

THIS OLD THING?

How Hollywood went secondhand.

BY DANA GOODYEAR

Ten years ago, Cameron Silver, a former Weimar-style cabaret singer, opened a fancy vintage shop on Melrose Avenue, in Los Angeles. He was twenty-six, and he called the shop Decades. A few years later, Decades moved to a new space, above the old, and Silver and a partner, Christos Garkinos, now run a contemporary consignment shop, Decadestwo, on the lower level. On a recent good day, Silver sold a piece to Gwen Stefani, a dress to someone who lives in London and Los Angeles, and a fur vest to Sandy Hill, in Los Olivos, and he sent a Birkin and three Chanel purses “on approval” to clients in New York. In the days immediately before that, he sold an Ossie Clark maternity dress to Julia Roberts, a short white Thierry Mugler dress to Chloe Sevigny for the *Vanity Fair* Oscar party, and a mocha chiffon Carven dress to Jada Pinkett Smith.

Decades is behind a frosted-glass door at the top of a short, steep flight of stairs carpeted in leopard print. There is a zebra skin on the floor, a wall of Hermès, Chanel, and Judith Leiber bags, and a mannequin usually clothed in vintage Azzaro (a small French fashion house where Silver consults), Yves Saint Laurent, or Jean Dessès. A vitrine of paste-and-glass jewelry sits beneath large windows that face the street, and around a corner is a row of Oscar gowns arranged by color from red to pink and purple, blue, green, and gray; a wall of black; and, in the farthest recess of the store, racks of bohemian English designers, a Pucci ghetto, and one or two pieces that date back to the nineteen-tens. “Vintage” has a shifty definition, and Silver will sell things from even the

nineteen-nineties if he deems them collectible. (Nineties Versace, for example, counts, so long as it was made before Gianni was murdered.) The guiding principle is not history so much as what might look “directional”—relevant to runway fashion today.

“We cover a hundred years of fashion, but there is a Decades look,” Silver



Cameron Silver helped make vintage a red-carpet standard.

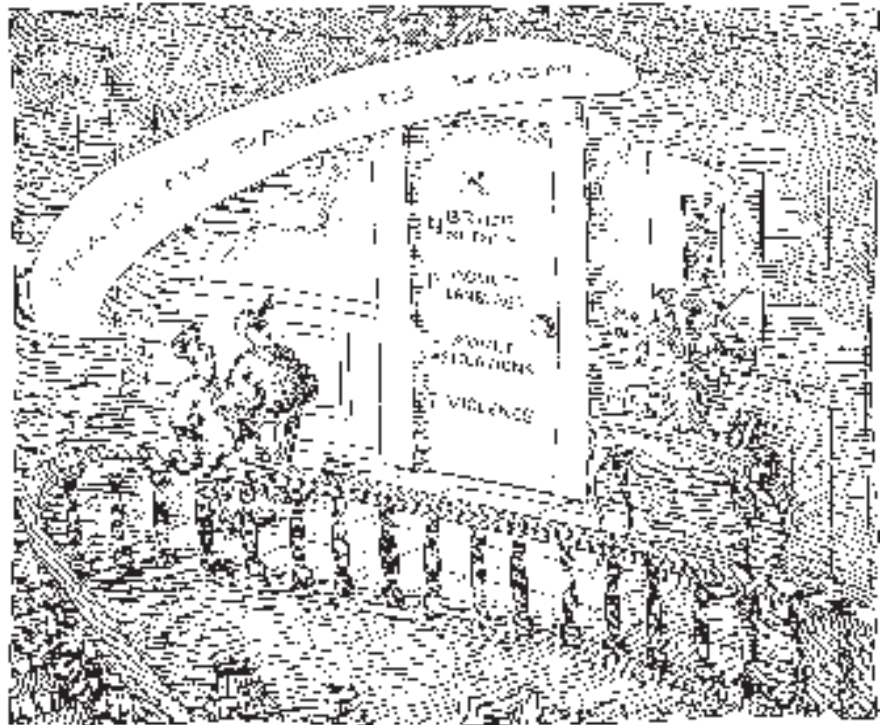
says. “It is about vintage that looks modern, sexy, unstudied, and glamorous. It’s the democratization of the red carpet. I had a client buy two Y.S.L. haute-couture dresses for thirty-eight hundred dollars. You can’t go into Y.S.L. and buy a skirt that’s ready-to-wear for that. You can barely buy a blouse that’s evening.”

Since Decades opened, and partly

owing to Silver’s efforts, vintage has become standard attire for celebrities. In 2001, a watershed year, both Renée Zellweger and Julia Roberts dressed in vintage for the Oscars (Zellweger wore a yellow 1959 Jean Dessès from Silver’s biggest competitor, Rita Watnick, of LILY et Cie, in Beverly Hills; Roberts wore Valentino from the company archives). That spring, Nicole Kidman wore clingy white vintage Azzaro, from Decades, to the New York premiere of “Moulin Rouge” and the next day made the cover of *Women’s Wear Daily*. Vintage has become so important to Hollywood that this year eBay’s style director, Constance White, added vintage to the selection of clothes she bought from the Web site and made available to celebrities during Oscar week. “It’s a compliment,” Silver said. “But I would never buy on eBay. I don’t want people to come in and be able to pinpoint where I got something. The mystery is gone.”

Silver has the soul of a popularizer, and the affect of an aesthete. He is tall, with side-parted dark hair slicked back on one side and set to a tumbling curl on the other, and a mode of dress that recalls a vaguely sinister mogul of old: black crocodile vest, slim gray tweed suit, monogrammed shirt, Codognato skull ring. Until recently, he wore his hair chin-length and pin-straight; before that, he had an Afro. Liz Goldwyn, a close friend and a wearer of vintage down to her undergarments, says, “He’s gotten more dandyish—sometimes when just my husband and I are at his house for dinner he’ll get completely turned out, and then disappear and come back carrying a humongous burgundy crocodile Hermès bag. He’s got this great character that he’s doing. It’s an extension of him, but it’s a character.”

Silver is deeply, unpretentiously polite, with an air of mischief that makes it seem as if he were always slightly struggling to stay on best behavior. His is the kind of irony that preserves deniability. Blair Sabol—a former fashion writer who sold



him her Zandra Rhodes, Stephen Burrows, and Rudi Gernreich—says she can't get him to badmouth anyone. "Ah, but she's such a sweet spirit," he will say of the most notorious boor. Circumspection is important in his line of work. He is often among the first to know who is pregnant, feuding, or turning Scientologist—one stylist in particular does heavy business with the Church. (Sometimes women anticipating divorce bring clothes to Decadestwo, a way of discreetly converting assets to cash.) Silver has learned to keep a poker face.

A week before the Golden Globes, Silver was setting aside gowns for Salma Hayek, whose stylist, Rachel Zoe—a Hollywood fixture who works with Lindsay Lohan, Mischa Barton, and Keira Knightley, among others, and is known for her seventies-inspired jersey-dress-and-gold-bangle look—was sending an assistant to pick them up. (Silver, playfully talking shop with Zoe's office: "I've got some real cheap dresses for her that she can afford. I've got lots in the eighteen-hundred-to-four-thousand range.") There was one small complication: Nicole Richie had sent her personal assistant and her new stylist's assistant to Decades to resell some unwanted clothes. Last fall, Richie and Zoe, who outfitted Richie during her transformation from volup-

tuous party girl in getups from the West Hollywood shop Kitson to skeletal party girl in vintage Hervé Léger, had a nasty falling out, which resulted in Richie's posting a "blind item" on her MySpace page about a "35-year-old raisin face," which was widely assumed to be a reference to Zoe. Everyone was scheduled to arrive at the same time. "I'm like Norway," Silver said, calm in the face of a diplomatic crisis.

Richie's helpers arrived first, hauling a dozen garbage and garment bags of castoffs. Several employees from the store downstairs appeared—most of the clothes were contemporary—and, with Jarred Cairns, who has worked for Silver for eight years, they started emptying the bags onto the zebra rug: dozens of pairs of tiny little jeans, nighties, shrugs, shirts with the tags still on. Silver held up a pair of jeans and said, sardonically, "I hear skinny jeans are really in."

The buzzer rang, and Silver and Cairns exchanged a furtive look as Zoe's assistant spilled into the room, laughing loudly. Her cell phone rang, and she jabbered into it, in a display of nonchalance ("Shut up I'll call you back I love you goodbye"), as she dashed around, looking at gowns. With the changing-room door open, she undressed and tried on

something for herself. "Where are you going to wear that?" Silver asked chidingly, as she put on a mustard-colored burnt-velvet bell-shaped minidress. "To the movies!" she said. Richie's assistant, studiously, loyally BlackBerrying on the couch, refused to acknowledge the enemy presence.

Meanwhile, the shop employees sorted silently through Richie's clothes. Silver took a few vintage pieces to sell on consignment—"It's not going to fit anyone, so I don't want to hold on to much of it," he said. Six bags went to Decadestwo, and Richie's helpers carted away the rest to donate to a charity thrift store. After they left, Cairns said, "I thought there was going to be a little catfight there."

Silver grew up in a house with seven bathrooms in the flats of Beverly Hills. He was a doted-upon only child, but for a year had five or six siblings from a family of Laotian boat people that his parents, committed humanitarians, took in. (His father, Jack, is a lawyer; Margot, his mother, gave up a job with an advertising firm when she had Cameron.) He entertained his grandmother's friends, at lunch parties, and his parents, when they took him overseas. In Madrid, the Silvers stayed in a hotel suite with two phone lines. After Jack walked through the lobby without a jacket, the phone rang and a Spanish-sounding voice said that the hotel manager needed to have a word with him about his improperly casual attire. Jack went down to the lobby only to find that the manager hadn't called: it was Cameron, playing a prank from the other room. (He still regularly fools his parents, friends, and the people at Decadestwo, calling in a high squeaky voice, or pretending to be a charlatan with a hot stock tip.) Silver's tendency to accumulate and divest manifested itself early. Margot says that she could never leave Saks without buying him a Polo shirt, and that once she came down to the kitchen and saw him with a stack of Polos two feet high. He was giving them to the housekeeper.

At thirteen, Cameron had a bar mitzvah, and his parents hosted a reception at the Beverly Hills Hotel. In contrast to the bat mitzvah of a classmate who made

her party entrance on a white stallion, the distinguishing excess of Cameron's bar mitzvah was that Margot managed to get both rabbis from the synagogue. He named the event "The Cameron Awards" and, wearing a tuxedo, top hat, and white gloves, performed "New York, New York," "Easy Street," and "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile" for his guests, before giving out Oscars.

After studying Theatre Arts at U.C.L.A., Silver travelled around the country, singing in theatres for audiences of several hundred. In L.A., he drove a Land Rover with the vanity plate "CROONR." When, in Seattle, he found an apple-green coat by Pauline Trigère and a trove of fifties Dior couture, he started buying vintage clothes and sending them home to his mother to store. He lived in a guesthouse at his parents' place until he was thirty, when he bought the house he now shares with his boyfriend of nine years, a handsome commercial actor named Jeff Snyder. The house, in Los Feliz, was built by Rudolf Schindler for his insurance agent, in 1930, and after Silver and Snyder completed a painstaking restoration (for which they won an award from the L.A. Conservancy) they had it landmarked.

In 1996, Silver released "Berlin to Babylon," a recording of the songs of Kurt Weill and Friedrich Hollaender. Writing in the album's liner notes, he explained that he was drawn to the themes of "alienation, yearning, irony, humor, and unresolved sentimentality." The year after the album came out, Silver stopped singing and opened Decades, but, by his own account, he has never stopped performing. The actress Marisa Tomei, who has several times bought awards-show gowns or after-party dresses from Decades just hours before an event,



told me that Silver's past in show business makes the act of buying something from him feel more creative than ordinary shopping. "He's got a vaudevillian heart inside there, and I connect with that," she said. "I've known him through different stages and phases of my career, starting with 'What am I supposed to wear to a fancy party?' He helped me in a Maurice Chevalier-in-'Gigi' kind of way." There

is also the charm: “You always feel like he’s gifting you, even though you’re spending an enormous amount of money.”

Silver makes friends easily. Early in his career, he had a party and asked Peggy Moffitt, Rudi Gernreich’s model and muse, whom he had never met, to be the guest of honor. Shortly after that, Moffitt and her husband, the photographer William Claxton, were going to Milan for a show of Claxton’s pictures of Moffitt wearing Gernreich. Silver lent Moffitt a Gernreich for the opening party, given by Karl Lagerfeld, and she invited him along. “We had great fun, and he made a lot of contacts, which was very good for him,” Moffitt says. “I think he’s the most socially adept person I’ve ever met, and I’ve met loads and loads of people in a very long life.” When Tiffany Dubin, the stepdaughter of A. Alfred Taubman, who was then the chairman of Sotheby’s, started a couture program at the auction house, Silver was extremely supportive: at the first sale, in 1997, as more established dealers snobbishly refused to bid, he bought a pair of 50-inch-waist Gucci leather pants that Taubman himself had put up for sale, with the thought that he would have them altered to his own size.

Sally Singer, an editor at *Vogue*, believes that Silver has a stylist’s eye. “He likes to take a designer who’s undervalued in the vintage world,” she said. “No one was looking at vintage Azzaro before Cameron appeared with a trough of it he got from God-knows-which old lady who was slinky once. He thought, Slink, Hollywood, we can do this—and then it starts moving. Eight to ten years ago, vintage was about looking at the right pedigree, the labels, things that hadn’t been altered. We love those collectors—they help preserve the history of fashion. But Cameron is about where is fashion moving and how can we move with it.”

Last year, for example, Silver began to sense that the world was experiencing a “Lacroix moment.” At Doyle, the New York auction house, which until recently held eclectic couture sales, he tried to buy a couple of Christian Lacroix pieces that were said to have belonged to Bette Midler but was outbid. The Lacroix moment took on definite contours when his client Becca Cason Thrash let him know that he was expected at a high-black-

tie party in Houston, at the end of February, where, to benefit the American Friends of the Louvre, the latest Lacroix couture show would be reenacted on a runway built down the middle of her indoor swimming pool. “All the ladies are calling about Lacroix to wear to Becca’s party,” he said, several weeks before the event. He had none in stock, and began to search for Lacroix and other suitably grand dresses. “I have good business in Texas,” he said later. “I will see people I’m really fond of. I don’t make these trips intentionally to build the business, but I’m sure it has real value in that regard. It’s like being a politician when you’re a retailer.”

A rule of thumb in vintage is that you will find a cache in the place you least expect. Keni Valenti, who sells vintage clothes in Miami and New York, told me, “The weirdest place I ever found something was at a Salvation Army in a really poor neighborhood where the Arch is—what town is that? St. Louis. I found a couture Lanvin dress and a couture Dior dress, for two or three dollars each.” Mark Walsh, a high-end dealer—he sells mostly to museums and to collectors who don’t alter, wear, or even touch the clothes with ungloved hands, and says that he has more twenties and thirties Chanel than the Chanel archive—told me that he once put off for a year a woman who called him about some antique linens and lace she had found in a trunk in the house of her aunt, who had died. He has allergies, and she had mentioned that her aunt had cats. She kept calling. “Finally, I fortified myself,” he said. “I bought a respirator at Home Depot.” In the attic of the house—a Westchester Tudor decorated by Dorothy Draper in the forties and, by the time Walsh got there, populated by a couple of hundred cats—he found more Vuitton trunks than he had ever seen. In them was a pristine collection of couture, dating from 1905 to 1925; some of the clothes will be on display this spring at the Metropolitan Museum, in a show devoted to Poiret.

Once, Silver got a tip from a friend of a friend (a former stylist for the Dixie Chicks) that a private collection of three thousand pieces of designer clothing and haute couture was being sold in an estate sale in Spokane. He flew there and

ELEGY

The bird on the other side of the valley
sings *cuckoo cuckoo* and he sings back, inside,
knowing what it meant to the Elizabethans.
Hoping she is unfaithful now. Delicate
and beautiful, making love with the Devil
in his muggy bedroom behind the shabby office.
While he is explaining the slums were there
when he got the job. *And* the Buicks burning
by the roads in the dark. He was not the one
doing the judging, he says. Or the one pointing down
at the lakes of burning lead. He is feeding
her lemons. Holding shaved ice in his mouth
and sucking her nipples to help with the heat.

—Jack Gilbert

bought what he considered the sixty best items. He has bought in New Hope, Sydney, and at several places (a tailor, a charity shop) in La Jolla that Liz Goldwyn turned him on to. He has been in Joan Collins's closet but didn't find anything for the store. The magic combination of Neiman Marcus, oil money, and closet space has made Texas a gold mine of stashed couture, and Silver has prospected there with success. The morbid aspect of his job seems not to affect him, and he is sentimental only to a point. "I love older people," he said. "That's one of the ways this job works for me. One of the first things I bought was from a woman who had recently lost her husband. She said, 'Cameron, this is the dress I met my husband in.' It was Chantilly lace. Tom Ford bought it three months later."

Several years ago, after stopping by the store when Silver happened to be out of town, Catherine Deneuve invited him to come and see her at home in Paris. She gave him the security code to her apartment, made him an espresso with almond milk, and showed him what she was willing to part with: Chanel accessories (he gave a couture headband to Goldwyn), Y.S.L. jewelry (which all went to one client, who has a four-thousand-piece collection), Hermès luggage (he kept some for himself), and clothes. She smoked skinny cigarettes, and had beautiful accessories. "There were these decorative-arts cigarette boxes," Silver said. "They were so wonderful. All

these cigarette boxes that I *wish* she would sell."

Six months ago, he got a phone call from the Bond girl Jill St. John. "I went to the house and met her and R.J."—her husband, the actor Robert Wagner. "Unfortunately, she's not ready to get rid of her Alaïa yet. When I was buying, she said, 'I've sold my jewelry already—that was fun, since I got it all for free.' I still haven't sold the best piece: a James Galanos beaded gown. She wore it on the cover of *People* in 1982." In the fall, he took a number of pieces to Hong Kong, to a trunk show at Lane Crawford, a department store. Sarah Rutson, the fashion director, had flown him over to educate her Chinese clients about vintage, and remove the stigma and the superstition associated in Chinese culture with wearing someone else's clothes. "Fashion is about storytelling, and Cameron's very good at that," Rutson said. "They loved hearing about Jill St. John and her Bond-girl phase." (They also loved Silver, and many asked to have their picture taken with him.) Recently, Mary J. Blige bought a mink-trimmed Galanos maxicoat that St. John wore to the Oscars in 1969, and wore it in the limo on the way to a party that Jada Pinkett and Will Smith threw for her the Friday before the Grammys. The hostess wore a purple Halston from Decades.

Silver travels constantly—to auctions, fashion events, trunk shows, parties—and thereby puts himself in the way of luck. Last fall, he went to Flor-

ence for the wedding of a Texan friend and, while he was there, heard from an Italian collector that Irene Galitzine, a Russian princess and designer known for having made Claudia Cardinale's pants suit in "The Pink Panther," had died. He went to her apartment in Rome and trolled through heaps of clothes—runway samples from the seventies and eighties—to pick a few choice pieces (including the mustard-colored mini-dress). In January, he was in Miami for a vintage-jewelry show, where he bought lots of seventies Kenneth Lane, flamboyant eighties Chanel (Maria Sharapova likes it), and a Cartier belt of misshapen golden disks that looked like something dredged from the Mediterranean. "Jackie O. always wore this style in Capri," he said. Afterward, he flew to Paris for the fashion shows, and bought Chanel bags, dead-stock Mugler, and a very small Christian Lacroix that went to a Hollywood client rather than to a Texas one.

In February, Silver flew to New York to host a party for Lisa Perry, a designer friend, and to scout the vintage show at the Metropolitan Pavilion, in Chelsea. The day before the show, he stopped by the Met to see an exhibition of clothes from Nan Kempner's wardrobe, and hit a couple of local resale stores, looking for Lacroix for Houston. The first was Encore, a grungy consignment store on upper Madison, where Jackie O. used to sell her clothes. "Any Lacroix?" he said, greeting the manager. "I want super-eighties-looking Lacroix. It has to be a

dress." The manager said no, but in a few minutes Silver had amassed a group of other things: a brown Bill Blass, a midnight-blue Chanel, a Leiber bag. The manager pointed out a long red-blue-and-yellow striped Balmain. "It belonged to one of the people who ran with Nan," he said, offering it to Silver for a hundred and fifty dollars.

"You know how this would be chic?" Silver said, buying the dress. "Cocktail length."

The following day, at the vintage show, Silver was dressed down, in a black turtleneck, a blazer, and brown wingtips, topped off by a sandy ostrich trench with a fur collar and a gray knit cap. He wandered among booths of Heart and Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirts, trashed Louis Vuitton suitcases, and Bakelite jewelry, asking everyone for sexy, colorful Oscar gowns and, to no avail, over-the-top eighties Lacroix. "You know what'll happen with all these requests?" he said. "The next time I come, there will be all this Lacroix, but I'll be over it." Instead, he bought an emerald-green Bill Blass, a Hanae Mori (after a "Madame Butterfly"-inspired Dior couture show, he thought the "Asiatic thing" was coming back), a Thierry Mugler, a Versace top, and a blue Y.S.L., which he sold to Aerin Lauder to wear to an Oscar party. A small steel-gray-haired woman in a mohair coat approached him with a tight smile. "I'm getting ready to start selling," she said quietly. "Are you interested in Beene?"

INTERNATIONAL HOUSE OF PAPERWORK



"Yes and no," Silver replied. "I have a client whose husband is nominated for best actor. She's an actor, too. It has to be *beyond*, and she's a size zero." He was leaving that afternoon for Los Angeles, so they decided that the woman, a fashion-and-film-industry psychiatrist, would FedEx him images. As she walked away, Silver said proudly, "She has probably one of the most important Geoffrey Beene collections in the world. It's a profound collection. She was one of my first clients."

Becca Cason Thrash lives in a twenty-one-thousand-square-foot two-bedroom house near the golf course of the second-best country club in Houston. (The house was recently on the market for thirty-nine million dollars.) The bayou runs through the back yard. Thrash, a spunky woman in her early fifties, who can easily seat three hundred for dinner, had two hundred and fifty to what was to be the first-ever Lacroix couture show in Texas. She had moved a glass wall to accommodate an entrance for the models. Princess Napoleon was coming; so was Charlie Rose. On the night of the party, Thrash, nicknamed Tribeca for her habit of changing her outfit three times a night, was wearing a backless red Halston dress (vintage) and a bejewelled bolero from this season's Lacroix show. Silver had on a Jean-Louis Scherrer haute-couture *bisht*, embroidered with silver thread and crystal beads, over a tuxedo. "Just something simple, Cameron!" Thrash hollered hoarsely when she saw him. "I knew you were going to upstage me."

Silver, who arrived with his friend Susan Casden, one of the few serious buyers of couture in Los Angeles, walked around the party pointing out clothes that had come from Decades: a vintage pink Azzaro with a silver-leaf-motif bodice; an Oscar de la Renta skirt from Decadestwo; a 1983 one-shoulder Chanel. He saw clients and old friends: Mica Mosbacher (who once invited him to Houston to attend a party with her and to meet her husband, Bob, the Secretary of Commerce under George H. W. Bush) and Melissa Mithoff, who recently debuted on Houston's best-dressed list. One client had e-mailed fifteen times that day, with questions about lipstick, jewelry, and hair. "Loose bun" was his advice.

Thrash patrolled a silent-auction table, to which Silver had donated a Lacroix haute-couture necklace, urging bidders on. "Come on, people! I wish I was serving tequila shots—normally I do. Drunk people bid more. But it's very French tonight and there's no tequila in France. There should be." In the library, beside a low marble-block coffee table decorated with fashion monographs, Silver met another client and her husband, who had made a fortune in nursing homes. "What are you, the Pope?" the husband asked, and Silver, good-humored, explained that he was wearing Middle Eastern garb. The husband gave him a high five in response. Thrash appeared: "Dinner is being served, y'all."

Tables for ten, covered in pink linens and pink roses, were arranged around the pool, which was flanked by long arcades whose arches framed a series of Warhol Marilyns. Thrash stood on the runway, in the center of the pool, and presided over a rapid-pace live auction: "Y'all have so much money, come on, baby, this is for the *Louvre!*" Then the models appeared, in wild dresses of yellow, orange, and pink, with necklines at the navel and enormous flowers everywhere. The Texas women were entranced. "I want that," one said to her husband, of a dress that would cost tens of thousands to have made. The men seemed less sure of what they were seeing. A cluster of them stood under an archway, expressing appreciation, in perhaps the only way they knew how.

"What do they call that? A chignon? That's sexy."

"This one is making me horny."

"I remember seeing that one on the pole a couple of weeks ago."

"Who wears this shit?"

After dinner, as waiters passed cognac on trays, Casden, beautifully attired in couture Lacroix, chatted with Marie Martinez, the Lacroix model and muse who is now director of couture for the house. She wore a black dress, with coral and jewel detail at the waist, and a black flower headpiece in her stark-white hair. Silver approached and told her she looked fabulous.

"This is an old, old dress," she said.

"I *want* some of those old dresses," Silver said flirtatiously. Martinez smiled, noncommittal. Perhaps it would take a little time. ♦