Hooked on Vintage!

The term “vintage” in its association with wine means a good grape crop of a specific region and year. But the term has extended to other things—a vintage automobile—meaning a type of model, even an exemplar, of an earlier time (Smith and Medin 1981). When used to refer to clothing, vintage is differentiated from historical, antique, second-hand, consignment, reused or resale clothing. In clothing, vintage usually involves the recognition of a special type or model, and knowing and appreciating such specifics as year or period when produced or worn. Wearing vintage is primarily about being involved in a change of status and a revaluing of clothing beyond the original time period or setting, and only secondarily about markets for resale of clothing. But what constitutes a change of
status and revalue, and how does this revaluing relate to fashion and aesthetics?

Postrel (2003) develops evidence for a trend toward an aesthetic imperative for design of the twenty-first century. One sign of this new aesthetic is the increasing importance of the look and feel of products and the coexistence of many different styles, when compared with earlier periods. She believes we have replaced the axiom, “one best way,” with a far more personal and fluid ideal expressed as “my way, for today” (2003: 9). She views the purpose of good design as pleasing the owner and signaling meaning through personal expression and social communication. How we make the world around us special varies widely, according to Postrel, and today good design is more about helping individuals build their own personal identities rather than rely on a universal standard. She cites numerous and diverse aesthetic examples of this trend that include products such as computers, desk lamps, and coffee. She mentions that clothing is frequently mixed and matched to create options rather than mandates. Wearing vintage clothing could be considered as another viable option for expressing individuality.

McRobbie (1988), Professor of Communications and Media at the University of London, described the search for vintage as ransacking history for key items of dress in a seemingly eclectic and even haphazard manner. But does haphazard relate to the wearer of vintage or the manner of shopping? Dubin and Berman (2000) discuss the knowledge needed to shop for key vintage items, “Vintage shoppers learn to pinpoint the decades in which the clothes best suit their particular figures and to focus their shopping excursions accordingly” (2000: 13). Bardey (2002) describes shopping for vintage as an addictive and thrilling adventure because you never know what you are going to find. But what motivates the user to move from simple bargain-shopping consumer to vintage-seeking connoisseur?

Upon researching vintage use in London, Gregson et al. describe the process of mixing vintage and new clothing as “clever dressing for knowing audiences; it is a performance of taste, knowingness, and discernment acted out for an audience of those in the know” (2001: 12). Thus being hooked on vintage begins to appear not so much haphazard as a rather complex process involving the consumer/connoisseur and the accompanying aesthetics, taste, clever dressing, historical curiosity, and an ability to discriminate the authentic product, and revalue it in a new setting.

Our interest in the local vintage market grew from a survey of the used clothing market in Minneapolis and St Paul, Minnesota, that looked at all manner of reused clothing from vintage, consignment, and recycled clothing to understand how each fit into the total apparel market and how vintage apparel differs from used and consignment apparel (Reiley 2003). We discovered an increase in resale markets that ranges from thrift stores to vintage, with accompanying price tags ranging from economical to expensive. We found that a person who becomes interested in recycled
clothing at one level may begin to differentiate the authentic, exemplar model and move to another level—that of vintage.

We created a set of specific questions to understand motivations for buying and wearing vintage, to determine what created the consumer’s interest, and to identify shopping habits. Then we selected five distinctly different women for extensive interviews because they each have at least ten years’ experience buying and wearing quality vintage to create well-defined and imaginative personal styles.¹ In short, they represent the high end, the crème de la crème, of vintage wearers.

History of Wearing Vintage

Little has been written about vintage clothing, but the concept is becoming increasingly important in our time. According to McRobbie (1988), the trend toward wearing vintage clothing began in the 1980s; since then wearing used or recycled clothing has not been the same. In the past wearing recycled clothing was motivated by economic necessity, but in the 1990s Tolkien (2000) describes an aesthetic shift that helped rid thrift stores and flea markets of their stigma and elevated them to becoming acceptable sources of fashion. With this elevation in our perceptions came the elevation of vintage clothing.

Differentiation between vintage and used clothing followed. In the 1990s young adults experienced alternative music styles by bands such as Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Soul Asylum that gave rise to alternative clothing styles. Gregson et al. (2001) also reported on the revival of 1970s clothing styles, and they concluded that an outcome of this revivalism is that wearers began to see vintage clothing as “aesthetic objects, to be valued, understood, and worn in terms of, and as an appreciation of, their design, construction and authenticity” (2001: 8). Dubin and Berman (2000) observed that many notable actresses began to wear vintage publicly and “since these women could obviously afford contemporary couture, they are sending a powerful message: Vintage is about having and wearing what nobody else can; it’s about looking wonderful while not looking like every one else” (2000: 13).

Concepts Related to Vintage: Commodity, Creativity, and Authenticity

According to the literature, such terms as commodization, creativity, and authenticity are important to understand when examining the concept of vintage. Commodization is defined as value in the marketplace (Kopytoff 1986; Spooner 1986). At a very basic level, commodity involves both exchange value and use value of certain things and rights to things that are produced. Such things exist and circulate through the economic system
as they are exchanged for other things, usually money. From a cultural perspective, according to Kopytoff, commodity involves a cultural and cognitive process where the product is not only produced but recognized and differentiated as a certain kind of thing. In each society only some things are marked as commodities, and some people may see a product as commodity while others do not. Kopytoff (1986) addresses the question: what are the possibilities inherent in an object's status and in period and culture and how are those possibilities realized?

Vintage clothing could be viewed as a cultural commodization, involving a cultural shaping in its change in status through a process of withdrawal from one setting and rebirth into another setting. In this process vintage clothing is re-valued and given a new status and identity. However, Kopytoff (1986) warns that the status of a commodity is only clear at the moment of actual exchange, but most of the time when out of the commodity sphere, its status is ambiguous and results from the push and pull of desires and events in a variety of attempts to differentiate and singularize it. Clothing may go through this process when discarded or sold by one person with the possible exchange through a dealer (estate or consignment shop, for example) or simply a discard of clothing through an agency for disposal that ends in resale and reuse. In any case the dealer, consumer, and connoisseur become involved in its authenticity and re-valuation.

Revaluation of vintage requires perceiving its possibilities in a new setting. Hansen (2000) describes the cultural shaping process of clothing discarded from one culture and shipped to another. In this instance, Hansen reports on the revaluation of the clothing that involves a reperception on the part of the consumer who looks upon the discarded clothing as a new resource and at times even as a raw material that takes on another life in the revaluation process. But Hansen’s research was about crossing cultures with vast economic differences. In our study, revaluation was linked more with aesthetic creativity, innovation, and authenticity.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) defines the creative person as “someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain, or establish a new domain” (1996: 28). Innovation is important to such change. Rogers (1995) sees innovation as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption. If the idea seems new to the individual, it is an innovation” (1995: 11). This concept of innovation then does not necessarily mean a change in the product, but could mean a change in the way it is used or combined by the individual involved. As McCracken (1998) notes, “combination and recombination take place until a concept and an aesthetic emerge that help give substance to a group’s wish to differentiate itself from the mainstream” (1998: 136). Not only does vintage clothing allow an individual to be creative, such clothing can be an important resource in assembling a unique look because, unlike current mass-produced clothing, vintage clothing pieces are more likely to be one-of-a-kinds.
Authenticity is an important concept in revaluation of vintage. According to Spooner (1986), authenticity involves a concern with things alien or the “other” and is a term used for involvement in addressing criteria of differentiation or singularization. Authenticity engages the perspectives of various types of people: the connoisseur or collector who deals in classification, discrimination, and appreciation of differences; the dealer concerned with sources of supply and cost; or the consumer concerned with social needs and budget. Searching for vintage could involve all of the above perspectives, but all three perspectives deal in authenticity.

The most common and influential meanings of authenticity are enumerated by Postrel (2003): authenticity as “purity” where the original form is what is considered true and legitimate and any dilution or recombination are treated as forms of pollution; as “tradition,” referring to the way surfaces and forms always have been done; and as “aura,” that is, those signs of use that involve changes and imperfections left by the passage of time. However, because these meanings imply a dispassionate standard, she offers three additional meanings that are personal and reflect the way that people actually apply these meanings: first, authenticity that results in sensory pleasure, namely, formal harmony, balance, or delight; second, authenticity as connection to time or place; and third, authenticity as self-expression or the way it serves to identify, that is, “I like that. I’m like that.” In these latter instances, authenticity comes from the match between form and desire; it is what “seems right,” which is decidedly subjective and changeable over time.

Finally the search for and wearing of vintage is about satisfying personal desires, needs, and motivations (Guy et al. 2001). This is how products make people feel special. More than ever the search is about shopping for identities, constructing images that include presenting status and identities in public, as well as revealing and concealing our private selves. This means acknowledging the contexts of our various audiences as related to our continuing and discontinued selves. How does wearing vintage both involve and require us to revalue ourselves? It would seem that discriminating clothing selections to reveal our authentic selves is more difficult when pursuing vintage than when selecting from what is available in the contemporary clothing market.

**Case Studies: Dressing Vintage**

Case studies of five women, ranging in age from twenty-eight to seventy-seven, who are hooked on vintage may tell the tale, as each revealed unique characteristics and motivations for wearing vintage. We refer to them as K, L, M, E, and C and introduce them with a brief description to illustrate their personal attributes and distinctions at the first interview.
K—Wit and Whimsy

K, aged twenty-eight, is the youngest of these women and her attitude suggests that age may be a factor in her approach to vintage. Sociable and charming, K frequently uses the word “fun” to describe the clothing she likes. “Fun” also expresses her youthful attitude toward the styles of the 1950s to the early 1970s, her favorite time period. The clothing from that era just suits her 5’3” hourglass shape. Twin sets, shift dresses, skirts, blouses, and simple silhouettes dominate K’s wardrobe. Small- to medium-scale cheerful prints, argyle, madras, and medium to light colorful stripes are some of the design motifs that K prefers and wears. However, she says the colors are the primary reason that she was drawn to these clothes in the first place.

Light or bright fresh floral hues like pink, blue, green, and yellow are some of K’s favorite colors and she often adds various shades of pink to her natural blonde hair. At the interview, K is wearing a crisp cotton vintage blouse the color of orange sherbet with a small, scattered, outline floral print, combined with a pair of contemporary cropped lightweight denim pants that she says have a vintage look. Indeed, they almost could be “pedal pushers” from the 1950s or 1980s. A contemporary version of classic white canvas tennis-style shoes completes her look. Because K always considers mixing new and vintage items as she dresses, this fresh and appealing aesthetic result is not unusual.

L—Pragmatic and Political

L is slim and of medium height allowing her many clothing style options. Her fine bones and small well-defined features create a linear quality about her appearance that suggests alertness and action that is often accompanied by precise staccato-like movements. Her appearance is further defined by contrasts of dark hair and fair skin. She has a slightly mysterious quality to those who do not know her well. Because the day of the interview is a cold day, L is wearing a cardigan sweater over the shoulders of a turtleneck sweater; both are a deep cocoa brown and work well with her narrow deeply hued skirt. L describes her lamb’s-wool turtleneck as “really ancient that comes from Scotland and has lots of sentimental appeal.” Her Jantzen cardigan is from the 1950s and has a fine black distinct curvilinear design that relates to the predominant line movement in her facial features. The deep tones of L’s garments and her hair color contrast with her fair skin and create a visual separation that emphasizes her face and delicate features. Small geometric prints and firm or crisp smooth surfaces are particularly becoming on her.

L mixes clothing from different periods and works to avoid looking like a specific era. However, one category of vintage that she specifically looks for is business suits. L said with one exception, all of her business suits are vintage. The tailoring is the reason she is drawn to them. “I love tailored things and it’s difficult or I find it difficult to get a nicely tailored article off the rack. I really like the quality and the detailing on vintage
suits." M likes clothing that is quite fitted and is particularly fond of the 1940s and 1950s, as such styles emphasize her slender frame. Her aesthetic result is often dramatic.

M—Knowing and Discerning

M’s confident stride and upright posture reinforce her tall, well-proportioned, and physically toned body that defies an age category. Her demeanor has all the earmarks of a person who has achieved professional success that comes only through diligence and experience. Today M has dressed to emphasize the linear and slightly angular qualities of her body’s contours and the golden tones of her coloring that hint at her Scandinavian heritage. Although she discloses that she is wearing her favorite base color, a column of black, this is not necessarily where she begins assembling her look.

M enjoys pairing interesting pieces like jackets or shawls with basics and adds jewelry as a finishing touch, but she also can begin creating her day’s outfit by first choosing an accessory. She thinks about how she feels and what accessories go with what, regardless of period and looks in the mirror to help her decide. She said, “If I want to wear a Christmas pin, then I add what looks good with it." She added, “I don’t keep my vintage pieces, either accessories or clothing, separate from the new. My closet is arranged by color, not period or age. I decide in steps.”

Her ensemble includes a shawl-collared, mid-thigh-length jacket in peridot green, and a finely woven scarf with a refined paisley design. She is wearing sheer black hosiery and black shoes in a current style. Her jewelry is gold and has an heirloom quality that is not commonly seen in contemporary pieces. Because it is the Christmas season, she has added a reindeer pin with colored glass ornamentation to her jacket lapel. M shared that her scarf is from the 1920s, her pin is from the 1950s, and one of the rings she is wearing was her mother’s 1946 graduation ring. M’s aesthetic result is timeless and intriguing.

E—Exemplary Historic Portrayals

E is an attractive middle-aged woman of average height with a slim but curvaceous and well-proportioned figure that allows her a wide range of clothing options, which she eagerly exercises. On one particular Fall day we met she was dressed in a pencil-slim two-piece suit from the 1940s with an asymmetric closing, a fox stole, gloves loosely crushed down toward her wrists, platform pumps, and an elegant leather vintage envelope bag with a tassel closure. Her suit was the color of a vintage tawny port wine that emphasized her warm, rich coloring. She wore her long dark hair swept up in a French twist. As E stood in front of a grouping of several old framed family photographs that hung on a deeply colored wall, it seemed the perfect backdrop for her. E reminded us of Loretta Young’s feminine and glamorous appeal when Young entered a living-room set each week in designer fashions to introduce her long-running
dramatic television program that began in the 1950s (Ritrosky-Winslow 2004). As she swirled to close the door, Young created a mini fashion show that became her trademark.

Like Loretta Young, clothes are E’s passion, too. E loves the attention that her vintage pieces receive from others. When she was working at a brokerage firm, to amuse herself and everyone else, she started a “theme week” where she would wear nothing but one category of clothing: Asian clothes, for example, clothing from a particular decade, or a single color such as green. She said, “I think one [theme week] was ‘Island Week’ where I’d wear sarongs or anything from the Islands. I had straw purses and little straw shoes. It was a lot of fun.” E’s eclectic aesthetic result often emerges from an era, a location, or an attitude.

C—Unassuming Connoisseur
C is small in stature and this is what motivated her interest in vintage clothing. Until recent years when petite sizes have become more available, C found that vintage clothing sizes were closer to her diminutive proportions than any ready-made items she could find in stores. On this particular day she is wearing simple black pants and a black turtleneck sweater topped with a vintage Chinese Miao (Hmong) embroidered jacket embellished with tiny silver balls that repeat the silver streaks in her dark chin-length hair. In fact, all the colors in her ensemble either emphasize or replicate her coloring. Even though she is a mere 4’11” tall, the proportions of her jacket are perfect with her small frame and body.

Although C is petite and her demeanor unassuming, the extent of her aesthetic interests are wide ranging and her expertise in collecting is astounding. She freely shares her age at seventy-seven years, and says she has a lifetime supply of vintage and antique clothing. Her wardrobe is diverse with garments that date from the 1800s to Chinese clothes from the Ch’ing dynasty. C’s aesthetic result can be refined, opulent, or sophisticated but always transcends time and place.

Commodity and Re-valuing Vintage

Exchange value and use value are components of commodity and the re-valuing of vintage (Kopytoff 1986). Though we did not discuss exact prices these women paid for any given item of vintage, the number of times they mentioned monetary value versus what they paid gave us the impression that they paid less than how they valued them. Prices varied depending upon the source and how much searching was necessary in the discovery process. For example, E frequented estate sales and often bought in batches. She selected a grouping of vintage items and then bargained for a batch price. C often found her treasures in antique furniture stores where antique dealers did not know much about pricing vintage clothing nor did they want to be bothered, and so were happy to accept rock-bottom
offers. She also found exceedingly affordable treasures on her travels, particularly her trips to China.

Condition was another factor in exchange value and each mentioned how far she would go in repairing and remaking a vintage purchase. Typically, the women preferred to limit repairs to reattaching a button or hem, but examples of genuinely special discoveries brought exceptions. For example, E loved a jacket so much that she relined it. M discussed how she concealed a moth hole as she wore a treasured scarf, and all mentioned the various patinas they lived with as an accepted part of wearing vintage.

**Motivation and Discovery**

The process of revaluing involves use-value and these five women represent a variety of motivations for searching for vintage as well as goals for combining vintage into their appearance. For instance, E’s goal is to look of an era in all vintage whenever possible while M’s goal is to pass for contemporary, except for those in the know who recognize and appreciate her vintage.

K’s motivation for wearing vintage began in high school as a way to break away from mainstream fashion. She said creating an individual appearance that announced “Look at me” was one of her main goals. During this process, not only did she fall in love with the clothing, she also fell in love with the vintage shopping experience. K describes how visiting vintage stores was like visiting a museum exhibit for her. “Vintage pieces were everywhere—in the window, on the walls, and on garment racks. I loved being surrounded by all the vintage clothing!” However, unlike visiting a museum where “do not touch” signs are posted everywhere, touching, trying on, and experimenting with combinations of these garments was accepted, expected, and encouraged. K has modified her appearance and her goal in dressing since her high-school days. She now mixes vintage clothing with new pieces so that her appearance ranges from vintage to contemporary while still maintaining the individuality that comes from the mix. K feels that adding even a small touch of vintage to an ensemble can create a look that is different from what mainstream consumers might choose. For example, K has a 1950s cream-colored cardigan sweater with colorful yarn-embroidered flowers that she often throws over a contemporary basic garment such as a pink T-shirt. She says that this can turn heads, an unmistakable response to “Look at me!”

In the past, K frequently looked for vintage pieces at estate sales, used clothing stores, and antique stores. These days K prefers shopping at vintage clothing stores because of time restraints from being a new parent and going to graduate school. Limiting her shopping to a few vintage stores saves her time since the pre-selection is made and customers choose only from vintage pieces that are in good to excellent condition.
L has a pragmatic attitude about her wardrobe with few personal attachments to her garments except for family heirlooms. If she has not worn an item in a year, she recycles and eliminates it from her wardrobe. L attempts to keep it all organized—business suits, summer dresses, trousers. She categorizes by color, not according to old or new things. L cares a great deal about fit and quality. She also prefers natural fibers such as wool that has a nice drape or a finely woven cotton or linen. She said, 

You learn to feel those things with your fingers. I learned from one of my aunts, who is a terrific vintage shopper, to run your hand along the whole rack and you’ll be able to tell from the touch what’s really nice quality and from that initial sort you look to see what you might actually like, what’s your size. But the first initial sweep determines the quality of textiles. It really works! Try it!8

All of the women mentioned recycling as a positive element in their choice about vintage, but L specifically discussed the politics of buying recycled clothing. She said, “Sometimes it just depresses me about all things we have in this material world to consume. Part of it is satisfaction that at least I’m not fully participating in this unfettered consumption of stuff.”9 She added, “I hope I’m not being misleading when I say I don’t care about what I’m wearing because I do care a lot, but the things themselves aren’t the things that matter so much to me. But I do care about what I look like.”10 She also thinks of herself in relation to what other people are wearing, especially what she sees as the uniformity of what many other people are wearing. She said, “I don’t want to look that way. It’s part of the decision factor as well—that I don’t want to look like other people.”11

M is motivated by good quality and the expression of individuality that wearing vintage allows. But she never wants her appearance to be linked with a particular historical period; vintage things must be combined to afford a subtlety to her as wearer and a pleasure to the viewer who is in the know. M could represent the archetype for Gregson et al. (2001) as they describe the process of mixing vintage with new—“clever dressing for knowing audiences” (2001: 12).

M especially likes to buy vintage accessories and brought several of her favorite pieces of jewelry to the interview. She emptied her accessories bag onto the table to reveal an assortment of exquisite and favorite vintage bracelets, rings, and pins ranging from a 1890s hairpin, several bakelite pieces from the 1930s, to the 1950s pin she is wearing today. She said she had made a conscious decision to stop buying cheap things and buy one good thing instead. She disclosed, “I am always looking for a good vintage piece, but I need to focus. I am scattered and still driven by good deals. This year all my money is going to one gold piece, but it is hard to find.”12
Anticipation is an important motivation in M’s searches. Because of her job, she knows and loves good design so she is overjoyed when she discovers something unusual at any one of her haunts. To illustrate, she had wanted a tuxedo for a very long time and ultimately found a man’s tuxedo that fit her perfectly. She says, “I hunt for the classic—not the ephemeral or trendy. I keep classic clothing. In the 1970s I bought a midi in London and still have it.” When asked what her fantasy garment might be, she replied, “I want a Chanel suit—if not the whole suit—at least the jacket. I am still looking!”

E started wearing vintage in high school and as she describes the origin of being “hooked on vintage,” she acknowledges that it was not because she suddenly woke up and thought vintage clothes were “cool.” E said, “We were very, very poor. Poverty was an understatement.” E discovered a nearby church auxiliary store that sold all kinds of old clothes and that is what started it. She said, “It suddenly occurred to me that some of the really old stuff not only was really cheap, it was really cool because I had something no one else had. For 50 cents, I could have an outfit.” E recognized at an early age that the importance of clothing is not only visual and tactile. She said, “You don’t realize how it impacts other people until you start playing around with it. And I’m the queen of playing around. I’m an exhibitionist at heart.” Once she understood the power of dress, E said “everything else came with it. The history, the color, the design, how it’s made—all these other things.”

E can begin assembling her look in a variety of ways although she usually begins with the basics and adds what she describes as “the frosting,” preferring additions of the same period. She showed us a suit from the 1960s that she views as “Very simple, very boring . . . When I wear it, I feel boring in it until I add the frosting. I’ve got the cake and I need to add good frosting to this cake because it’s boring.” E likes to think about what she has that would create interest. She admits that sometimes she enjoys combining things that others might find unusual but that the combination of pieces must have a certain allure.

Collecting for C has not been a life-long passion, although she described herself as having “a good eye” from spending many Saturdays in her great uncle’s antique store as a child. She described a pivotal time in her life when she attended some university seminars in the 1960s on art history. She said, “It really changed my life because the professor wasn’t trying to tell us what was good art and good design but to give us an insight so that we could make decisions ourselves on it.” So a few months after taking the course she just started to buy a few things—paintings and the like—for, as she described it, “our house of no views” and became hooked—but not on clothing yet.

This serendipitous experience led to meeting the director at a major metropolitan art museum, joining the membership committee, and becoming membership chair. She also had a volunteer job for the orchestra that ultimately turned into a long-term permanent job. These positions
required a social wardrobe and C stumbled upon an antique dealer who had once worked for her great uncle. When he bought old furniture to refinish, he sometimes would get clothes too. He would sell them for almost nothing because they were not his basic merchandise and he wanted to get rid of them. With these purchases, C discovered that she had something to wear to her social functions that looked better than what she could buy in stores because the price and proportions were better suited to her. Over time she also accumulated a wonderful collection of Chinese textiles and clothing that began in Boston where she found her first Chinese skirt. C said, “After that wherever I went I found Chinese clothes and without even looking for them!”

Wearing Vintage

The persistence and acceleration of vintage as a trend does not address how an individual creates a unique appearance and personal style, but these women’s experiences tell the tale. The “way we look” involves not only how we perceive and discriminate clothing, but how we create a unique appearance through selecting and combining pieces of clothing, designing the body, and the reasoning that goes into that process (DeLong 1998). Bardey (2002) suggests that shopping and wearing vintage is like being your own designer because you get to choose and combine your ensemble from a variety of eras including contemporary and thereby creating a new and unique identity.

The search for vintage and ultimately wearing vintage is about knowing how to combine a variety of garment styles, fabrics, colors, patterns—so important to the process of shaping and revaluing the product. This process can take a number of directions, from searching for a total look of a given period to blending vintage with new. Based on our discussion, the search for vintage is about fitting the body from clothing that fitted a person of another era to reconfiguring the current body proportions with different foundational structures. For example, wearing vintage may mean acquiring an eye for what looks good on one’s own body without the aid of girdles or corsets that normally were worn in the garment’s original era. The uniqueness of vintage clothing comes with less standardization in sizing as well as fewer available examples or models for dressing, that is, the art of mixing pieces to create a signature look.

Pursuing vintage and the revaluing process must include one’s own perceptions of body, wearer’s relationship with clothes, wardrobe, and lifestyle. For each of these women, the relation of body to clothes was a significant one and determined what categories of clothing they selected, and what historical period they considered for the search. For example, M said her larger feet meant she could never find vintage shoes. Body shape and size factored into the search although all of the women could have found adequate clothing for their particular body from contemporary
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sources. E and L, for example, have slim bodies that give them the freedom to pursue and be successful with many categories of vintage clothing, from suits to shoes, to evening dresses. C and K, though limited somewhat by their proportions, found eras where they said they felt better in clothing from other historical periods and K took comfort in knowing that people from another time were similar to her shape.

Authenticity in Wearing Vintage

Our findings substantiate Postrel’s (2003) idea that aesthetic meaning and authenticity are deeply connected to the history, experience, and personality of each individual woman although the motivations and initial interest for buying and wearing vintage clothing differed. We examine Postrel’s definitions of personal authenticity in relation to the use of vintage clothing for a deeper understanding of how these women became “hooked on vintage.”

Authenticity as Formal Harmony, Balance, or Delight

Authenticity as formal harmony, balance, or delight is more about pleasure than meaning, according to Postrel (2003: 114). All of our interviewees found pleasure from different aspects of buying and wearing vintage clothing. E discusses pleasure when explaining how she became “hooked on vintage.” “What attracts me to these clothes is that they kind of hit all those pleasure receptors: color, texture, design, shape, the history, the beauty of it. It’s very compelling.”

K’s response to seeing all of the beautiful garments displayed on the walls of vintage clothing stores was clearly one of delight and sensory pleasure. C had a similar response on a trip to China in 1980. She said, China was just opening up at that time and they had loaded these warehouses with Ch‘ing dynasty textiles and everything was $85 for the most fantastic old pieces. And I loaded up my suitcase not knowing how or what I’d ever do with them. This particular skirt [hanging on her wall] I saw in one city in the south of China and I went back to get it but the shop was closed. We had traveled by that time to the other end of China and I kept begging our guide to please get me that skirt and somehow they brought it by personal courier.

All the women also experience pleasure by combining different eras or combining vintage with new clothing to create unique ensembles whether they reflect a specific period or create a contemporary look. Postrel says, “If an ‘inauthentic combination’ is in fact pleasing, it will become a new—and newly authentic—style” (2003: 114). Even though some could view the mixing of vintage with new or other era vintage as “inauthentic,” the authenticity of vintage pieces is not devalued by these women.
M reported that she rarely wears an ensemble from a single historic time period unless she attends an event such as a 1940s exhibit where she might wear all items that could be from the 1940s, but they may not be all authentically 1940s. She says, “I know enough that I can mix periods. A 1972 platform can go with 1940s garments if I do it carefully.” M receives pleasure from knowing how to successfully combine vintage pieces to obtain her desired look. Her pleasure increases when others “in the know” recognize that some items are authentically vintage.

E, on the other hand, wears vintage head to toe by mixing pieces from different time periods and rarely wears new clothing. Pleasure for E is creating complete vintage ensembles without having to include new clothing unless necessary. E says she will mix new with old only if she must. It is a challenge to find all the pieces to complete an outfit. E said, “I bought this suit and had absolutely nothing to wear with it. I went to a discount store and bought a $5 turtleneck that matches this green in the suit exactly.”

L wears vintage regularly but does so by mixing vintage pieces of different eras and always adds new pieces to the ensemble. She prefers that her vintage selections are inconspicuous and finds pleasure in creating contemporary ensembles with them. “I like to mix and match. I’m almost never all in completely vintage. Even with my 1940s suits I always wear them with a new silk shell, new jewelry, or new shoes. I never want to look like a period.” She added, “I never want someone to think, ‘Oh she’s wearing a 1950s suit.’ More likely, if anyone were to think anything at all, I’d want him or her to think, ‘Oh, what a nice tailored suit.’ That would be all.”

K also mixes vintage clothing with new clothing to create a range of ensembles. Even though she does not put pieces together to look of a certain time period, K does not mind if her clothing pieces clearly look vintage. She says that many of her vintage pieces go together because they are from the same time periods. She said, “I often mix vintage tops with new slacks or jeans and they just work together. I don’t put items together in order to look like I dress from the 1950s or 1960s.”

**Authenticity as a Connection to Time or Place**

Postrel (2003) suggests that authenticity as a connection to time or place “represents one of the most common uses of the word ‘authenticity,’ and one of the most criticized” (2003: 115) particularly as it relates to architecture or furnishings. However, all five women discussed the importance of their vintage clothing as having a connection to time or place, whether it was through family heirlooms, knowing the history of the piece, or knowing and valuing the original time period. This personal connection adds authenticity to these items and makes each woman become even more “hooked on vintage.”

M enjoys the memory of where she purchased each piece and also the time period it represents. She says, “I have complex reasons why I like a
Hooked on Vintage!

I consider what it looks like, how I will use it, who I bought it with, where I bought it, and what period it represents. I go for the whole look!” M also feels a connection to time or place when shopping for vintage items with close friends. “My friends with good taste give to me, or shop with me for good pieces. Then the meaning involves remembering them, too.”

L has received vintage accessories from her family members and values them because they help link her to her family origins and are far more important than any vintage accessories she has purchased. “The vintage accessories I do have tend to be very special pieces with some family association. When I wear them, I always think of the family members who previously owned them. It’s a way of feeling connected for me.”

She is particularly fond of a special belt. She said, “My great-grandmother had a silver belt and it fit me and still fits me and I love to wear that.” Even receiving vintage items that are not heirlooms connects L to time and place as long as family members sent them, her vintage sweater that “has lots of sentimental appeal” since it came from her aunt in Scotland, for example.

E enjoys knowing the history of her purchases and often finds out about the previous owner at the estate sales she attends. “I like the history of clothing. It’s like, who had this? Who was this person? It hooks me into wanting to know more about what happened to their lives, what happened to them. The history is really important to me.”

M, like E, is also passionate about the history of the vintage pieces she owns. The history that M desires though is more technological and cultural than a personal history about who owned the item. M says, “I know a lot about history and relate it to my selections. I like things of many ages around me. I really like the Arts and Crafts movement so you see that influence in my selections.” In a second interview, M discussed in more detail how wearing vintage connects her with others historically. She said, “I value other times, other places, other cultural traditions, other technologies, other design motivations, other skill sets. The continuity is important to me intellectually.”

C sees her collection of textiles as art and is particularly passionate about the cultural aspect of her garments. She likes to research her finds, to know what culture a treasure came from, and credits her sociology background for this interest. She said, “It ties into being a docent at the art institute now for 15 years. Our main thesis is ‘Art is a symbol of culture,’ ‘art is a reflection of culture’ so it’s all really tied up with that.”

Three of the women also feel a connection to pieces from a particular era because of the garment styles or designs they prefer. Two of E’s favorite time periods are the 1930s and 1940s. E explains saying, “The suits were simple but elegant. There was a lot of detailing stitching, interesting buttons. They were just beautifully made, beautifully tailored—simple, but very elegant.”

L and K also look for vintage garments from specific decades but their choices are based more on their body shapes; oftentimes one’s body
suggests a certain silhouette. Even though L likes the fitted silhouettes from the 1940s and 1950s she also likes the 1920s, “but it’s so difficult to get anything decent looking from the 20s that isn’t all wrecked.”

K, on the other hand, being shorter and curvier says, “Vintage clothing fits me better because of the body shape that clothes were made for in the 1950s and 60s.”

**Authenticity as Self-expression**

Postrel observes that these authentic connections to time and place in fact are consistent with identity and self-expression because part of the selection process often includes saying, “I like that. I’m like that.” Such statements may not fit the objective definitions of authenticity, “but they are genuine expressions of an individual’s inner truth” (2003: 115–16). For these women, self-expression is also often tied to individuality. L spoke about inheriting and cherishing her great-grandmother’s silver belt. Not only does the belt connect L to her past, it displays her individuality. She says, “Nobody else has an art nouveau silver belt.” L also likes to create a distinctive appearance with her vintage clothing. “I like to wear things that I know I won’t see anybody else wearing. Vintage clothing provides a way to escape the dictates of what’s currently available at any one time.”

K knew in high school that she wanted her appearance to set her apart from the crowd and discovered that wearing vintage clothes was a way to accomplish this. K said, “I enjoy looking different than the mainstream and vintage clothing allows me to do this. When you buy vintage pieces, you know that 99% of the time, no one else will have the same top, skirt, or dress.”

M uses vintage pieces as self-expression by adding them to her mainly contemporary wardrobe. M says, “Vintage clothing means individuality and I like to discover items that stand out. I want to select choice pieces of jewelry, scarves, and jackets that look great and enhance my wardrobe.” Not only does M want the pieces to add to her unique appearance, she also uses vintage accessories to express her interest and knowledge of design. She looks for pieces that can stand alone as a design element but do not scream “look at me.” She says, “They have to be able to be integrated with other pieces and should look versatile. I seek out an individual look without a primary goal of drawing attention to myself or the pieces.”

E wears vintage clothing and accessories from head to toe because she does not particularly like new clothes. She likes things that are not available anywhere else. She says, “When I wear some of my clothes, people do stop me on the street and say, ‘Oh, I love that!’ I’m an exhibitionist. I love it. I love the attention.” She also feels it is important that how one chooses to dress should not be in conflict with one’s self. E said, “You should be at ease with [your image]. And it took me a long time to figure out where in the continuum I belonged. When I started wearing vintage clothes, all of a sudden I felt comfortable.”
Unlike the other women, C’s vintage wardrobe is primarily formal and provided a social identity for her roles in the arts. She said it all came about from her art history class and “just seeing something beautiful. And having more places to wear stuff like that in those days.” She says of her professor, “He was really a good teacher; he really changed my life, really opened up new worlds.” C’s teacher had been a catalyst for her; C realized from his lectures that she had, indeed, developed a good eye.

**Conclusions and Implications**

A strong appeal of vintage clothing, as determined in these interviews, is the perception of wearers that reconfiguring “old,” i.e., vintage, creates something original. Being able to buy and wear recycled clothes is an important goal to these vintage clothing shoppers. The result that emerges from the efforts of each woman is a recombination of products into a new and personal aesthetic. Creating different ensembles using all vintage clothing or mixing vintage with new pieces allows these women to be creative. Postrel describes the importance of design in making life special. These women do get pleasure from their passion for vintage that has enhanced their lives. None are striving to look alike or to arrive at some collective fashion statement; their goal is to assemble a distinctive and individual look.

Making discriminating clothing selections to reveal an authentic self is what pursuing vintage is all about for these women. The search for and wearing of vintage is about satisfying personal desires, needs, and motivations. For these women being hooked on vintage, though first motivated by economics or personal histories, evolved into recognition and a revaluing of self. As these women demonstrated, it is about constructing images with their vintage discoveries from different historical, cultural, and economic contexts. These women acknowledged that wearing vintage is a complex and creative process that involves making authentic judgments and being authentic.

The aesthetic trend toward purposefully wearing vintage dress now includes celebrities and many such women as the ones interviewed in this study. Such a revaluing of the market and who wears vintage, to what event, is an important validation. It is about a change from a person looking as though she is wearing used clothing to looking individual in vintage clothing—a statement of “Hey, this is me!” Wearing something old and something new at the same time allows a vintage wearer to champion values from the past and present, and take advantage of expanded choices. For example, if the fashion is casual and a woman likes tailored clothing, she can wear an exquisitely tailored vintage suit, maybe even one she could not have afforded new. If a woman believes in sustainable design and is bothered by the indiscriminate production of new products, she can choose to recycle and still gain pleasure from looking...
good. The motives and outcomes vary but the enjoyment of the process is obvious.

Finally, the increased and creative use of vintage clothing is changing the domain of fashion by redefining what is fashionable. Designers of contemporary fashion are creating eclectic mixtures using a concept of pairings from different markets and prices, such as Isaac Mizrahi featuring a $9.99 cotton halter top with a $20,000 couture tulle ball gown skirt on the same model, as reported in *Women’s Wear Daily* (Wilson 2004). In the twenty-first century knowing how to create a unique look in an otherwise bland mass-produced market may be a way to regain one’s individuality through revaluing and reuse, and redefine fashion in the process.

**Notes**

1. We interviewed these women extensively, and all but one several times over the course of three years.
5. Interview with M, December 2003.
15. Interview with E, March 2002.
22. Interview with C, December 2003.
27. Interview with K, March 2002.
32. Interview with E, March 2002.
34. Interview with M, July 2002.
35. Interview with C, December 2003.
41. Interview with K, May 2002.
42. Interview with M, May 2002.
43. Interview with M, July 2002.
44. Interview with E, March 2002.
45. Interview with E, June 2002.
46. Interview with C, December 2003.
47. Interview with C, December 2003.

References


