Unzipping Vintage Fashion in Phoenix

Written by Morgan Tanabe

The girl strolling down the Phoenix sidewalk in an embroidered chiffon dress and Oxford flats is not a rarity these days. Phoenix residents have been turning to vintage fashion as an alternative to popular retailers.

The quaint vintage shop does not exude appeal from the outside. A hand-painted sign is the only clue distinguishing it from a public laundromat. Inside, the charming space is lit with natural light streaming through the front windows facing the bustling streets of downtown Phoenix. An eclectic array of clothing material ranging from cheetah print, flashy sequins, polka dots and faded flannel, hang neatly with apparent intent. In an age where newer is better in most industries, this reserved vintage store, like many in Phoenix, is a cherished treasure for people who choose to wear timeless apparel.

Exploring the Melrose District is like slipping into a time capsule. In Phoenix, vintage clothing has made a roaring comeback. Charming boutiques full of boisterous character supply the demand of ‘70s glam fans. Whether the style that appeals is of the ‘20s flapper era – with short dresses and shimmering headbands, or a preferred ‘50s sweetheart fashion, accompanied by flower-printed skirts and letterman-style jackets—Phoenix vintage culture is not lacking timeless fashion favorites.

Along the curve of Seventh Avenue, between Indian School and Camelback Roads, an influx of vintage culture has become a destination-shopping district for advocates of trendy thrift shops, retro home décor, eccentric boutiques and quirky vintage stores.

Like many of the shops along the Melrose District, LollyPOP vintage is full of unique pieces. Brimming with clothing designs by idolized fashion designers, like Christian Dior, to more affordable Guess apparel, there is nothing minimalistic about the cozy store. Clutches, dresses, tops, hats and lingerie hang from the walls and are stuffed methodically into clothing racks. The walls are painted in a retro design of shapes in faded orange and blue. While the ambiance reveals funky character, the widespread variety of vintage styles is what attracts customers.

LollyPOP vintage owner Heather Powers opened the vintage revival shop in November 2010. Powers grew up adoring fashion. Today, her home and wardrobe is an eclectic mixture of ‘40s-’70s pieces. While, vintage trends have become a prominent aspect of her lifestyle today, Powers fell in love with vintage at a young age.

“I have always been attracted to vintage,” Powers says. “When I was a kid my family did not have a lot of money but I would save up all my allowance and any money I made doing odd jobs for the neighbors and go on a shopping spree once a year for school clothes at the thrift stores. Luckily my mom let me dress myself and even at age 6, in the ‘70s, I was picking up beaded cardigans from the ‘50s, little mod dresses and vintage hats. I always had a quirky sense of style.”

While she appreciates the detail of vintage pieces, the gal with a budget discovered vintage clothing was a subtle alternative to retail prices. The affection grew and led her to her occupation at LollyPOP vintage today.

“Vintage can represent the best of fashion, the most delicious materials, exceptional details, craftsmanship very rarely seen now,” Powers says. “It’s not disposable fashion like most of the world wears today.”

“Modern mall fashion, is what you see the average Joe walking down the street in, which I find a little sad,” Powers says. “The kind of high-quality modern clothes that appeal to me are extremely expensive. I am not going to be able to afford that Galliano dress I may be coveting right now anytime soon, but I can go to a vintage store and find a fabulous high-quality dress at an affordable price. That being said, I love and I crave it!”

Macy Fuquay, 22, an Arizona State University alumna and young fashion entrepreneur has been combing the Melrose District for years. Her long, naturally brown, wavy hair portrays a carelessly tasteful image. Today, Fuquay is the co-founder and manager of her Etsy store Bennett & Rose. Bennett & Rose is an online boutique stocked with affordable “must-have” vintage finds. While the selection ranges from dresses and blazers to belts and shoes, each item is handpicked; and Phoenix has served as an integral source of inspiration.

The unique revival-shopping boutique is as original as its owner. Fuquay is able to effortlessly incorporate a button-up collared shirt with an oversized boyfriend cardigan and maintain an airy, feminine flair. It is rare that one will catch Fuquay purchasing items at the shopping mall.

“When I can take home 58 quality shirts for the price of one designer shirt and feel equally as stylish in all 58 of them, I find there is no further explanation necessary,” Fuquay says.

With Phoenix being the sixth largest city in the United States, it is bizarre that residents are not more aware of the vital role it has contributed to its vintage culture.

“As Arizona is really such a young state we may not to have the depth and breadth of vintage that maybe New York or perhaps even California has,” Powers says. “Not to mention they are a little more fashion-forward there than a good amount of Arizonans tend to be. On the bright side though, our vintage tends to be a lot less expensive then either of those two places. Buyers from stores in those states come here and buy from our stores to resell in their own.”

This belief in “higher quality” vintage clothing is common among many vintage lovers. While the shopping mall provides a convenient outlet for those looking to spend money and revamp their wardrobe, vintage shops require more patience and a better eye for detail.

“Vintage pieces are constantly surprising me with their little, too often overlooked details,” Fuquay says. “Design was much more time-consuming back then and included intricate elements that are commonly left out in most modern pieces. A lot of the vintage clothing I find is of better quality than most of the clothing in stores now for nearly 100 percent less, and there’s nothing more exciting than that.”

The Valley offers a plethora of vintage finds from men’s and women’s clothing to housewares. Glam fashion of the ’50s, ‘60s and ‘70s is offered at most Phoenix shops with an astonishing array of mint-condition garments. While thrift clothing can be associated with being “unsanitary,” vintage pieces provide nostalgia for many. In LollyPOP vintage a Boy Scout shirt is hung neatly. Still adorned with its once cherished badges such as art, astronomy and sports, the sash offers a glimpse into the history of who the owner was. It is items like these that vintage consumers and owners view as treasures.

“I come from a family with an excessive need to save everything, and despite the negative connotations to this, I have been able to revive my grandmother’s old dresses for years,” Fuquay says. “After learning clothing design and production, I have been able to see every piece from a designer’s perspective and appreciate it in a new light.”

There are many elusive pieces Powers is still scouring for today. The fashion expert explains, “There is so much I would love to have if I had an unlimited budget it’s hard to narrow down. I would swoon over a Dior New Look suit, Roberta Di Camerino trompe l'oeil dress, almost anything by Elsa Shiaperelli, a gown by Adrian; oh, this is really such a hard question.”

Phoenix vintage offers a unique culture incomparable to other vintage markets. While Seventh Avenue offers a condensed variety of vintage stores such as LollyPOP, Retro Ranch and Antique Sugar—vintage stores around Phoenix are widespread.

“There is the obvious answers, jeans, men’s white dress shirt, the trench coat but I really feel that it is the person and how they wear the piece that makes something timeless,” Powers says. “To quote Gore Vidal, ‘Style is knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a damn.’ The allure of vintage is that it has a history, but it can be worn in a new way.”