

Past is Prime

Nostalgia is in the air as 20th century foxes prowled the catwalks of Autumn/Winter 2011. Does this mass tribute signal that designers have finally run out of ideas? By Baey Shi Chen

History always repeats itself. It is a mantra that rings true on this season's catwalks, as snippets from every decade of the previous century showed up in full glory.

Jazz Age beauties à la *The Great Gatsby* filed out in beaded flapper dresses and cloche hats at Ralph Lauren. Thirties social swans sauntered *en deshabille* in bias-cut gowns and silk robes at John Galiano. Burberry and Jean Paul Gaultier ushered in a Sixties love-in, while the bohemian Seventies flourished at Chloé. Eighties biker chic reigned at Yohji Yamamoto, and Nineties minimalism was the order of the day at Calvin Klein, Jil Sander and Céline.

Sometimes, the time travelling overlapped. For Gucci's 90th anniversary collection, creative director Frida Giannini fused Forties mob moll and Seventies temptress with pussy bow blouses and sharply tailored pantsuits lushly lined with furs. Seeking to capture "a contemporary female dandy", she also included sexy see-through gowns straight out of the closets of style sirens Bianca Jagger and Jerry Hall.

Marc Jacobs also delivered blasts from the past for his namesake label with a Fifties-flavoured collection, albeit with a subversive twist. Giving the classic leather-and-lace combination a saucy new spin, prim pencil skirts and high-collared lace blouses were matched with gleaming sex shop latex. Furthering the fetish-meets-fashion formula he introduced last season at Louis Vuitton, he paid homage to the Forties with a cast of handcuffed femme fatales, decked out in demure silhouettes accented with Peter Pan

collars, pretty prints and sequin blades.

Not to be outdone was Miuccia Prada. She also straddled different eras, trotting out post-war belles with slim, long-sleeved tea dresses with Lily of the Valley motifs at Miu Miu, complete with hair combs and matte red lips. Her main line Prada channelled the Swinging Sixties, thanks to A-line dresses and flippy schoolgirl skirts, knee-high go-go boots, along with the iconic Mondrian print immortalised by Yves Saint Laurent.

GOOD OLD DAYS

It's always refreshing that influences from an era gone by are reworked for a modern context – just like how luxury houses constantly reinvent their storied codes.

Karl Lagerfeld once declared: "Chanel is like music – there are certain notes and you have to make another tune with them."

By the same principle, mining the past for inspiration and updating key elements serves as a perfect springboard for new designs that still offer comfort in familiarity. A kind of sartorial retrofitting, so to speak.

For cynics, however, this revival of "era" dressing has only highlighted the scarcity of ideas in fashion. Even after a decade into this millennium, we remain hard-pressed to pinpoint what the definitive look of the Noughties was, save for the growing cult of individuality and eclecticism fuelled by the rise of high street chains and street-style fashion blogs.

And such 20th century throwbacks show that we are no closer to it. In a world of lightning-quick fashion cycles, where the Internet offers limitless accessibility to what's

come and gone, it's ironic that the pool of inspiration appears to be drying up.

It may have to do with how the fashion industry has evolved in the last decade. Just ask Carine Roitfeld, who recently bemoaned that fashion is no longer what it used to be. "It's less light-hearted, less spontaneous. Fashion has become an industry, one that increasingly stifles creation... There's no excitement anymore, no amazement, none of the madness you could experience even a few years back."

MOVING INTO THE FUTURE?

With multi-billion dollar empires at stake, sticking to the tried-and-tested is understandable for corporations. But with the dearth of startling originals like Alexander McQueen, Isabella Blow and John Galiano, fashion now finds itself in an awkward transitional phase. Shorn of a wild originality that could usher in a fashion revolution, there's now an order of wearability and hence, profit.

More importantly, if we continue to look backwards in an endless regurgitating loop, we run the risk of trading definitive movements like the Fifties New Look, Sixties Mod or Eighties punk for safety and blandness. After all, moving into the future is about translating novel and foreign influences into looks that mirror the times. And given that fashion has always been about being one step ahead, what could be a better marker that we have arrived properly in the 21st century than a new sartorial movement?

RALPH LAUREN

JOHN GALLIANO

GUCCI

MARC JACOBS

20s

30s

40s

50s

90s

80s

70s

60s

CÉLINE

YOHJI YAMAMOTO

CHLOÉ

PRADA