

Vintage advantage

On today's red carpets, dressing in 20th-century couture "gives a celebrity a lot of credibility". Cameron Silver delights in sourcing fabulous and glamorous vintage gowns

Story Sharon Krum | Portrait Photography Tom Ferguson

There are a number of directions your mind might go when you learn that Cameron Silver (pictured right) has seen many of the best Hollywood bodies up close and, well, undressed perfectly. You have a couture dress offering style and mystique, one that hasn't been part of the season's fashion or pop culture conversation. Or a magazine publisher or a plastic surgeon? If this were a multiple-choice test, the answer would be: none of the above.

Silver has found himself continually in this situation because he is the founder of Decades, the Los Angeles vintage couture boutique considered responsible not only for a good percentage of the vintage dressing you see on the red carpet now but for transporting vintage from the idea it was dusty and dated into the realm of glamour and cool. "Oh, I see everyone naked," he laughs, explaining this only happens courtesy of dress fittings before a big event. He politely and resolutely won't be more specific. Yet knowing he has outfitted Renee Zellweger, Chloe Sevigny, Jennifer Lopez and Rachel Griffiths, among others, in vintage Chanel or Schiaparelli, Halston, Dior or Jean Dessès, relieves some of the conjecture.

"Cameron definitely had an influence on people getting dressed up on the red carpet," says Melissa Magavoy, fashion writer at *The Los Angeles Times*. "And I think he played a big part in showing women that vintage can be elegant, that you won't look like you're wearing your prom gown."

Silver, 42, was once named one of *Time*'s "25 Most Influential Names and Faces in Fashion," thanks to his multiple roles as stylist, purchaser, tastemaker, curator and entrepreneur. And he's done it all not from the fashion hubs of New York, London or Paris, but LA. "San Francisco gave us counter-culture fashion but glamorous vintage came out of LA," he believes.

Though a tougher sell when he opened Decades in 1997, it's not surprising vintage-couture dressing took off first in the City of Angels. This is, after all, Planet Red Carpet, a land where film premieres, award shows, store openings and charity galas are the right glove matching the

left that deals in the serious business of making movies and television. Yet thanks to magazines, entertainment media and fashion blogs, wearing a dress from the runway to an event suddenly no longer delivered the surprise moment. Who hadn't seen it? Vintage solves this problem perfectly. You have a couture dress offering style and mystique, one that hasn't been part of the season's fashion or pop culture conversation. "Vintage is one way to have something truly unique," says Silver of its appeal to the women from LA to Houston, Kuwait to Sydney, who frequent his store. "The current state of luxury is so incredibly ubiquitous and accessible, I think a lot of people who are true luxury lovers want to return to the original incarnation of luxury and find a lot of appeal in vintage."

"I look at what it did for Nicole Kidman," he continues, referencing the star's separation from Tom Cruise. "When she started buying vintage ... it was 'I own my own style.'" Silver then mentions a quote he once heard about Kidman that he loves. "She said, 'Decades is my favourite store I have ever been to.' Her stylist used to always pull clothes for her." After Kidman wore Louis Arano, he says, the French label experienced a revival (and he consulted for them for a time). "I'm proud we have been responsible for boosting the cool factor of sleepy brands."

You will find Decades on Melrose Ave up a flight of carpeted stairs (downstairs, Silver co-owns Decadent, modern designer consignment), lending the store a "by appointment" feel, even though anyone can walk in. Inside are racks of vintage couture ballgowns and daywear so artfully constructed they turn you into an excitable child on their birthday – a sampling includes beaded gowns from Galanos, Lacroix and Dior, coats from Norman Norell, Alaïa and Jean Muir, and Hermes shirts and pants. Chanel jewellery and Hermes bags sit waiting for buyers who lust for both a particular era and craftsmanship.

Stylist Cristina Ehrlich told *Los Angeles* magazine last year that Decades was her pick of vintage stores because "Silver" has the most thorough and concise collection of 20th-century couture. He's the funniest guy. Going in there is like being greeted by the man who holds the key to Oz."

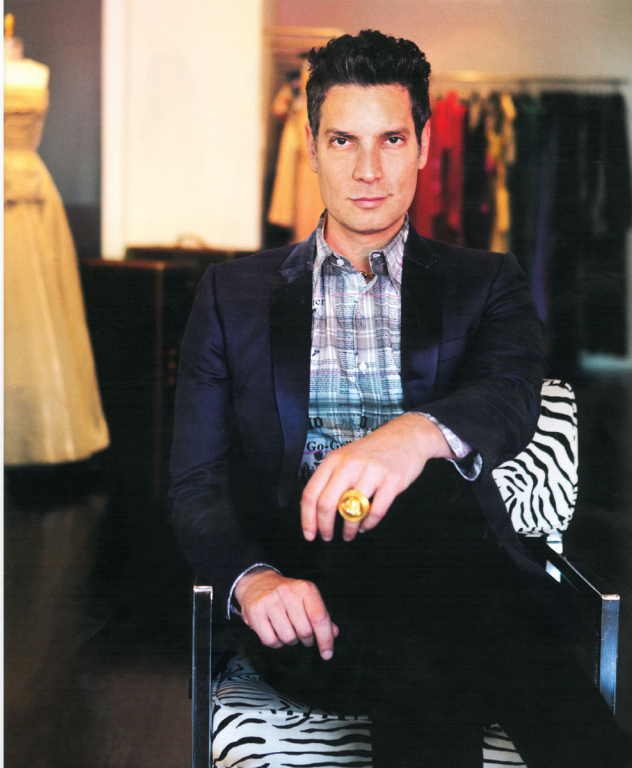
True. Though he landed in LA from Singapore the night before this interview, Silver is in fine form. Seriously charming and chatty, jet lag doesn't give him a day off style-wise either – he's wearing a furry Valentino cardigan when anyone else after a long flight would be sporting a hoodie. He had gone to host a vintage trunk show and seems pleased with the results. "The past five or six years, as the Asian market has opened up, there is a segment of arbiters who understand vintage. The newly rich, they want everything new, but I like to remind people that things from the store were worn during a joyous time in a woman's life, and probably only once or twice."

While Decades is based in LA, Silver's business is now global, with a London shop-in-shop (within Dover Street Market), trunk shows in Asia and the US, and e-commerce. He estimates buyers of Decades vintage are now more than 40 per cent non-American and include women in the Middle East, Europe and a nice slice of Australians "who are buying a lot of Hermes."

"For us, the bread-and-butter business is event dressing, great costume jewellery and Hermes bags. It's what made us, although we have plenty of daywear and outdoor wear pieces that are great," Silver says. "The attraction is to find something nobody else has and our client understands the value. A couture jacket at Chanel is \$8,000, but a vintage couture one is \$500. We are a bargain basement I think."

Growing up in Beverly Hills, Silver's tastes developed early, starting with a vintage tux worn to his prom. He studied theatre at UCLA, then took the interesting turn of travelling around the US performing Weimar cabaret. On the road he started buying men's vintage clothing – "Gucci, YSL, Pucci, cool things for me to wear" – and supping up great women's vintage pieces as well. "I have always loved fashion [he collects Hermes]. I worked at Fred Segal in high school, it was kind of in my blood."

When Silver came off the road he found he had amassed enough pieces to open a store, then considered a risk. "Melrose in 1997 was quiet, I remember real estate agents said, 'Don't do this.' Plus, with LA then tilting toward casual chic, the word vintage signalled to many "grandma clothes".



KEITH MACKAY/REUTERS

There was nothing sophisticated about it. (Today LA has become a vintage mecca, with a clutch of stores catering to red-carpet customers, collectors and fashionistas.) Undaunted, Silver opened his door, confident the allure of wearing collectible fashion history would gain traction.

"I wanted Decades to be about modernity, not vintage," he says of his intention then and now. "The gown had to look modern, even if it was 30 or 40 years old." His initial focus was clothes from the '60s and '70s. "Then, gradually, I thought that '50s or that '40s dress is beautiful, and then Alaïa and Montana looked good, and suddenly Versace is interesting and Lacroix and Gaultier." His own taste in vintage favours Vivienne Westwood, Madame Gres and Halston, while modern designers he reveres include Lagerfeld, Rodarte, Haider Ackermann and Rick Owens. "I love everything," he grins. "That's my problem."

Silver sources vintage across the US and in Europe – a real find once was a 1950s Dior for \$200 – along with estate sales, flea markets, vintage fairs and auctions. "But I always prefer to buy out of the closets of people." He was lucky, he believes, that Decades' launch overlapped with Hollywood stars no longer dressing themselves for events. (Yes, they did once, often with awkward results.)

Around 1997 was the beginning of the big celebrity red-carpet moment. Celebrities were becoming aware of their image and creating a studio system for themselves. So a designer might approach a celebrity, or they could buy a dress at Decades. "That was also a time when Hollywood actually bought clothing," he adds, alluding to the present culture of loaning and gifting stars.

Soon vintage gowns started landing celebrities great press, stylists and editors came on board, then fashion lovers. Wearing a '60s Chanel or '70s Halston is no longer a quirky girl preoccupation but a status symbol and Silver (once a guest at the Melbourne Fashion Festival) has become the unofficial master of ceremonies of the movement. When asked to name his favourite Decades red-carpet looks, his simple answer is all of them, but he



From left: Kristin Davis wears Jean Dessès; Chloe Sevigny wears Thierry Mugler; Anne Hathaway wears Dior Haute Couture; Rachel Griffiths wears Larvin-Castillo; and Nicole Kidman wears Loris Azzaro.

"Silver wraps women in design history while delivering a smart 'take that' to disposable fashion"

ites Kristin Davis at the *Sex and the City 2* premiere in Jean Dessès, Chloe Sevigny at the 2002 *Vanity Fair* party in Holly Harp, and Tea Leoni in Don Loper at the 1997 *Playing God* premiere. This year Decades is already responsible for Julia Roberts in a YSL necklace and Anne Hathaway in Dior, both worn to benefits, while Calista Flockhart donned Chanel for the Golden Globes. "Stylists start coming in December for awards season and from then until an hour before the Oscars, it's chaos."

"Dressing in vintage gives a celebrity a lot of credibility," explains Magavoy. "It tells their audience they're not concerned with the hamster wheel of fashion, but prepared to wear something timeless." LA may have a voracious appetite for glamorous clothes but when loaning and gifting became the norm – a label on a famous face is publicity and branding gold – high-end retailers suffered. "Rodeo Drive was primarily supported by celebrities. Giorgio Beverly Hills could never exist now because there is nobody to buy the clothes," laments Silver. Vintage, however, remains desirable and prestigious enough that people will pay. "We're busier than ever in terms of revenue. It's definitely more competitive to dress somebody today but our red-carpet moments are special."

Decades may have begun as retail but 15 years on

Silver has morphed into a branding expert and entrepreneur. Over the years, he has been hired to consult for Pringle, Samonite, Costume National and Boucheron but is now focusing on building a new brand, his own.

So far he has birthed a Decades Denim capsule collection and collaborations with jewellery house Miriam Haskell and Modern Vintage Shoes. A Decades coffee-table book is imminent, ready-to-wear is part of the larger plan. There is also a deal for a reality show, a necessary component of branding these days. "Our goal is to build Decades as a lifestyle brand that has this historic relevance as being purveyors of vintage luxury." The operative words here are vintage luxury. Silver doesn't put as much stock in contemporary couture. "Those shows are primarily done for selling fragrance and red-carpet dressing. I do see couture as a place where fashion is art at this moment in time but, to me, couture was about a woman's wardrobe."

Which is what Silver has achieved with Decades, seeding 20th-century couture into the wardrobes of 21st-century women. He wraps them in design history while delivering a smart "take that" to disposable fashion. "I always say, we are about the democratization of the red carpet. Everybody deserves to look glamorous." ☺