

# Why retailers are launching retro collections

By Nicola Copping

Published: June 27 2009 01:23 | Last updated: June 27 2009 01:23

This weekend, in the giant loft-like space that is Azzedine Alaïa's Paris atelier, fashion history will come alive as a selection of the work of Elsa Schiaparelli, style's surrealist, is exhibited prior to auction. Surrounding the show are rumours about a possible relaunch of the fashion house, first mooted in April by influential blogger Diane Pernet, who suggested ready-to-wear darling Olivier Theyskens, late of Nina Ricci, might be tapped to help the brand.

If the whispers are true, Schiaparelli will simply be the latest example of fashion's love affair with reinventing its own past, coming hot on the heels of the House of Vionnet, which recently reopened under the ownership of ex-Valentino executive Matteo Marzotto. And before Vionnet there was Biba, Halston, Ossie Clark – not to mention Biba's Barbara Hulanicki and Zandra Rhodes, both of whom have found fame again thanks to collaborations with Topshop and Marks and Spencer respectively.

But while fashion has been plundering its own history for years, these days it's not just the designers who are having a renaissance. Designs of long-ago are, too.

"The demand for archive pieces is huge in the fashion market," says Jean Bousquet, managing director of Cacharel, which launched a vintage collection, in collaboration with Liberty, to celebrate its 50th anniversary in April. "We are arriving at the end of a fashion cycle; there has been nothing very new for a long time and a general tiredness has been established. The comeback of vintage testifies to a passion for the renewal of the past. We look at past successes to create the new. We might do several more archive collections in the future." Bousquet is not alone: Nike, See by Chloé, APC and Gap have all fallen for the historical charm of prints, as evinced by their various Liberty-inspired pieces.

Meanwhile, both Marks and Spencer and Jaeger are celebrating their 125th anniversaries this year by reproducing star styles from their own archives. Jaeger has focused on remodelling designs from the past to coincide with today's retail market, so a black-and-white floral swimsuit from 1965, say, has been transformed into a dress (£350) – and has proven their bestseller for spring/summer.

"We're on a journey in terms of repositioning the brand, of being more modern, more accessible and more relevant to today," says Belinda Earl, Jaeger's group chief executive. "We had to be careful how we reinterpreted the pieces; I think they have to look great for today."

Marks and Spencer, by contrast, has picked pieces from each significant decade in fashion and recreated them as classic silhouettes; witness a 1940s-style grey polka dot dress that was an immediate hit when the collection launched last month. "With all the recent concerns in the economy, people are feeling a bit nostalgic; they are looking to brands they can trust, who have a significant heritage and who offer great quality and value," says Sir Stuart Rose, executive

chairman of M&S. “You only have to look at the M&S business now and over our entire history to see that the values .. are still as relevant and important to us and our customers today as they were when Michael Marks set up his market stall in 1884.” After all, when the future is uncertain, why not rely on the stability of the past? This seems the rationale behind Dolce & Gabbana’s decision to update pieces from previous collections, including leopard print blouses and faded jeans à la 1980s, for their cruise collection.

“Our clients are demanding more of our traditional pieces,” explains Stefano Gabbana, thus confirming what we have long suspected: when it comes to clothes, no matter what we learn, history does almost always repeat itself.

*Nicola Copping is the FT's deputy fashion editor*