

Proud Archivists

The fascination with fashion's past has never been greater. Ben Olsen investigates the brand goliaths plundering their archives – and how the process impacts the industry



Opposite page
Dior Ecarlate afternoon dress, Autumn-Winter 1955
Haute Couture collection, Y line. V&A Museum.
Photo © Laziz Hamani

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Christian Dior with model Sylvie, circa 1948
Courtesy of Christian Dior



In a fast-paced fashion industry that celebrates newness, inspiration is everything. To keep this three-trillion-dollar global business firing, designers must dig deep to produce the hundreds of looks shown across up to four seasons each year. Yet for all the focus on the current, one key form of inspiration lies in the past. That is, in the fiercely guarded archives of fashion's major players, which preserve past glories and play an increasingly important role in today's contemporary collections.

As evidenced by a succession of blockbuster retrospective exhibitions gracing the world's biggest galleries this year alone (including Azzedine Alaïa at London's Design Museum and Martin Margiela at the Palais Galliera in Paris), the fascination with fashion's past has never been greater. Whether it's Raf Simons sifting through historic sketches in the *Dior and I* documentary, Donatella Versace reproducing her late brother Gianni's bold prints in

a touching tribute at Versace's AW18 show, or Karl Lagerfeld describing his first couture collection for Chanel as "like doing a revival of an old play", basing the present on the past is proving a popular approach.

"Brands need 'house codes' in order to establish a strong point of view," says Lauren Sherman, chief correspondent for the Business of Fashion in New York, on the importance of an archive. "Referencing and reinterpreting iconic pieces from past collections helps a designer to write a brand book rather than a series of disjointed chapters." Sherman points to Christian Dior as a key example. "The house of Dior was founded in 1946 and Christian Dior passed away in 1957. Those 10 short years of fashion continue to ultimately define the brand. What would Dior do without its archive?"

Christian Dior will be the main focus of a major exhibition at the V&A at the start of next year, drawing from an extensive archive to showcase more than 500 objects and 200 rare haute couture pieces. According to the show's curator Oriole Cullen, Christian Dior's creations have transcended the era they were born into. "In their own individual ways, each of the house's six successive artistic directors have referenced and reinterpreted Dior's own designs and continued the legacy of the founder, ensuring that the house of Christian Dior is at the forefront of fashion today," she says.

Reinvention plays a major role in today's collections, with incoming creative directors often



putting their own spin on a label's output yet rooting it within the brand's lineage, whether that be through shapes, materials, colours or – more abstractly – essence. For Sherman, Demna Gvasalia has excelled in finding a balance since taking over as creative director at Balenciaga in 2016. “He has done a singular job of reinterpreting one of fashion's most oft-referenced archives,” she says, referring to his debut collection that saw him draw heavily from Balenciaga's 1930s and 1940s designs before – his respect for the house now clear – making his own mark on later collections.

While some rip up the rule books (Hedi Slimane at Saint Laurent and Alessandro Michele at Gucci two recent examples) archival elements are appearing

in abundance on the runway. Last year, Dries Van Noten celebrated his 100th show by bringing back signature prints from past collections, and Carol Lim and Humberto Leon dug deep into an archive that stretches back to 1970 for their Kenzo La Collection Memento project. More recently the likes of Valentino, Prada and Katharine Hamnett have all reintroduced pieces, logos or patterns from previous collections to great acclaim.

It's not just luxury brands that have embraced their past. The launch of Levi's Vintage Clothing in the mid-1990s saw the release of innovative selvedge denim pieces inspired by the brand's 145-year history. “Our archive is incredible and provides a rock-solid foundation for us to build on,” says Paul O'Neill,

head designer at Levi's Vintage Clothing. “When creating something new it's important to understand the classics. It is full of classic designs like the 501 Jean and the Levi's Trucker jacket and with this history and knowledge we have the building blocks to move forward and create new exciting products.” For O'Neill, dipping into this resource is a crucial part of his working practice. “Once I decide the seasonal story, the archive is my first port of call,” he says. “There is so much there to draw from and reimagine. As a brand, having this archive grounds us and shows us how things were done in the past and informs decisions for the future.”

Getting to grips with a brand's heritage is a task all designers now face after

“It's advertising campaigns and ephemera that reveal the heart and soul of a brand.”



This page and opposite page:
Courtesy of Levi Strauss & Co.

arriving at a new company. When Becky French took up the role of head of design at Turnbull & Asser earlier this year, she had to immerse herself in a history that stretches back to 1885. “I've been working here for six months and it has been vital for me to dig into the archives to get a sense of what they are about, delving through more than 130 years of history,” she says. French, who previously worked for Aquascutum, adds that an archive can be pivotal, with evidence not just of previous collections but advertising campaigns and ephemera that reveal the heart and soul of a brand. “I have worked with brand archivists at Aquascutum and Turnbull & Asser, and they are fountains of knowledge and references,” she says. “A conversation or image can strike a modern



chord and spark an idea for a new concept, photo shoot or product.”

These include a series of evening shirts referencing archive shots, including one of Terence Stamp wearing a baby blue poplin shirt and tie, and a long-point collar shirt sample that led to a new collar style being created for the same collection. “During my time at Aquascutum an outerwear cloth from 1953 was rediscovered from the archives that was used by explorer Edmund Hillary and his team during their first ascent of Mount Everest,” she says. “We worked with a fabric mill to recreate this historic cloth and then reproduced it in more contemporary styles.”

Many brands use their archives to produce crowd-pulling exhibitions that extend their message by expressing their cultural heritage. The Fondation Pierre Bergé – Musée Yves Saint Laurent opened in 2017 on Avenue Marceau in Paris, holding 5,000 garments and 15,000 accessories. And the opening of the Gucci Garden in Florence this year, designed by creative director Alessandro Michele, explores the eccentric creativity innate to the brand through pieces dating back to Gucci’s origins in 1921. This rich heritage is displayed alongside recent work, memorabilia and contemporary art delivered as an interactive experience.

Not all archives are created equally and the role of archivist is one that



Turnbull & Asser: Terence Stamp. Photo by Susan Wood/Getty Images

“A conversation or image can strike a modern chord and spark an idea for a new concept, photo shoot or product.”



Alaïa/Design Museum. Photo by Mark Blower

has become increasingly important for those fashion houses seeking to put their history in order.

Yves Saint Laurent started keeping pieces during the 1960s and as a result it’s a truly comprehensive collection accompanied by sketches, specification sheets and press clippings, with a specialist staff dedicated to documenting and preserving these pieces. Others have been created more recently, with the likes of Givenchy and Gucci, archiving since 1997, playing catch-up. Meanwhile, Helmut Lang famously shredded his archive after quitting the fashion industry in 2005, with 6,000 items lost forever. For new brands on slim budgets, keeping items might seem like a luxury, but is increasingly prescient.

The digital age has been a game-changer for designers, students and fashion lovers. More and more brands now have an online archive, making it easier to research and reference than ever before. According to O’Neill, digitisation has made his job even easier. “Everything is now catalogued and research can be done remotely,” he says. “We can research a lot faster, so when we visit the actual archives we are more focused.”

Of course, too much retrospection can hinder progress and true innovation. Mining the past for inspiration has its limits and there’s an argument that it can prevent designers finding new expressions. “When a designer begins to rely too heavily on greatest hits, the house’s influence begins to wane,” says

Sherman. French agrees, arguing that historic material has a time and place and should be used in balance. “While I love looking to the past and striking a nostalgic tone in my work, my job is to add modernity and create relevant, exciting products for now,” she says. “It’s essential to draw from a variety of sources for inspiration and it is this mix of art, music and film, as well as archive references and conversations, that all play into creating newness.”

Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams is at the V&A from 2 February to 14 July 2019
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