy times” when women’s work was seemingly uncomplicated and families were frequently together is clearly what we should achieve for the fashion season. Kenar hopes that their clothes will transport contemporary women into this realm of supposed simplicity.

Although Anna Wintour, editor of *Vogue* once decreed that the 1990s had no specific look it has also been argued that the 1990s *did* have a signature look (Brannon 2000: 102). In the 1990s, “waves of revivals of past fashion eras—revivals of the tailored suits of the 1940s, the club scene of the 1950s, the psychedelic 1960s, the bell-bottoms and platform shoes of the 1970s, and hints of the extravagant, colorful, affluent 1980s” (Brannon 2000: 102). In other words, in terms of sartorial fashion, the last decade of the millennium was marked by a compilation of styles spanning more than the two centuries that preceded it.

Following is a selection of writings by fashion journalists who have addressed the power of nostalgia in recent sartorial styles:
Beware of nostalgia. Understand that you are officially old the first time you hear yourself say, 'Things were so much better in the old days'... Fashion also has been invaded by the nostalgia beast. Someone, please, punch the monster in the nose. Reviving the 1980's before the silhouette was even cold was ghoulish, regardless of how much the cut was tweaked by the newest designer talents.

(William Norwich, reporting on how to entertain in the manner of grand parties of the past, 2000a: 55)

Children of the 70's who haven't had their fill of nostalgia with the resurgence of Farrah Fawcett hair and fondue parties have a new style option: high fashion iron-ons... 'It's fun to wear something that you wore when you were cool, carefree and didn't have to worry about rent'.


Vegas, too, is in the grip of an unfathomable 80's revival, with casino headline acts like Sheena Easton, Eddie Money and Andrew Dice Clay. Even Mr. T was spotted at the opening of Magic"... In a twist, one of the few manufacturers supplying some certifiable cool... was Ben Sherman, a 37-year-old British firm that introduced American-style button-downs to England in the 60's and was, for a while, shirt maker to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones... 'Kids are into these shirts their fathers wore.'

(Guy Trebay reporting on an apparel convention in Las Vegas called "Magic," 2000a)

The current eighties revival doesn't exactly take me back to my former life. I may buy the new puffy rip-stop nylon skirt at Morgan Le Fay or those cherry-red patent-leather boots at Sigerson Morrison... But the fact of the matter is, the real eighties were not the same as the twenty-first century's interpretation of the eighties, at least in New York. Back then, the fashion choices were a bit more complex... To wear something chic or current downtown meant you'd bought into the system. That is why thrift-store shopping was also popular—not vintage, but something worn and wrecked, as if the wearer had never gotten over her summer of love in Haight-Ashbury... This was in startling contrast to uptown, where women wore brightly colored suits, Chanel- or Adolfo-style, pink or red, often with padded shoulders... Which is why that Louis Vuitton opening was such a surreal experience for me. It was vintage eighties, and yet it was not. It stirred old memories and yet it inspired new ways to think about fashion... By the end of the evening, I was overtaken by feelings of nostalgia and amusement—but also great sadness: I suddenly realized that I had tossed out a pair of Day-Glo pink pointy-toed shoes with kitty heels, circa 1983. They would have gone so perfectly with Sprouses's and Vuitton's spring 2001 hatbox.

(Tama Janowitz in "Eighties, the Sequel," Vogue, 2001: 284)

In the fall, classic vintage-looking sneakers were the leisure footwear of choice: black-and-white Pumas, Adidas Sambas and the like. Lately, less obvious brands have been thriving—brands that take one back to the old "Flashdance" aerobic step-class era... [As noted by Ingrid Casares, a ] "Miami club impresario, "They're more original than Adidas... and they remind people of their childhoods.

Although this nostalgic turn is not always seen in a positive light by those in or out of fashion, it is seen by some as something to be respected and valued, or at the very least, acknowledged for its power. According to *Vogue*’s esteemed fashion advisor, “Mrs. Exeter”: 

> And the nostalgia in the collections? I really do not think it as bad as you think, not at all. Many a false step is made by standing still, so keep moving, keep looking, remain curious. Remember what Diana Vreeland often said: “We mustn’t let the splash drop. We must be amusing all the time!” Or consider what my yoga instructor told me the afternoon I first learned that Yves Saint Laurent was retiring, and I felt blue. “Look ahead,” the yoga man said. “Don’t drive through life with your hand on the rearview mirror!”...Until something really, really new comes along, until they can combine a Chanel suit with a hovercraft, so I can look sharp while winging my way above the impossible traffic to my various appointments thanks to my “smart” suit, I have resolved to enjoy all the refinement of familiar themes, while vowing not to make the same mistakes twice. For instance, I will be wary of suede fringe and stacked clogs. The only things “stonewashed” allowed in the house are diamonds.

*(Vogue 2002: 361)*

Mrs. Exeter makes several interesting points here that reiterate arguments made in previous chapters. First, the mere mention of the recycling of fashions from past eras is particularly poignant. Moreover, the author acknowledges that this sort of backward gaze is recommended neither by the maven of all fashion mavens, Diana Vreeland, nor by our society’s current exemplar of healthy living and lifestyles—a yoga instructor. Nevertheless, the nostalgic clothes not only maintain the sartorial panache for which she yearns, but also satisfy the lack of current clothing styles seemingly made for women no more than twenty-five years old. Furthermore, Mrs. Exeter sees the return of styles from years ago as an opportunity to correct fashion faux pas from earlier years. The fact that she recognizes what has been deemed a fashion “rule”—that if one wore a certain style before, especially one that is easily recognized and associated with a particular period of time, one should not wear it again—is also important since she simply chooses to ignore it. Mrs. Exeter is happy to wear the styles which are familiar and suit her lifestyle and her age, whether or not they are au courant or avant garde or nostalgic.

Although most of these trends began well before September 11, 2001, it, too, has had a tremendous impact on the fascination and the embrace with all things considered comfortable. Exactly one week after those events, Cathy Horyn commented in an article entitled “The
Unexpected Comfort of the Familiar,” in which she reviewed some of the Spring 2002 collections which recalled fashions from previous decades, “There may be more reason than ever for fashion to be nostalgic” (Horyn 2001: E8). Thus, indulging in a bit of nostalgia and the comfort it might bring does not always have to be viewed negatively. The benefits can sometimes outweigh the drawbacks, but the understanding and insinuation that nostalgia is inherently problematic cannot be avoided.

Yet, retro does necessarily have to signify a mass flight into nostalgia at all (Steele 1997: 152). It is thought, in fact, that most fashion trendsetters, and even many fashion designers, really have very little sense of fashion history (Steele 2001: personal communication). “Designers, stylists, photographers, and club kids all ransack the past for usable images, which are then ripped out of context and ruthlessly stripped of most of their original meaning... Avant-garde fashion designers use retro in this spirit” (Steele 1997: 152). It is also worth reiterating that Kaja Silverman sees this return to retro elements as an opportunity “to chart the affinities, for instance, between fashions of the forties and feminism in the eighties, or between fashions of the twenties and the ‘unisex look’ of the late sixties” (K. Silverman 1986: 151). This is not only an interesting exercise for those wanting to brush up on fashion history, but perfectly suits this post-modern admixture of multiple referencing that spans all cultural arenas as proposed by Jameson and supported by other post-modern theorists.

*Vintage—A Post-Modern Strategy of Anachronistic Juxtaposition*

The conflation of materials, time periods and styles in seasonal clothing collections shown on the runways in the last several years in particular is referred to by several terms which have become commonplace in our post-modern rhetoric—“pastiche,” “bricolage,” “retro-chic,” “nostalgia mode,” “fashion historicism,” and so forth. These terms seem to be used interchangeably for what Vincent Crapanzano calls “a sort of promiscuous quotationalism that subverts history, continuity and memory” (Crapanzano 1991: 432). This “random cannibalization
of all the styles of the past [and] the play of random stylistic allusion” has become the hallmark of
this era (Jameson 1984: 65-66). Tracy Tolkien concurs that in this post-modern age riddled with
bricolage, the juxtaposition of clothes from different eras made perfect fashion sense:

Suddenly it was okay to wear your cowboy boots with a flimsy 1950s slip dress
and a Victorian jet choker because it was all about pulling it together with
‘attitude.’ Retro styling is the ultimate bricolage tool and top designers…all re-
invented and recombined a variety of earlier eras while a popular fin de siècle
passion for vintage swept through the mainstream. The authentically old blended
easily with 1990s updates and vintage gave an outfit that slightly eccentric
personal twist (Tolkien 2000: 142).

Richard Martin writes that we should not be surprised by the influx of fashion historicism which,
for him, was initially prompted by post-modern ideals borrowed from the discipline of
architecture (Richard Martin in Wolf and Schlachter 1999: xx). He and his colleague at the Met,
Harold Koda, write:

Of course every era knows some appeal to history, whether in the form of
symbolic revivals or a new version of a prior style. The 1980s, however,
emerged as a different decade, its self-conscious and learned archaism and
renewals more fundamental than merely nostalgic... [A] hybrid historicism
evolved, arising from a mingling of models and surpassing discrete
traditions... Fashion assumed a prominent cultural role as it had at times in the
past. Such historicist appreciation enabled it to defy the triviality and caprice
customarily associated with la mode, placing it about vanity and making it an
important artistic and cultural barometer in the 1980s (Martin and Koda 1989: 7).

Thus, historicism, especially in the 1980s gave fashion a new significance and made people
consider it in a new, more respectable light (Martin and Koda 1989: 7). This is especially
interesting when considering that fashion has never been a decorative art that has garnered much
serious attention and indeed, is considered to be frivolous and without meaning and value.

Jameson likens the phenomenon of co-mingling things (or different garments in this case)
from different time periods, not only in fashion, but in cinema and in other arenas of popular
culture, to what happens inside the brain of a schizophrenic. For a schizophrenic, temporal
continuities break down and the world becomes overwhelmingly vivid and almost hallucinatory
(Jameson 1983: 120). “But what might for us seem a desirable experience—an increase in our
perceptions, a libidinal or hallucinogenic intensification of our normally humdrum and familiar
surroundings—is here felt as loss, as ‘unreality’” (Jameson 1983: 120). Thus, in Jameson’s estimation, post-modernity has a detrimental effect on those living through it. Important to his understanding of post-modernity is the sense of confusion wherein time is not linear, but jumbled.

Ulrich Lehmann’s work provides another way to try to understand fashion’s reliance on the past for today’s sartorial inspirations and as a way to lend it substance. Citing the problem of confusion with regard to time, Lehmann argues that in “quoting from past clothing styles, fashion is able to break the historical continuum and to become both transitory and transhistorical” (Lehmann 2000: xvii). Lehmann’s inspiration and theoretical touchstone is Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” where he “singled out fashion as the metaphor for the construction of history, for the definition of a special historical moment” (Lehmann 2000: xvii). As quoted in Lehmann, Benjamin writes:

Fashion has the scent of the modern wherever it stirs in the thicket of what has been. It is the tiger’s leap into the past. Yet this leap occurs in an arena commanded by the ruling class. The very same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which Marx has understood as the revolution (Lehmann 2000: xvii).

The “transhistorical character of sartorial fashion” is evidenced by the sartorial design elements quoted from the past (Lehmann 2000: xviii). It seems as if modern fashion designers anticipate and are the harbingers of things to come when in fact, they are always quoting from the past. In this convoluted way, fashion designers “create the perfect expression of the contemporary spirit” (Lehmann 2000: xviii) and capture the spirit of post-modernity. As Lehmann writes:

In its urge to be radically new, it has to be conscious of what came before...But...it is only the truly modern artist who uses this device deliberately. His or her art becomes self-referential, ironically conscious of the quotation from the past. Essentially, la modernité equals la mode, because it was sartorial fashion that made modernity aware of its constant urge and necessity to quote from itself” (Lehmann 2000:xx).

What Lehmann calls modernity might also be described as post-modernity, given Jameson’s widely accepted definition of it. This is primarily because fashion as a social entity constantly quotes from the past, and calls to mind the ideas that shaped society in prior eras through the
styles popular at the time. In so doing, it assists in breaking up the historical continuum which one might think is moving forward when, in fact, it is making the past part of the present and even of the future.

I agree with Angela McRobbie who suggests that contextualizing the popularity of vintage clothes within the sphere of post-modernity ought to be problematized. Not questioning this categorization of vintage as a manifestation of post-modernity would be to see "retro-dressing as merely yet another cultural re-run, no different from the nostalgic remakes of 1940s 'B' movies, or the endless re-releases and revivals of old hit records" (McRobbie 1988: 48). For McRobbie, "[w]hile pastiche and some kind of fleeting nostalgia might indeed play a role in second-hand style, these have to be seen more precisely within the evolution of post-war youth cultures" (McRobbie 1988: 48). Simply placing the rise of vintage in the midst of post-modernity takes away the sense of rediscovery of not only the items themselves, but also the styles and perhaps what they mean to these excavators of the past. Moreover, it detracts from the power of those creators and designers to imaginatively re-create them in the present with an eye towards the future (McRobbie 1988: 48).

Collectors: Public and Private

Collecting and collections have become so much a part of life that it is hard to think where we would be without them. Collecting is not only popular as a hobby for many different kinds of people and for many different kinds of things, but museums are what they are because of the collections they either house, or exhibit, or both. Store owners with whom I spoke for this research generally include "die-hard collectors" as a significant part of their client base:
Vintage clothes used to be sold at more inexpensive shops, more like thrift shops and now it's taken on more of a high fashion... there are just a lot more stores now that have expensive, collectible designer clothing. There are auctions when there never used to be. People pay a lot of money. I mean, people collect it like they are important antiques. And what used to happen was that when people cleaned out estates, people would always call someone to look at their furniture or jewelry but the clothes were always thrown away. No one seemed to think that they were worth anything, and they, I mean, I think people have started to realize.

(Interview with Elisa Casas, owner of 1909 Vintage 2001: personal communication)

Ms. Casas quite accurately describes the scene for vintage and the newfound respect for vintage clothes. Not only does she point out the higher quality garments (and the prices which reflect that quality) but she also makes note of the role of auction houses in the rising popularity of vintage clothes as valuable collectibles.

One important theme that recurs above is the influence of the infamous Diana Vreeland. Tiffany Dubin also attributes the effect of the work of Diana Vreeland from 1973-1986 when she was in charge of the Costume Institute at the Met to the success of vintage today. Dubin feels that with every exhibit Vreeland mounted, “important garments came to be seen as objects to be venerated, preserved and collected... It was during these decades that many antique dealers added vintage clothes to their stock, specialty vintage dealers opened their doors, and the auction houses of London and New York established their fashion departments. While some buyers were serious collectors of couture dresses and other fragile antique garments, increasingly, they were also women who bought to wear” (Dubin and Berman 2000: 9).

It is also interesting that many of these same store owners consider the merchandise that they have in their boutiques or in their warehouses as their “collection” which they just happen to have for sale. In fact, some of the garments that they have are not even for sale, but are rented for photo shoots. Their collection thus ultimately remains intact but can still provide income.

Another interesting aspect of a store’s collection is that it sets it apart from its competition. For example, at the SoHo boutique What Comes Around Goes Around, co-owner Seth Weisser claims to have the largest denim collection in the United States. He told me that anyone else’s selection of denim fails by comparison and more, since “it is such a tight market to
get denim, nobody can really get a stronghold on that market" (Weisser 2001: personal communication).

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for some boutique owners, such as Justin, the co-owner of Atomic Passion, to be a self-professed shopaholic and packrat. He and his partner entered the vintage market primarily because their cumulative collection became too large for them to handle in their home and the price for maintaining a storage shed for their goods was exorbitant (Atomic Passion 2001: personal communication). They decided that if they wanted to keep shopping, that they had to start selling what they had already collected for several years—both independently and together—in order to make ends meet.

Lenore Newman is quite proud of her carefully assembled collection, which also happens to be the stock for her Nolita boutique, Patina. She told me, “I don’t have that big of a collection. Every piece is something that I choose. It’s not like racks and racks of clothes. It’s a very idiosyncratic collection, unlike a lot of other stores near by” (Newman 2001: personal communication).

On the flip side, what these store owners’ customers collect and why they collect vintage clothes, are questions that will be addressed here. For Lenore Newman:

Collecting clothes is not really any different than collecting any other objects or heirlooms and that way, evoke memories of people who have come before. I think historically, people held on to things longer than we do now because this is a disposable culture and therefore it is not the norm that we hold onto things whereas years ago it just a matter of fact. People had clothing and wore them until they fell apart mostly... There is a difference between those people who collect and those people who buy to wear. There are a lot of people who just have collections... I buy to wear, not to collect

(Interview with Lenore Newman 2001)

Interestingly, Ms. Newman calls into her analysis of collecting vintage the idea that we live today in a culture of disposal, bringing to mind the writings of Gilles Lipovetsky. Moreover, it is true that many people who shop for vintage have no interest in keeping the clothes as part of a

---

6 Perhaps part of what might make Mr. Weisser’s collection so plentiful, as many other store owners also have large and prestigious collections, is that the garments are priced exorbitantly. Therefore, they do not fly out of the store as would less expensive clothes, but
collection, but purchase them as they would any clothes—to wear until they appear to go out of fashion again, become too worn to continue wearing, or lose interest to the owner.

Jan Reeder at Doyle New York auctions clothing that is both worthy of being in an important personal collection or museum collections, or that is of high quality, couture, or otherwise that is simply being purchased to wear (Reeder 2001: personal communication). As a result, she keeps an eye towards what people will buy to wear now. While showing me the clothes in her storeroom at Doyle, Reeder commented:

Like, these things from the 60s or 70s as well, well, yes, they are by a well-known designer, they really express the period very well. Yes they could be good in a collection or yes, someone could buy it and wear it and enjoy wearing it very much. There is a piece that will not sell for tons of money because you are really not going to buy a $5,000 or $10,000 dress to wear probably. So you get the real clear ones that are obviously going into collections and the others that you know are the great wearables.

(Interview with Jan Reeder 2001)

What is interesting is that those collectors and clients of the auction house interested in purchasing to wear have in many ways altered how the auction works. Before this aspect of vintage really burgeoned, those bidding on textiles and garments would not necessarily want to try them on. Now when clothes are auctioned, the bidder often has a desire to try them on to ascertain if they fit, as if the auction house were a vintage store. Decisions must be made, therefore, about which garments may be tried and which cannot.

Phyllis Magidson, the Curator of the Museum Costume Collection at the Museum of the City of New York, shared an interesting experience she had with modern collectors when she went to the exhibition for the auction of Princess Diana’s dresses:

I went to the viewing [of Princess Diana’s dresses] at Christies. And it was interesting because it took place only about a month before she died. And there was this competition of who was going to buy two dresses, and someone who was going to buy 6 dresses, and everybody knew that it was for charity and that the prices were going to be extraordinary. And yet, walking through those galleries, the clothes were so secondary [to the flower displays] and you realized that it wasn’t the clothing. It was how she wore the clothing. I don’t think that there is anybody else who is that kind of package. There was a complete cross-demographic. There were people who bought so that people the desire for them is great, if not amplified by their inaccessibility.
could immediately know that they could afford to buy... It was the ultimate consumer conspicuous statement on the part of the vendor. There were people—one woman who I know is a collector and designer in Texas bought 6 dresses. And it wasn’t for any reason other than to [show off]... it was almost like people were saying that they were more important than Diana because they could buy her clothes and she can’t buy my clothes. There were a lot of people who bought and gave it as a tax deduction to the Met. They received a lot of clothing from the auction, because, once you have it, what the hell do you do with it? You are not going to wear it. I mean, maybe your granddaughter might get a kick of wearing it one time, but what are you going to do with it. I think that that happens with anything that has that kind of attachment.

(Interview with Phyllis Magidson 2001)

Magidson’s experience sheds light on other aspects of buying to collect or buying to wear. Here, she observes one woman buying several dresses that once belonged to Princess Diana. Here, it is clear that this is a certain kind of conspicuous consumption through which the women can attempt to trump their society competition. Moreover, it is widely known that Princess Diana was a very small size, and thus only the sveltest of the svelte could fit into her dress. I recall watching when Katie Couric, one of the hosts of *The Today Show*, who had invited a representative from Christies to come with some dresses in order to drum up more publicity for the charity auction. Couric, too, made mention of just how small the dresses were and that it would be very difficult indeed for the average woman to wear one. Last, Pamela Fiori, editor of *Town & Country*, also went to the preview at Christie’s just before Princess Diana’s untimely death. Fiori writes that Diana’s “radiant presence at Christie’s that night added enormously to the occasion” (Fiori 2001: 37). What was particularly striking to Ms. Fiori was that despite the fact that Diana was lovely, the clothes themselves inadvertently revealed much about the Princess (Fiori 2001: 37).

Harold Koda notes that the issue of buying to wear or buying to collect comes to the fore even for museum curators. Although part of their job is to hunt for clothes for the museum’s collection, Mr. Koda says that the idea of being able to wear the garments enters into the decision-making process regardless of the gender of the curator. He states, “I think that there are some male curators who can actually project themselves into the actual wearing of the clothing,
but I have never had that. I notice that with women curators, they exercise a bias that’s related to
the fact that they can wear the clothing” (Koda 2001: personal communication).

Marianna Klaiman believes that collecting clothing as it is done today started in the late
1970s using the bicentennial in America as a point of departure (Klaiman 2001: personal
communication):

You know, I have been doing this for over 20 years in fashion and whether it’s from a museum perspective or whether
it’s a selling perspective here, the type of property, the person who is collecting it, has changed over the years. I think
the reason that vintage fashion first started being collected and looked at was in the 70s because at that point, you had
a post-hippie revolution where a lot of the hippies would go to the thrift shop and pick up the Edwardian dresses or
the funky clothes and wear them because it was inexpensive and it made them stand out from the crowd. Prior to that,
wearing vintage fashion was something nobody did. You don’t even read about, you don’t even hear about it, it just
wasn’t something that was in society…People were looking back at historic fashion and people were getting dressed
up in 18th century pieces. So, there was more of a popularization of vintage fashion and actually wearing it. Prior to that,
you still had of course people that collected, but those were the historic collectors. Maybe they were collecting
18th century, or maybe sort of Asian textiles or special types of embroideries or beadwork. There were people at that
point collecting, but it wasn’t popularized.

(Interview with Marianna Klaiman 2001)

Ms. Klaiman’s unique take on collecting is informed by her background in museum work and her
former position as the couture specialist at Sotheby’s New York. Most of the people with whom
she deals, and has dealt with since the inception of her career, are primarily interested in
collecting. Not so long ago, if people collected textiles, they collected pieces of tapestry from
other countries, or embroideries. Even so, this was not a popular item to collect. It seems that
collecting garments remained in the domain of museum collections.

Harold Koda attributes much of the impetus to collecting clothing to the idea that
clothing can be fetishized and can have a fetishistic association to personality of the original
wearer (Koda 2001: personal communication):

I mean in the 19th century people used to collect ballet slippers from famous ballerinas and spent a fortune. So it’s
been going on since the 19th century, and maybe even earlier…in terms of handing clothing down and I know that that
has happened. That kind of association with personality has always existed. The problem is that it’s easier to keep a
book than it is a dress so that kind of pattern of collecting is much more discernable in the 20th century.

(Interview with Harold Koda 2001)
However, the popularity of vintage clothing as something worthy of collecting and as something of value has made obtaining "good" garments a much different practice for those who have been doing it for some time. Indeed, it has been noted that because many collectors have surfaced who focus on everyday garments, finding good examples of great design periods has become "a challenging, but rewarding task" (Dolan 1995: vi). Many women are now being urged to consider what they purchase each season as pieces which might be collected when they fall out of use, and those who already have great clothes by famous designers are being implored to keep what they have. In the December 2001 "Vogue View" assessing the "Best and Worst of 2001," Sarah Mower breaks down the fashion trends of the year into the following categories: "Store It," "Keep It/Wear It," and "Toss It" (Mower 2001). Here, garments and accessories in the "store it" category are deemed "time capsules" and "quality keepsakes" that should be locked up "to be let loose in another decade" (Mower 2001: 172). Although it is not stated as such, the directive not to discard the items in one's closet suggests the beginning of a collection of sorts. But one's wardrobe does not have the same panache as what has come to be called an "Important" personal collection. These collections are either the wardrobes of someone of fame or fortune, or are collections that have so many important pieces, either purposefully or not, that they become highly coveted and quite valuable.

In the last couple of years, Vogue printed a series of articles entitled "Celebrity Closet Case." Here, celebrities are interviewed about their wardrobes and how they create their signature style. Vintage clothing has featured prominently in the closets of many of these women, such as Tatiana Soroko, who revealed that she would "rather buy a one-of-a-kind vintage couture dress at auction than wear this season's thing" (Vogue 2000: 154). In addition to loving Madame Grès who she asserts "was the Rei Kawakubo of her time," Soroko notes that her prized possession is a 1932 Jeanne Paquin velvet dress she was given by a designer friend when he

---

7 Harper's Bazaar had a similar monthly column entitled "In Her Closet" or "Closet Case."
could not afford to pay her (Vogue 2000: 154). Similarly, in an expose about Liz Goldwyn in Harper’s Bazaar, the granddaughter of Sam Goldwyn of MGM Studios, it is emphasized that she has a sizable collection of about 150 pieces of vintage Yves Saint Laurent clothes (Morton 2001: 100). In keeping with other themes set forth in this research, Goldwyn says that she “romanticizes the past—La Dolce Vita, Marlene Dietrich, the Hollywood golden era,” which is why she has so much vintage in her collection (Morton 2001: 100).

Other notable collections that have been put together and that have been publicized and acclaimed in popular fashion magazines like Harper’s Bazaar include Sarah Jessica Parker’s collection of Manolo Blahnik shoes:

> I have every pair I’ve ever owned and bought—I don’t care if the heel looks silly or not. They’re art. One day I will turn over my Manolos to a bigger collection. One day I’ll teach my daughter—while I’m teaching her to read and taking her to museums and telling her not to watch TV—by telling her, ‘Mommy bought her first pair of Manolos in 1983 in a little boutique called Madeleine Gallet.’ I have far too many shoes. I mean, really really too many shoes. (Henry Alfred 2001: 258)

Parker has become quite famous for her starring role in the television drama Sex and the City for which the wardrobes have been coordinated by noted fashion designer Patricia Field. As a result, Parker’s personal wardrobe, which seems not to stray very far from her character’s wardrobe, has become a topic of interest for many fashionistas, especially her Manolo Blahnik shoes. These shoes are extraordinarily expensive, costing well over $400 per pair. The fact that Parker not only associates each pair with a narrative of its acquisition but also wants to donate them to a museum is in keeping with other themes I have suggested in this research. Her collection would in fact be of interest to a museum, not only because she has purchased such high-quality designer shoes, but also because of her own fame and the association that the shoes (and the rest of her clothes) have with such a popular television program.

Keni Valenti also has an interesting take on not only how he augments his own collection from famous and wealthy private collectors and famous people, but how the garments
in his loft-space are desired by museum curators and how creative he has had to be to stay financially afloat:

The [Countess von Bismarck]’s granddaughter called me up and sold me all these old couture dresses. I bought the whole collection. I mean, people come in here and tell me not to sell anything because it is all historical. But this is a business and I have to sell things. This is not a museum. I get Valerie Steele [Acting Curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology] in here and she says don’t sell stuff. But I am not running a museum here. I just want to get it in and get it out. But this is not the proper way to store clothing either. And Valerie comes in and she wants everything but she doesn’t have the money to buy it...I mean look, I have a lot of stuff and I spend a lot of money. I spend like a million dollars a year on clothing. But I try to turn it around. I just opened a place in Soho at a place called Skirt. It’s a rental studio where they rent new clothes for film and still pictures and video. So we recently opened up a Keni Valenti Retro Couture department there that is only for rental. So they have a thousand pieces. I also have a department in a store called Emma Gold on Melrose Avenue in California and I’m opening up a department in a store called Georgina’s in East Hampton. So I am trying to get stores to do vintage departments too or rental departments. I rent it. I mean I really don’t rent it for people to wear, unless it’s Kate Moss or someone important, but I rent it to designers to copy...I have been going into ladies houses. They call and say why don’t you come over and I sit and have tea and I have to hear about every dress and where they wore it. I mean, it’s kind of sad. But it’s fun though. They had incredible lives. I can’t believe that they held on to stuff for so long. It’s funny to me when you go to some women’s apartments and you open up their drawers and you see that they really thought that they would be living forever. Like, they would buy things and just never wear them because they are too good to wear or whatever. Or they buy things in dozens of things they like. I saw a lot of sad stuff with all of this too. Like, women who have died of cancer and alcoholics, and there are all sorts of stories behind the clothes. This place is kind of haunted in a way. I mean, when you die, do you think the children care about it? The children are the last to care about it. They are like, get it out of here. Just like Bismarck’s grandmother. She was actually standing there saying, [Valenti takes a German accent] “Ugh, I remember my grandmother wearing this stuff.” She was just grossed out by it. She was just like, “Get it out of here. Take it all.”

(Interview with Keni Valenti 2001)

What is particularly fascinating about Mr. Valenti’s statement is how he is figured at the epicenter of so many parts of the vintage clothing industry. He deals with museums, fashion models, fashion designers, the rich and socially powerful, and even royalty. This provides yet another clue to the clout that vintage clothing has come to enjoy, not just as a legitimized sartorial alternative, but as something of (growing) value.

The extraordinary success of Norma Kamali’s famous bathing suits and ‘sleeping bag’ coats allowed her to amass a remarkable collection of vintage clothes (Hass 2001b: 52). She commented that in fact, she learned the craft of making clothes by studying the technique of good
vintage clothing (Talley 2002: 112). At the end of 2000, she took her clothes out of archives and is selling the collection, which is considered to be one of the most valuable in the world, piece by piece in her boutique on West 56th Street and on the internet as well. Ms. Kamali seems to be divesting herself of her collecting as a backlash to nearly a decade of acquisition and excess, there's something distinctly...real in the air (Hass 2001b: 52). Since she can do whatever she wants in her own store, she has taken to mixing vintage clothing among her contemporary designs, the way young fashion editors do (Talley 2002: 112). Interesting here is that Kamali seeks to get rid of her collection because it allegedly reminds her of vast spending in the 1990s, due to her success in the 1980s and is apparently embarrassed by her wealth of clothes.

As noted above, not all collections that are deemed to have value belong(ed) to persons of fame, fortune or from the upper echelons of society. For example, Evangeline Morphos, an associate professor at Columbia University, became something of a legend when she donated a significant part of her Perry Ellis collection to the museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (Witchel 2000). Her collection was considered to be a windfall because Perry Ellis International had no archives of their own of Perry Ellis's work before his death. "Ms. Morphos's original compunction was to curate a collection. She bought complete ensembles even in the wrong sizes, just to own the signature looks, which she organized in her closet by year and season" (Witchel 2000). As a result, this woman, who purchased clothes that she loved and wore for years, wound up owning a collection that had historical worth and was deemed museum quality.

Similarly, an attorney, Jill Rittblat, donated a significant part of her wardrobe to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Her donation spawned a fascinating exhibit and accompanying book entitled One Woman's Wardrobe in 1998. The commentators who wrote the catalogue for the exhibit emphasize that this was not a collection. Rather, the clothes are merely those that she purchased to wear over a period of approximately 30 years. The clothes, which she kept in pristine condition, not only tell a story of fashion, but also narrate the life—the twists and turns—of Jill Rittblat. Ms. Rittblat writes that she kept a lot of her clothes because she thought
she might wear them again or she simply loved the design of the garments (Victoria and Albert Museum 1998: 14). She writes, "Then I began to feel affectionate towards them, as towards old friends. Some had a certain significance and others... were obviously special or evocative (Victoria and Albert Museum 1998: 14). She also notes that there are still some things that are too difficult for her to have given to the museum because of the emotional attachment that she has for them. However, she does note that anything in which the museum showed an interest would eventually wind up there, presumably after she passes away. Rittblat also makes a special point to thank her daughter for allowing her to give her clothes to the museum, which would otherwise be her rightful inheritance.

Important personal collections can be sold as a whole through auction houses. Marianna Klaiman at Sotheby's shared a story of one of the most impressive collections. This received extensive media coverage and can be considered an example of how sartorial collections as a whole have come into their own in terms of value, historical interest, and cultural importance:

Sometimes we do special exhibitions for internet auction and we did that with one that I did at the beginning of this year which was the Joseph LaRose Exquisite Footwear collection and this was a huge collection that we discovered down in Florida. He was a man who was an exotic footwear retailer in Jacksonville, Florida for 50 years. He never got rid of any of his dead store stock. So we went into his store and we gathered the collection, it was probably about 200,000 pairs of shoes. So for that, we actually had an exhibition here and then we had it coinciding with the internet auction. So, that is a way that we can market to different clients... It was fascinating. I never knew there were so many shoe people out there—and vintage shoe people—and it was kind of a whole new collecting category... What I found is that there is a whole collecting sub-culture for shoes especially. It's people, whether they collect a certain era or they collect a certain kind of shoe or whatever. And it was a lot of industry people that then have their own private collections. And then there were people who loved them and wanted to wear them and most of them came with matching handbags. That was the most exciting thing about it... So we did get a lot of museum buying as well. It was interesting because no one had ever heard of this man before outside of Jacksonville, Florida, practically. So we really had to create a whole buzz about it and say, this is an important collection, these are important things to have and I think we were very successful with that sale. If we had just put it up on the internet without any marketing, we wouldn't have sold even one pair. It's not like we were saying that this was the Manolo Blahnik archive which people would know. But when the story was told that Joe LaRose had celebrity clients, it was a fascinating story... we had letters and correspondence. He had sold a lot to Joan Crawford and he sold a lot to Dear Abby, Abby VanBuren, Jane Mansfield, and actually when she was killed in that automobile accident down in Florida, she was wearing Joe LaRose shoes and they even put that in the newspaper article, and Betty Grable... and he kept all the
correspondence. That part of it as well was also a selling point. In fact, it was Cesar who brought us that collection because his partner grew up in Jacksonville, Florida and always knew about this shop and they would actually go down and buy shoes from Joe—because he only died a few years ago—and bring them back up and sell them at Cherry. And they were brand new. They were all dead store stock from the 40s and 50s. Boomerangs and wedges and all sorts of wild of shoes but perfect, in their boxes, all different sizes, but they had no idea until he passed away and then there was a foundation created... Joe was a multimillionaire in real estate but shoes were just a love. He had those great little Papagallo flats in every color you could imagine, like all those great 60s lime green and yellow and pink and purple with all the little flowers on them in every size stacked up to the ceiling. I mean, there were estimates that there were 200,000 to 400,000 pairs, and probably about 10 to 20,000 matching handbags. So I was one of the first people to go down there and it was daunting. Room after room with stacks to the ceiling of shoes. And then bags! So what I did was put the most complete sets together, so you’d have a pair of shoes with 6 different matching handbags. Or a handbag with seven different styles of shoes. Those kind of things are important to collectors, to have a full run, all the color ways. Then we had the Papagallo swatch book from 1970 with all the different leathers. That’s something that did go to a museum because those kinds of things are hard to come by. Not only the sample book but then all the shoes that are with all the examples.

(Interview with Marianna Klaiman 2001)

This particular sale at Sotheby’s was so extraordinary that it was mentioned in popular fashion magazines and was featured on The Incurable Collector. The collection seemed to spark a sense of nostalgia for a time when women matched their shoes to their handbags, a sartorial practice that has come back recently, but not to any great extent. Yet, the fact that women not so long ago took the time and did not spare the expense to be garbed in this manner is striking to people who have discounted so many fashion “rules,” such as not wearing white after Labor Day, or no patent leather shoes before Easter, and so forth.

Jan Reeder also auctions collections that straddle the spheres of fame, fortune, taste, style, and design:

I have a group of clothes that belonged to a particular Baroness. Now she is not a big known figure. She was a big socialite in Dallas, Texas, but that doesn’t mean anything to a lot of people. I took the clothes because they are incredible flamboyant clothes and have some good makers and so they stand alone in themselves as pieces that I think people will like to have as either wonderful exhibition pieces or, as in the case of this woman, the clothes totally speak of grand entrances that she made. Now in this case, yes, it adds to the caché of these clothes and adds to the value because of that. But they are also great clothes. Now if you are talking about a really famous person—Marilyn, Jackie, Diana—that’s an entirely different ilk of things. That has so much to do with the person that that overshadows what the clothes actually are. So in that case, if they are not great clothes, it doesn’t matter because it’s who wore them that matters. And that is celebrity. Now we normally don’t deal with big celebrity like that. However, we are
going to have one of Diana’s dresses that was sold at the Christie’s sale in this upcoming sale. It had been purchased by a newspaper and then was given as a gift for a sweepstakes prize and the person who won it has never done anything with it and is ready to part with it. So I think you can get those distinctions. You know, if the person is a well-known person, but is not known for what they wore, then selling their clothes doesn’t really make that much difference. People don’t buy it just because...Jackie and Marilyn and Diana were all known for what they wore as well as for other things. But they were highly stylish people. But if you get somebody who was well-known but not because of their appearance, for instance say they were a writer or something like that, that provenance doesn’t necessarily enhance the price of the clothes.

(Interview with Jan Reeder 2001)

Here, Ms. Reeder took into consideration many different factors that made this Texas Baroness’ collection have significant value. Since she was not a widely recognized personality (which would increase the worth of the garment to a buyer), her clothes still had enough value to be in league with those clothes that were worn by personalities like Marilyn Monroe.

Museum collections of clothing and textiles do not necessarily have their roots in nostalgia per se. They ostensibly collect items that have historical value, as in garments that are representative of a particular period of a designer’s career, or cultural value, as in a garment or textile that is typical of an era, a movement, a group of people, or the work of a designer. As Jan Reeder notes:

There have been major museum collections of clothes and textiles for years and years and years...The nature of a collection is that it keeps growing and the curator’s job is to acquire things that he or she feels will be significant or representative of costume’s history in the future. Pieces that are really very representative of a designer’s best work or what the designer is really known for...That is the curator’s job—to develop that collection.

(Interview with Jan Reeder 2001)


As Curator of the Museum Costume Collection at the City Museum of New York, Phyllis Magidson explains how the department was started and the kinds of things that she looks for and permits to be accepted into this very special collection:
The museum charter was ratified in 1923. The earliest items in the collection came in 1926. Initially the costume collection was under a larger blanket of decorative arts—toys, costume and anything that really related to material culture in New York... In recent years as costume developed into a separate field, the level of connoisseurship has increased. This department has taken on a very favorable position with other costume collections in the New York area and also in the country... The thing about this collection is that the clothing was more or less conformed to a blanket requisite of having a history in New York City. Whether it was made in NYC, worn in NYC, both... you have to have some link to NYC to qualify as a candidate for inclusion. If the most spectacular imaginative walks in the door and it doesn’t have a NYC tie, we can’t accept it. If a dealer comes in with a Poiret and cannot come up with NYC history for that Poiret, if it wasn’t made for someone in NYC and if it doesn’t have anything that qualifies it as a New York City based artifact, we can’t take it... We get stuff just about exclusively through donations. Very rarely do we purchase things. We just don’t have funding for that. And, also, the thing that has come to our attention for purchasing is that very rarely do things have the history of the wearer as part of the piece and we also at this point are looking for items that relate to people who lived in New York City who were not of the upper crust. Items that were kept in the drawers of families who may have come over around the turn of the century, were never in positions of buying high-end, possibly did home-made things that were copied from examples from the department stores which were accessible to the general public who sewed them on their own machines or by hand so that there are very few auctions that have included in the catalogues which really hold strong appeal for us. Obviously, if it is something of a pivotal New Yorker, case in point, there was an auction at Doyle a couple of years ago of costumes worn by Marion Anderson who at one point resided on 102nd and Fifth Avenue, but more importantly, she was an absolute ground-breaking performer and woman and African American artist and the concert gowns were up for sale at Doyle and we realized that we didn’t have any budget for that and Bette Midler was attending the auction and she asked, after the second and third lots were passed because they didn’t meet the reserve, she was aghast and said that she understand what was happening and wanted to know why no one was bidding on these things and the truth was that no one that was there was interested in the history and they were not showy garments—you had to be able to visualize that they were also large and she turned around and bid on every lot and then went back to the house and bought the two or three that had been passed up and offered them to us. And those came with complete documentation because they came directly from the family; there were photographs of her wearing them, and it was exactly the kind of thing that resonates for us. But that’s very rare. Ideally, I like items that have four different reasons for taking them. It was worn by a pivotal New Yorker, it was photographed and documented in whatever newspaper, publications or magazines, it was made by somebody who was a pivotal designer, that’s the kind of thing that really meaning for us because then when we exhibit it, we have the documentation... It is a very humanistic collection. Even at a time when the cataloguing was very primitive, the early curators still had enough presence of mind to take genealogies of some of the families or really respect the garments and be selective than they are in many other collections. I know that the most documentation on a lot of the most pivotal pieces and I know when they mounted the Art in the Empire City exhibition, they had to come to us to borrow clothes that had to documentation as having been worn to major New York City events in the 19th Century. They simply don’t have that kind of documentation... You know, they might have the documentation of where the designer was in his career when the garment was created, but they don’t really go in for the family history, and very often they don’t even know who the original wearer was. And again, they are not restricted to a particular location...

(Interview with Phyllis Magidson 2001)
Of course, the collection at City Museum of New York is only one of many throughout the United States and the world. What is especially interesting about it, however, is that unlike other ethnographic collections that one might find at a museum such as the Museum of Natural History, this collection has clothes from contemporary people. As Ms. Magidson notes, provenance is a must and she makes a special effort to have clothes that represent all the people from New York—not just the upper crust.

On a related note, More magazine featured a short piece entitled “Museum of My Life” (More 2001b: 25). The writers asked five famous women including Stevie Nicks, Nadia Comaneci, and Mary Matalin what clothes they would give to a museum that was celebrating their lives (More 2001b: 25). This article is of special interest because it is so seemingly random in the context of the rest of the magazine. However, it is timely in the context of how clothes have come to be regarded as poignant markers of the highlights on one’s life, and also, as something that can be imbued with the essence of a person. Marianna Kaiman confirms this from her auction experience at Sotheby’s. She said that they have had Marilyn Monroe clothing which generated a lot of interest because it was something people could connect to—“because people think that it is almost like a piece of the person” (Kaiman 2001: personal communication).

*Museum Exhibitions*

Fashion shares with art the power to express the moment.  

(Katherine Betts 2000: 48)

In the last twenty years, clothing has become *de rigueur* as the subject of an art exhibit in art museums around the world. It should be emphasized that the museums mounting these exhibits are primarily for art, as opposed to museums such as the Fashion Institute of New York, dedicated to anything and everything having to do with fashion, or the Black Fashion Museum in Harlem which is a repository of garments designed specifically by African-Americans throughout
history. Clothing has come to be seen as art and also has been used more and more as an art medium.

While Bill Blass a designer who might be considered part of the American fashion cannon is quoted as saying, ""Fashion is a craft and an expression of a period of time, but it is not an art!"" (Nemy 2002: C13). Conversely, Tara Subkoff, Vogue's "Girl of the Moment" in September, 2002, reinterprets vintage clothing for her label Imitation of Christ, and considers every garment she makes as a piece of art (Kotur 2002: 313). Nevertheless, many in the fashion industry, and those invested in vintage clothing in some capacity, have latched on to the idea that clothing can be seen as art, and is therefore collectible and worthy of museum exhibition. Indeed, many people invested in fashion go to great lengths to legitimize clothing as something worthy of collecting to counterbalance the anomalous position of fashion among the arts:

Fashion designers have been trying to position themselves as artists since the end of the nineteenth century and the show collaborates with that construction of their image. But the whole idea of high art also collapsed at the same time into a sort of mixture of high and popular culture so you can have someone like Versace more easily in an art museum because "What is art?"—that whole question has gotten thrown open.

(Interview with Valerie Steele 2001)

It's become fine art. Clothing has become fine art. Some people respect it and buy it like that, like some of those spoiled model girls who just wear it and trash it. But some people, some rich girls, will just buy it and are really into preserving it and taking it to the best dry cleaner and having it stored in boxes...I don't know what they are doing it for but they are doing it. But they are doing it like an art piece. A woman who buys dresses from me puts them on mannequins in her living room as art pieces. So she'll have her Warhol over there and her Saint Laurent dress over there with lights on it. So that's another whole thing. Fashion has become a form of art. I think that there is more money in this right now than there is in the art market today.

(Interview with Keni Valenti 2001)

Today, while there is surely no agreement that fashion is equal to art, nor should there be, the leading and prevailing tastes assert that fashion is culturally important... Ambiguously balanced between art, design, and popular culture, fashion is at least something one dares to speak of.


Indeed, "[f]ashion isn't just for hangers and shoulders anymore: In museums around the world, clothes are climbing the walls" (Colman 2001b: 230). Clothing has even become a
common way to decorate one's home. Instead of hanging a painting or placing a sculpture in a bare space, people now buy significant garments and put them on mannequins as did Keni Valenti's client mentioned above. Some people, such as David McFadden, the chief curator of the American Craft Museum in Manhattan, are purchasing garments like kimono that plays the role of a painting in his apartment which he considers to be a "happy confluence of fashion and art" (Louie 2002: 8).

There has been a rash of fashion exhibits around the world celebrating the works of landmark fashion designers such as Rudi Gernreich, Norman Norell, Pauline Trigère, and current avant garde designers as well. The gist of most of these shows seems to be not only to exhibit the body of work of a particular designer, but also how pervasive their influence was on fashion today. For example, "Rudi Gernreich: Fashion Will Go Out of Fashion" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia was mounted in order to represent what they deemed to be an unrecognized "artist" whose decisions were influential (Koski 2001: 410). He is primarily known for the topless bathing suit, but more importantly is responsible for the baby-doll dress and the thong, ultimately freeing women from constricting clothes of the 1950s (Koski 2001: 410). Gianni Versace will also be honored with a retrospective five years after his death at London's Victoria and Albert Museum at the end of 2002 (Peretz 2002: 162). Poignantly, his sister, Donatella, who continued to design for the label is quoted as saying that going through the archives for the exhibit was an inspirational journey because the "clothes are reminders of so many special times in [her] life" (Peretz 2002: 162).

The Cartier Foundation for the Contemporary Arts in Paris mounted a 10-year retrospective of the work of Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake. (See Figure 4.2)

---

8 Indeed, there have been a lot of retrospectives not only in museum settings, but also in popular journalistic writing. Several popular and literary magazines such as Vanity Fair (Collins 1998; Jacobs 1998), The New Yorker (Als 1998), and Town & Country (Fiori 1998; Vienne 2000) have featured articles chronicling the lives and careers of important fashion designers including Claire McCardell, Charles James, and Pauline Trigère to name a few.
The review of the exhibit in *The New York Times* promulgates the idea that his clothing designs and utilization of pleats which express the fragmentation in today's societies as a result of late capitalism (Muschamp 1998: 37). Here, the clothes are more than art in an art museum, and more than fashionable, well-designed garments that are part of a costume and textile collection of a museum. Rather, they are an amalgam of things that are seen as comments on the state of contemporary society.

Another interesting outcome of this rash of retrospectives is that it creates an inordinate demand for the clothes of the designer in question. The museums, by mounting an exhibit about a particular designer or a theme having to do with a bygone era, legitimates those clothes, and create a consumer desire for either the authentic vintage originals or reproductions. For example, in an article about the Rudi Gernreich exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, Valerie Steele comments, "Many of his clothes still look so directional...Vintage clothes fanatics will fight tooth and nail over Rudi Gernreich" (Koski 2001: 412). Moreover, when the director of the ICA asked a member of her board if she would donate her Gernreich clothes, it turned out that she could not because her own daughter was wearing them (Koski 2001: 412).
It is true that there seem to be more retrospectives of clothing and clothing designers in
the last decades of the twentieth century than ever before. Harold Koda states:

The public loves retrospectives. Maybe it has something to do with curators having shows they want that have to do
with answering questions that they have. So they don’t have the same questions that the general public has... It’s very
rare to find a chronological survey of the work of a designer from beginning to end. And part of what the curatorial
process tends to yield is as you learn more and more about the work is that there are these interesting things that don’t
conform to prejudices that the curator might have or the public might and so it’s usually those issues that you want to
bring to the exhibition so that you don’t have a straight retrospective. The closest thing Richard [Martin] and I ever
did to a retrospective is the Madame Grès exhibition. But even there, I know I was conceiving it not as a A, B, C, D, 1
2, 3 progression. The pieces were loosely organized chronologically, but they really for me based on delineating for
the public the progress that she made in terms of the actual making of the garment, when she made these quantum
leaps from something that she was doing earlier... So that had a kind of chronological narrative. Our Dior show, the
catalogue is strictly chronological but again the show dealt with different issues. We grouped them by concept, not
by date of conception. I’m not sure that the public thinks that way.

(Interview with Harold Koda 2001)

The exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House
Years” and “Giorgio Armani” at the Guggenheim set new attendance records which brought
unprecedented monies to the museums. 9 However, because of the enormous financial success of
retrospective exhibits or those like the Jackie O exhibit at the Met, some museums have been
criticized for mounting what are deemed commercial exhibits for the sole purpose of making a
profit. Diana Vreeland who has been credited for the increasing number of fashion and fashion
designer retrospectives did a lot of retrospective-type exhibitions and was often criticized:

She did a lot of good things for the field because she had an eye for creating excitement and she made it very high
profile. She made costume exhibition exciting and before that, it really wasn’t so much on the map. But Diana
Vreeland really put it on the map and for that, I think that everyone is very grateful. Her scholarship and so on... she
wasn’t a scholar and she took liberties with things that later on people questioned ... And she did do a lot of
commercially based things. So yes, museums are becoming more commercial.

(Interview with Jan Reeder 2001)

9 It should be reiterated that it was only in December 10, 1992, that the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was
given its own permanent space, albeit in the cellar of the museum. It should also be noted that the Jacqueline Onassis exhibit in 2001
was the first time that a collection from that department was mounted in one of the exhibition halls upstairs and not in the basement
setting. This was, incidentally, one of the highest grossing exhibits in the history of the Met, in league with the enormous profit and
media attention given to the Tutankamun exhibit in 1977.
You started seeing a lot of interest in the 80s with Mrs. Vreeland’s shows at the Met. I mean, that’s when you had a real breakthrough when it was no longer just antiquarian fashion shows or costume shows, but real kind of fashion extravaganzas in museums and that’s grown so now you have lots of museums like the Guggenheim that are putting on fashion as an aspect of high culture/pop culture.

(Interview with Valerie Steele 2001)

In a strange twist, the very success of the shows mentioned above that lend legitimacy to couture and textile collections are also those that make the collections and the shows seem less serious than other collections in the museums. However, it is indubitable that such exhibits have been enormously instrumental in bringing these collections to the fore and bestowing upon them newfound respectability:

I think that costume collections have had the same problems from the earliest times in that people still view costume as a secondary curatorial collection. They view it as old clothing. The IRS views it as old clothing. Even the Met, despite all of the successes that have been mounted by the Costume Institute starting with Mrs. Vreeland’s Ballenciaga exhibition, the first time that that collection has come out of the basement was with the Jackie exhibition. It creates a very interesting future situation because now it is precededent that they can fill galleries upstairs. And not just fill them, but absolutely pack them. That exhibit has completely taken care of the deficit of the museum.

(Interview with Phyllis Magidson 2001)

On the other hand, not everyone, even those well-ensconced in the fashion industry, is enthralled by or interested in or supportive of such shows. Alexander McQueen, for example, asserts that he does not find fashion exhibits interesting, with the exception of Jackie O and what she wore at the height of the Cold War which had so much social history, compared to the Armani show (Colman 2001: 237). Interesting to not also is the disappointment with the Armani exhibit, even by its curator, Harold Koda:

CJB: What do you think about museum collections and exhibitions of the kinds of clothes you have given away?
BH: Oh, I think that if they are put up correctly, they are wonderful.
CJB: Are you interested in the Jackie O exhibit that is going to be at the Met?
BH: It doesn’t interest me. And I didn’t go to the Armani exhibit at the Guggenheim either.
CJB: Because?
BH: Well, I don’t consider him to be a designer of any great worth.
CJB: Who would you be interested in seeing?
BH: Well, the Geoffrey Beene exhibit was wonderful. I mean, just passing his window every day is wonderful!

(Interview with Betty Halbreich 2001)
The Armani situation is not a museum really kind of exhibition. It to me was something different and I don’t think that it is a good example of what a museum exhibition is. Yes, in a museum exhibition you have a story to tell and you have a theme or a point of view which you want to express through the things that you chose to be in the exhibition. So, the Armani had a lot of commercial aspects to it and it was decorative but it really wasn’t a retrospective because practically everything in the exhibition was from the 1990s. I’m sure that there were a lot of reasons for this, but it was a real departure from what a museum would do. But Armani really made his mark in the 1970s, early 80s when he began showing the very casual signature suits and clothing and fabrics and so forth and that was really a departure from the past. That’s when he made his mark. Now that exhibition had nothing to do with that including no clothes from that period. It was called a retrospective but...

(Interview with Jan Reeder 2001)

The institution had a very strong idea about what it wanted. They wanted to treat it like a painting or sculpture show. No one wanted it to be a retrospective. They wanted some sort of interpretation of what Armani was. I have come under a lot of criticism because it was a retrospective that did not include of a lot of earlier material, but part of the reason why I thought that it wouldn’t be a retrospective is because I had worked with Armani years ago when I worked on an exhibit with him at FIT and I knew that there weren’t early pieces to be had. There are people who collected from the very first collection but nobody had whole ensembles and it would have been impossible to reconstitute the material. I had argued that we had more photographs of that from the first decade but once we saw the collection and started to put together the catalogue, we felt that wasn’t what we were about.

(Interview with Harold Koda 2001)

Thus, the Armani exhibit was not meant to be a retrospective, but remains important as one of the prime examples of art museum exhibits that go out of their way to incorporate fashion into the sphere of modern art.

Not all curators, therefore, are interested in simply creating retrospectives but have come up with educational, decorative and interactive exhibits which use clothing as their medium. A case in point is an exhibit at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in 1999 called “Women of 97 Orchard Street,” in which dresses were hung from the ceiling of an old tenement building and information about the building’s former residents were pinned to them in an effort to tell the history of immigrant women in New York City’s Lower East Side. Likewise, Phyllis Magidson seems ultimately concerned about education and what might be taken as a determination not to sell out to a viewer who cannot take the time or make the effort to look at the clothes in more than two dimensions:
I think the direction that I am trying to go in for our exhibitions is to try to come up with as much information for the public as possible. I think that the technology of the camera has provided us with a whole new opportunity to show interior construction, digital construction. It is a digital camera that goes directly to disc and had a macro capability so that we can show the interior seams on the label on the dress. I am privileged in that I have had an opportunity of handling these garments and being able to see the insides but now everybody can see it. It can only increase the public’s respect and awe for some of the groundbreaking couture people and also those people who just did remarkable things as a result of their own ingenuity... We were brainstorming on [what kind of exhibit might bring the same kind of critical acclaim that “Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years” did] the other day. We are trying to come up with some kind of museum-wide historically based exhibition on the 60s because now we have enough distance between contemporary culture and that time. But I think that the celebrity based phenomenon is still the ultimate factor in drawing the public and the children’s exhibition [on display in the museum at the time of the interview]. Every scholar that has come through, every museum colleague that has come through, has absolutely loved the exhibition. I love it in that it says exactly what I wanted it to say. But as far as having a very massive public appeal, it does not. There are no designer names in it. It has only one designer name in it. One of the problems that a historical museum has where, especially our collection was founded by materials which were amassed by the wealthy families of NYC, and obviously they have more to give. They had more to transfer from their households to a museum and they had tremendous monetary value, the silver, the decorative arts, the furniture, this collection in recent years has been criticized because it was too top-heavy. And yet, how many exhibitions can you do about epidemics and about depressing aspects of life in the city. The Jacob Riis photographs. Things that are very sobering. People want to see spectacular things. They want to see Boss Tweed’s cane with the Tamany Tiger and the jewels and they want to see diamonds or pearls at the Museum of Natural History. They just don’t want to see things that are reminders of their own shortcomings or family frailties. They want to come to a museum to see something they cannot see at home... In the children’s exhibition, we have a number of objects that came to the museum as the only surviving artifacts of a child that died at the age of three. And here is this one little precious shoe and a photograph of the child wearing the shoe. It’s really sobering. If the viewer has the sensibility to really appreciate it.

(Interview with Phyllis Magidson 2001)

There are a number of exhibits that fit so uncannily within the arguments and themes of this research that they are worth particular mention. Indeed, there are several contemporary artists who have achieved fame with art that incorporates clothing, sewing or fabric into their work and garments as their medium. Indeed, it seems that “fashion is fashionable” in the world of art (Bernadac 2000: 17). One artist’s work worth mentioning is Annette Messager who, in “a 1990 series produced in homage to her mother...enclosed wedding (or first communion) gowns in coffin-like boxes, endowing these garments with the status of relic and mortal remains”
(Bernadac 2000: 17). In this way, the "garment is a wrapping that bears a person’s imprint, it is a relic that serves as replacement" (Bernadac 2000: 16).  

In an article interviewing curators of fashion departments in some prominent museums throughout the world, Pamela Goblin describes an exhibit she mounted in 1999 at the Musée de la Mode in Paris. Entitled ‘Wardrobes,’ Goblin explored the intimate details of their owner’s lives. She commented, "'You can’t just hang fashion like a painting...[In the show,] I wanted to show how each woman created her own visual biography through the clothes she wore'" (Utz 2000: 158). A similar kind of exhibit mounted at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in July 1993 by Steve Williat featured “clothes as two-dimensional canvases with personal identities emblazoned in felt-tip either by wearer or spectator, as surface decoration on the clothes” (Ash 1996: 221).

A fascinating exhibit was mounted at P.S. 1 in New York City. The announcement for the show stated, “If sentimentality is overtaxing your tiny closet and giving it the bleak smell of a mediocre thrift store, Nakagawa Sochi’s Recycouture may be your salvation” (Purves 2001: nytimes.com). In this interactive travelling art exhibit, museum patrons were invited to bring in “unwanted yet undiscardable clothes” which the team would then make into something drastically different (Purves 2001: nytimes.com). Moreover, the group asks customers to share why garments are important to them or what they associate with their garments. “Those anecdotes then become an essential part of the reworking” (Purves 2001: nytimes.com). One example is a woman who brought in her husband’s navy blue pinstriped suit pants. Because she had left the matching jacket in the backseat of a taxi, the pants had become useless, but she could not part with them because he wore them on their first date (Purves 2001: nytimes.com). Ultimately, they were remade into a strapless dress.

---

10 It is interesting that in art, used clothes seems bound to notions and themes of death, and tend to symbolize those who are no longer of the earth. This will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5 in a discussion of clothes as either repositories of contagion or as talismans, having been imbued with the essence or spirit of their previous owners.
The work of sculptor Louise Bourgeois, (who is currently approximately 90 years old), is primarily concerned with the body, but more recently clothing has been the substance of her work (Bernadac 2000: 15). Clothing has figured prominently in her life, as her mother was a seamstress and her parents used to vie for her attention and affection by showering her with designer clothes. Thus, for those scholars who follow her work, her use of garments in her sculpture is not surprising. Starting in 1995, Bourgeois began pursuing a reconstruction of her own past by going the carefully preserved contents of her closet, spanning nearly the whole of the twentieth century (Bernadac 2000: 16; Neri 2000: 83). She uses clothes she has kept since childhood, which recall “memories of places, occasions, people, seduction or personal qualities” (Herkenoff 2000: 103). For Bourgeois, clothes are “personal effects’ that have their own affects” (Bernadac 2000: 17). Her sculpture also comments on the cyclical nature of fashion—“how it renews itself and is redrawn in circles...a permanent process of construction and deconstruction” (Herkenoff 2000: 105). Her work can be seen as a “memoir-in-progress of a remarkable life imagined, lived and transformed into a powerful aesthetic statement” (Neri 2000 81).

These exhibits touch upon the themes of clothing as art or as a medium to create art, but also underscore the idea that clothes are repositories of memory. What is interesting about “Wardrobes” is that it is true that merely hanging clothes from someone’s wardrobe has little meaning to an outside viewer without contextualizing the garments within the narrative of one’s life, or in the life of the garment. However, I am intrigued by the words for the invitation to the show at P.S. 1, which correctly assumes that people indeed have clothes that are “undiscardable” and perhaps even kept in the hopes that they might find some use at a later date.

In closing, I was especially struck by a story told to me by Marion R ess, a former professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology. The story poignantly shows the circularity of the used clothing market, from wearer, through the passing of time, to a closet cleaning, to museum:
I had a gorgeous Geoffrey Beene evening dress. It was so simple, so plain and beautiful. I guess I had that in the 60s and it was white satin, heavy white satin, lined, interlined and it was made like a shirtwaist so it had little covered buttons going down to the waist and it had a little tiny muscle sleeve and it had a skirt collar but under the color was a brown satin tie that just tied in a little bow with fringed edges and the bottom of the dress had a band of the brown satin. And it was gorgeous. And then time went by and I couldn’t wear it anymore, I couldn’t button it, and I couldn’t wear short sleeves anymore and of course I offered it to my daughter, but she said, “What do I do with it?” and I gave that to FIT. I’ve given them several things. There was an exhibition several years ago at the National Arts Gallery on Fifth Avenue a couple of blocks above the Guggenheim and there was a retrospective of Geoffrey Beene’s clothes and some clothes came out of FIT and some individual donors. And I thought, well, we’ll go see the show, certainly, and the show opened and we didn’t get there yet and someone at school said, “Oh, Marion, I saw your dress, Geoffrey Beene at the show.” “It’s in the show?” My husband had said, “Maybe they’ll have your dress in the show” and I said “They won’t have anything as plain as that. They’ll have all the jazzier stuff.” And so we really ran up there to the show and not only was it in the show, but it was in the spotlight! It was so great! It was really such a great dress. It was really so beautiful. I wore it maybe two or three times...I got it wholesale...There is stuff that I had years and years ago that I gave away that I resent having given away because I was so dumb. Like the Claire McCardell, and Bonnie Cashin and Claire Potter, and I had clothes from all of those people and I didn’t know enough that they were historically important, that I should hang on to them.

(Interview with Marion Ress 2000)

Unfortunately, the words printed here cannot do justice to the genuine pleasure, pride, and still fresh surprise that her dress, which she clearly adored and had been carefully donated to a museum she trusted, was then chosen as the centerpiece for a museum display. In a way, I believe that Ms. Ress felt as if she, by extension of her dress, were featured in the show and she was thrilled. It speaks to her incredible taste, her recognition of quality and sophistication, and her ingrained connection to the fashion world.
Chapter Five: (In)vesting

The magnificent possibilities of collecting vintage clothing not only for wearing but for beauty and investment are not endless, while new pieces keep coming into the market place, the really stupendous garments are disappearing into collections and museums. But if you want to enrich your life, educate yourself about times and past and their history, if you want to learn about fabric and the art of dressmaking... the incredibly creative art of design, and take yourself out of the everyday mundane world, Vintage Clothing is for you.

(Maryanne Dolan 1995: vi-v)

Although it has been argued that one reason people are drawn to vintage clothing is that it is inexpensive, it is also true that there is a whole segment of the vintage clothing market that depends on its ever-growing cultural, historical, monetary, and nostalgic value—in vestimentary investments. In the eighteenth century, a wardrobe could be considered equivalent to a savings account (Lemire 1997: 145). “Articles of clothing were commonly used as a ready source of cash in emergencies” and were often stolen to supply the personal and collective demand for an essential commodity within the informal economy of the second-hand trade (Lemire 1997: 145). It has been some time since clothes were considered to be so valuable or so difficult to acquire, and in fact, have been regarded as a frivolous waste of money. However, judging by the price of vintage clothes at boutiques around Manhattan, buying clothes can no longer be considered a “bubble-headed investment” (Bellafante 2000: 1). It is true that in certain circles buying clothing, vintage or contemporary, is no longer regarded as a waste of money, but as a commodity that can even increase in value with the passage of time.

Karen Tranberg Hansen suggests that one group for whom this is true is “the young upwardly mobile for whom vintage may serve as investment dress” (Hansen 2001: personal communication). And, as Betty Halbreich told me, her more sophisticated clients at Bergdorf Goodman tended to dress up more in the 1980s and spent a great deal of money on evening gowns. According to Ms. Halbreich, although these gowns take up entire racks, women still kept them because evening clothes are the easiest things to recycle (Halbreich 2001: personal communication). “You can rest them for a couple of years and then bring them out. They don’t
seem to get dated” (Halbreich 2001: personal communication). However, for those who are willing to sell their old clothes, a vigorous resale market has grown for designer garments. Customers “buy designer labels to wear as ‘investment dressing’ much like collectors buy art” (Hansen 2000: 12). People have become savvy to the realization that clothes, especially designer vintage clothes, have greatly increased in value over time.

Auction houses have played, and continue to play, a pivotal role in this aspect of the vintage clothing industry. They have become a seemingly obvious choice for people either looking to sell the clothes that they already own, or who are interested in purchasing high quality garments, perhaps even with provenance, or at least the seal of approval from a highly regarded auction house. Here, the influence of Tiffany Dubin is indubitable and remarkably far-reaching, not only in auction houses, but also in the popularity of vintage in general.

Last, fashion designers can be seen to have a vested interest in vintage, as they frequently derive their design ideas from fashions from prior eras and use vintage as a design safety-net, as previously discussed. Contemporary fashion designers are often derided for borrowing from the sartorial past, because it seems as if they have no original ideas and are stealing designs, rather than creating them. Yet they all do it in one way or another and to varying degrees. Boutique owners are explicit in saying their best customers are fashion designers or their representatives. Museum curators concur that their collections are often mined by fashion designers for inspiration, but this seems to happen much less regularly. Designers tend to prefer buying the clothes they like outright, thus being able to take them apart for greater ease in pattern-making. How much fashion in the last decades of the twentieth century has been “inspired” by vintage fashions, and in addition, how many different eras are conflated and represented in any one outfit or garment is exemplified by fashion press, reaction, and reviews of what has come down the runway in recent years. It is important to remember that this is not mimicry or parody, as much as imitation in the hopes of achieving absolute novelty. This overwhelming return to styles from previous eras as they are incorporated into contemporary fashion collections either tongue-in-
check or with the seriousness of a tribute to the designer’s accomplished predecessors will be discussed below.

*Investing in Stock*

It is clear that vintage boutique and store-owners have enormous personal and financial investments in vintage clothing either because they love it, or because they see it as an opportunity to have a successful business at its peak in popularity. The investment of their time, their energies, their money, their creative vision, and their enthusiasm, speak to the ultimate success of their stores. For example, Keni Valenti, who is admittedly exceptional in his approach and involvement in the fashion industry, claims to spend a million dollars per year on vintage clothing for his retro couture business (Valenti 2001: personal communication). Andy, owner of Andy’s Chee-Pees Antique Clothing in Manhattan, is genuinely ebullient about some of his most memorable acquisitions over the twenty some-odd years he has been in the “rag trade”:

```
Sometimes, there are couple of pieces that are just great and you have to buy them. You don’t care what they smell like, because you love them and they are gorgeous and they have a style and they have the material and they have a design and so on and so on and you must have it. So I have a coat that is from the 1870s or 1880s, I haven’t dry cleaned it. I’m afraid. And it smells but I don’t care because I am in love with it... Someone has offered me $40,000. And I turned it down and the woman stood there and told me that I was a sick man. I said no, but $70,000 would be good.
```

(Interview with Andy 2001)

It is clear that those involved in used clothing can run the gamut from wanting to divest their investment in their stock by selling as much of it as they can, or not being able to part with some pieces that for one reason or another have significant value—monetary or otherwise.

Alice and Ronald Lindholm renovated and dedicated an entire dairy barn on their property to their vintage clothing collection and business (Lindholm 2001: personal communication). Because they have so much space, they have been able to invest in an enormous amount of dead stock in addition to whatever clothes they find from the rag warehouses and their pickers. “Dead stock” refers to clothes or shoes that are usually purchased from a store that has gone out of business and never sold all of its stock. The clothes have never
been worn, usually have their original store tags and prices, and, uniquely, there are many examples and/or sizes of the same garment. Because the Lindholms have an abundance and a substantial selection of dead stock from a number of different eras, and a number of different styles for both men, women, and children, they have been able to profitably branch out and become the outfitters for those people in the film industry making period pieces, like *Almost Famous*:

We would never have been able to do the films if we did not have the dead stock and what prompted us to purchase the dead stock—it was just instinct. I didn’t think film... It’s like you walk into this place and there are all these things with their original tags and they are from the 50s and 60s and I would look at it and say, this is so great, we have to have it. So we started buying it and the first really really big one we bought was all children’s clothes and it was amazing clothes but you don’t make money on it. But in film, nobody has it and nobody has it because you need space and when I take you to the warehouse, you will see. You’re not going to take up your space with children’s clothes. You’re just not because it is not a money maker and we just started accumulating it because we loved it and then films would say that they heard that we had children’s clothes and that’s how we really started. And then, somebody who had worked on “Snow Falling on Cedars”—that we got out of a show. We were at a show and we had some things that the buyer liked for Ethan Hawke. And she asked if we had more and one thing led to another and we supplied them with a ton of stuff and one of her assistants on that film was doing “Almost Famous” and he called us and that was really the turning point. You know, one film I thought, that was fun. The second time I said, “This makes sense.” Because what “Almost Famous” wanted, we didn’t have to go out and find it, it was just there. It was all profit because when we first started in this business, I don’t understand the stock market and I don’t invest in it—I invest in my business. Rather than put our money into something that we have no idea what it is, we put it into the business and so when we first started and we were doing schools, schools were really lucrative. We would buy tremendous quantities. If there were Hawaiian shirts available, we bought them by the bale. And so we would have thousands and thousands and thousands and we just went through a whole floor of discards and we found fabulous shirts because 15 years ago, what people wanted was different. Now these shirts that were 60s and 70s, they’re 15 years older now and they have more value. And because we have the space, that’s where Seth [Weisser from What Comes Around Goes Around] was really good too. He held on to those things that perhaps someday he would use. So when “Almost Famous” called, we had bought like 15 years ago, bales and bales of what were supposed to be chambray shirts from this really disreputable warehouse. And it wasn’t. It was a little of this and a little of that but we said, well, we’ll just keep them. Well it was exactly what “Almost Famous” wanted. They wanted 70s but they didn’t want it to be that Austin Powers 70s. They wanted mid-west 70s that we bought 15 years ago from garbage. No one wanted it. And so we put together boxes and boxes of it and they kept most of it so we started putting our energy thinking about film. And it’s word of mouth. And it’s because we have dead stock because they needed 2 or 3 of something and we would have it and that goes a long way. They like that and also some actors are weird about wearing something that has been worn before.

(Interview with Alice Lindholm 2001)
Without really knowing that they were making a wise investment by purchasing so much dead stock, the Lindholms have been able to sustain themselves and their business in ways they never imagined. Because their home and barn are located a significant distance away from New York City, they benefit by having an affordable large piece of land and the barn in which they store their vintage garments. On the other hand, they are too far away to have customers as in a boutique setting and at their age, they are no longer interested in travelling great distances to fairs and college campuses they way did some twenty years ago. Thus, having a wide array of dead stock sets them apart from many other people working with vintage clothes and permits them to succeed in a highly specialized and heretofore unseen niche of the vintage clothing industry.

Auction Houses: Collections and Investments

The sale of vintage couture and designer clothes by auction houses has become an increasingly popular and reliable way to either purchase quality garments, or get a significant return on clothes which presumably are worth quite a bit, although they have been “gently worn.” Even haute couture fabrics designed by the Maison Robert Perrier and photos of the gowns that were inspired by these silks and brocades, etc. have been auctioned at a highly publicized yet private auction conducted by Philippe Rouillac in France (Moonan 2001: E31).¹ Prior to 1997, when Tiffany Dubin inaugurated a new dimension to the textile department by incorporating contemporary couture or designer clothes, auction houses primarily sold antique fabric and embroideries and historical clothing. Although William Doyle Galleries has been holding couture sales twice a year since September, 1993 and Christie’s held a successful sale of Tina Chow’s fashion collection (which included several Fortunys and totaled $206,379), in the same year, the auction of private clothing collections and couture garments did not ensure that the auction houses would meet their estimates (Schiro 1997). For example, a 1995 sale of period

¹ These fabrics were used by Dior, Balenciaga, Jacques Fath, Jean Patou, and James Galanos, to name a few well known couture designers, who dressed many women from the noble families throughout Europe and many stars. Moreover, Perrier’s archives also include photographs and multilingual press coverage of the couture creations made out of these fabrics from before World War I to the 1960s (Moonan 2001: E31). All of these documents and photos fill some 35 giant scrapbooks that were also auctioned in the sale (Moonan 2001: E31).
couture clothing at Christie’s, including Trigères and Dior’s, was a disappointment, with many pieces selling below estimates (Schiro 1997). Subsequently, when Richard Martin, the late director of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was asked his opinion about Tiffany Dubin’s first sale, he was unsure whether this type of clothing would really sell well at auction. Mr. Martin thought that the only way that it could be successful was if the clothes had the pull of a famous name:

I think it's interesting that they're taking 20th-century fashion seriously, as opposed to historical costume,” he said, “but I don't know whether it will succeed. One of the things driving this trend is the celebrity market. If you bought something from the Jackie Onassis sale, I assume you'll put it out on the coffee table and tell people it came from Jackie. When you buy a dress, you can't really display it. It will be on a hanger in a closet or in a drawer. It's not the kind of thing most collectors want. They want to decorate the home, and it's all but unthinkable to decorate your home with clothing (Schiro 1997).

There is little doubt that the power of a name or the power of celebrity is a prime motivator for people bidding on clothes at auction. This is what sparked Christie's June, 1997 auction of seventy-nine dresses from Princess Diana. Her “discarded finery” which was sold for cancer and AIDS charities brought in a staggering $3,258,750 (Schiro 1997). Ms. Halbreich also stated that anything that touches a celebrity has a significant resale value (Halbreich 2001: personal communication). She believes that clients would not buy the garments of celebrities to wear themselves, but rather to resell yet again (Halbreich 2001: personal communication). Thus, the clothes being purchased at this stage of their existence, are seen by their new owners as an investment—garments to be sold at a future date for an augmented monetary value.

Princess Diana’s auction of her gowns for charity inspired Natasha Richardson to organize an auction of gowns at Christie’s in March, 1999. (See Figure 5.1)
In conjunction with Christie’s, Ms. Richardson presented an auction of the gowns worn by Hollywood stars when they attended the Oscar Awards (CNN.com). The designers of the dresses included Giorgio Armani, Arnold Scaasi, Richard Tyler and Valentino and were worn and donated by actresses such as Elizabeth Taylor, Raquel Welch, Julia Roberts, Diane Keaton, Bette Midler, Madonna, Glenn Close, Cher, Angelica Huston, and others (CNN.com). In fact, during the bidding, a large video projection of the actress and the gown at the Oscars was shown (Keisler 1999: fashion-planet.com).²

Yet, Tiffany Dubin proved Richard Martin wrong. As mentioned above, Tiffany Dubin, a New York socialite, has had a profound influence on the acceptance of vintage clothing, starting with a job she had at Sotheby’s. Dubin revitalized Sotheby’s and brought in a younger crowd with money to spend and also revamped the image of vintage clothes. She really straddles two worlds:
“What she has done is take the buying and selling and collecting of vintage clothing from an obsessive, arcane club into the wider public arena,” said... Amy Fine Collins, a fashion writer and special correspondent for Vanity Fair. “She has people buying vintage clothes, boasting about wearing vintage clothes. People used to be ashamed, or at least secretive, about wearing these clothes. Now it's a badge of honor and chic. Tiffany legitimated all that” (Haty 1999).

Ms. Dubin told me how she came to realize that clothes worn by wealthy women could be seen as desirable by other women in the same social circles and economic spheres, and how her newfound vision became a reality in the founding of a fashion department at Sotheby’s in 1997. I quote her at length hoping that some of her enthusiasm and the nuances of her personality and her charisma are apparent in her own words:

Well, I had a really unusual situation. I worked for 5 years as a personal shopper at Sotheby’s—I would bid for you, I would take you to lunch, I would introduce you to department specialists, I would send you catalogues, I would basically save you from the system and you would only have to deal with me. And one day I was having lunch with Arnold Scaasi, and there was an exhibition at this time of Arnold’s work at the New York Historical Society and some of the stuff from the 60s and 70s were really quite amazing and I was thinking, “Hmm, I wonder what he does with his old samples?” thinking I could shop. And so I said, “So Arnold, what do you do with your old samples?” and he said, “I don’t know, I have 2,000 of them, I’ve got to get rid of them” and I said, “Well, why don’t you do an Arnold Scaasi couture clothing sale at Sotheby’s?” The reason I knew that Sotheby’s would be interested in that is because he has an amazing collection, he has never bought at auction and actually, had more affiliations with people at Christie’s than at Sotheby’s, so this would be a great in. So, I went back to Sotheby’s, lobbied for the sale, got it approved, at the same time, Sotheby’s was selling the estate of Martha Phillips, the legendary American retailer. She was the first person after the war who sort of opened up a multi-designer boutique on Park Avenue in Manhattan. She discovered Valentino, she mixed Italian designers, French designers, American designers... Anyway, we were selling her furniture and her jewelry. And, it seemed to make sense since she was all about retail to sell some clothes. No one knew anything about clothes there at the time and I was doing Scaasi so they assumed that I knew what I was doing. And they handed me the Martha Phillips sale of which we were having a portion of the clothes put in the jewelry catalogue. I had never catalogued before. I literally stayed up at night and studied old cataloguing, where the comma goes... I started studying labels, to teach myself... This was in 1996. So, both sales woud up happening in April, 1996, a week apart from each other. We sold 100 Arnold Scaasi dresses and make $120,000 for breast cancer. And then Martha Phillips tripled its estimate. And so it was very successful, people were surprised. I wrote a business plan, presented it, there was Dede Brooks who was the head of Sotheby’s at the time, sort of was in the mood for clothes. She ran everything on a whim. And they thought it was a good idea and thought that it was another thing to tell clients. You give us your Monets, we'll sell your clothes and honor your mother’s estate. All the small departments at auction houses are pretty much services because you only really make money from the big sales, from the multi-million dollar sales... But what I did know about was couture. My mom has been a buyer in couture

2 Ms. Richardson’s auction, which benefited the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR), raised $786,120.
clothing at the couture houses in Paris and I had always gone with her as a child and in Paris all the fun cool women all work in the couture houses and they are all friends and it is like a fun network. So I knew them all. So, I sat at this desk and I thought, "OK, who has a lot of clothes who might want to sell some?" and I picked up the phone and called this woman... Sao Schlumberger. Have you ever heard of her? The jewelry family, Schlumberger... So I called this woman and I said, "Hello, Madame Schlumberger, I started this department at Sotheby's and I was wondering if you had some dresses you would want to sell, we could donate the money to your favorite charity..." and she said, "Oh, yes, I have some, could you come this afternoon?". I said no, but I could be there next week. So I got approval to get a $350 round trip ticket to Paris... So basically, I was going to Paris and I had to have a concept so I put together with a friend of mine a dummy brochure/catalogue of my vision of what this auction could be—of couture dresses. Based on couture, something that is not collectible at auction whereas costume is, whereas couture is an art form that's dying and even it's made 5 years ago, it's 90 hours to make... I felt that couture was something that was worthy of being collected. That was the basis of the department. So, I go to Paris and start running around to all the friends of my mom's who worked at these couture houses started helping me and I started telling people I was doing a sale called "The Glamorous Women of Paris—The Last Bastion of Haute Couture". Because all these women were the last bastion of the traditional couture clients. And I wanted a photo of them in the dress and then for them to give me the dress to sell and my hope was that I'd give it to their favorite charity. So I ended up meeting Catherine Deneuve in a bar and it became like the cool thing in Paris, like I was meeting in the bathroom at the Ritz because of this lunch and the lady who was giving the lunch—it was not appropriate for her to give a dress because if she gave a dress, then Jacqueline de Ribes might pull out because she was not of the same stature [class status]—it was really surreal. So three days later I have 40 women who think that Sotheby's is doing this sale in October in New York called "The Glamorous Women of Paris" and their dresses are in it, so it was a very big group of people, including the Empress of Iran, so I need to tell Sotheby's... this has to be done really really well. I knew that I needed some kind of financial partner before I could tell Sotheby's about this. At the time I wasn't knowledgeable about Condé Nast having a lot of money. Well, the editor of Town & Country had written me a note when the department was announced saying that if you ever need anything, give me a call. So I called up Pamela Fiori, and I said "Pamela, I'm calling you not for an editorial, but I have this amazing sale, these women I can't tell you who they are, but I promise it's right up your alley. It would be an incredible Town & Country event. The only hook is Sotheby's doesn't know about this". Next thing you know, the next morning at 11 o'clock in the morning, seven editors, including Pamela, all the top editors of Town & Country, were coming to Sotheby's. Now, during the Jackie O sale, the head of our press department had trudged through the snow to the Town & Country offices to meet with the one editor so now, we have seven coming, and no one at Sotheby's knows about this. I had to keep it from Sotheby's because I had to wait for money. It had to be a beautiful catalogue. It had to be well done. And the value of a clothing sale would warrant a black and white Xerox catalogue. Anyway, that's how the department got launched.

(Interview with Tiffany Dubin 2001)

What becomes clear immediately is that Ms. Dubin's accomplishments at Sotheby's would not have been possible without her family connections. This is not only because her step father, A. Alfred Taubman, was the principal owner and former chairman of Sotheby's (until he was convicted of rigging commission fees in April, 2002) and was able to secure a position for her at
Sotheby’s in the first place, but also because her mother had so many social connections and
connections to the couture houses in Paris. Dubin has been accused of being “trendy” for her
embrace of vintage clothes and for the sales at Sotheby’s that came after her initial foray into the
auctioning of used clothes and kitsch fashion accessories which were “given witty titles like ‘To
Have and to Hold’ (for handbags) and ‘Pulp Fashion’ (for paper products)” and “Cocktails”
which included “1960’s Pucci hot pants, Hugh Hefner’s silk pajamas and all kinds of lounge
accessories -- corkscrews, openers, matchbooks” (Hayt 1999). Although she has also been
criticized for exploiting the recent interest in mid-century design, she has attracted a much more
contemporary and youthful crowd to Sotheby’s which can be seen as a boon for the auction
house. “A Dubin sale brings out deejays, East Village clothing vendors in vintage Nikes,
downtown designers like Pixie Yates and models like Chandra North who, between sneaking
cigarettes outside the building, mingle with suited corporate types from Hermès and the Costume
Institute” (Hayt 1999). The great variety of amateurs in addition to fashion professionals
becoming interested in couture auctions has also been noted by Kathleen M. Doyle, the
chairwoman of Doyle, who commented, “This appeals to fashion designers, film producers,
museum curators, private collectors and young people who want ideas on dress construction”
(Schiro 1997).

These auctions set a precedent not only for auction houses, but for people who believe
that their wardrobes contain garments unique or valuable enough to be auctioned at one of the
most prestigious auction houses in the world. Whereas it used to take six months to accumulate
enough clothes for each sale, now it takes only three months (Schiro 1997). It was commonly
thought that only death or bankruptcy brought the auction houses calling, but of recent, it can be
as simple as a question of storage space (Kerwin 2001: 414). Moreover, “vintage garments
continue to go way over estimate at auctions, and auctions overall tell us the truth, vintage fashion
has arrived as a prime collectible…and it has a fascination and beauty and something else, a
mystique which thrills us and stirs our sense of history and challenges our imagination” (Dolan 1995: iv).

Amy Spindler also took note of the increasing role of auction houses not only in the divestment and collection of used designer clothes, but also in how people purchase their wardrobes from season to season. She writes about women who spent fortunes on their wardrobes in the 1980's and who decided to “divest” in the 1990’s when those styles were no longer fashionable. Caroline Milbank Williams, a former couture specialist at Doyle New York, is quoted as saying, “It shows people are looking at fashion with a sense of connoisseurship, which I’ve always experienced working with clothes at auction” (Spindler 1996: B7). Spindler suggests that people should continue to purchase good quality clothing. If they “want their current wardrobe to be worth something, they should buy the great classics... If they are looking 30 years into the future, to sell their clothes for their children to pay for college, they should buy more unusual things” (Spindler 1996: B7).

Linda Donahue at Doyle notes that while some things come from estates, other people call up the auction house and say they want to sell (Schiro 1997). She says, “A lot of women shopped in Europe every year and bought fantastic clothes. This is a nice venue for them. We treat them well. We love them. And it's a compliment to their taste” (Schiro 1997). As a result of the increasing sense of accessibility primarily amongst society’s upper eschelon, Cesar Padilla and Radford Brown, owners of the downtown New York vintage boutique Cherry and the former preferred dealer/specialists at Sotheby’s, “have logged countless miles in the name of fashion, rummaging tony closets from New York to Memphis and from Paris to Los Angeles” (Kerwin 2001: 414). Padilla and Brown not only have access to some of the highest quality vintage for Sotheby’s, but also for their very popular and high-end boutique.

One of the most popular tales of an auction house combines history, a bit of celebrity which was recounted in House & Garden (Cerio 2002). Here, a Charles Frederick Worth gown,
owned by a great-great-granddaughter of George Washington’s sister, was auctioned at Doyle New York for an astounding and record-breaking $101,500 (Cerio 2002: 116). (See Figure 5.2)

Evidently, the experts at Doyle were quite certain that this dress in particular would bring in a lot of money and publicity, and decided to feature it on the cover of the exhibition catalogue. The great-great-granddaughter was in desperate need of money and by happenstance, inherited her grandmother’s gowns. Jan Reeder at Doyle delightedly related the story to me in my interview with her as a means of describing how many phone calls she receives from people wanting to make appointments to have their wardrobes auctioned:

I get phone calls all the time from all over and emails from people with things and that includes people with solo items, with estates, we get some dealers that they know is particularly fine that they think would do well in our sale...So it’s all different kinds of situations. Women who have held onto for a long time that are very fine pieces of clothing and they have finally decided that they are not ever going to wear them again and they know they are valuable and they want to sell them or things that are found in attics by descendants...You know in the last sale, we had a dress that sold for $100,000 which was fantastic. It was a Worth court gown that was handed down from a descendent of George Washington’s sister. The great-great-granddaughter of George Washington’s sister wore it. And her great great granddaughter was the one who sold it through us and it was very exciting and that was in a trunk in Cape Cod. And that’s the kind of thing that happens and so you never know who is going to call. And so I am

Figure 5.2 – Cover of Doyle New York Spring 2001 Couture and Textiles Catalog
confronted with all of this and I have to sort through all of that. I have to decide what will work in a sale. What I think will be of enough value, will be of interest. I try to shape a sale to a certain extent. I mean, every sale takes on its own shape. That’s what’s so great. You chose from what is offered. But generally, if I realize that we don’t have enough things from the 60s, then I try to keep my ears open for things that are from the 60s and try to get a few things there. Usually, every sale, there seems to be a curve, like this time we seem to have gotten very flamboyant coats happening. Like in one sale, we had three Piret’s and I couldn’t believe it. And they all came from different places for different reasons and then we haven’t had any for a few sales. And then I have to think about whether something has the right look, does it have an Asian influence which is hot right now, is it skin baring or body hugging which all the young gorgeous women like to have... I am looking at things that I don’t think are necessarily going to end up in collections. I am thinking about what I see in magazines and so on. I mean there are some wonderful people wearing vintage all the time and they are great looking people and you look to see what they are interested in. And I also like to see what influences the designers, what they are showing in Paris... But my heart is in finding the rare museum pieces that are in attics, in closets, that I think are being salvaged because people now know where they can call. And the Worth is a really good example of that. The woman vaguely knew that it was important, but she never focused or knew what to do with it. And then she purchased a book about textiles in which quite a few things had been purchased from our sales. And she called up and said “What does a Worth label look like?” and I thought, “Oh, brother. How am I supposed to describe what the label looks like.” So I told her to send me a fax of the label and we went from there. And a lot of times someone will bring me just a ton of stuff that I have to sort though because they themselves don’t know if there is anything that is any good. And this one time I found this magnificent Piret dress that sold for $32,000. It was from 1913. There was nothing wrong with it. It was a quintessential “Oriental tea gown”—an interpretation of a kimono and things like that happen and I think that the more we are known, the more that will happen.

(Interview with Jan Reeder 2001)

However, sales such as the Worth gown are few and far between. In reality, couture and textiles sales are not bread-winners for any auction house, especially when compared to sale revenues from other departments. Indeed, when interviewed in 1997 prior to the “Paris à la Mode” auction, Ms. Dubin admitted that her fashion department was never going to be “be a huge money maker” (Schiro 1997). According to Ms. Dubin, auction houses try to stay away from selling what they deem to be low priced items—those being $10,000 and under. However, historically, 80% of the auction buying business averages $5,000. Moreover, it costs just as much to sell a dress that sells for $2,000 than it does to sell a painting for $35 million (Dubin 2001: personal communication). Marianna Klaiman, who took over the department when Ms. Dubin decided to pursue other interests (albeit still related to vintage fashion and design) concurs. Ms. Klaiman points out that this is the main reason why the fashion department was dismantled so soon after
its inception. "It's just very hard to justify keeping the fashion department as it was when the revenue, was... I mean, I can't sell even the most exquisite gorgeous Worth ball gown, it's only going to be in the tens of thousands of dollars. And how many of those can we sell. You know, they have one Monet and it's like $9 million, so that's the problem" (Klaiman 2001: personal communication).

Interestingly, the internet and each auction houses web site has enhanced sales and broadened client bases. Doyle New York has just two couture and textile sales per year, and provides the entire catalogue free-of-charge on the website (Reeder 2001: personal communication). Jan Reeder puts everything on the dress forms and photographs every single object that is in the sale digitally and posts them on the internet (Reeder 2001: personal communication). This is unusual because it differs substantially from the print catalog that is shot by a professional and only offers a selection of what is for sale. Moreover, people from all around the world can see what is on sale without having to purchase the catalogue and wait for delivery (Reeder 2001: personal communication). Unlike Sotheby's, Doyle does not have online bidding although people can register and leave bids on the internet. However, one cannot not bid via the internet during the auction and the online bids are not often those that win the block (Reeder 2001: personal communication).

The fashion experts at Doyle take tremendous pride in their auctions and their theatricality, asserting that "everyone loves to come to see the clothes" (Reeder 2001: personal communication). After an exhibition weekend prior to the sale in which all of the blocks are displayed in a gallery setting on the first floor of Doyle's townhouse, they hold a live auction at which everything used to be sold in one day (Reeder 2001: personal communication). At these exhibitions staff members are on hand with tape measures to help potential bidders determine whether the clothing fits, since it is believed that at least half of the clothes are purchased to be worn (Schiro 1997). Because the number of blocks have increased dramatically in recent years (approximately eight hundred blocks per sale), they now hold the auction on two consecutive
days (Reeder 2001: personal communication). All the clothes are held up by an employee of the auction house for display as they come up for auction (Reeder 2001: personal communication). Although they used to show everything in the same manner, including fashion accessories, books, magazines, costume jewelry, purses, artwork related to fashion, and some men’s clothes, they now have a digital show on a screen because it was too time-consuming and too laborious to continue doing it the other way (Schiro 1997; Reeder 2001: personal communication).

On the other hand, when the fashion department was dismantled the web provides much of the revenue for that department at Sotheby’s, with the exception of sale such as the Joseph LaRose Exquisite Footwear sale discussed earlier. Marianna Klaiman has found that different property sells better on the web than what sells at live auctions (Klaiman 2001: personal communication):

> It needs to be property that is either very recognizable, like an Yves Saint Laurent couture piece from 1965, a Mondrian dress, that will sell. Boom, that will sell because there is no gray area other than condition, we know that that’s a stellar piece, any collector would want that in their collection, any dealer would want that in their collection. I sold it off the site for $5,000 and that was sight unseen, you know, just on the site. Things that are more like, oh, maybe it’s fun or maybe it’s cute that you need to try on, they are not going to buy on the site. It is very hard to sell them. As I said, the historic pieces sell well on the site because you don’t need to try those on, it’s not a wearable market it’s a collectible market. You have almost two markets and that’s what I have seen.

(Interview with Marianna Klaiman 2001)

It is a fascinating turn of events that Sotheby’s, which was so instrumental in legitimating vintage under the direction of Tiffany Dubin, has altered its enthusiasm for that department so dramatically in such a short period of time. What is also interesting is how integral the internet became to their sales for objects falling into that category. This speaks volumes to the types of people to whom they sell— it is not the usual client for Sotheby’s, but a new generation that is fashion and computer savvy.

It is also interesting with regard to the sale of vintage clothing how the clothes are valued and ultimately, what price is achieved when all is said and done. The fashion experts at the auction houses are not only attuned to fashion history and the value of textiles, but now they are
also obligated to follow contemporary fashion trends so that they can look for either a designer’s best work, or things that coincide with the latest trends. For example, in 1997, Linda Donohue at Doyle was looking for Dior, Charles James, early Chanel, early Saint Laurent, and Norman Norell (Schiro 1997). She was also interested in close-fitting evening gowns and sheer dresses from the 1920's, which were shown without their slips so they looked like current designs (Schiro 1997). When there is an estimate that the client agrees to, the auctioneer starts the bidding at half of the low estimate and hopes to go up from there (Reeder 2001: personal communication).

According to Jan Reeder, value is initially determined according to “rarity and provenance, and it if clearly expresses the work of that particular designer” (Reeder 2001: personal communication). Ms. Reeder also noted that she looks for clothes that might be considered iconic of the designers work and its physical condition and size are very important, especially for couture pieces (Reeder 2001: personal communication). Here, the ideal size for a garment is either size four or size six because if the garment is any bigger or smaller, it loses its shape and then the piece loses value (Reeder 2001: personal communication).

If the piece was previously featured in a publication, that makes it more valuable (Reeder 2001: personal communication). For example, “if you get something that was on the cover of Vogue in 1935, that’s a big deal” (Reeder 2001: personal communication). Sometimes if there is a photo of the previous owner wearing the garment, and that person was also famous, the estimate value can increase quite substantially. At the time of my interview with Ms. Reeder, she was in the process of getting permission to publish a photograph of Princess Diana wearing a dress that was going to be in the upcoming auction (Reeder 2001: personal communication). In addition, Doyle also had some clothes of a very well-known socialite in Washington, D.C. for whom they sold a Charles James ball gown (Reeder 2001: personal communication). According to Ms. Reeder, “There happened to be a fabulous photograph of her in the Charles James ball gown, in her dramatic entry hall with the circular staircase. That did everything for that dress because you
could see what it looked like on its owner in the right pose and her dramatic flair. That just did it!” (Reeder 2001: personal communication).

It is worth noting that the prices realized for many of the garments at Doyle fall well below the estimated value, despite the fact that the auctions on a whole have exceeded their sum total estimates. While Jan Reeder emphasized to me that the estimates are just a ballpark figure, often the clothes found at such a prestigious auction are less expensive than they would be at one of the tony vintage boutiques in Manhattan, or, for that matter, at any vintage clothing store in the United States where the historic value is respected and the price is non-negotiable. For example, garments from the turn of the nineteenth century with historic value and in very good condition, such as an early Filene’s bathing costume and a frontier woman’s embroidered linen town dress, sold well below their estimated prices ($125 compared to $300, and $650 compared to $1,500, respectively) (Doyle New York 2001: 78-80). More, a Mainbocher bouffant dress from the 1950s and a Balenciaga black linen dress from the 1960s, both of which have historic value for being representative of an era and have well-recognized designer labels, sold for half of their estimated prices (Doyle New York 2001: 89-90). On the other hand, an early Lilli Ann coat, a label that has recently become popular for the quality of the fabric, and the style and construction it signifies, sold for twice its estimated price (Doyle New York: 85). What struck me especially was that the garments designed by Emilio Pucci, a highly coveted designer for both his vintage and contemporary pieces, were sold for much lower prices than at boutiques or vintage fairs throughout the United States. Many of the most contemporary garments from desirable and respected designers, such as Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto, remained either unsold altogether or sold well below their estimated price—in fact, much less than what the original owner paid at whatever high-end department store or boutique from which he or she purchased it (Doyle New York 2001: 110). Even Versace clothing designed by Gianni before his untimely death, sold for less than its anticipated price (Doyle New York 2001: 111).
Hermès bags, especially their trademark Kelly bags and Birkin bags, which have become highly sought after as status symbols among society women, albeit a functional one can be found at reasonable prices at auction. These bags are each made by hand. Women can order them to be specially made in whatever skin and color they choose. Depending on the skin—calf versus crocodile versus ostrich, for example—the bags can cost as much as $7,000, and the waiting list is several years long. Auction houses such as Doyle can help women anxious to bypass not only the absurd waiting list but also the enormous expense by offering these bags at auction, in addition to a large array of other desirable designer bags—Gucci, Chanel, Fendi, Kieselstein-Cord, Roberta di Camerino, etc.—as long as they are willing to buy a bag that has already been used. The Hermès bags auctioned in May 2001 ranged in price from $475 to $2800—hardly a bargain for the average consumer, but a definite savings compared to the price for a newly ordered purse.

*Investing in the Future*

Nowadays, it seems, being fashion-forward means going back to the future. (James Scully 2000: 288)

Another aspect of vestimentary investment is evidenced by the phenomenon of many contemporary fashion designers entrusting their future careers to designs obviously influenced by fashions of the past. They seem to be using vintage as a safety net instead of going out on a limb to create something radically new. As noted before, it is commonly thought that contemporary designers are creatively bankrupt and have no option other than to copy what has already been done and make it seem novel. This practice among fashion designers has come under attack more and more as being anti-fashion, devoid of creativity, and as a pitiful nostalgic retreat:

Yves Saint Laurent's 1979-1980 collection of 1940s-inspired fashions, for example, was savaged by the press...It all seemed 'vulgar,' in 'bad taste,' 'kitsch.'...In retrospect, it seems clear that retro is one of the most important stylistic features of postmodernism. The elements of pastiche and irony, the mixing together of different and often wildly clashing elements into a form of bricolage, is crucial to the late twentieth-century aesthetic sensibility (Steele 1997: 89-90).
Indeed, because fashions from eras past seem to be so seamlessly integrated into current fashions, perhaps the recurrence of styles is not always as obvious to the average consumer as it is to those deeply invested in the fashion industry, especially among fashion critics and vintage clothing dealers for whom this kind of information is their livelihood. It fits into what Jameson points out as being one of the hallmarks of post-modernity. Here, “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles” (Jameson 1984: 65). Indeed:

now that the century has ended all of its decades seem like poignant reminders, souvenirs, that everyone can wear regardless of which particular decade felt most like ours. Today’s designers recognize this fact and have been mining the archives for the best of twentieth-century fashion, then re-combining past styles and details in a post-modernist bricolage that feels simultaneously both historical and modern (Tolkien 2000: 9).

As I have argued throughout, the millennium becomes a useful point of departure and is a key component in examining this surge of interest in vintage clothes, or at least, in clothes that are contemporary, but “vintage inspired.” This categorization as a manifestation of post-modernity seems to become more and more crucial as a means of describing this phenomenon which not only seems to have no end in sight but also to be expanding its scope.

What was once understood to be plagiarism is now falling under the rubric of “inspiration” according to a report in The New York Times. Nicolas Ghesquiere, a contemporary designer who ironically is known for his originality, copied the work of a little-known designer from San Francisco named Kaisik Wong (Horyn 2002b: B10). (See Figure 5.3)
However, the blatant reproduction of Kasik Wong's work is not seen as copying, but euphemistically, almost admiringly, as "referencing":

Today, under the postmodern rubric of "referencing," copying flourishes so openly that nobody bothers to question it. And the practice isn't confined to the low end of the business, to knockoff kings like Allen B. Schwartz of ABS and Victor Costa. Tom Ford, Marc Jacobs and Miuccia Prada have all dipped into other designers' wells... Even fashion historians and store buyers who depend on selling ostensibly innovative clothes are not all that troubled by Mr. Ghesquiere's transgression. "I think it's a phase of our time," said Harold Koda, the costume curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Part of it is post-Warhol. It's just rummaging through extant material culture and juxtaposing it with other things to create something different. Postmodernism has really pervaded our culture."

(Cathy Horyn 2002b: B10)

Mr. Ghesquiere's actions are deemed fair and are not seen to diminish his creativity. First, many well-respected designers have collections that are designed by unnamed assistants and this is not seen as theft. Second, since many savvy fashion historians and journalists are well-versed in what designers are known to have designed in the past, when they themselves are copied, it is seen merely as borrowing and the reference is thought to be obvious. When asked about the incident, Mr. Ghesquiere spoke candidly and said that he was flattered that people were so interested in the sources of his inspiration, and noted that he frequently looked at vintage clothes...
as well (Horyn 2002b: B10). The problem, as rightly pointed out by Ms. Horyn, is that “fashion designers have taken postmodernism to mean a license to borrow from the past — without irony.” In this way, post-modernity seems like an excuse for the borrowing/referencing phenomenon, more than the backdrop.\(^3\)

One of the most telling reports that continues, but does not directly address the Ghesquiere incident cited above, is a journalistic exchange between an interview of Oscar de la Renta printed in *The New York Times Magazine*, and an article printed the following edition of Fashion and Style for *The New York Times*. Mr. de la Renta is quoted as saying that he hates retro, and that the only reason that his clothes resemble each other over his career which spanned more than thirty five years is because he has “zero memory” and no archives of the clothes that he made in the 1960s and 1970s (Hirschberg 2002: 15). Amazingly, then, de la Renta makes specific reference to a coat he designed in 1967 that he believes was copied line for line by Marc Jacobs (Hirschberg 2002: 15). Two days later, Guy Trebay addresses these quotes in utter disbelief:

Is it possible that the people who call Marc Jacobs an idea thief have never heard of sampling? Is it plausible that those selfsame people (And why be coy? It was Oscar de la Renta in the pages of *The New York Times Magazine*) may have missed school on the day when the key chapters on postmodernism were being assigned? (Guy Trebay 2002a: B8)

Noting that fashion is one arena where “image saturation and appropriation” is not respected and “a charmingly antiquated, Edith Head-era notion of fashion as a pure creative effort stubbornly hangs on,” Trebay proceeds to recount the time he spent with the fashion thief in question just days prior to the interview’s publication (Trebay 2002a: B8):

---

\(^3\) One of the problems with Mr. Ghesquiere’s public display of imitating a less-well-known designer’s work without being sanctioned is evidenced by what Amy Spindler calls “Reissues” in one of *The New York Times Magazine*’s year-end issues entitled, “The Year in Ideas: An Encyclopedia of innovations, conceptual leaps, harebrained schemes, cultural tremors and hindsight reckoning that made a difference in 2001.” Among other notable changes in fashion, Spindler notes that when the “designers responsible for some of the most iconic pieces of clothing in fashion history” see their designs copied, or sold at auction, or for sale in vintage stores for thousands of dollars, they receive none of the profits (Spindler 2001c: 94). As a result, innovators have begun to reissue, under their own labels, some of their most important works” (Spindler 2001: 94). Some of the most prominent designers to do so include Diana Von Furstenberg, Yves Saint Laurent, Valentino, and Hermès. Thus, copying other designer fashions depletes the profits of the people who might be seen as the “real” creators, and not merely the innovators of something already created.
Mr. de la Renta’s comments seem to transcend what simply might be attributed to his French cultural heritage and snobbishness at the hubbub over this young American newcomer. In fact, Marc Jacobs validates and breathes new life into fashions of another era making them au courant and à la mode. Thus, what is particularly fascinating about de la Renta’s interview and Trebay’s quick response is how much the popularity of vintage and vintage reproductions has become a common part of fashion discourse. The constant reference to post-modernity as the natural and assumed backdrop to this theme in contemporary fashion to such an extent that older fashion designers seem so stodgy and outdated for scoffing at what is proving to be a sartorial mainstay. Indeed, Karl Lagerfeld’s designs for Chanel over the past two decades have been praised not simply for being innovative, but for layering historical depth conflated with modern needs (Horyn 2002c: 6). In this way, despite his comparatively advanced age, Lagerfeld is lauded for being an “extraordinary postmodernist” (Horyn 2002c: 6).

Postmodern rhetoric has become a common way to describe and explain current sartorial fashion and to categorize certain renowned designers. Diane Crane makes the distinction that while some “designers draw on previous styles to create new work, postmodernists recreate them in order to juxtapose different periods and ambiances” (Crane 2000: 156):

---

4 Guy Trebay expanded his analysis of whether or not imitation is a new trend in the fashion industry, or something that has been happening in fashion since the designers created their own labels and fashion houses (Trebay 2002b: 10). He notes that designers flocked once again to Gallagher Paper Collectibles, a store in lower Manhattan that holds a remarkable collection of vintage fashion magazines from whence designers get “inspiration”. Trebay surmises that in fact, copying clothes is not new to sartorial fashion and is an essential part of post-modernity, in spite of the cultural movement that persists in valorizing what is thought to be originality. Trebay concludes by sharing a story about Miuccia Prada who, because she copied a vintage Balenciaga coat exactly, instead of using it
The difference in these approaches can be seen in Dior’s adaptation of an early twentieth-century style. Rather than produce a copy, he used elements from an older style to create what is probably the most famous twentieth-century style, the New Look... By contrast, a post-modernist, John Galliano, duplicates styles from different periods, often juxtaposing them in the same collection, or mixes elements from past and present in the same costume. It is typical for designers in the same season to revive clothing styles identified with several previous centuries (Crane 2000: 156).

Christian Lacroix, for example, who rose to enormous fame in the 1980s for his haute couture designs, has been quoted as saying: “I revive what I feel like and what I think women want. Every one of my dresses possesses a detail that can be clearly connected to something historic, something from a past culture. We don’t invent anything” (Crane 2000: 153). The spring 1989 Paris collections of Lacroix, in addition to those of Martine Sitbon and Jean Paul Gaultier, were described as a reappearance of the retro-chic pastiche of the 1970s, making these collections a “pastiche of a pastiche” (Wilson 1989: 194).

However, it would be incorrect to say that the popularity of retro clothing as a fashionable counterpart to contemporary garb is related to postmodernism as if older styles were only recycled first in the latter decades of the twentieth century. As Elizabeth Wilson argues:

> if we look at fashion we find that some of the themes and hallmarks of what is today termed postmodernism have been around for a long, long time, so that it is doubtful whether a postmodern Zeitgeist or ethos does exist in the way in which writers such as Jameson and Baudrillard would have us believe. Their generalisations begin to seem to have more to do with the creation of a cultural myth about ‘our times’ which flattens out the contradictory, refractory nature of contemporary existence and seeks to create a stereotype of the present in the present (Wilson 1990: 231).

Indeed, designers have always flirted with styles from the past. Yet pace Wilson, if this is hardly a new phenomenon, it has never been done to the degree that it is being done now. Moreover, retro styles are ubiquitous throughout popular culture, in architecture, and graphic design (Steele 1997: 149).

---

as inspiration, she is, in her own way, original. Thus, perhaps concepts of originality are in flux, in addition to how people regard and accept the practice of imitation.
The success of retro clothes is partly attributed to the fact that they remind people of their past, which in retrospect can sometimes seem comforting or make the past seem, better than the way it really was. Thus, even if clothes are not authentically from another era, the reproduction of styles from the past can be an effective way to recall other times, even if they were not really as enjoyable as they may appear in retrospect: “Imitation…connects the present with tradition and lends gravitas to “implacable times;” when each person increasingly [feels] (at) a subjective loss” (Lehmann 2000: 147). Kennedy Fraser writes that for many people:

The past offers a vision of measurable, wrapped-up order. Fashion had its place, once upon a time, and its own clear rules…Many fashion designers today—at least, many of those who attempt anything more artistically ambitious than the merchandising of blue jeans—are drawn time and again to the past as to a world of paradisal certainties (Fraser 1981: 240).

Even if the past was not paradisal in reality, in memory, it often seems far more preferable than the present. This is important for Maurice Halbwachs’ theories of the reproduction of memory, rather than its recollection:

That faraway world where we remember that we suffered nevertheless exercises an incomprehensible attraction on the person who has survived it and who seems to think he has left there the best part of himself, which he tries to recapture. This is why, given a few exceptions, it is the case that the great majority of people more or less frequently are given what one might call nostalgia for the past (Halbwachs 1992: 49).

This perspective would have it that memory allows us to be in a society we choose and ignore that which is unpleasant. We are not imprisoned as we are in the present—one can pick and choose from the past, as one does when picking out vintage clothes from different eras.

In the 1970s, “Marylou Luther, the fashion editor of the Los Angeles Times, complained that designers ‘seem to be as afraid to face the future as they are to let go of the past’” (Steele

---

5 Customers of vintage inspired clothes vary quite significantly in age. Vogue reports that baby-boomer mothers going shopping with their daughters are purchasing clothes that are marketed for adolescents. The clothes, which borrow styles from the 1960s, like puffy-sleeved peasant shirts and clam diggers, seem to appeal to these women. According to the assistant manager of DeLa’s, a store understood to be for teenagers, the mothers go to the stores with their daughters and “say, ‘Hey, that’s exactly what I wore when I was a teenager’…Then they discover that the pants have elastic waist bands, and they buy a pair for themselves” (Lehman-Haupt 1999: 103).
1997: 149). Below are various comments about retro as a signifier of a lack of creativity among the fashion designers of the times:

It is a measure of how inextricably the visual language of the past is tangled with that of the present that you don’t hear much mention of historicism in fashion this season. You’d think that “retro” was a cloud that passed, some five years back, leaving us with a brilliant expanse of purely contemporary style. That most collections both here and in Europe continue to be absolutely saturated with more or less direct borrowings from the twenties, the thirties, the forties, the fifties—and now the sixties as well—is often passed over in silence. In some part, this is a conspiracy among those whose business is the promotion and sale of new clothes. Too many potential customers are either bored with the idea of retrospection or still made nervous by the untried prospect of it. If a brand-new fashion is really blatantly retrospective, some expert is called in to wave a magic wand and pronounce that, this time around, it has been done “in a contemporary way.” Often, though, it’s not even a question of denying the presence of retrospection. In all sincerity, we simply don’t see it, so successfully has our eye assimilated it and our mind forgotten how to distinguish it from innovation.

(Kennedy Fraser 1981: 240)

Watching designers exhume the seventies, I began to wonder whether we’re doomed to relive the same few decades over and over forever. Since the recycling began, even designers on the cutting edge have seemed to take it for granted that the future would simply be another chapter of the past: while mainstream designers recapitulated one decade, the avant-garde would move on to the next.

(Holly Brubach 1999: 78)

"Young designers working today "are too attached to the past," Mr. Cardin observed. "Without old books, magazines and pictures," he said, "I don't know what any of them would do."

(Ginia Bellafante 2002d: nytimes.com)

I love the past, but try not to be its victim.

(Giorgio Armani "Made in Milan" directed by Martin Scorsese)

When you reach my age, there is a dread danger of being too connected with the past. That is a terrible error. Diana Vreeland was never guilty of that, and that was the thing that made her so interesting as a fashion editor. It’s also why she was such a great one. You have to be able to observe what’s going on without being too nostalgic, because, God, that’s hopeless. Lethal.

(Bill Blass quoted in Peterson 2001: 216)

Despite the hoopla of the twice yearly ready-to-wear shows, it’s no wonder that fashion can’t produce the kind of excitement it once did. “There’s a lack of new ideas,” said Karim Rashid, an industrial designer in New York... "The fashion world needs to start thinking about social behavior and how people live today—forget about seasons and looking at the past," he said, adding with a laugh, “I’m starting to deplore history.”

(Cathy Horyn 2001: B11)
On the other hand, even though Holly Brubach can be critical of designers' reliance in the past, she finds a way to excuse designers for “taking refuge in the past” (Brubach 1999: 78). She argues that “the retro cycle in fashion has continued—not...for any lack of imagination but because the mood for the last decade of so have been so bleak” (Brubach 1999: 78). Brubach’s account of the history of the recycling of decadal fashions is worth note:

With the return of the seventies, fashion comes full circle. Some twenty years ago, when designers first went retro on us, it was the thirties they were resurrecting; now it’s the thirties as seen through the eyes of the seventies—twice removed. By the end of the seventies, we had worked our way into the forties, with shoulder pads and aggressive-looking suits. Then, in the mid-eighties, with Christian Lacroix’s pouf-skirted party dresses, came the return to the New Look of the fifties—tight, strapless bodices and bouffant skirts. After that, fashion moved on to the sixties. We’ve been consuming the past at an accelerated rate: it takes us only five years or so to go through a decade.
(Holly Brubach 1999: 77)

It has also been said that many designers in the 1990s were accused of copying styles from the past “to compensate for a dearth of their own original ideas” (Tolkien 2000: 148). However, “[w]hile this is partially true, particularly at the lower end of the fashion pyramid, it is a ridiculous charge to level at the truly talented designers because it misinterprets the whole spirit of the 1990s post-modern aesthetic...Poets, novelists and painters have long looked to their predecessors for inspiration, and now that the art of the best fashion designers is taken more seriously, it is hardly surprising that they too should study their history and use it in their efforts to push their art forward” (Tolkien 2000: 148).

Retro may be a pastiche, and may even be a pastiche of a pastiche. It’s many Platonist detractors notwithstanding, however, it is not mere imitation, whether it is once or twice removed. It is reckoned to be a modern. The current rationale for drawing on vintage clothing for inspiration lies in using the vintage clothes themselves and altering them or embellishing them to make “new” clothes or using vintage fabric to make new garments. Consider Susan Cianciolo’s “purposefully crude clothing line, ‘Run,’ made from vintage fabrics with button-on appliqués, hand-painted patterns and coarse stitching, was championed by the designer Martin Margiella, the
art dealer Andrea Rosen, and Flash Art magazine” (Hass 2001: 1). If the clothes themselves are not refashioned or revitalized vintage, or simply vintage-inspired, designer Ellie-Mae Aitken’s “pants are all cut from vintage fabrics, culled from every corner of the globe. Aitken knows where to shop, the world over, for the best textiles” (Arakas 2001: 295). Another designer, Jenny Bell Whyte “has been rescuing old textiles and making them into ‘new’ clothes since 1972 when the Brooklyn Museum culled its textile collection and Mrs. Whyte bought the entire lot” (Green 2000b: nytimes.com). Her line, called “Museum Pieces to Wear,” and has been described as a way of connecting to the past in order to influence the future (Green 2000b: nytimes.com).

Rene Lewis, a jewelry artist who has been described to me as a consummate business woman, took advantage of the vintage craze and created her own line. Ms. Lewis describes herself as an artist who takes art to a place where it hasn’t already been. She had been “reworking” antique jewelry for 20 years and decided to do vintage clothes because she values the quality of old things (Lewis 2001: personal communication). Since she already had a market for her jewelry, it was easy to sell her clothes at the same stores, like Barneys and Nordstrom’s. She “updates” the necklines and adds new buttons and other notions to dresses she gets from dealers. Ms. Lewis tears the original labels out to make them “more timely,” but for her, the bottom line is that her art medium is nothing more than used clothing. Another woman who describes herself to be a couturier, costumer and customizer notes that customizing not only makes the fit more custom to the individual, but it also allows one to work with the amazing fabric and detailing of major labels that you could not afford to manufacture on your own (Spindler 2001b: 81).

It is curious that so many changes in fashion seem to happen simultaneously, as if the designers get together and collectively decide what will be in style, whether it be a popular color or a particular style. With marketing, the popularity of certain fashions seems to grow exponentially throughout a fashion season. Although unspoken, there is a kind of collective acknowledgement as to what styles will dominate a season. As Guy Trebay wrote, “It’s no secret
in an appropriationist age that fewer fashion campaigns are mined from fertile imaginations than from the pages of vintage Bazaars and Vogues… If you want to know what people will be wearing in a year, one truly reliable way is to check which vintage magazines designers are buying now” (Trebay 2001a: B8).

Likewise, vintage clothing store-owners, museum curators, and auction house fashion experts can also “predict” what styles will be popular in future seasons when designers and their lackeys are their top customers. Nearly without exception, store-owners commented that designers provide the bulk of their business and that without them, their boutiques would not be nearly as profitable:

We sell stuff to designers all the time. Every major designer has their people come in here and pick. I wouldn’t say that they rip it off. They might have a pair of shoes that has a flower on the toe coming out next year and they will come in here and buy every pair of shoes that has a flower on the toe to figure out which is the best style flower and I don’t think of that as ripping off. It just makes sense for them to look at other flowers rather than have someone sketch flowers for hours.

(Interview with Justin, Atomic Passion 2001)

The same designers that I mentioned to you before, all of them, about 4 or 5 years ago came in and bought all my 30s gowns. They are all in Hollywood and recreated them… I knew that the 30s long gown are coming in fashion 3 years before they happened. So the bottom line is that I know the cycle. Ask me for what will be in fashion next year, I don’t know yet. Because I saw what everyone was doing but right now, nobody knows what they are doing.

Everybody is doing a little 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, it’s such a mixed concoction, there is no direction. So what’s going to be hot next year? I don’t know. What color is going to be hot next year? I don’t know. But usually it takes a while to observe and see what’s going on. [I put the more collectible and valuable clothes out of reach] because it gets damaged easily and not accidentally. Designers work on prints and they walk around with little scissors or if someone needs some gorgeous 1940s buttons that they can’t find anywhere. Suddenly I have a gorgeous dress and all the buttons are missing. So I put everything up and customers hate it but that’s the way it has to be. I’ll take the whole ceiling down for someone, even they don’t want to buy it in the end I will be the nicest guy in the world but that is how I protect my merchandise. Patches. 30s, 40s, 50s military jackets. The jacket is one thing and then it has very rare patches. Patches disappear. You go to department stores and they steal. You don’t think that they steal here? The guy who collected military doesn’t want to pay $300 for the jacket. So he rips that patch off and the patch is worth half of the price. They just rip it right off.

(Interview with Jack Markus 2001)

I think they just can’t come up with anything else. Like Dolce & Gabbana used to come in here all the time and knock it off. There were some designers who were in here last week from Spain. I don’t know who they were, but
they bought anything 60s that we had. Even if it was huge, they just wanted it for the style. I think they just think that they have nothing else to do and so they go back again. And they all do it. No one is coming up with anything different or new unless something explodes all of a sudden and people think that it is a great look...otherwise it's boring.

(Interview with Maureen Disimile 2001)

I don’t think that contemporary designers are really thinking in terms of something that is a complete package where you have an aesthetic, you have a functionality, you have something that is historical, the concept of time—and the only designer I can think of who has kept the concept of timelessness as a key point is Ralph Lauren and I think because he has such a strong attachment to the past. He has derived much, if not most of his collections from the past. You know, he has an archive that he has amassed and you can just see entire collections where it is 1908 – 1910 and everything in it is kind of a movie wardrobe as opposed to something that is really contemporary. I think that [other contemporary designers who are copying stylings of the past] are blatantly into the marketability of the collection and if they see any sign on the part of the public that they are responding to an icon, any icon, they are going to try to incorporate elements of the clothing of that individual into their own collections whether it is a color reference or if it is a particular cut or something that is evocative. I never really experienced such blatant merchandising intentions on the part of design. I mean, we are really purely now in the business of selling clothes and there are very few individuals, certainly not in this country, who are committed to creating clothing totally from their own impulses. I think that it’s always the marketability. I don’t think that people like Balenciaga or Vionnet or Chanel were ever creating with the intention of selling. That was a by-product of their collections. They had enough confidence in what they had to say to put their money into a collection and the public had enough confidence in the collection and in the eye and taste of the designer to respond. I don’t think that there is anyone at this point like that.

(Interview with Phyllis Magidson 2001)

Store owners satisfy both ends of the vintage clothing spectrum by providing originals to those customers who desire authenticity and knock-offs to those who are looking merely to replicate the look of garments from years ago. Importantly, the women of whom Markus speaks are not hunting reproductions, but the authentic originals that would be easily recognizable to a discerning fashionista’s eye.

To reiterate, designers have nearly always fashioned their seasonal collections with a nod to the past, but most significantly and most obviously in the last decade of the twentieth century. For instance, designers such as André Courrèges, whose fashions were remarkably popular in the 1960s and inspired the costumes worn in the movie 2001 (Steele 1997: 152), are now being copied in the new millennium. Original pieces are highly sought after in vintage stores and in auction houses. These “modern” millennial designs are seen as retro in the real new millennium.
In a strange twist, contemporary styles in the new millennium are not futuristic as much as they are vintage. “The Courrèges aesthetic was developed and completed by 1965, and they’ve been waiting for all of us to catch up. In fact, Madame Courrèges [the wife and woman behind the designer André Courrèges] does not believe in the word ‘vintage.’ She does not like it because to them ‘vintage is now’” (Eisner and Alonso 2001: 50).

Azzedine Alaia was one of the first couture designers to acknowledge in 1995 that fashion is not ‘synonymous with change’ by publicly reissuing clothes from previous collections (Siegel 1999: 36). He is quoted as saying, “I’ve reintroduced clothes I designed in the past because there are people who want them.... [C]lothes don’t die. You merely forget them, then bring them back” (Siegel 1999: 36).

It has been noted that even Yves Saint Laurent, one of the most revered and influential fashion designers of the twentieth century was not impervious to being affected by the past (Thomas 2000). Apparently, Paloma Picasso apparently used to go around Paris “dressed in old 1940’s frocks and wide-brim hats that she bought at the flea market” (Thomas 2000: 70). Although her mother disapproved of wearing clothes from the less than romantic war years, when Saint Laurent saw her “at a dinner party in one of her get-ups—a ‘Gloria Swanson’ dress and a gray turban with plumes—he was so moved that he spent the next day sketching ensembles based on the look until he had an entire 1940’s collection” (Thomas 2000: 70). Just as Saint Laurent and his peers looked back thirty years earlier for inspiration, contemporary “young designers like Miuccia Prada, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Michael Kors, Tom Ford and Stella McCartney are referring to the late 60’s and early 70’s.” (Thomas 2000: 70). When I mentioned Miuccia Prada as one very popular designer who has excelled in this regard to Harold Koda at the Met, he had an interesting perspective on her work at the end of the twentieth century:

I think the Miuccia Prada thing is interesting because she is such a fascinating phenomena as an individual because I think she’s really complicated and that aspect that you are suggesting of her work—and it is a real one—is not necessarily the only one. Simultaneous with that is that she evokes a lot of the marginal stuff about the past, workers
uniforms, service workers uniforms, but done in sleazy transparent nylons that remind one of sex workers. She says, that she was interested in how prostitutes dress. It's not simply about a past that is reassuring and comforting though she herself is a designer who has a family, has children, has a very—I mean, if you just did a profile of her—her personal life is a very bourgeois profile—but yet her work had a kind of edginess but I don't think that edginess is coming simply from a citing of that which is positive about the past. I think what she does—what all of the designers are doing—in fact I think it's kind of frustrating—is that the way to seem avant-gardist is to do everything with a tongue-in-cheek or with a sense of irony and I do think she's one of those designers who proposes something but it is somewhat ironic... The designer who I think might fit for you is Helmut Lang. You know, he embraces new materials and the technology of our time, the aesthetic of our time, as with everything in clothing there's some references that appear to be historical but he tends to avoid those. There are these really strong narratives to his work.

(Interview with Harold Koda 2001)

Helmut Lang, unlike many of his contemporaries, notes that the clothes for the Spring 2001 collections are a rejection of the clothes for the collections presented for Fall 2000. "I think that look is to be forward and modern and do clothes for the society of our time" (Trebay 2000b: nytimes.com). Thus, Mr. Lang is somewhat unique in his truly fashion forward designs, or, in other words, not designing for the future while looking to the past for inspiration.

A "Fictio" of Millennial Sartorial Fashion

Following are excerpts from various fashion journalists writing in the years immediately around the millennium who have taken special note of which designers have borrowed or referenced clothes from different decades in their seasonal collections. Sometimes, journalists have made special mention of designers who were in their heyday decades before and have scoured their archives in the hopes of profiting from the overwhelming interest in their former designs such as Diane Von Furstenberg. (See Figure 5.4)
Figure 5.4 – Diane Von Furstenberg, The Second Time Around

In the fictio below, one might imagine one seasonal fashion review in which those designers who have become known for referencing the past are highlighted, instead of the variety of reviews over a period of months that discuss the latest trends for the season at hand:

Spring 2000
Those who forget history are doomed to relive it, and I’m beginning to feel like I’ve slept through the bleak-chic nineties and woken to find that Nancy is still redecorating the Lincoln bedroom (Woods 2000: 472). ‘The dressing-down trend among Hollywood is a reaction against this nineties version of a fifties carbon-copy cutout’ that has made fashion boring.’ ‘These girls are not Audrey Hepburn, they’re not Grace Kelly. They’re into new designers: Taleh, Blumarine. It’s all about vintage looking clothes’ (Van Meter 1999: 294). For example, Chloé Sevigny, who for several years was fashion’s “it” girl is widely admired for her quirky, original style…She prefers her own new/vintage mix (Van Meter 1999: 294).

A decade of spare, rigorous, restrained, unadorned, ascetic minimalism was rolled away in a decorative froth of ruffles, rhinestones, Club Tropicana prints, and Charlie’s Angels’ hair…Everybody had Statement Bags. Everybody fized with logos (Woods 2000: 472).. In Rizzoli’s tony coffee table book entitled Millennium Mode, Betsey Johnson states, My vision at the moment for fashion in the millennium is to go back to the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s in order to move fashion forward with a personal twist, keeping it organic and old-fashioned (Wolf and Schlachter 1999: 103).

In Paris, too, most of the prominent designers were motivated to create collections with styles from the past. For Cathy Horyn, these couture shows were too besotted with the past, and worse still with their own past, as Valentino was…when he trawled back over 40 years of jet-set glamour, right down to the blue eyeshadow and petrified-looking hairdos that recalled Baby Jane Holtzer, circa 1963 (Horyn 2000: B8). In the last couple of seasons, Nicolas Ghesquière has emerged as a cult figure, in part because his shapes seem to combine two current themes: 1980’s disco (wide shoulders, pencil thin trousers) with 1950’s volume (Horyn 1999: nytimes.com).

On the other hand, Ms. Horyn writes positively about Jean Paul Gaultier’s spring haute couture show which
had a hilarious Love Boat theme and John Galliano’s collection which brought to mind the late 1950’s of Stanley Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange (Horyn 1999: nytimes.com). Acknowledging his blatant reference to the eras gone by, Gaultier is quoted as saying *It’s important to remember that while I love the past, I am not from that time* (Horyn 2000: B8).

Roland Mouret’s inspiration from his own past is the most obvious in terms of its sentimentality. A former butcher from Lourdes, France, Mouret is a promising new designer whose mother had sent him a package of his father’s aprons which inspired his Spring collection. The apron, with its family associations, obviously has personal resonance for Mouret (and personal resonance is something he believes people are gravely in need of in their wardrobes) (Vogue 2000: 266).

**Fall 2000**

Fall 2000 has been an unashamedly retro season where women were on the hunt for originals with a vengeance (Singer 2000: 387). Alas, there is no reason to fret if one cannot find a vintage original. All across the board, from Versace, to Marc Jacobs to Michael Kors to Prada—designers were hugely influenced by vintage clothes (Hirschberg 2000: 476). It seems like *every season there are inspirational vintage touches—*a certain print, some hardware on a bag, the cut of a jacket—but this season, it went well beyond inspiration: *Some collections seemed to be stitch-by-stitch knockoffs of famous names like Courrèges and Pucci and Yves Saint Laurent. Even young designers like Miguel Adrover and Veronique Branquinho borrowed heavily from the past. Some designers—Helmut Lang and Hussein Chalayan, in particular, took iconic vintage shapes...and put their own spin on them. Miuccia Prada’s brilliant collection was clearly inspired by the 1940s suits, coats and floaty pastel chiffons designed by Sandy Powell for the film The End of the Affair. But Prada, like any great designer, was not content to duplicate. She made the 40s her own* (Hirschberg 2000: 476).

Even today, Giorgio di Sant’Angelo, a famous designer from the early 1970s, continues to influence fashion designers. His signature style can be seen on this season’s runways. For example, *frills and fur tails showed up at Nicolas Ghesquière’s collections for both Balenciaga and Callaghan; bold layered color mixes ruled the runways at Etro and Junya Watanabe; and 80s-era ruched and ruffled stretch gauze defined DKNY resort* (Scully 2000: 288).

For his final look in his debut collection for the house of Yves Saint Laurent, Tom Ford expressed sensuality with a sculptured bodice reminiscent, critics pointed out, of an outfit Saint Laurent himself had shown long ago (Trebay 2000b: nytimes.com).

**Spring 2001**

Helmut Lang, unlike many of his contemporaries, argues that the clothes for the Spring 2001 collections are a rejection of those presented for Fall 2000. For him, those collections were unfortunately very much about putting young girls in the clothes of their mothers and grandmothers (Trebay 2000b: nytimes.com). Lang is quoted as saying, *“I think that look is to be forward and modern and do clothes for the society of our time”* (Trebay 2000b: nytimes.com). But, it seems that he is alone in his assessment because vintage looks are still very much in demand. For example, *houses like Valentino, have begun to bring back styles and accessories from their archives* (Horyn 2001: B8).

*Recycling is the big conceptual balloon that’s floating around fashion right now* (Green 2000b: nytimes.com). John Galliano started recycling clothes early in his career, designing new clothes that looked not only
like they were vintage, but that they had been worn to death. In the same vein, Jean Paul Gaultier’s idea was [that] you have all these clothes from your past, from your own or from your parents or whatever, and you take the parts that work for you, slice a sleeve off one thing and a pocket off another, and then stitch the whole thing together* (Green 2000b: nytimes.com). Tara Subkoff and Matthew Danhave, the twenty-something designers behind the label Imitation of Christ, who don’t really make clothes as much as sample them, turning out reworked pieces they dig up from garage sales, thrift shops and waste bins—a way of commenting, one can only assume, on how perversely acquisitive this particular affluent society has become. In some instances, the pieces are not reworked at all, but offered as is, like a beer-stained T-shirt found in a Munich bar, now priced at $300 (Bellafrante 2000c: nytimes.com). They caused a buzz at New York’s spring 2001 fashion Week with its reworked 80’s prom dresses (Purves 2001: nytimes.com). For their part, [i]f the style cognoscenti have been wearing fake London’s cashmeres, made from pieces of old sweaters…Magda Berliner transformed old tablecloths and bits of antique lace into dresses that sell at Barney’s. And many small urban labels like Preloved in Toronto and Alicia Lawhon in Los Angeles turned old T-shirts with team logos and lettering into semicouture items, catering to slackers who still find a Goodwill shirt reassuringly ironic but realize the look must evolve or die (Purves 2001: nytimes.com). Drea De Matteo, an actress in the “Sopranos,” and her boyfriend opened a store in the East Village called “Filth Mart” (Davis 2001: 36). They claim that they are responsible for kicking off the vintage rocker T-shirt frenzy (Davis 2001: 36). Because, according to De Matteo, those shirts are now everywhere, they are moving on to something else (Davis 2001: 36).

Indeed, [r]eferencing, exploring, styling. These were the criticisms once hurled by those who surmised that, as Lauren took things that already existed, rather than adding to fashion’s lexicon in the manner of Yves Saint Laurent or Coco Chanel, he didn’t deserve the tag designer…In the past decade, Miuccia Prada and Tom Ford at Gucci have built boldfaced designer reputations by cherry-picking from an available past, revisiting all kinds of looks, including ‘40s utility dressing, ‘60s space age, ‘70s hippie, and the military styles. So does Lauren who has always looked at, reinvented, and repackaged what is around him, felt vindicated? Not entirely (Hume 2001: 221).

Even if [Marc Jacobs] doesn’t like having his work put in a box, it’s tempting to describe Marc as retro-inspired. There’s something intensely Eighties about a parachute-style jumpsuit that’s shirred from neck to toe. And there’s more than a whiff of those Fiorucci memories in the striped tuxedo shorts and gored denim skirts. Very ‘Brady Bunch.’…’I like the idea that things have endured from the Twenties and the Fifties and Sixties,’ [Jacobs] says. ‘There’s something great about a silk camisole, and there’s something great about a pair of blue jeans. So I really don’t have a problem going back there’ (Socha 2001: 324). Alice Roe, a newcomer, also went all out for the 1980s—an era of which the 24-year-old has only the vaguest memories—because that is when everyone, it seems, was having the most fun. Herexact references are harder to pin down: She reprined vintage patterns on jacquard fabrics and made them into boxy jackets with puffy sleeves, and borrowed the wide shoulders, long legs, and skinny waist of Kay Thompson’s 1950s Eloise, reinventing the look for the Grace Jones era. It adds up to a historical maelstrom in which nothing is as it seems (Harper’s Bazaar 2000b: 124). In keeping with this nod to the 1980s, [p]reppy style was…spotted on the runways in collections as diverse as those by Michael Kors for Celine (cashmere Fair Isle sweaters); Michael Adrover (Edie Beale as soccer mom); and Cacharel, where the design team of Suzanne Clements and Inacio Ribeiro showed a suite of clothes in the upholstery print fabric toile de Jouy. And monograms are making a comeback, said a spokeswoman for the luxury linen shop Leron (Treby 2000d: B9).
Fall 2001

One of the fashion directors at Bergdorf Goodman stated that he is hoping to see a real return to modernism, away from so many prints, embellishment and even color (Ozzard 2001: 6). For him, the suit has to be modern. It can't be retro...We're looking for fashion to move forward, and get away from very obvious decade references (Ozzard 2001: 6). It seems that he is going to be gravely disappointed. Fall's collections have never been so evocative of sartorial memories. There's enough nostalgia in this season's clothes to make you weep...There are the minis of the 60's, the hippies of the 70's, the classic American sportswear of the 80's. There is the St. Moritz style of the 50's, the military look of the 40's. There is the draping that Vionnet and Madame Grès popularized in the 20's and 30's. And perhaps the most nostalgic note of all is the dominance in nearly every designer's collection of black and white. Aside from sepia, there isn't a single color combination that lives more in the past. Almost every celluloid fashion memory before the 1950s is in those tones...Nostalgia is so necessary, so basic to our lives, that perhaps it shouldn't be called nostalgia at all. Perhaps nostalgia is the most modern thing we have (Spindler 2001a: 157). Even clothes that send shivers down a person’s back have returned and been embraced like prodigal sons, all in the name of nostalgia. For example, acid-washed jeans were probably the most reviled fashion trend of the Eighties, but fashion's love for nostalgia is blind, and jeans-wear customers are hungry for new trends. Manufacturers are frantically studying the history books to see what will look new again, and acid wash is up this season. Some of fashion's more forward designer and junior denim lines, like D&G, DKNY Jeans, Dollhouse and Hot Kiss, are embracing acid avidly, and a few mainstream lines like Lee are testing it. 'To teenagers, it's fresh and new,' said [the] director of licensing and brand management at Dollhouse. 'There is not this horrible stigma of 'Eew, you're wearing a van Halen T-shirt and acid-washed jeans' (W Magazine 2001: 86).

This season's Fashion of the Times features some of the most influential designers of the season and their Roots: The secret behind the success of some of the world's greatest designers is their remembrance of things past (Rosen 2001: 152). With this ubiquitous reference to Proust, Marjorie Rosen serves the madeleines and provides excerpts from her interviews with fourteen designers about their early influences (Rosen 2001: 152). Like many of his peers, Mr. Jacobs is the kind of designer who seems to draw his inspiration more from visits to vintage clothing dealers than from the rhythms of contemporary life. Those who have tracked his career recently have watched him jauntily follow Bonnie Cashin one season, and circle around Norma Kamali the next (Bella fante 2001a: B12). For example, Mr. Jacobs has a lemon-yellow sequined mohair coat that reminds him of one of his mother's outfits from the late 1960s (Rosen 2001: 152). Rosen also quotes Darryl Kerrigan: "In my fall collection is an army-green combat jacket like the one I used to love wearing over my school uniform. My mother would go crazy, she hated it. For me, it was the quintessential symbol of rebellion, especially over my uniform, which I actually quite liked" (Rosen 2001: 152). For his part, Tommy Hilfiger included a tartan-lined trench coat that is similar to the one [his] mom wore when [he] was a kid (Rosen 2001: 152). It is interesting that these designers fashions are deeply informed by memories of their youth.

Miuccia Prada, that most relentless of designers, sent the fall 2001 season into a delicious panic today by skipping back to the era of felt crash helmets and high-waisted granny dresses. Could it be that the 1960s are upon us again?...It seems strange that Ms. Prada, with her interest in contemporary art and the exhibit she is opening tonight to show off Rem Koolhaas's designs for Prada stores and offices, should go back to the styles pioneered by André Courreges and Mary Quant. But as [Ms. Prada] said after the show, 'I was attracted to a time when fashion was really avant-garde' (Horyn 2001a: B9). Betsy Johnson and Nicole Miller’s collections for Fall 2001 were also heavily
influenced by vintage. Johnson concentrated on things that she took from her own archive while Nicole Miller quoted art deco stylings. Moreover, along with pieces from his Fall 2001 collection, Mr. Ghesquiere [the designer of Balenciaga] incorporated styles from past seasons and added vintage looks that he collects (Horyn 2001b: B7).

Looking back at the year in fashion, Amy Spindler writes that one of the notable changes in fashion for the year 2001 was something called “kustom” (Spindler 2001b: 80-81). In the beginning, there was mass production and there was made-to-measure, and those were the only two kinds of fashion that anyone who cares about such things was ever seen wearing. Now there’s something in-between: kustom. Customization of vintage clothes—‘kustom,’ to its hip practitioners—has become an inescapable force in the market. Like ready-to-wear and couture, kustom comes in high fashion and low; it can range from a Kiss concert T-shirt cut into a halter to the corseted-and-altered U.P.S. uniform...to a Chanel original refashioned for a new era (Spindler 2001b: 80-81).

In sum, the general manager of Henri Bendel expects trends to continue their diffusion, moving away from any one central theme and toward an eclecticism that blends vintage with new looks and mixes up silhouettes and fabrics. Eclecticism plays in to the whole vintage trend. Who needs another closetful of clothes?...Sometimes you want to go back to the original, great thing (Ozzard 2001: 6). It seems that the designers at MaxMara share these sentiments. It is MaxMara’s old-fashioned design values that just might lead the fashion future. ‘What’s next is clothes that live longer...It might seem antique. But it’s also modern. In the market, the idea is for everyone to throw everything away each season. But I’m interested in making good design and things that last’ (Zimbalist 2001: 186).

Spring 2002

What feels right and looks even better in less-than-feel-good times? Clothes that are nostalgic but not retro, revealing but not risqué. For spring 2002, the personal is fashionable”, Sally Singer writes, “The appeal of this spring’s deliberately homespun garments is that they do not simply tickle our seventies funny bone or indulge our fetish for vintage. They offer something that’s much subtler and, in these special times, much more important: a sensory reminder of home, hearth, embroidery hoops, craft cupboards—af, in other words, mother, grandmother, childhood security. What’s provoked is a nostalgia of a completely different order from the retro impulse, which is all about connecting to a collective and cultural past rather than to one’s personal history. Of course, John Galliano’s patchworked argyle cardigan or Chloé’s charm-bracelet sandals may not send you scurrying down memory lane, but they can function as a means to retrieve moods buried by years of fashion sophistication (Singer 2002: 40-41).

Writing exactly one week after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which resulted in the cancellation of Fashion Week in Bryant Park in New York City, Cathy Horyn reiterates these sentiments in an article entitled “The Unexpected Comfort of the Familiar” (Horyn 2001e). She writes that There may be more reason than ever for fashion to be nostalgic (Horyn 2001e: E8). For Mr. Klein’s show, the models wore flat, ribbon laced sandals or open-toed stilettos with a slight 1940’ s look (Horyn 2001e: E8). Also acknowledging the events of September 11, Ginia Bellafante writes that some designers were more prescient than one would think, in particular, Ralph Lauren, whose designs have always rested on some sort of reminiscence of a more wholesome America (Bellafante 2001c: A19). Mr. Lauren’s collection, had it been shown before Sept. 11, might have seemed corny...The reference point, as for other designers, was a particular psychic slice of the 1970’s—one that evokes images of girls with lank blond hair parted in the middle and standing in fields of sunflowers. It is the 70’s of Joni Mitchell’s “Court and Spark,” Big Sur and Transcendental Meditation, an era suddenly worthy of
nostalgia... Cynthia Rowley’s show the night before produced the same feeling. Ms. Rowley’s sweet clothes always suggest a yearning for times less complicated, and you could not help looking at her with a new, less jaded eye (Bellafrante 2001c: A19). Marc Jacobs’s show for Louis Vuitton on Friday afternoon [also] plundered from the 1970’s, but hardly the 70’s of the sexually peregrine. Mr. Jacobs showed baggy cottons, often in tricolored tiers, partly inspired by the English designer Ossie Clark, partly inspired by the smocks worn to protect the school clothes of third graders from all that cake-like white paste used in art class. Cotton culottes were paired with loose, big-buttoned shirts plucked from the closet of the same 8-year-old. When Mr. Jacobs veered away from this idea, he turned toward folkloric embroideries that put one in mind of Russian stacking dolls (Bellafrante 2001d: nytimes.com). Cathly Horyn thought Mr. Jacob’s collection brought to mind the late 1970’s style of Jean Muir (Horyn 2001e: E8).

The jackets in Donna Karen’s collection had muscle and a pertinent ambivalence toward fashion. But there was no mistaking the elegant connection to Dior’s New Look of 1947 (Horyn 2001f: A19). Ralph Rucci opened his show with a white satin raincoat that was a slight nod to Hubert de Givenchy and Nicole Miller’s collection inspired by Coney Island meant vintage prints, crepe de Chine peasant tops edged with lace and exotic jungle prints (Horyn 2001f: A19). In keeping with this vintage movement, Mr. Chalayan’s technique [in his collection] was to layer one historical look over another and then literally shear it away, leaving sometimes only a trace of the top layer. Cut away in the front, a 1960’s-era black cotton shift revealed a 1920’s lace slip with a medieval breastplate, so that the dynamic between layers, the references, constantly shifted. What was inside was suddenly out, and what belonged to one era was suddenly liberated by the conceptual use of time (Horyn 2001f: A20).

Following the likes of Norma Kamali who along with other designers are either scavenging their archives or are coming back from a long hiatus, Diane Von Furstenberg recently re-branded her wrap dresses, with her daughter-in-law’s assistance, with startling success. Even Stephen Burrows has resurfaced from his disappearance from the fashion scene in 1982, and has been given studio space in the basement of Henri Bendel’s (Bellafrante 2002: B8).

Finally, for those who have indulged in the recycled fashions from the first eight decades of the twentieth century, yet still have that nostalgic pang and are wishful for the early 90’s, Ginia Bellafrante assures them that they should have something to look forward to as well: There is going to be a grunge factor (Bellafrante 2001d: B8). With that, fashion from every decade of the twentieth century is being sampled, reproduced and sold simultaneously as current fashion. Current fashion is indeed, the past.

What is especially fascinating about these accounts and reviews of fashion collections and trends in the years just before and just after the turn of the millennium is how much they are all rooted in vintage style. Although it has been suggested by some fashion experts (Koda 2001: personal communication; Steele 2001: personal communication) that consumers do not know what they are buying or which designers are being referenced, the journalists who cover fashion make no bones about this persistent sartorial recycling and specifically cite those designers. Moreover, throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to show the redundancy of words and observations
from a diverse array of popular culture critics and journalists through the use of a patchwork of
text boxes all related to the same subject. It is this redundancy, despite the diversity of the
journalistic or academic sources, that gives the words a particular power and demonstrates the
far-reaching popularity of retro.
Chapter Six: (Re)Collecting: Unpacking Narratives from the Closet

Old clothes are old friends. (Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel, quoted in Tobias 2000: 159)

And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die. (Marcel Proust 1954: 47-48)

Clothes are frequently thought to be imbued with the essence of their owners or collectors and are thus saturated with meaning and value. Clothes, especially in a collection like a wardrobe stored away in a closet or an attic, can tell a story about their owners or can even have their own biographies. Clothes can also outline a particular designer's creative work over the span of his or her career, as seen in the spate of retrospectives in art and fashion museums all over the world. For example, the Armani exhibition at the Guggenheim in 2000 was a thematic look at the designer's work spanning twenty-five years, was presented in what the museum called "narrative clusters."

Indeed, clothes can be so suffused with the essence of someone that the garment can almost stand alone as a symbol of one's identity. In these ways, garments act as spring-boards for memories, which facilitate the formation of a story. Clothes "are the body's second skin, they cling not only to its shape but also to its spirit, enclosing the fragrance of a specific period in their folds (the recollection of a fashion or a stage of life) (Bernadac 2000: 15). These memories are a link to the past, are integral to a sense of who we are (Belk 1988: 148).

The writings of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff provide a useful way of thinking about people's relationship to things and the idea that people are not the only entities that have biographies or narratives. For Appadurai, things have meaning only when human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with it. This is true for clothing in particular. Many
people believe that clothes really only have meaning when they are worn.\textsuperscript{1} Appadurai suggests that we follow the trajectories of things to uncover their meanings and examine the dialogic relationship between people and the things they possess or desire to possess, where each gives the other meaning and value. The value of these objects need not be monetary. Rather, things can become invested with significance—emotional investments, memories, and so forth, which are, in fact, invaluable. Their values can be expressed through a narrative that sheds light on how the object has value and the nature of its importance. In this way, inanimate objects can appear to have a life of their own.

Appadurai comments that there is a tendency to believe that objects are interchangeable, because of his own Marxist understanding of the commodity form.\textsuperscript{2} This is problematic because there are clothes that are unique or special in contemporary cultures, such as couture garments, designer clothing, or clothes which were owned and worn by someone of cultural or historical importance, which prove that Marx’s assertions are unfounded. It is important to recognize that the value of a garment is not inherent in the garment itself, but the value is bestowed upon the garment by others. Following the work of Georg Simmel, Appadurai believes that the exchange of things is what really “sets the parameters of utility and scarcity” (Appadurai 1986: 4). Thus, exchange is ultimately what gives objects their value. Thus, a commodity is not one kind of thing or another and does not have static value (Appadurai 1986: 17).

Jonathan Friedman agrees that things have meaning and indeed have a social life, because of the strategies in which they are embedded. He understands the “social life of things” to be the movement of meaning-endowed objects. However, for Friedman “the commodity form itself is a

\textsuperscript{1} For instance, Anne Hollander writes that “[d]ress has not only no social but also no significant aesthetic existence unless it is actually being worn” (Hollander quoted in Tobias 2000: 33). And, the renowned designer Elisa Schiaparelli once stated, “A dress has no life of its own unless it is worn, and as soon as this happens another personality takes over from you and animates it, or tries to, glorifies it or destroys it, or makes it into a song of beauty. More often, it becomes an indifferent object, or even a pitiful caricature of what you wanted it to be—a dream, an expression” (Tobias 2000: 94).

\textsuperscript{2} Karl Marx famously discusses the value of commodities in terms of a coat and the amount of linen needed to make a coat (Marx 1976). The value of the coat and the value of the linen is reduced to the human labor required to produce each commodity and their respective use-values (Marx 1976: 132). Indeed, the value of the coat is purely its use-value (Marx 1976: 143). Although Marx talks about different kinds of labor in terms of weaving and tailoring, he asserts that these are merely just two qualitatively different modes
very general property of social relations in commercial capitalism, an integral aspect of modern
personhood, that is, much more than the fact of exchangeability of goods (Friedman 1991: 161).
Thus, Friedman’s suggestion is the inverse of Appadurai’s—“that it is in the strategies of
selfhood and identity that “things” take on their social life. Things do not have social lives.
Rather, social lives have things” (Friedman 1991: 161).

Igor Kopytoff also explores the possibility of investigating objects and their circulation
by constructing their cultural biographies making “salient what might otherwise remain obscure”
(Kopytoff 1986: 67). Whereas Appadurai is more interested in the social history of things
wherein the general classes or types of things move in bigger spans of time and on a larger scale,
which allows him to reference a greater historical narrative, Kopytoff is more concerned with
“specific things as they move through different hands, contexts and uses, thus accumulating a
specific biography, or set of biographies” (Appadurai 1986: 34). This reflects the idiosyncrasies
of the things themselves.

As Appadurai aptly points out, the cultural biographies of small things over a long period
of time may lead to shifts in a larger social history of things (Appadurai 1986: 36). Importantly,
Kopytoff talks about what he calls a “yearning for singularization,“ especially when an object is
privately owned. Here, when an object is privately held for an extended period of time, “the
longevity of the relation assimilates them in some sense to the persona and makes parting from
them unthinkable” (Kopytoff 1986: 80). He also notes the market for things that may be
commodities now, but will later be a singular “collectible” and have even greater value (Kopytoff
1986: 81). While Kopytoff’s concern seems to lie primarily in commodity exchange where value
is rooted in money, my interest remains in the formation of narratives illustrating that the
relationship between things—specifically articles of clothing—and people is how they obtain
meaning and value in every day contexts.

of labor power (Marx 1976: 134). In this way, Marx does not account for varying qualities of fabric, design, or what Bourdieu called
“cultural capital.”
In his article “Neglected and Unused Things: a Narrative Encounter,” Anthony LaBranche talks about the companionship that objects provide us and how this relationship between ourselves and objects can lead us to “re-examine our view of the autobiographical, narrating ego which appears to thrive at the center of our stories of ourselves” (LaBranche 1973: 163). He suggests that we do this in order to ensure that our own narratives are not extinguished to allay the fear “of an annihilation of our current histories” (LaBranche 1973: 164). This adds another element to the practice of telling stories that incorporate material goods in order to create one comprehensive narrative. Here, we figure out ways to incorporate objects into our narrative, whether they are used or not, in order to stave off the possibility of being forgotten.

*The Things They Carry: Using Clothes to Trigger Memories*

She had a few handsome dresses left—survivals of her last phase of splendour... Though they had lost their freshness, [they] still kept the long, unerring lines, the sweep and amplitude of the great artist's stroke; and as she spread them out on the bed, the scenes in which they had been worn rose vividly before her. An association lurked in every fold: each fall of lace and gleam of embroidery was like a letter in the record of her past. She was startled to find how the atmosphere of her old life enveloped her... She put back the dresses one by one, laying away with each some gleam of light, some note of laughter, some stray waft from the rosy shores of pleasure.

(Edith Wharton quoted in Tobias 2000: 160)

“...My closet is a library of all the different personalities, periods and stories I can live. Some outfits are very reassuring, comfortable and comforting. I have outfits I look at and think, ‘Oh, this is so-and-so’s favorite outfit.’ Or ‘So-and-so hated this outfit.’

(Andrea Siegel 1999: 248).

A piece of clothing is also an exercise in memory. It makes me explore the past. How did I feel when I was wearing it? Clothes are like signposts in search of the past.

(Louise Bourgeois quoted in Neri 2000: 85)

It has been suggested, especially in psychological analyses of clothing and wardrobe, that sartorial possessions are an extension of the self, an expression of one’s identity or an expression of how one wants other’s to perceive them. By extension, many different types of sartorial fashion can reveal much about the lifestyles of their owners and can create a personal connection to the past. When taken either individually or in the context of other clothes in a wardrobe, they
can be used as sign posts which mark meaningful events in one’s life. As Amy Spindler writes, “as long as we have the clothes from our past in a closet, we can always revisit ourselves.” (Spindler 1999: 86).

When this project began several years ago, I believed that people could go through their closets and upon discovering different garments or accessories, they would be reminded of past events and occurrences in their lives. In this process of recollection, they could narrate their lives or chapters of their lives to some extent. Here, the clothes would trigger corporeal, affectionate and sensorial memories since they are so closely associated with the body (Herkenoff 2000: 103). Clothes are especially personal because they are so physically close to the body and can bear so many disparate meanings—personal, economic, social, cultural. Because there are so many layers to their importance in one way or another, they are extraordinarily useful as a point of departure for telling stories about ourselves and our times. Changing clothing styles from season to season can also assist someone in retelling their lives “by the shape, the weight, the colours, the smell of those clothes in [their] closet” as well (Herkenoff 2000: 104).

Benjamin’s assertion in his essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1969) that “the art of storytelling is coming to an end” (1969: 83) is contradicted by how willing and able people are to talk about their clothes and their wardrobes. They use these objects as a point of departure for talking about events in their own lives and also as a means of explicating things about themselves that might not otherwise be self-evident. People are indeed willing to talk about their garments—where they got them, if they got a bargain, who they were with when the garment was purchased, or, perhaps, who gave them the garment and the garment’s own history of ownership and use.3

---

3 Carolyn Steedman’s book Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives (1987) is worth noting. It is about how people interpret, remember, and retell events that occurred in the past and the objects that were significant to those events. For the author’s mother, longing for what she could not attain but felt that she was entitled to despite her socio-economic status, was the way in which she structured the narrative of her life. This is metaphorically signified in her desire for a Dior “New Look” skirt—an item that was quite beyond her economic means both because of the yardage needed to make such a garment required to make, and the impossibility of purchasing an original. The fact that clothes become a marked category of such longed-for possessions is especially interesting here. Steedman’s book helps illustrate that these kinds of stories should not be regarded merely as anecdotes, but as parts of a larger story that can construct a comprehensive narrative.
In a utopian fieldwork moment, I was invited to the home of Marion Ress in February, 2000. Mrs. Ress was eighty years old at the time. Over a period of a couple of hours we went through her walk-in closets and her husband’s closets while she recounted the dances she had attended in her teens, her trips to Europe with her husband, and the tailors she had befriended throughout the years who had either altered clothes she bought, or reproduced clothes that she adored and wanted in different colors and materials. Most astounding to me was a garment that she could date with precision unlike any other because the woman who had recommended a tailor for its alteration turned out to be her husband’s mistress—obviously a time in her life that left an indelible impression.⁴

Oddly enough, prior to the publication of Andrea Siegel’s book Open and Clothed, she herself was featured in an article in the Real Estate section of The New York Times because she chose to live in a not-so-chic part of Queens instead of Manhattan. The journalist was shocked that although she wrote a 1,600 paged manuscript about people’s obsession with the clothes in their closet, she was not immediately willing to talk about the contents of her own wardrobe. “Gradually, though, she begins telling the tale of each dress, including one of rayon brocade woven with gold thread and crystal bead on the hem and sleeves, that belonged to her grandmother, and an Alaïa dress she found for $12.99 that would have cost thousands new” (Hall 1999: 4). Thus, even Siegel who banked an entire book on the expectation that people would open up their closets and perhaps share intimate parts of their lives was not exactly forthcoming about the stories dwelling in her own closet.

Casual conversations with anyone interested in this project led to an enormous amount of voluntary information about clothes they once owned and gave or threw away and now regret.

---

⁴ Interestingly, some time after my interview with Ms. Ress, I came upon a textbook entitled The Meaning of Dress meant for students commencing a career in some segment of the fashion industry. At the end of each chapter, projects are offered to students for different ways to investigate sartorial behavior. One exercise is for students to talk to an older person about old photos and saved clothes to “explore how dress reflects the lifespan of an individual” (Damhoerst et al. 1999: 335). Dress is a part of that exploration in that it can trigger memories which are a “valuable part of self-history and social history” (Damhorst et al. 1999: 336). “You will learn how dress is a window to the self and the past and how dress reflects the lifespan of the individual. The interview might make you want to save for your own future collection” (Damhoerst et al. 1999: 336).
having done so, or conversely, clothes that they have that they cannot imagine throwing away because they are too precious. In his article, “Possessions and the Extended Self,” R.W. Belk writes, “If possessions are viewed as part of self, it follows that an unintentional loss of possessions should be regarded as a loss or lessening of self” (Belk 1988: 142). For some people parting with things is enormously difficult, but for most, there is a “simple nostalgic regret at the disposal of wornout clothing and similar items that have been associated with pleasant memories of one’s past” (Belk 1988: 143).

Conversely, unintentional dispossession can also lead those who discover these objects—however they were left behind—to feel a sense of loss as well. One example that comes to mind, again has to do with the events of September 11, 2001. For weeks and months after the collapse of the Twin Towers, rescue workers of all sorts working at “Ground Zero” were constantly being interviewed by news journalists to ask what sorts of things they were discovering at the site. Many of those interviewed would say that not much was distinguishable—no staplers or desks or things that one would expect to find in the collapse of an office building. But periodically, they would unearth a shoe and imagine what happened to the person wearing that shoe. Was it one of the many pairs of shoes that women kept under their desks to change into in the morning? Was the person running for their lives and lost their shoe in their haste? Was that person still alive or did they perish? These questions about the lives and the fates of the owners of these abandoned shoes seemed to haunt the recovery workers in ways just as powerful as finding actual body parts.

There are many examples that have been published in recent years where garments have their own biographies and where clothes can assist people in narrating their lives. The articulation of the narratives in such a wide array of essay, books, and magazines is on one hand rather surprising, but it points to how far-reaching and seemingly important this practice has become. For example, in the early 1980s, the magazine iD began asking young people to itemise what they were wearing, where they got it and how much they paid for their outfit (McRobbie
1988: 24). Many other weekly and monthly magazines have taken their cue and have similar pieces in their magazines in each issue. Harper's Bazaar and Vogue, for example, have extended this spontaneous interview on the street by featuring interviews with fashion mavens having to do with the contents of their closets, where they purchased their favorite or most distinctive garments, and sometimes, how much they paid. For a brief period of time, the Oxygen network even had a segment called Closet Cases for an animated television program called X Chromosome (Harper’s Bazaar 2000: 100). Importantly, I have never once seen a person interviewed who talks about a pair of chinos and a T-shirt. Rather, those people who are interviewed or open their closets to the world have seemingly interesting stories to tell about their outfit, wardrobes and consequently, of their lives. For instance, they will say that they bought their pants in Berlin or purchased their shoes in a Parisian flea market—information that is indicative of their lifestyle and or how hip or sophisticated they are.

Susan Langley, author of Vintage Hats and Bonnets (1997) writes that “[v]intage hats reveal a bit of the personalities of their previous owners... You can tell simply by the style of hat a woman wore if she was conservative or playful or even a little risqué” (DeRuiter 2001: 92). The by-line of an article entitled “Out of the Closet” featuring photos of garments that belonged to the author and her mother, spanning a period of time from 1951 to 1997, reads: “Forget Proust and his madeleines. By glancing though my wardrobe, I can conjure up the entire story of my life” (Gordon 1999: 46). (See Figure 6.1) Notably, Proust is dismissed by Ms. Gordon for having to ingest his cookies in order to recall his youth. Ms. Gordon, on the other hand, need only open her closet door to have memories of different stages of her life come rushing back.
Consider also the idea that a personal trainer can narrate her life from 1967 to present by the kinds of skirts that she wore in any period of time in a feature entitled “My Life in Skirts” (More 2001b: 32). (See Figure 6.2) Here, Denise Austin, traces forty-four years of her life, from her Catholic school uniform, to a skirt she got in order to look more like her older sister, to wrap skirts she purchased after the birth of her children in order to mask her weight-gain, and finally, to the dozens of skirts she hemmed four inches above her knee because her husband finds them attractive (More 2001b: 32). Similarly, a woman interviewed by Andrea Siegel recalled that her grandmother was an incredibly intelligent woman who kept track of details of what she wore to any occasion and who could tell you what she was wearing on every day that had historical importance during her life, including the fact that she was wearing Norrell when Kennedy was shot (Siegel 1999: 83).
Hélene Cixous' essay "Sonia Rykiel in Translation" (1994) is virtually a biography of the life of the clothes she owns, most of which are designed by Sonia Rykiel, and the relationship that the author has with them when they are worn, both intimately and socially. Cixous even names the garments in her wardrobe that evoke particular feelings of freedom and sexual power for her.

This garment comes from very far away. I had never seen it, I have always known it. It comes from the origins. It comes from the trace of the immemorial origins in the farthest depths of my memory, where memory does not remember itself, has no images, is still nothing more than the movement of life

(Hélene Cixous 1994: 95-96).

The garment about which Cixous writes holds a place in her life that goes beyond a covering to protect against the elements; rather, the garment has become so much a part of her life, that she cannot remember being without it.  

---

5 This essay is also a tribute to the designer, and the unspoken and imaginary relationship Cixous has with Rykiel through her designs, as if they knew each other personally—the clothes mediate this relationship and speak to Cixous. In her mind, Rykiel seems to be designing clothes specifically for her— for her needs, pleasures and desires.
Likewise, Caroline Rennolds Milbank’s pictoral essay follows the “career” of the life of a red silk satin and chiffon Valentino dress that was purchased by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in 1977 (Milbank 1998: 132). (See Figure 6.3)

Figure 6.3 – “Its Brilliant Career”

In this one-page piece, six chapters in the life of this gown are sketched; from its “birth” in Rome, its “charmed life” in New York, and its eventual death when it goes to “heaven”—or heaven’s equivalent for a dress of this quality—to a museum. Ms. Milbank explains what famous even Ms. Onassis wore this dress, how she donated it to a tony thrift store in Manhattan, where it was worn
by its next owner, and how it was eventually auctioned at Doyle in 1995 where it was enshrined, owing to its remarkable “career.”

If possessions are viewed as part of self, then it would follow that the loss of them would be like losing part of one’s identity. This becomes especially poignant when the loss includes either the death of a loved one or the loss of clothing belonging to someone who has died. In a Costume Society of America’s newsletter, one member writes about finding a pair of sixty year-old mittens among her mother’s possessions when she died. The author had them restored so that she could wear them, but they were stolen out of her shopping cart at the grocery store. For her, “somebody had stolen this transitory yet very real piece of the mosaic of one’s own life” (Janostikova 2001: 9), and in this instance, it was like losing her mother in once again.

Phyllis Magidson at the City Museum of New York shared one story about how difficult it can be to receive donations from desperate survivors of women who clearly loved their clothes, having kept them over the span of their lives:

We had one woman who was in Bronxville, who was a New Yorker, she had only moved there the latter part of her life, but she was an absolutely insatiable bargain hunter and she had people scouting for her at every major department store, like Bergdorf’s, Saks Fifth Avenue and when we went into the apartment, it was filled with hat boxes it was filled clothes from Mainbocher, it was filled with everything and she documented the percentage of the original price that she paid. She had costume jewelry. And with the exception of a couple of pieces where she actually fell in the love with the hat and actually wrote “Fell in love with the hat in the window of Bergdorf’s. Had Miss so-and-so hold it for me. Paid full price!!!” Triple exclamation points. You also get the phone call from the husband whose wife died of cancer a few months ago and he has this dress that she wore for her wedding and she wore it for every anniversary and she was still able to fit into it and here it is and this is my treasure and brings it to you tearfully. There are all kinds of donors.

(Interview with Phyllis Magidson 2001)

Here, Ms. Magidson, by virtue of the nature of her collection and also her own interest in the history of the clothes, is not only a curator of clothing, but also a collector of the biographies of both the clothing and their owners.

Sometimes clothes are specially made in order to commemorate the dead, rather than the dead person’s clothes being retained as a memento of that person’s life. Emily Yellin reports that
in New Orleans, a place where death rituals are usually elaborate, T-shirts commemorating the lives of the dead youths became especially popular among young blacks, especially in the late 1980s (Yellin 2000). Because there had been a rash of gang-related murders, one woman wearing a shirt of a young man who was killed a couple of years before, is quoted as saying that she had sixteen other shirts to memorialize deceased friends and family members. “She always wears them to funerals, she said, but also puts them on whenever she wants to keep alive her memories of the person on the shirt” (Yellin 2000).

For some people, the narratives created about clothing do not derive from personal experiences, but rather are spawned from their imagination about what they might do with garments they encounter. As Holy Brubach writes, clothes are indeed sources of inspiration for narratives of self-creation, even if they are not narratives about the past. “In our experience, a picture of a beautiful dress—or a glamorous coat or a sexy pair of shoes—can bring out the writer in all of us, inspiring some new story full of possibilities: we see the dress, we imagine ourselves in it, we invent circumstances in which we would wear it, we flesh out the cast of our fantasy with friends, loved ones and sometimes total strangers, whose adoring response persuades that, indeed, we need the dress and that it will change our lives” (Brubach 1998: 87).

Many people also use objects of body adornment as ways to remind themselves of their own past. One example is a necklace that became very popular at a small but popular boutique called Kirna Zabete in SoHo in Manhattan. The owners of the boutique had been “feeling blue” but when they saw a necklace designed by Liz Collins that she made for herself, they “perked up” (Bellafante 2002a: 7). Ms. Collins made this beaded necklace from which she dangled

---

6 It should be noted that after the events of September 11 and the horrific loss of 343 firefighters in the New York Fire Department, T-shirts emblazoned with epithets such as "Gone But Not Forgotten" and "Some Gave All, All Gave Some" and a list of names of men lost from either the entire department or from each individual fire house became highly coveted and exemplified New Yorkers' allegiances with each other and with the emergency workers whose sacrifices had too long been taken for granted.

7 Interestingly, J. Peterman, the catalog-based clothing company, had its great success (before filing for bankruptcy in 1998) due in large part to the narratives that accompanied each garment in the catalogue. The whole catalogue was relied on the imagination of its customers to create narratives of themselves in the outfits that were sketched in watercolor, not photographed. The narratives, which were made especially famous by the television program Seinfeld where the character Elaine worked as an editor of the catalogue, were meant to transport the potential buyer to another time, sometime in the past, whether they had any personal experience or investment in that era at all.
mementos of her past, for example an old earring and a bracelet from her middle school boyfriend (Bellafante 2002e: B7). The shopkeepers asked Ms. Collins to make each of them a necklace and then decided to order a batch for the store where they have been flying off the shelves despite the fact that they are about $300 each. “The necklace...‘captures the vintage idea, the jewelry moment, the hippie-bohemian thing...It’s like 10 trends in one’” (Bellafante 2002e: B7). It should be noted that the popularity of these necklaces is somewhat curious; the baubles on the necklaces now being produced in numbers mean nothing to the people buying them, belying the original intention of Ms. Collins when she made her own.

It should be noted that among the spate of memoirs published in recent years, some specifically have to do with clothing and how clothes were important to the author. One memoir worth mentioning is Lois Gould’s *Mommy Dressing: A Love Story, After a Fashion* (1998). This memoir was inspired by Holly Brubach, former fashion editor of the *New York Times Magazine*. Brubach approached Gould asking if she would write about her mother, Jo Copeland, who was a legend in early American fashion design. Gould obliged and wrote a disturbing account of her non-existent relationship with her mother, whose life was essentially one huge sartorial expression. The memories that Gould has of interactions with her mother primarily have to do with the garments she wore of her mother’s design and memories of her mother getting dressed. She writes, “what I knew about [my mother] was only the dressing. Nothing of the rest of her life was visible to me. Unless, the dressing was, in fact, the life” (Gould 1998: 2). Here, clothes were seminal to her mother’s life and were the foundation of her dysfunctional relationship with her daughter.\(^8\)

---

\(^8\) Interestingly, a writer for *The New York Times* likes her own experience watching her mother get dressed and the experiences of people just like Lois Gould. She writes, “In the memoirs of children of celebrities, especially movie stars or socialites, they always seem to recall one exceptional glamorous image of their parents, one magical night when Mother was in a ball gown, shoulders wrapped in chinchilla, and Father was in black tie — and they were happy with each other. I have such a memory. I was 15, and my parents were going to a fancy dinner dance. My mother was wearing a red lace dress with a plunging neckline, long sleeves and an ankle-length skirt designed to make her look like Ginger Rogers on the dance floor. She had a mink around her shoulders and my father, who was in black tie, beamed” (Louie 2001: 2).
But, perhaps the most intriguing publication that exemplifies the underpinnings of this research is Ilene Beckerman's memoir *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* (1995). It is a small book, barely seventy-five pages long and written in staccato sentences which accompany the dresses she illustrates. According to reviews and comments posted on Amazon.com, it has become a favorite gift for women from women. It is thought that it pinpoints a common experience for women of all age-groups. It has evidently has a particular resonance with American readers, given the tremendous impact it has had on women in the United States since its publication. It is an autobiographical account of her life, both tragedies and celebrations as remembered through her clothes. She not only remembers events, but also recalls how these garments came into her possession—where she bought them, or from whom she borrowed them—especially when her mother died and Beckerman had to start purchasing her clothes. The fact that this memoir's focus is the author's wardrobe throughout her lifetime and has been as popular as it has with American women demonstrates the effectiveness of clothing to trigger memories and mark significant moments in one's life.

*Some Things Are Better Left in the Past: Contagion and Somber Memories*

Things, boxes. Why do these possessions carry such sorrowful weight? There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding. They make me wary not of personal failure and defeat but of something more general, something large in scope and content.


The memories which garments carry are not always welcome, nor is the sense that they have retained the essence of their previous owner. If it is accepted that possessions are seen as a part of their owner, then the part of oneself that may remain in a garment, for instance, which is especially intimate in its closeness to the body, may harbor things thought to be unhealthy or dangerous, or at the very least, unhappy. What is overwhelmingly evident is that the idea that the garments have another, previous life, is unshakable (Gould in Tobias 2000: 87).
First, a strong belief persists that used clothing is disease ridden—most likely contaminated with the supposed disease that killed its original owner—and, therefore, is less than desirable. There is a historical precedent for this, whether or not it is true. Elizabeth Wilson reports that in the late 1840s, it was believed that one way typhus reached Canada was through the import of men’s clothing, which was the most likely to be purchased second-hand (Wilson 1989: 40). At that time, there “was an extensive export trade in second-hand men’s clothing to Europe, South Africa and North and South Americas” (Wilson 1989: 40). Although it has been argued that these “taboos have been banished by the high general standard of public cleanliness and health and the omnipresent laundrette” (Ginsburg 1980: 133), it is clear that these fears and sensibilities about wearing someone else’s clothes still linger. Carol Atkin mentioned that when she went vintage shopping in the 1960s, “[e]verything was dirt cheap because there was a prejudice right through the land that if you bought something like that, it meant that you were wearing a dead person’s clothing” (Atkin 2001: personal communication). The irony is that although this was the predominant feeling, those same people were giving clothes away to Goodwill and it never occurred to them that there was a connection between the clothes that they were giving away (Atkin 2001: personal communication).

Harriet Love, whose investment in vintage clothing goes back to the 1960s, and Tiffany Dubin whose role in the vintage clothing market has already been discussed, both address people’s trepidation about wearing used clothes:

Many potential converts to old clothes cannot bear to the idea of wearing something someone else has already owned and worn. Some people are hung up on whether the clothes are really “clean” and free of dirt and germs. Even people who seem to have no objection to lending their clothes to friend and friends of friends seem to have trouble with wearing clothes that once belonged to strangers. Fortunately the stigma attached to buying ‘secondhand’ began to disappear when young college students, with very little money for imaginative wardrobes, caught on to thrift-shop possibilities in the last fifties and early sixties. And hesitation over cleanliness might well disappear altogether if everyone were to realize that dry cleaning includes a sterilization process, which should dispel the myth that you can catch another’s diseases.... The other stigma attached to secondhand clothing has nothing to do with cleanliness. It’s a myth that I like to call “bad-vibes jive.” Who was the person who owned this dress? What was she like? How do I know what she did in these clothes? Did she die a horrible death? And what do I need someone else’s weird vibes
around me for? This, of course, is ridiculous, yet I am constantly surprised by how many people have voiced these superstitions to me when buying secondhand.

(Harriet Love 1982: 5-6)

If...you are tempted by the possibilities of vintage clothes but are one of those stubborn souls still hung up on the idea that they once belonged to somebody else, consider this interesting fact: Whether you are shopping at Neiman Marcus, Barney's or Selfridge's, fifty other women probably tried on that black sheath before you came along. Some of them probably wore it out to dinner with the tags still on and then returned it to the store. Don't let this misplaced squeamishness get in your way.

(Tiffany Dubin and Ann Berman 2000: 233)

It is interesting that Ms. Love picks up on the importance of contemporary cleaning technologies to the vintage industry, as did Alice Lindholm and Andy from Andy's Chee-Pees, who all relied on their trusted dry cleaner to rid the clothes of odors, stains, and any other kind of decontamination possible. Nevertheless, the thought that the clothes belonging to and worn by someone else, especially someone else who most likely is deceased, remains an issue for many people.

It has also been said that "[t]hrift stores and vintage boutiques are, in essence, funeral homes. And if the dealers are the funeral directors, then the pickers are the gravediggers" (Garbarino 2001: 126). Pickers have been likened to vultures swooping in on the homes of the recently deceased, or thrift stores—a melting pot for unwanted possessions (Garbarino 2001: 126).

In fact, many writers comment upon the strange aura of used clothes taken out of the context of their owners' lives. For example, Pascal once said, "'No one...dies so poor that he does not leave something behind" (Benjamin 1969: 98). Surely it is the same with memories too, although these do not always find an heir. For Wilson, costume museums and thrift stores have this eerie ambiance due to the untold stories that the clothes tell with regard to their conspicuously absent owners (Wilson 1985:1).

A dusty silence holds still the old gowns in glass cabinets. In the aquatic half light (to preserve the fragile stuffs) the deserted gallery seems haunted. The living observer moves, with a sense of mounting panic, through a world of the dead. May not these relics, like the contents of the Egyptian tombs, bring bad luck to those who have been in contact
with them? There are dangers in seeing what should have been sealed up in the past. We experience a sense of the uncanny when we gaze at garments that had an intimate relationship with human beings long since gone to their graves. For clothes are so much part of our living, moving selves that, frozen on display in the mausoleums of culture, they hint at something only half understood, sinister, threatening; the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life. These clothes are congealed memories of the daily life of times past. Once they inhabited the noisy streets, the crowded theaters, the glittering soirees of the social scene. Now, like souls in limbo, they wait poignantly for the music to begin again. Or perhaps there is a silence patient with vengefulness towards the living... Clothes without a wearer, whether on a secondhand stall, in a glass case, or merely a lover’s garment strewn on the floor, can affect us unpleasantly, as if a snake had shed its skin. Similarly, a pregnant woman described how the little frock hanging up in readiness for her as yet unborn child seemed like ‘a ghost in reverse’. A part of this strangeness of dress is that it links the biological body to the social being, and public to private.

(Elizabeth Wilson 1985: 1)

As Wilson so vividly describes, a used garment can be seen as a shell to a being that no longer exists. Charles Dickens was even struck by the discarded clothes in limbo on Monmouth Street. He described the second-hand clothing market on there as the “burial place of fashions” (Wilson 1985: 2). Unlike their owners, clothes do not die and therein lies part of the reason for the uneasiness in the notion that clothes have their own lives and their own biographies. Thomas Carlisle was stuck by the very same market place:

Oft have I turned into [London’s] old-clothes market to worship. With awe-struck heart, I walk through... Monmouth Street, with its empty suits... Silent are they, but expressive in their silence: the past witnesses and instruments of woe and joy, of passions, virtues, crimes, and all the fathomless tumult of good and evil in ‘the prison called life.’ Friends! Trust not the heart of that man for whom old clothes are not venerable!

(Thomas Carlisle quoted in Tobias 2000: 87)

Thus, things that are seemingly abandoned such as these garments on Monmouth Street, or in any thrift store in contemporary times, seem to be able to speak to us. Despite their apparent disuse and neglect, they can still be eloquent and have a story to tell. Rather than remaining a passive audience, we help the objects tell their stories by contributing our experiences to theirs.

Many stories have been written in recent years, inspired by shopping excursions for vintage clothing in flea markets and thrift stores with special consideration of the original owners of the garments. These stories incorporate the realization that the clothes had an existence with a
previous owner who is most likely deceased. This sudden awareness seems to weigh heavily on the shoppers who share their experience.

One particularly poignant story is about the discovery of a collection of clothes at a flea market all belonging to the same woman, Helen Hollis. In her article “The Haunted Wardrobe,” Lynn Hirschberg writes ironically that she met Ms. Hollins, even though she was dead. At a flea market, she came upon forty years worth of clothes that spanned Helen Hollis’ life “piled high on three tables, a five-foot mountain of skirts and sweaters and jackets and handbags” (Hirschberg 1999: 90). Although it is common to wonder about the past owner of a garment when you buy vintage, in this case, Ms. Hirschberg felt that this information she acquired about this previous owner was “a little creepy” (Hirschberg 1999: 92):

Helen Hollis was dead and these clothes had all belonged to her. It seemed as if she had never really worn them—instead, she kept them pristine, waiting, waiting, waiting for the right opportunity. Did that moment ever arrive... Maybe she wore everything once in 1965 and then replaced the plastic wrap, but mostly she treasured these clothes like jewels you never remove from their velvet boxes. She died in Nyack, alone in that condominium with her dresses and coats and bags, a memory of a different life that she may never have lived... Wearing vintage is about trying to capture a part of history that is more romantic than today, but the clothes from the Rosalee feel haunted. They don’t belong to me and, perhaps, never will. They still belong to Helen Hollis.

(Lynn Hirschberg 1999: 92-93)

Thus, even in her physical absence, Helen Hollis’ clothes tell a story, indicative a life of loneliness and broken dreams.

In a related article, Ms. Hirschberg hunts down Precious, another woman with whom she became acquainted by shopping for her clothes (Hirschberg 2002b). Although Precious was still alive, the sense of mystery and a bit of melancholy still lingers in her reporting. Precious lived with her husband, Jack, in a mansion in Memphis. In their time together, they lived for fashion, traveled the world, dressed extravagantly, and knew all of the then contemporary designers personally. Jack is now consigning her clothes in small increments with respected dealers and auction houses throughout the United States. Ms. Hirschberg, who has been following and purchasing Precious’ clothes for a number of years, was permitted to interview Jack at their home
in Memphis and see a few of the closets that contain the remainder of her enormous wardrobe. The same overwhelming curiosity that drew Ms. Hirschberg to investigate the life of Helen Hollis also drew her to research the life of Precious. She is once again astounded by the power of a lifetime’s worth of clothes and the haunting memories they possess.

Louise Rifkin, who spent several months crisscrossing the United States and going to all the Salvation Army and Goodwill stores in her path also experienced a degree of sadness with her purchases:

While thrift shopping, I have discovered stories and secrets about people living in places I might otherwise have driven through... A grieving staff person told me that I had almost the same figure as the recently deceased and that I even looked a bit like she did when she was younger, though my hair was darker. I wrote down the name of the teacher and kept it pinned on the inside of her (now my) suede 1940’s car coat.

(Louise Rifkin 1997: 27)

This connection to the past, and especially to someone else’s, can be interesting and endearing.

When one of the men Andrea Siegel interviewed received a call to tell him that his friend Sylvia had died, he instinctively took the phone into the closet because he and Sylvia had done so much shopping together. Being among the clothes that he purchased with her reminded him of all the good times they had shared:

A lot of times when I go to my closet, I feel like there are all these people sort of in there. I look at different outfits, and I feel like, in some ways, people stay with you, different stories and things stay with you, and there are times when I go into my closet and I hear Sylvia saying to me, ‘No pleats! Never!’ There are times when I feel a little presence in my closet. Because of all the different associations, it’s very comforting to me.

(Andrea Siegel 1999: 94)

Clothing and death seem to be inextricably linked.

For some people it can be unsettling to know that someone is wearing the clothes of a deceased loved-one. There is a history of fear of used clothes, especially the clothes belonging to people who have died, that extends beyond cultural, spatial, and temporal divides. It is fairly common to refuse to dress in ‘used clothing’ and in some cultures, it is simply unthinkable to wear the clothing of the dead. In some contemporary traditional societies, “using the clothing or
possessions of the dead is often a taboo" (Belk 1988: 144). This is because the possessions of the deceased are understood as another physical remnant of the dead person.\(^9\)

Consider, for example, the indigenous people of San Carlos, Guatemala who are keenly anxious about clothing due to their "belief that one's soul is extended to his clothing. In other words, the clothing contains some emanations of the soul" (Roach and Eicher 1965: 184). Some of these "Indians do not like to sell their garments secondhand or to throw them away. When no more rags can be obtained for patching, when no more threads can be unraveled, the remains are buried secretly or burned" " (Roach and Eicher 1965: 184). On the other hand, they are not afraid to wear the clothes of people who appear to be rich or influential (Roach and Eicher 1965: 184). John Gillen, who worked in this community for a number of years, used to give away some of his clothes at the end of every trip (Roach and Eicher 1965: 184):

At first I thought the great avidity with which they were begged for was based entirely upon utilitarian motives, but I discovered later that some of the recipients of these felt that they would keep with them a certain part of my essence by having my clothes. One man to whom I had given a pair of trousers in 1942 had a long story of his adventures to tell me in 1948 in which he attributed a large part of his good luck to my trousers. He kept them carefully in a box and wore them only on important occasions or times of crisis (Roach and Eicher 1965: 184).

The man was hoping to gain Mr. Gillen's apparent good luck by osmosis, extending the notion that clothes, whether those of the living or deceased, retain the essence of their owner, and can be a bad luck or a talisman.

The idea that clothes are able to transport either the good or bad luck of their previous owners across cultural divides is evidenced in an exposé in The New York Times Magazine as well. This article traces the journey of a T-shirt donated by a woman living on the Upper West

---

\(^9\) The notion that clothes are a part of their owners and can be emblematic of their lives becomes evident in an article entitled "Inheriting Memories, With White Elephants" which offers suggestions for what to do when people want their treasured material goods to have a good home (Baldwin 2001: F10). This can be problematic especially when individuals to whom they want to give the inheritance have no interest in the items being bequeathed. The author writes that every handoff has a story, or at least a fragment of a story, attached to it. She believes that every time she looks at the abandoned objects she wants to bequeath, she can hear voices (Baldwin 2001: F10).
Side of Manhattan all the way to a small village in Africa. The journalist writes how the importation of used clothes is regarded by Africans:

In warlord ridden, destitute Somalia, used clothing is called, rather contemptuously, *huudhaydh*—as in “Who died?” A woman in Kenya who once sold used dresses told me that not long ago Kenyans assumed the clothing was removed from dead people and washed it carefully to avoid skin diseases... In Togo, it is called “dead white man’s clothing” (Packer 2002: 57).

It is also interesting to note that these sentiments were shared quite independently by the original owner of the shirt. When the author of this article initially told its owner that she hoped to follow her discarded T-shirt to Africa, the owner was delighted. She said, “Maybe our clothes change the lives of these people...No one would agree with me, but maybe some of the vibrations are left over in the clothing. Maybe some of the good things about us can carry through” (Packer 2002: 55).

In fact, many people believe that garments have talismanic properties. People of all ages and backgrounds frequently become deeply and irrationally attached to a particular item of clothing. Alison Lurie talks about the supernatural powers of clothes suggesting that there is a certain “sartorial conservatism” where men and women continue to wear fashions that were becoming in their youth (Lurie 1983: 156-157). Likewise, Andrea Siegel asserts that the reason that people wear and feel comfortable or uncomfortable in the clothes that they wear today is due to the formative influences of one’s family and childhood (Siegel 1999: 73). And, “Billie Jean King, for example, wore a favourite, sixties-style mini-dress for her big tennis matches in the belief that it brought her luck; during the Second World War British Spitfire pilots used to attach their girlfriends’ bras to their cockpits for the same reason” (Wilson 1985: 56).

**Closets**

A closet is a sort of contemporary biography of your life. (Amy Spindler 1999: 86)

A women’s closet is “that intimate garden every woman cultivates, whether pruned or overgrown, Zen or magpie-full.” (Judith Krantz 2001: 96)
A woman’s closet is like a memoir: it’s the details that are so telling.

(Vogue 2001: 86)

There seems to be a certain fascination with closets, and a concomitant preponderance of writing about them. This includes anything from mundane tips on how to organize them, to more interesting probes about what is in them, what people keep and what people should discard and all the reasons behind these decisions. Hoarding clothes in one’s closet is so commonplace, that even cartoon-strips poke fun at what people cannot bear to give away. (See Figure 6.4)

![Figure 6.4 – Cathy’s Closet](image)


Moreover, many fashion magazines have perused the closets of the rich and famous, or at least, those women who have made their mark on the fashion industry in some capacity. The overwhelming volume of such articles and comments in a wide variety of publications and talk shows on televisions demonstrates that talking about wardrobes and all things having to do with closets has a particular resonance with American readers. It has been said that “there is something very romantic about the idea of... once treasured clothes coming out of their dark hiding places to live again and become associated with special moments in our own lives, as they once were in the lives of their original wearers” (Tolkien 2000: 9).

One overwhelmingly popular theme has to do with cleaning out one’s closet and the conflict that it causes for many people, as it means parting with objects that are intimately linked
with the past. As mentioned earlier, the focus of Andrea Siegel’s book Open and Clothed (1999) is to examine what people keep in their closets, but more importantly, she makes suggestions on how to clean them out. Her goal is for people to figure out how to part with their old clothes, and thus she offers activities for people who cannot clean out their closets on their own:

There are lots of good reasons why you should not clean out your closet. List yours:

- I can’t clean out my closet because:
  a) I don’t have time.
  b) I’m afraid to open the door.
  c) As Marlow said of Kurtz, “The horror, the horror.”
- My closet looks like: ________________________________
- If my closet only contained clothes I like that fit, ________________________________
- My clothes mean so much to me. (Sigh.) I can’t let go of ____________ because ____________. Even though ____________ (item of clothing) upsets me, I have to keep it because ____________, (Who is going to catch you? Who will be hurt? Whose body would you need so it would fit?)
- Closet history is a personal matter. Who or what is metaphorically in your closet?
- List the top ten embarrassments of your closet. What do you wish you had never laid eyes on?
- How much is enough?
- How is your closet like your family?
- How many complete outfits do you own? How many do you need?

(Andrea Siegel 1999: 247)

Hoping that her readers have taken her quiz, Siegel tries to help people put aside their feelings of guilt or sentimentality, and clean out their closets, if for no other reason than to rid themselves of clutter and increase their efficiency.

Much has been written about how important cleaning out one’s closet is for one’s happiness, in part because it means letting go of any nostalgic attachments to clothes or accessories that may hold memories. At the very least, if one has accumulated a large collection of clothes, they should be organized. For instance, one contributor to Vogue attributes her deep love of vintage to her grandmother who notably saved and archived all of her outfits in a huge walk-in closet arranged by color (Dunn 1999: 62). According to André Putman, a renowned French interior designer, this seems to be a problem for Americans in particular. He is quoted as

---

10 Closets are also often used as a metaphor for hiding things or revealing things, such as when gay/lesbians publicly acknowledge their sexual orientation, they are said to “come out of the closet,” whereas if they hide their sexuality, they are “closeted.” The hit track off of Eminem’s album, “The Eminem Show” (2002) is called “Cleanin’ Out My Closet” where he reveals some of his innermost feelings and “dirty laundry.”
saying, “I love America, and I love American women. But there is one thing that deeply shocks me – American closets. I cannot believe one can dress well when you have so much” (Tobias 2000: 17).

Following is a series of quotes having to do with how Americans feel the pressure to purge their closets of unnecessary clothing, even if (or especially if) they harbor memories from the past:

At the beginning of my vacation, I go through my dresser drawers and remove the shirts that have seen their best days... I can’t tell you the satisfaction I get from wearing these old friends on vacation. It gives me the feeling that I’m saving money but I also like the idea of getting everything there is out of something. Wearing a comfortable old shirt with a frayed collar on vacation is conservation at its best

(Andy Rooney 1984: 15)

Once you weed out what you no longer want or need... you’ll be much happier... But the real challenge... is deciding what stays and what goes... If you haven’t worn it in a year, it should be tossed... I say get rid of things you don’t wear because they don’t get any younger. And, if you are planning to wait around until it’s retro, you’re going to have a long wait. Besides, even with all the retro fashions designers are bringing back these days, the updated versions are always a little different. The same exact thing doesn’t really come around again—and if it did, would you want to be able to get back into it? When I look at the young women wearing some of the hideous polyester clothes from the seventies that they’ve pulled out of the back of their closets or rooted out of some vintage store, I can’t help but think that anyone who was old enough to wear them the first time around is not going to be in a rush to wear those things again!

(Betty Halbriech 1997: 8)

Organizing experts agree that most of us wear only 20% of our wardrobes. Left unattended, our excess clothes become larger than life, consuming air, space, and ultimately, us. Closet chaos can be crippling—top the psyche as well as to time.

(Sue Hertz 2001: 26)

[Jeffrey] Kalinsky, [owner of the Tony boutique Jeffrey, in Atlanta and New York City] is not the sentimental type. He subscribes to a no-fear, less-is-more school of thought where clothing is concerned... In Kalinsky’s world, what ‘needs to go’ is shorthand for anything that is just wrong.

(Sarah Brown 2001: 320)

Bliss Can Be As Simple As an Empty Clothes Closet

(Title for an article in The New York Times, Green 2001: 1)
It should be remembered, however, that cleaning out one’s closet can also lead to regret years later, and one should not toss things without really considering the long-term ramifications. Denis Diderot, one of the most prominent of the French Encyclopedists and one of the leaders of the Enlightenment, so longed for his old dressing gown, which he had discarded for a brand new gown, that he wrote:

My old dressing gown—why didn’t I keep it? It was made for me; I was made for it. It hugged all the contours of my body— but comfortably, without constriction. In it, I was picturesque and handsome. This new one, ... tight and stiff, makes a mannequin of me.  

(Denis Diderot quoted in Tobias 2000: 159)

Betty Halbreich, an avid proponent of cleaning out one’s closet so as to not succumb to sentimentality, advises that virtually the only exception to tossing out things you have not worn in a year, are the clothes one spent a great deal of money on (Halbreich 1997: 9). She suggests that in this instance, the expensive things should just be stored in a someplace other than your everyday closet—indeed, she suggests that they can be stored in an entirely different closet. Importantly, she warns:

Think carefully before tossing out things of value. I do have things I regret getting rid of. I often ask myself, What was I thinking throwing away perfectly good alligator handbags? They would cost an absolute fortune to replace today. So, yes, sometimes it does make sense to hold on to a few prized possessions. Even of they never come back into fashion, chances are, you’ll be glad to visit them every now and then.  

(Betty Halbreich 1997: 9-11)

At the same time, there are things that may not have monetary value, but should be stored away precisely because of their sentimental attachments:
Cleaning out the back of my closet one weekend not long ago, I came across assorted evidence of my former selves: a high-school cheerleading sweatshirt worn by the pre-conscious small-town ingénue; a pair of blue denim overalls that constituted a uniform for the arty college student; a black leather jacket that served as some kind of downtown armor for a bashful newcomer to the city; a long, droopy cardigan sweater that represented a rookie writer’s idea of what somebody literary might wear; a Chanel suit that, it was hoped, might confer some authority on a young woman endeavoring to live by her opinions.

Though conventional wisdom claims that everything comes back in style sooner or later, and despite a sentimental streak I’ve tried but never managed to eradicate, I know that I’ll never wear any of these clothes again; their relationship to the person I’ve become is purely historical. Still, I can’t bring myself to get rid of them, and in the end I left them in the closet, out of respect for those people I used to be. They meant well. Each one gave way to the next and disappeared, leaving only the clothes behind.

(Holly Brubach, "Serial Dresser" 1999: 14-15)

In my closet hangs a dress I cherish but will almost certainly never wear. My mother sent it me long ago, when I fancied the idea of wearing vintage clothes... The gown dates to the early days of President Kennedy’s Camelot—to his 1961 inaugural ball in Washington D.C., in fact... I can still picture my mother wearing it that magical night, along with her pearls, her gold high heels, and the mink stole that tickled cheek when she bent to kiss me good night. She looked like a movie star and smelled heavenly. That night she made my small world not just safe, as mothers do, but exciting too. That gown was just one in a series of beautiful creations she painstakingly produced on her trusty Singer sewing machine.

(Carol Susan Woodruff 2000: 46)

Sometimes, it seems that being forced to go through one’s closet means forcing one to face one’s misguided purchases and things from their past that they would rather not revisit. For example, after what she calls a recent closet purge, Melissa de la Cruz, a self-described fashion victim, finds that she “owned not one, not two, but seven ponchos. Remember ponchos, 1999’s retro-radical answer to outerwear? The fashion statement that was part Janis Joplin, part Juan Valdez, and all wrong?” (Melissa de la Cruz 2001: 7). And, Penelope Green amusingly writes about her impulse-purchase of a pair of Prada shoes which she hates the moment she gets home because she suddenly thinks they are ugly. She is advised by friends that she should get rid of them so that she is not reminded every time that she sees them in her closet that she was a rube for buying something for the label (Green 2000a).
Moving from one home to another is often an impetus for many people to deal with the things they had stuffed in their closet, rather than confront parting with them. Here, it is also noted that giving up possessions is giving up a part of one’s self.

Getting ready to sell the house, I went through the attic and basement and made three piles of clothes – those to throw out, those to give away, and those I didn’t know what to do with but couldn’t throw out or give away.

(Ilene Beckerman 1995: 128)

In the old days, people didn’t move. If you were lucky, you left home when you were married... [I]t was possible to find clothing dating back to the Civil War in the attic... As some doctors have noted, moving is one of the most stressful things to go through, right up there with death or divorce. To tear up one’s roots, however tenuous or fragile, provokes anxiety, a sense of loss — of possessions, place or life.

(Tama Janowitz 1998: 110-116)

However, Liz Goldwyn, filmmaker and granddaughter of Sam Goldwyn of MGM studios, admits that she has to keep moving in order to accommodate her ever growing collection of vintage clothes. “People give her things, she says, because ‘they know I will take care of their memories’” (Green 1999: 160). In any case, cleaning out one’s closet can be an emotionally wrought process, and it seems that even the most ardent closet liquidators have made exceptions for certain kinds of items that are simply too precious — either monetarily or sentimentally — to discard. In many cases, the closet and all the garments and accessories within, becomes a repository for memories of all sorts — of the people that come in and out of one’s life, of places visited, of bargains found, of splurges happily and/or guiltily made, of happy occasions and sad occasions — that can literally span a lifetime. All of these moments, symbolized by these sartorial treasures, can be seen as the hallmarks of the outline of the story of one’s life. Thus, parting with any one of these objects, even for the sake of space, or the simplification of one’s everyday routine, or for the sake of charity, or whatever might possess one to clean out their closets, can equate to losing the memory of a part of one’s life.

Conclusions
I close this chapter with an essay written by a woman who lost her husband. It sums up many of the themes discussed in this dissertation. It is lengthy, but in my opinion, so eloquent that it is worth including:

"Memory and objects"

"This essay offers a 'positive' view of an aesthetic of absence through looking at clothes which remain and discusses an iconography of garments in relation to memory. A collection of ties may not have the same effects on the spectator as do painting, sculpture or music, but 'memory objects' can and do have powerful repercussions in terms of visual and emotional affectivity. Within particular contexts clothes retain a potential revelation to the observer which goes beyond meaning within the orthodox 'objective' arena of design history. It is important to relocate feeling within design history, particularly within fashion history—not least because clothes are of human beings as much as the property of human beings. Clothes relate to our feelings more than perhaps any other designed artifacts, and thus, require 'subjective' as well as 'objective' analysis. The ways in which objects affect 'life' and have represented people's lives deserves attention. Death and it antedote—life-feature little in cultural discourses concerning the artifacts which surround us, yet after a death of 'next-of-kin' lives with memories embodied in objects, garments, photographs which live on when living is over for the dead while death still lives with the living.

Clothes, their smell and texture, remind the spectator of the past presence of the person to whom they belonged, their inhabiting them, a moment when they wore them—or a moment in which they removed the item of clothing. The garment becomes imbued with the essence of the person, but, although the instigating of the memory (like a dream manifestation of the dead) can be reassuring, it can also be disquieting.

Does it trivialize a person to feel close to and/or to image even a part of them through an item of clothing? Maybe no more than through things which our culture finds more appropriate—their words or letters or their eyes in a photograph. Each is a small part of a whole which is never complete. As much as can be conveyed in an accessory as in a whole garment, a coat, a suit, a shirt. Minute parts of the whole, their significance is perhaps more in proportion to the whole than their minimal entity.

The coexistence of reassurance and disquiet as part of the memory sparked by an item of clothing has its essence—mystery. It is a prompting to our conscious lives of inexplicable mysteries which exists both in present relations with living people and as reminders of people who are absent, relations with whom are only dimly remembered despite the objective reality of the item of clothing, the photograph. The interconnections between clothes as objectively worn and the subjective sensation of wearing them and seeing them being worn indicate a possible variety of identities of people in the present, and question not only how they reappear from the past into the present, from their temporary absence into the present of the observer, but also how and in what ways the images recur, and may vary in the future...

The associative memory of an absent person, stimulated through the viewing and/or sensing of an existing item of clothing, requires us to be imaginative about the past, about the object or person when they did exist, and that process is positive, not sentimental, although the contemplation is of and for the absence—possible death... It is through this process of connection now with the past by way of imagination, alighting on a mere item of clothing such as the tie, that the spectator/griever can proceed from regret to a more positive comprehension of absence, in the recognition of the once present and the ability to feel a past human presence through the looking at the object. The ability to imagine is positive proof of one's own existence in the knowledge of the other's absence...
For me ties act as a link to remembering a specific man who ides. The memory became, through imagined moments, a recognition of a shared past, connecting, through the present reality of the tie, with the present moment, now. Thus the absence of the person, as with the ‘chic’ male’s absent tie, indicates a possible previous presence. The absence of a thing or person may, through memory, indicate not only a previous presence but also a possible future return to the present, the now, of self—and thus a return to a life of the imagination, not merely material reality.

I have this tie-rack, I feel each tie, and look at the vibrant colours, the sheen of silkiness, the zany 1960s pop art tie, the big-patterned chintzy tie. The exuberance of ties I noticed but took for granted in the past, now reminds me of parties, laughter, communication, a language of touch we had and which now I again experience through touching his ties... In abundance, these ties retain memory for me, but with the absence of the wearer they become a collage of memories, associations. They take on a different reality from the contextualized reality of their being worn. They are incomplete without their wearer yet signify an ‘aesthetic’ about the wearer...

In encountering garments and linking them with the possible collective memory people have of both the garments in actuality and the people who inhabited them, we may open ourselves to a different and wider view of ourselves and them. Through recognition of the absence of a person, through witnessing the still remaining clothes they wore, is recognized the bereaved observer’s own possible partial absence in the history of the departed ‘other’.

(Juliet Ash 1996: 219-224)
Chapter Seven: The Future of Vintage

It is clear that one of the most important movements in fashion in the last decades of the twentieth century has been the embrace of the sartorial past and the re-marketing of used clothing from all eras, of all styles, and of all gradations of quality. Exhuming sartorial history was a significant motif in the last decades of the twentieth century, and notably in the beginning of the twenty-first century. This has had a remarkable influence on the dressing and shopping habits not only of contemporary Americans and Europeans, but even for people in impoverished nations around the world. Perhaps not coincidentally, the pinnacle of vintage clothing’s popularity and acceptance occurred at the crux of the millennium when anxieties about the future were exacerbated. There was a virtual boom in the vintage clothing industry to an unprecedented degree. “Vintage” clothing was no longer just a hobby, or a way for young artist-types to dress uniquely and carve out their individual style, or a way for people with limited financial means to find clothes they deemed fashionable. Rather, vintage became a serious business, and was celebrated in the fashion press, in Hollywood, in high-end auction houses, in museums, and on runways as it was interpreted and reinterpreted by fashion designers.

However, despite the fact that anxieties about the future are still high (especially since September 11, 2001), that all realms of popular culture are still nostalgically dipping into the past, that the quality of mass-produced and mass-marketed clothes is still poor, and that the need to individuate is still strong, perhaps stronger than ever, the future of vintage is unclear. As Herbert Blau points out, there was an “acceleration of pastness, leaving the future to retrospection as it became an abandoned prospect, tired, dated, simply growing old” (Blau 1999: 165-166). All of this success, press coverage, the proliferation of shops and boutiques, and its wide-spread appeal as a proper fashion alternative at all levels of society and in tony fashion circles begs the questions: How long will people continue to be interested in vintage? Will vintage be a fashion mainstay as many have suggested? Has it become too trendy and fallen out of favor? Will vintage linger (as so many other trends have) and have yet another heyday in due time, true to the
cyclical nature of fashion? If fashion was instead thought to be teleological, does vintage signify its end?

The popularity and success of vintage might contribute in many ways to its fall from grace. Indeed, as so many of the individuals who have been dealing in the vintage clothing market told me, compared to the plethora of quality vintage garments decades ago, now there is a dearth because of its growing popularity. As “interest and prices have soared, the pickings for both vintage clothes and furniture have never been slimmer, making this the most vicious time in a business that has always been cutthroat” (Garbarino 2001: 124). The scarcity of desirable garments in good condition is making it hard for small store-owners to turn a profit, even for those that have been in business in good locations for many years. For example, Maureen Disimile commented, “Where we used to be able to find tons of ladies 40s jackets, now maybe we find one, maybe in like six months. It’s just that the supply is gone. People are either holding on to their things or we are just not getting it anymore” (Disimile 2001: personal communication). In addition, for a period of time in lower Manhattan, it seemed as if a new vintage store was opening every week, with a frequency similar to that of Starbucks’ café openings. This additional competition did not help the problem of scarcity of good quality vintage pieces and presumably those stores will be unable to pay their rents and will go out of business.

Following laws of supply and demand, the paucity of saleable used clothes has necessarily augmented their prices, making them less attractive to those who were accustomed to finding bargains easily at thrift and vintage stores not so long ago. Some dealers and proprietors wish they had never sold the things that they had years ago. For example, Jack Markus mentioned that gabardine jackets that once sold for $8 in the 1980s are now being sold for $240—quite a significant increase in price (Markus 2001: personal communication). This mark-up has inhibited artists and students, who were some of the most dependable customers of vintage, from visiting vintage stores with the frequency that they once did.
Prices of authentic vintage and rare originals have escalated to such a degree concomitant with the proliferation of inexpensive vintage-inspired garb produced by large chain retail stores, that reproductions are becoming far more attractive. Not only are they much easier to find for shoppers who do not relish a treasure hunt, but they are cheaper. In this way, some vintage boutique owners, particularly those who seemed a bit more opportunistic than others, felt that vintage was a trend that would be replaced by something else for the vast majority of their current customers. Only the die-hard vintage consumers and collectors will continue to seek out vintage boutiques for that perfect piece to add to their wardrobe or collection. And, sadly, vintage will continue to be popular as costume. Andy from Andy’s Chee-Pees noted that many of his customers came in specifically for costumes for theme parties that had become quite popular among college students, and for Halloween. But, of course, these occasions are too few and far between to keep stores in business.

Some vintage dealers, from boutique owners, to auction house dealers, to museum curators, have tried to get out from under the problem of scarcity by turning their attention to clothes from more recent decades. The interest in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, was supported by the music industry and many other arenas of popular culture. However, part of the problem with this return to the recent past is that for many consumers, it is simply too soon to revisit those decades sartorially. Auction houses and “vintage” clothing boutiques have had only a modicum of success with their pieces from these decades. Indeed, one would imagine, given how strongly people seem to feel about the poor quality of clothes made in the latter half of the twentieth century as compared with the garments made earlier, it seems improbable that they would be desirable. The exception, of course, would be the designer clothes that were very expensive the first time around or which were iconic of those years.

It was also stated by many vintage clothing dealers and boutique owners that their best customers were not necessarily the people buying to wear, or people buying to collect, but fashion designers who bought dozens and dozens of vintage garments and accessories for
inspiration for their seasonal collections. If the trend for vintage inspired clothes continues to be popular, then ostensibly vintage store owners will be able to stay in business. Moreover, many designers were known to be going back into their own archives and reproducing some of their older and most popular designs, or “borrowing” liberally from other designers work from years ago. However, it was noted that some photographers hired for the September 2002 issues of the most popular fashion magazines betrayed fashion’s reliance on vintage clothes and focused on clothes that were seemingly new and original (Horyn 2002d: nytimes.com). It is suggested that this was because both designers and consumers suddenly had a better sense of what they do best and who they are (Horyn 2002d: nytimes.com). And, for London’s upcoming designers showing their work, there was a disparaging sense that in recent fashion history, there had been “too many old styles brainlessly revived, leading to revivals of revivals” (Horyn 2002e: B12).

However, coverage of the Spring 2003 fashion shows, focusing on many influential and wildly successful designers who continued to mine the past for inspiration, belie this newfound assertiveness. Diane Von Furstenberg turned out clothes reminiscent of 1980s club girls, while Imitation of Christ, in another chapter of their critique of the fashion industry, put on a “retrospective” of their work, even though their label has only been in existence for a few years (Horyn 2002f: B9). Marc Jacobs collection invoked a 1950s woman who is reliable and cares about dressing up (Horyn 2002g: B11) while his secondary Marc line “suggests uniforms for women who are no longer of school age but like to fantasize about reliving their youth, this time more riskily” (Bellafante 2002g: B8). Indeed, the past is still being revived and relived sartorially, allowing those who wear them to fantasize about youth, or the imagined youth of a life that seems more attractive than their own.

One of the other influences on the popularity and legitimation of vintage is star-power as Hollywood actors and actresses and those in the music industry embraced vintage as a means standing apart stylistically from other stars at award shows and in music videos. Moreover, for people like Alice and Ron Lindholm, the movie industry helped keep them afloat when they
stopped traveling with their collection to colleges on the eastern seaboard. Period films require costumes not only for the stars, but also all the extras, adding yet another category of customer for many people in the vintage clothing market, especially those dealers who have a lot of dead stock.

The internet and online auctions will most certainly assist in the persistence of the widespread sale of vintage and used clothing. Many vintage dealers who rely on Ebay and their own web sites will most likely continue to depend on those services. More and more people realize the ease with which they can both clean out their closets and turn a small profit. On the other end, doing a search on the internet for clothes in the correct size and at a reduced price is much easier than physically traveling from thrift store to thrift store and spending the time going through racks of clothes.

Auction houses, too, jumped on board when contemporary fashions seemed to suddenly have enough value and caché to be considered worthy of printing glossy catalogues for dresses and coats and purses. At a recent meeting of the Costume Society of America, I met Marianna Klaiman and discovered that although she is still employed at Sotheby’s she is no longer their “fashion expert.” Indeed, the section of their website that was once dedicated to couture, and for whom Cesar Padilla and Radcliffe Brown, owners of the tony Lower East Side vintage boutique Cherry had become special dealers, has few lots for auction. Here, not only has Sotheby’s lost a bit of their business, but so have the owners of Cherry. Interestingly enough, it was Ms. Klaiman, who, in our initial interview after the fashion department has already been downsized to be housed solely on Sotheby’s website, commented that the fashion pendulum swings back and forth. She implied that even if vintage clothing does fall out of favor in the next few years, there was a strong possibility that it will once again be on top (Klaiman 2001: personal communication). Indeed, Ms. Klaiman and Ms. Reeder at Doyle both seemed optimistic that there would always be a fashion component in their auction houses, especially because of the estate sales that they will always host.
There is little doubt that museums will continue to have shows where the garments are viewed as art, or that celebrate the work of a particular fashion designer, or historical exhibits where clothes play a role in expressing the nuances of an era. Similar kinds of exhibits in recent decades have proven to be extremely lucrative. They have brought startling numbers of people into museums who otherwise might not come. Furthermore, as the public becomes more aware of museum collections of clothes, the more museum’s collections grow. More and more wealthy women, recognizing that their closets hold sartorial treasures, have been bequeathing their garments to museums in greater numbers to such an extent that those departments are running out of space for their holdings.

When I asked some of the individuals I interviewed how they foresaw the future of fashion, most were optimistic that they would not have to find new and gainful employment when the air went out of the vintage balloon. Justin from Atomic Passion had an interesting and insightful response:

I think the future is small boutiques. My roommate is a designer and she has a boutique across the street and her business is gangbusters. The stuff that she sells is as unique as a vintage piece and her runs are so limited because she does all of her own sewing so she only makes like 200 pairs of one style of pants and then anyone who has them can be pretty confident that they are not going to run into someone wearing the same thing. But I think that that’s going to knock vintage. Because even vintage stores at this point, because there are a million of them in the city, the ones that are going to survive the next jump are the ones that are revamping vintage or even Keni Valenti, who is like, the apex of this business, he has his own line out now. He handpicked certain things and he reproduced them. They sell at Bendel’s or Bergdorf’s or something like that.

(Interview with Justin at Atomic Passion, NYC, 2001)

But, perhaps Keni Valenti’s own response about the future of vintage and the future of fashion in general was the most intriguing:

[Since I started Keni Valenti couture four years ago, the vintage clothing market has] only gotten better. And I don’t see anything changing because unless aliens come down and the body changes and the silhouette of fashion changes, what haven’t we done that already has been done. What are we going to do? Run around nude? And then no one would sell clothes. But that is happening now too with the kids in the club scenes. They are running around naked. With nothing on. Nothing. Like this...club kid. She
just goes to parties naked. High heels, gloves, maybe a necklace... And she gets photographed. She's in her 30s. And boys, too, have been going around naked in clubs. So I think that that is the future of clothes—no clothes at all.

(Interview with Keni Valenti 2001)

The persistence of styles like retro proves that businesses and designers do not really have the power to dictate fashion to the masses (Finkelstein 1996: 103). Rather, there is a dialogic relationship where consumers have just as much to say about trends in fashion as those creating and producing it. Moreover, the preponderance of vintage clothing acknowledges the evocative and nostalgic power of garments (Martin and Koda 1989: 8). Because the desire for the past has such a hold on so many consumers of fashion and other ephemera of popular culture, designers will continue to recycle the past and vintage clothing will continue to dominate:

We shall be seeing, no doubt, even in cyberspace, the revival of historical periods and the reprise of forgotten styles. But the past, or pastness, has also been coming upon us in a compression and reinvestment of the looks of recent time: a generation before, a decade, the last few years, the nineties recycling the seventies that had already recycled the fifties, double recycled then in the recycling of the seventies, through the expectancy now is that the eighties will be recycled through the year 2000 (Blau 1999: 166).

This double talk will only get more confusing as time goes on and more and more styles are replicated, recalled, retuned, and recycled as vintage continues to be a legitimate fashion option.
Bibliography

Alfred, Henry

Als, Hilton

Andy's Chee-Pees
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Appadurai, Arjun

Arakas, Irini

Arany, Lynne

Ash, Juliet

Associated Press.

Arakas, Irini

Atkin, Carol
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Atomic Passion
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Bal, Mieke

Baldwin, Deborah


Barthes, Roland

Batterberry, Michael and Ariane Batterberry

Baudrillard, Jean

Baxter, Charles

Bayley, John
1999 Elegy for Iris. New York: Picador USA.

Beahan, Paul
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Beckerman, Ilene

Bell, Quentin

Bellafante, Ginia

Belluck, Pam

Belk, R.W.

Benjamin, Walter

Bernadac, Marie-Laure

Betts, Katherine

Blakeslee, Sandra

Blau, Herbert

Blum, Stella
Blumer, Herbert

Botton, Sari

Bourdieu, Pierre

Brannon, Evelyn L.

Brown, Sarah

Brison, Susan J.

Brubach, Holly

Brody, Jane E.

Bruzzi, Stella and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.)

Candiotti, Susan
1999  “AMA guide helps doctors diagnose, treat dementia,” October 25, CNN.com

Carroll, Linda

Casas, Elisa
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Cerio, Gregory
Chen, David W.  

City  

Cixous, Hélène  

Collins, Amy Fine  

Colman, David  

Comita, Jenny  

Cooney, Eleanor  

Cordwell, Justine M. and Ronald A. Schwartz (eds.)  

CNN.com  

Crane, Diana  

Crapanzano, Vincent  

Crewe, Jonathan  

Crook, Thomas H. and Brenda Adderly  
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton  

Damhorst, Mary Lynn, Kimberly A. Miller and Susan O. Michelman, (eds.)  

Davis, Peter  

de la Cruz, Melissa  

DeLillo, Don  

DeRuiter, Sarah  

Disimile, Maureen  
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Dolan, Maryanne  

Doyle New York  

Dubin, Tiffany  
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Dubin, Tiffany and Ann E. Berman  

Dunn, Jancee  

Eisner, Lisa and Roman Alonso  

Faubion, James D.  

Finkelstein, Joanne  
Finn, Robin

Finnerty, Amy

Fiori, Pamela
1998  “The Quiet Man: In his own deliberate, understated way, Giorgio Armani has forever changed the face of fashion” in Town & Country. October, pp. 70-127.

Firfer, Holly

Franzen, Jonathan

Fraser, Kennedy

Friedman, Jonathan

Gadamer, Hans-Georg

Garbarino, Steve

Gettinger, Steve

Ginsburg, Madeleine

Gladwell, Malcolm

Gordon, Meryl

Gould, Lois

Grann, David
Green, Penelope

Grimes, William

Guisewite, Cathy

Hafner, Katie

Halbreich, Betty (with Sally Wadyka)
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Halbwachs, Maurice

Hall, Trish
1999 “Manhattanite Finds Sunny Studio in Queens” in *The New York Times*, June 20, Real Estate, p. 4

Hansen, Karen Tranberg
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Harper’s Bazaar
2000a *Untitled*. (February) pp. 96-100.
2000c “Letters” (December), p. 68.
2001a “Closet Cases” (June), p. 52.

Hass, Nancy
Hayes, Erin
2001  "Remember the Feeling: Emotional Impact can Be Key to Memory," August 6, abcnews.com.

Hayt, Elizabeth

Hebdige, Dick

Hegland, Jane
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Herkenoff, Paulo

Hershkovits, David
2001  "Mags for the Memories" in Paper, October, p. 110.

Hertz, Sue

Hinman, Al

Hirsch, Marianne

Hirschberg, Lynn
2002b  "Memphis Belle" in Fashions of The Times, August 18, pp. 110-118.

Horn, Marilyn J.

Horyn, Cathy

Hume, Marion

Jacobs, Laura

Jameson, Frederic

Janostikova, Bela

Janowitz, Tama
Kalb, Claudia
1999 “Hormones and the Mind” in Newsweek, April 19, p. 50.

Karch, Fritz
2001 “Had to Have It” in Martha Stewart Living, January, p. 174-183.

Kaufman, Leslie

Keisler, Douglas

Kennedy, Peggy
2001 “It’s Smart to Shop Thrift” in Victoria, June, pp. 26-96.

Keogh, Pamela Clarke

Kerwin, Jessica

Klaiman, Marianna
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Kleinhenz, Christopher and Fannie J. LeMoine (eds.)

Kling, Cynthia

Koda, Harold
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Kolata, Gina

Kondo, Dorinne

Koppersmith, Delance
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Kopytoff, Igor
Koski, Lorna

Kozol, Jonathan

Kotur, Alexandra

Krantz, Judith
2001 "Just Seventy" in Vogue, August, pp. 96-102.

Kroeker, A.L.

Kruulwich, Robert

Kyle, Richard

Ladies Home Journal

Laver, James

LaBranche, Anthony

Langley, Susan

Lehman-Haupt, Rachel
1999 "Under Age: Adolescent looks are all the rage" in Vogue. August, pp. 103-110.

Lehmann, Ulrich

Leland, John

Lemire, Beverly
Lewis, Rene
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Limnander, Armand
2000 "Costume Drama Wardrobe!" in Vogue, September, p. 358.

Lindholm, Alice and Ronald
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Lindholm, Christina
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Linett, Andrea

Lipovetsky, Gilles

Louie, Elaine

Love, Harriet

Lowe, John and Elizabeth Lowe

Lowenthal, David
1985 The Past is a Foreign Country. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lurie, Alison

MacDonald, Ann-Marie

Magidson, Phyllis
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Mandelbaum, Robb

Marcus, George
Marech, Rona

Markus, Jack
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Martin, Emily
1994 Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture – From then Days of Polio to the age of AIDS. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Martin, Richard

Martin, Richard and Harold Koda

Marx, Karl

McCracken, Grant

McDowell, Colin

McGinn, Bernard

McRobbie, Angela

Milbank, Caroline Rennolds

Miller, Daniel

Molishever, Jay
Moonan, Wendy

More
2001a  “Four Women One Outfit” (March), p. 42.

Morton, Camilla

Mower, Sarah

Muensterberger, Werner

Murphy, Kate

Muschamp, Herbert

Musto, Michael

Nemy, Enid

Neporent, Liz

Neri, Louise

Newman, Lenore
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

New York Times
New York Times Magazine
2001  "From Cause to Cure," June 10, pp. 48-54.

Norwich, William

O’Neil, John

O’Reilly, Lynn, Margaret Rucker, Rhonda Hughes, Marge Gorang and Susan Hand

Oxenhandler, Noelle

Ozaist, Liz

Ozzard, Janet

Packer, George

Peretz, Evgenia
2002  "Viva Versace: London Honors the Italian Fashion Legend" in Vanity Fair, August, p. 162.

Peterson, Holly

Polhemus, Ted

Proust, Marcel

Purves, Miranda
Radziwell, Lee

Reeder, Jan
2001  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Reeves, Hope

Ress, Marion
2000  Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Reuters
1999  “Researchers find enzyme associated with Alzheimer’s,” October 21, CNN.com.

Reynolds, Simon

Rich, B. Ruby

Richards, Kristina

Richardson, Jane and A.L. Kroeber

Rifkin, Louise

Risko, Robert

Roach, Marion

Roach, Mary Ellen and Joanne Bubolz Eicher

Robinovitz, Karen

Rooney, Andrew A.
Rosen, Marjorie
2001 “Roots” in Fashion of the Times, Fall, p. 152.

Rowland, Rhonda
2000a “Family size, environment may increase Alzheimer’s risk, study says,” January 24, CNN.com.
2000d “Experts fear large increase in Alzheimer’s as more people live longer,” July 11, CNN.com.

Sack, Kevin

Samson, Dan
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Sapir, Edward

Schacter, Daniel L.

Schaffner, Ingrid

Schiavone, Louise
1998 “Genes Linked to development of Alzheimer’s, studies report,” July 22, CNN.com.

Schiro, Anne-Marie

Schumberger, Lynn
2001 “What’s my name again?” in more, October, p. 72.

Schwartz, Hillel
Scully, James

Seeger, Anthony

Seeling, Charlotte

Shales, Tom

Shenk, David

Showalter, Elaine

Siegel, Andrea
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Sifton, Sam
2001 “Everything Old is New Again” in Talk, October, p. 43).

Silver, Cameron
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Silverman, Debora

Silverman, Kaja

Simmel, Georg

Singer, Sally

Skyes, Plum
Slatalla, Michelle  

Socha, Miles  

Spindler, Amy M.  

Spitzer, Leo  

Sproles, George B.  

Stanfill, Francesca  

St. Clair, Michael J.  

Steedman, Carolyn Kay  

Stewart, Susan  

Steele, Valerie  
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Talbot, Margaret  

Talbots  

Talley, André Leon  
2002 “Stylefax” in *Vogue*, October, pp. 100-112.
Tereshchuk, David

Thomas, Dana
2000 “The King and Them: When Saint Laurent ruled fashion, these ladies were at the epicenter” in The New York Times Magazine, April 30, pp. 69-70.

Thompson, Damian

Tien, Ellen

Tobias, Tobi

Tolkien, Tracy

Trebay, Guy

Trebay, Guy and Ginia Bellafante

Tung, Jennifer

Utz, Philip
Valenti, Keni
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Van Meter, Jonathan

Veblen, Thorstein

Victoria and Albert Museum

Vienne, Véronique

Vogue
2001a “Vogue Contributors,” October, p. 86.

W Magazine
2001 “The Month in Fashion” October, p. 86.

Weiner, Annette B.

Weiner, Annette B. and Jane Schneider

Weisser, Seth
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

White, Jackie

Wills, Laura
2001 Interview with Carolyn Babula.

Willis, Susan
Wilson, Elizabeth

Wilson, Elizabeth and Lou Taylor

Wintour, Anna

Witchel, Alex

Wolcott, James

Wolf, Roberta and Trudy Schlachter

Wolf, Zoë

Woodruff, Carol Susan

Woods, Vicki

Yellin, Emily

Young, Agnes Brook

Zimbalist, Kristina