



REAL ESTATE

KERRY TAYLOR IN CONVERSATION
WITH FELIX CHOONG

Clothing passes through many hands from the fields to the factory, the atelier, the shop and into our closets. It also passes through another's adept hands, those of auctioneer Kerry Taylor, who over the last 40 years has facilitated the sales of some of the most historic, important and coveted garments in textile history. From 16th century doublets and 19th century Imperial longpaos to haute couture and monumental showpieces by Issey Miyake, Comme des Garçons, Thierry Mugler, John Galliano, Vivienne Westwood, Alexander McQueen, the list goes on. To the onlooker, they appear out of nowhere like a deer running into the road, you have to slam the brakes, stop what you're doing and gawp at the fact one of those dresses from that collection has appeared out of nowhere. Collecting dust somewhere, left untouched for decades in a garment bag, memories of past lives, couture gowns coveted by a society lady unworn since her heyday stowed away in her lacquer wardrobes. Burnt into your retinas, like a spectre they disappear as quickly as they appeared, once more into the acid-free tissue paper and air controlled cabinets of the museums and the eager hands of the collectors and fanatics. You pray that in your lifetime that they emerge again, long enough for you to pull together enough money to submit a winning bid.

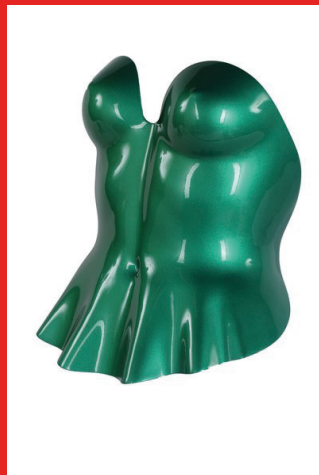
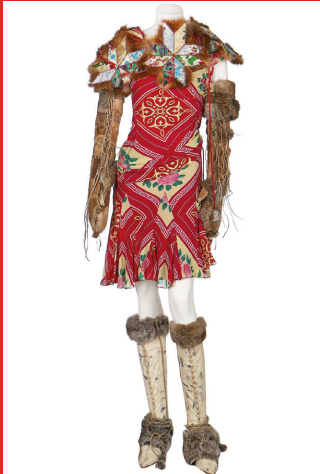
Kerry Taylor is something of a seance, she has been entrusted with the safe passage of cherished possessions, personal archives and estate sales. These clothes have lived lives, they have protected, adorned, indulged and celebrated their wearers and have come to be the embodiment of personal and cultural histories.

FELIX CHOONG: The first vintage garment you bought was when you were 11 – a 1930s sequin capelet. Do you still have it? Was there anything else down the line you bought growing up?

KERRY TAYLOR: Yes I still have it – safely stored away in a metal trunk alongside other treasures such as my son's first shoes and infant drawings. I also bought a black chiffon dress with bugle beaded hips and matching jacket with fabulous cuffs that I used to wear in my twenties that I bought at auction. I adore it but I don't fit it anymore and sadly I don't have a daughter. I will never part with it. When you wear something vintage – it's really special, and makes you feel

special also. People always comment and ask where did you get it? I once wore a Madame Gres coat down a London Street and Paul Weller (who is something of a style icon and a hero of mine) walked past and told me he loved it! I have a Lucky Dress which is 1940s navy crepe, probably homemade with little sequined flowers on the shoulders and belt. It's nothing special in the grand scheme of things but it suits me and I love it. I wore it on an important visit to a client with a huge Audrey Hepburn collection one summer some years back. Unfortunately, unbeknown to me, the cotton threads holding it together had started to rot. Every time I reached to pick up another dress or inspect the inside seams of a







garment – another of the seams on my own dress would go. By the time I left I looked as though I had been attacked and no-one wanted to stand next to me in the queue to board the plane. It was hilarious! I got the collection.

FC: Is there anything that you collect now?

KT: I like sailor's woolworks – portraits of ships embroidered by men on board their ships. They are primitive but highly detailed at the same time. I like the idea of these men spending their spare time sewing away in their bunks.

FC: You became Sotheby's youngest auctioneer at the age of 21 working at their Chester and London branches before establishing your namesake auction house in 2003. I'm 28 now and I always wish that I was someone that knew from a very early age what I wanted to do. I'm still carving it out and figuring out my place. Were there any formative experiences in your upbringing that led you down this path?

KT: I don't think I chose it – I think it chose me. It was serendipity really I ended up at Sotheby's in 1980 thinking it would just be for a year as my university application had been messed up by my Foundation course lecturers – but I fell in love with the antiques, the objects, the highly entertaining clients and interesting colleagues, with the whole auction business itself. I was completely hooked. Luckily for me someone spotted my dedication and enthusiasm (I think I only earned £2500 a year – even then that was terrible pay) and gave me a chance. I will always be grateful.

FC: You have held a number of notable wardrobe sales by the likes of Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Princess Diana,

Audrey Hepburn, Diana Vreeland, Ava Gardner, Elizabeth Taylor, Daphne Guinness, Marit Allen, Celia Birtwell, Jordan, Björk, the list goes on. In auctions, providence is key, turning something otherwise pedestrian and everyday into something special, symbolic and alive. There's one side of estate sales where anything and everything is up for grabs – pill bottles, locks of hair, diaries, slices of wedding cake... To you, what makes the sale of clothing different?

KT: Clothes are hugely personal. They are worn next to the skin but are also an indicator of that person's personal taste and style and how they wished to be perceived. The best fashion houses dressed some of the most beautiful, interesting women in the world – the combination of haute couture with a fashion icon is totally magical and usually adds lot of 0000s to the value – quite rightly.

FC: It must be quite a sensation seeing all of these items that belonged to people that were so revered. Do the sales ever feel eerie to you? I imagine sales often occur in the event of a death, sometimes with family members present. Do you ever think about this deathliness?

KT: No, I don't feel it is eerie. In many ways I see some of these fabulous women as old friends now, dare I say? I have handled so many garments belonging to them, I have seen them put on and lose weight as they lived their lives, seen their changes of style and direction – which usually coincided with life changes. I particularly revere Princess Diana whose clothes very much followed her journey in life and reflected her moods and lifestyle from young ingénue to sophisticated self-assured woman. I think for those who are left behind the clothes can be one of the

most upsetting things to deal with and I am always sensitive to that. It can be very emotional.

FC: There have been pieces that I have wanted to bid on based on a mix of nostalgia, desire, compulsion and that feeling of proximity to the original owner. Some of Jordan's pieces for example, maybe there's a subconscious thing that I might be imbibed with some of her essence. What do you think the motivations behind people's purchases are? Is it about possessing a moment in time for example? A sentimentality shared by strangers?

KT: Jordan was a wonderful woman and I was so proud to have handled the sale of her wardrobe during her lifetime and for her to have specified in her will, that she wanted me to sell her her wardrobe after her death. It was an honour. Most of the bidders in that sale were just huge fans of hers – they loved the way she had lived her life – seemingly fearlessly – a unique rebel who incited fear and admiration in equal measures during her 70's punk phase in particular. No-one messed with Jordan – not even Westwood!

FC: These garments are like peeking through someone's window, glimpsing into someone's private lives through their clothing. There is a level of intimacy there. For some individuals who come to you, the clothing is often deeply personal and clearing out can be traumatic and a rediscovery. How do you navigate this? Do you ever find people withdrawing items because they can't part with them?

KT: It is rare for people to withdraw something once they have made the decision to sell but it occasionally happens. Many clients find it a cathartic experience. I remember Daphne Guinness' huge sense of relief

when rail upon rail of clothing left her home and went under the hammer. Others want to move on in their lives and the clothes can remind them of a partner or a past that they want to leave behind. For collectors it can be really hard though – they see their collection as akin to selling off their children and that demands some real soul searching. My dear friend Sandy Schreier agonises every time she lets a piece go.

FC: Are you ever surprised to see something turn up for auction? I'm always quite floored when something from the 15th or 16th century pops up because I'm so surprised they still exist and are in such good condition. I think this might come from today's throwaway culture and my association with only seeing historical garments in museums.

KT: No not really – I really treasure these early pieces and it's interesting to note how many of the 20th century's



greatest designers have been influenced by historical fashion – e.g. Westwood, Galliano, McQueen to name just a few.

FC: There was an unusual lot in the "Vintage Fashion, Antique Costume & Textiles" auction from October 2022. It was a

1950s waist-slimming exercise belt by Rallie Health Appliances. It was quite a mad thing - pink cotton with chords, springs and two wooden handles that the wearer pulls at the chords cinching the belt, its slimming capabilities to be determined. Valued in the low hundreds, it ended up selling for £2,800. I hadn't seen something like that before, it gave me a new insight into 1950s domesticity and how the decade dealt with the body. Can you talk about this item and its way into the auction? Were you surprised?

KT: This is why auctions are so wonderful - you never know what is going to happen. I put that exercise corset into the sale because I found it amusing, but with a very low estimate, but on the day two museums decided they wanted it and bid it up to a crazy price. I was immediately offered another and approached the underbidder who confessed that they had been carried away and no, they didn't! I've sold another since and I think it made £200.



FC: I read somewhere you also have a photographic memory, which makes identifying a garment a lot easier. I have to ask what that's like? Do you scan a page for a few seconds and when you come across it in real life years later, does the image just appear in your head like that?

KT: I have a terrible memory for names but not for garments. I can still remember pieces I sold 40 years ago and recognise them if they appear at auction again. The famous Kitmir embroidered tunic for Gabrielle Chanel – was illustrated as a line drawing in Vogue and I had always wanted to find one. The moment my client sent an image of her tunic I recognised it. Very exciting! In my spare time I have built up an incredible archive of images taken from fashion magazines from the 1890s to the year 2000. I find them really useful resource for my research when cataloguing and valuing garments.

FC: I think about the lineage of fashion exhibitions that have traced aesthetic sensibilities from Cecil Beaton's *Fashion: An Anthology* held at the V&A in 1971 until now and the renewed spotlight on vintage and archive by brands and consumers. Have you noticed a change in our relationship to the past and where this might come from?



KT: I think big brands now recognise the importance of their Patrimoine or Heritage. It not only adds kudos to the brand itself but is invaluable as a resource for their creative directors who can mine the archive for ideas. Having said that, some cultures still don't get 'vintage



fashion' and see it as dead men's clothes. China, India, Germany are way behind the curve for example. 'I can afford to buy new – why would I want those?' is the attitude. Fair enough! The British with its art-school culture and the Americans with their interest in history have always been fairly playful with clothing.

FC: Aside from the auctions, you have negotiated the private treaty sales of the wedding suit of King James II of England, 1673, to the V&A for example. What has been the most exciting piece(s) you have come across? Are there any that linger in your mind to this day?

KT: Yes – I think one of my all time favourite pieces is the Zodiac jacket made by Elsa Schiaparelli for her 1938 collection. Of soft midnight blue silk velvet it was embroidered by Lesage with the signs of the zodiac. Schiap was highly superstitious and believed in astrology, the Great Bear being her own personal lucky symbol. It had belonged to an American living in London who had been given it as a present by an old boyfriend's mother in the 1970s. She only wore it once, because she felt it was too special, too beautiful to risk damaging. It eventually sold for £110,000 to Azzedine Alaia – my dear friend and one of the greatest fashion collectors in the world. When I recently visited the Musee des Arts de la Mode's Schiaparelli exhibition – there it was displayed in full glory. Made me very proud. The jacket changed my client's life – she gave up her job and took up a career that she had always wanted to do. I was proud to be a part of that.

FC: You've mentioned that you feel romance is missing from contemporary clothes, which is a feeling I share with you. There are things that I love, but they don't floor

me in the same way something vintage or historical does. Why do you think there is romance missing in contemporary clothes? Do you think it will emerge with time?

KT: Back in the day young designers were given more freedom to play with their ideas. These days with big business needed to backing emerging brands and talent – an uncommercial collection with poor sales can often mean instant dismissal. Galliano, Westwood, McQueen all had terrible sales figures in the early days and frequently lost their backers – but they battled on and produced some of the most groundbreaking influential fashions of their time. Would they be allowed to do that today? No, I don't think so.

So - if modern fashion (relatively poorly made in comparison to vintage and over-priced for what it is) doesn't do it for you – then like me, just look back in time. Unlike modern retail fashion, if you take care of your vintage piece, when you come to resell it in years to come – you will probably get your money back or even make a profit. What's not to like?

