

Frances Osborne Time Travelling through clothes for Vogue Feb 2006

Ever since I was a little girl, I have longed to time-travel. Back then I imagined myself as a late Victorian child in layers of white cotton frills: a starched high ruff collar digging into my chin and tight around my throat; wrists bound in tight long-frilled cuffs that covered half my palms yet which I was meant, impossibly, to keep spotless; long frills leading from my shoulders down to my waist and then volumes of skirt, layers of petticoats underneath which I wore necessarily itchy knickerbockers and then those tight-laced ankle-high blacked boots. I was lucky, my mother told me, not to be forced to wear those boots, which had endured until her own childhood and had been constricting in every conceivable way. The discomfort of my imagined Victorian child's clothes mirrored my imagined discomfort of a nineteenth-century's child's life: freezing baths, scorching fires and being confined to bed for weeks through life-threatening bouts of pneumonia and whooping-cough.

Now it is no longer as a child that I imagine myself. Moreover I have some time-travelling clothes for real. They have been passed down to me by my female forebears – my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother. Whenever I can I slip my mother's old short black astrakhan jacket around my shoulders and stride out into the city night. As I clutch it around me my fingers trace the tightly woven curving ridges of the wool and I sink my chin into its brown mink collar. I feel its weight pulling me back in time to 1963, when she was given it for her twenty-first birthday and London was beginning to tip over the edge from the propriety of post-war life to the Swinging Sixties. By the time I reach my destination I am buzzing like a twenty-one year-old in a bustling city on the brink of dramatic change, expecting to meet fresh-faced pop stars buttoned up in suits – for the first time around. My mother claims to have been nervous, gauche, as a young woman. The silk-lined astrakhan is wrapped around me like body-armour, and I think not.

I travel further back too. A few summers ago my grandmother, my mother's mother, leads me through a series of locked doors to a windowless room where the temperature is zero and the walls perpetually grey. There, in the middle of the stone floor sits a pale teak chest whose wood still smells of spices. Inside is folded a Jaguar coat. "Take it out," she whispers, "try it on – you're old enough to wear it now and it will fit you like a dream." I sling it around me. The shoulders do fit and it drapes down in thick folds of skin flattening into a hem that swings out above my knee. "I bought it in Peking in 1935," she continues in her husky former actress's voice, "and had it altered to fit the fashion then." I have a dozen questions I want to ask her: why was she in Peking in 1935? Who was she with? What did she see? But the Jaguar coat and its spiky golden skin with thick black paintbrush dashes demands all my attention, all her attention. I catch sight of myself in the mirror and feel like purring – a deep growling purr that comes from the pit of a hungry feline stomach. The sleeves hang eight inches wide at the opening, betraying the coat's oriental origins and concealing the tips of my fingernails. Deep inside, the silk lining grips my wrists in tight cuffs designed to stop the gales of a Manchurian winter. I look into my great-grandmother's bright blue eyes which are pointed at me, but looking at another place, another time and imagine myself with my hair short and my chin high as in the photographs I have seen of her then, lipstick

perfectly painted on in a cold Peking winter, with the Japanese army preparing to swoop down from its northern Manchurian base.

I grow the three inches I need to reach her height.

But when I return to London I can't quite bring myself to step out in this coat. Fine for the Forbidden City in minus thirty, seventy years ago, it is too vivid, too animal, to walk down a damp twenty-first century London street.

An infinitely more wearable white ermine jacket takes me back a further generation, to the twenties and a beauty of a great-grandmother who remains draped over a stone pedestal in her Oliver Messel portrait in my parent's hall. "Women then," I am often told, "were sophisticated in a way you can hardly imagine now." Unlike the Jaguar, the ermine is softer than any other fabric I have stroked. It has a single silk-thread covered wire hook and eye at the neck. Above it an inch and a half of fur is slightly stiffened and gathered. It leans out from my skin, framing my neck in a way that makes me understand why women were once happy to wear ruffs: the flipside of wearing corsets with their skin-splitting whalebones. Beneath the clasp the seams fall apart in the perfect inverted V-neck. Even the pockets hidden on the inside of the jacket (no inelegant slouching with hands in pockets possible here) have beautifully scalloped hand-stitched flaps. I stand tall in the ermine and try to draw this legendary lady's sophistication back out of the thick cream silk lining into which it seeped. I imagine standing the doorway of a nightclub like the otherworldly Iris Storm in *The Green Hat*, "wrapped in a cloth of soft snow." It is 1923. The orchestra is playing, and a *grande scandale* is about to begin.

I wore this at my wedding. It was my going away outfit, draped over my dress as I scarper out at midnight, bouquet in the air behind me. That was before I learned that the original owner had spent the entire night before her own wedding weeping because she was in love with another, already married, man. Now, perhaps, I have given this a new, happier set of memories to pass on.

The clothes I long for, however, are the ones lost in Africa half a century ago. They belonged to a great-grandmother of mine who was a legendary seductress and equally famous for bringing alive the clothes she stepped into – to the extent that her purchases in Paris would be reported as far a field as the American Mid-West: "Lady Idina Haldeman, before leaving for Cairo, ordered a peach crinkled crepe satin evening dress with peach ostrich feather cape from Molyneux. Peach chiffon covers the shoulders and the feathers begin midway between shoulder and elbow. Very pale at first they deepen into almost orange and the tips curl up like inverted question marks." Reported from Paris by the *Nevada State Journal, Reno, Wednesday April 18, 1934*. But when Idina died in 1955 the figure-hugging dresses that Molyneux had first designed for her, the draped silk shirts that Patou had sent to her in Kenya – as thanks for bailing him out of financial trouble at one stage – and the hundreds of pairs of shoes for her size three feet vanished.

And what shall I, in turn, add to this collection of which I am the transient curator – until I hand it on to my own daughter for safekeeping and, perhaps, she in turn to hers? There are my tall Christian Louboutin boots that I succumbed to one January sale, and which have lit up the dark days of winter for me since. They rise from my ankles in magnificent columns of shiny black leather and elastic to a wide crenulated top just below my knees. They so look as if they should be in a museum that I feel guilty about wearing them. Yet, night after night, I cannot resist sliding them on and feeling them grip

my calves in moral support as I stride out, leaving a glimpse of those bright red soles behind me.

There is also a thickly woven silver jacket I bought in Emporio Armani in Rome a decade ago. It is very fitted with a shirt style collar warmer than any scarf, tight shoulders and sleeves. Its coup de grace is the way it nips in at the waist and out again. I was window-shopping with an Italian girlfriend who first persuaded me to try it on and then encouraged me to discard my English inhibitions and financial prudence and “Buy it, darling, even if you have to sell your flat or steal.” Luckily neither was the case and, ten years on, I still wear it at least two days a week in winter. Each time it takes me back to that Roman Holiday all those years ago.

Then there are the clothes I have yet to buy. The ones whose purchase I will be able to justify in that I am not just buying them for the here and now, but for my descendants in generations to come. I feel I need to re-balance my tiny collection away from expensive outerwear. In this age of Zara, when high fashion has come to the high street, and has an equal claim to fashion history. Last autumn’s (2005) flat fronted and wide-legged stretch brown plaid trousers from New Look will stay with me. And already I am mourning the clothes that I wish I hadn’t thrown or given away – such as that Top Shop tartan drop-waisted mini-dress that screamed 1981. That batwing mohair jumper that saw me from beginning to end of the sixth form; also, my Levi 501’s and Russian Army belt. I still have a pair of Joseph fake stretch PVC drainpipes from the early nineties that can still make me feel a little daring in this demure fashion moment. A brown feather boa bought from the haberdashery stall in the Portobello Market and a controversial fake Liza Bruce dress from M&S ?? (legal?). A taffeta bright blue tartan mini-skirt – label-less and possibly home made but of its age. I vow to stop throwing away: the higher the fashion, the more unwearable the piece becomes, the greater its time-travelling effect will be in the future.

These clothes, the ones that started with me, are not just for passing on. One day they will make their way into my daughter’s wardrobe but I have decades of wear for them yet. As a teenager I used to visit my eighty year-old paternal grandmother in her London nursing home. Sometimes I would find her at six o’clock in the evening half-squeezed into one of her debutante dresses from the 1920’s. Come on, she would say to me, addressing me as her long-dead sister. We’re late, we have to get to Grosvenor Square.

Confused or not, I hope in the long-distant future also to be easing myself out of wheelchair and into my favourite clothes of now, time-travelling in years ahead back into the great moments of what will by then, be my past.

