

( VINTAGE COUTURE )

# "IT'S ART THAT YOU CAN WEAR"

*Stylist* talks to the 'king of vintage' William Banks-Blaney as he takes his concept online

To talk to vintage expert William Banks-Blaney is to wish you were his friend. Especially as he describes the lengths he once went to in an effort to cheer up a girlfriend going through a tough time. "I just said, 'Let's go shopping,'" he tells *Stylist*. "And I took her away to Paris for the weekend to set the world to rights." See? Dream best mate material. But the spontaneous spree wasn't as successful as Banks-Blaney had hoped. "I took her to a vintage store to try stuff on, and the staff were so rude to her that they made her cry," he says. "I thought to myself, 'There's something wrong here'. The whole point of retail is to provide a service that makes you smile."

While Banks-Blaney's efforts didn't go according to plan (although we suspect they still had fun), it was that ill-fated visit to the Parisian store that planted the seed for his

own concept; William Vintage. Increasingly disillusioned by the vintage shops he frequented, the former interior designer and lifelong fashion lover opened one of his own in London and filled it with exquisite 20<sup>th</sup> century haute couture – all of which he sourced himself. A celebrity fan base (Tilda Swinton, Lana Del Rey and Victoria Beckham are all customers) and a new industry nickname – the King of Vintage – followed.

Six years on, Banks-Blaney is ready to bring the "magic" of vintage to an international customer – including women here in the Middle East. His online store, which goes live this week (3 May), is likely to go down a storm with fashion fans in the UAE, where the luxury label is king but the vintage scene is virtually non-existent. Stock includes mint-condition Christian Dior cocktail dresses, Ossie Clark jackets from the 1960s and an '80s Mugler gown fit for Michelle Pfeiffer's character in *Scarface*. "Apart from the magic that's in a great piece of vintage, the reason people love it is that it's unique. It's one of the last of its kind, if not *the* last. Every piece is a real treasure," says Banks-Blaney, who travels the world to hunt for rare finds.

"I was in Pennsylvania last weekend, two weeks before that I was in Paris, and the month before that I was in LA," says the vintage expert, who admits that competition for the most precious pieces can be fierce. "We have a small network [of people] in place now that know the kind of thing that I look for and get in touch, but it's competitive, it's a commodity market – these are finite pieces." In fact, Banks-Blaney still thinks about a Balenciaga wedding dress he missed out on. "It was from his [Cristobal Balenciaga's] last collection before he retired, and only a

handful of them were made," he says. "It went for the most extraordinary price. But I should have manned up and paid it. It's the one that got away."

Doesn't shopping for vintage online mean missing out on the thrill of the chase he describes? "Yes, it can be very fun to rifle through a cellar, or discover the flea market of your dreams," he admits. "But it's actually quite a difficult thing to find a piece that works. As a commercial buyer, I'm very confident going into a store and sorting the wheat from the chaff. I can look at a dress with a two-inch patch of sequins missing and know whether or not it can be saved. With our edit, you're discovering something you know is in great condition. You know it's a safe piece to purchase."

Banks-Blaney describes the mid-century couture that made William Vintage famous as "art you can wear". "When you're looking at really serious pieces it's terribly exciting. This was before the age of the super brand. A time when Chanel or Dior actually meant a woman or a man, with a tiny team around them, and a creative idea. It's early artwork by real geniuses."

Despite his passion for couture, Banks-Blaney doesn't deal exclusively in luxury brands. "People always ask me what my favourite label is. I don't know, I just know if I want something when I see it. Yes, a very big part of our company is the great designers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but we also have some sub-£300 [Dhs1,590] or sub-£500 [Dhs2,650] pieces that I think are really great. We're not label snobs." And if you are ready to splash out on one of those 'serious' pieces he describes, don't forget vintage retains its value. As Banks-Blaney puts it: "It's the definition of investing in your wardrobe."

[williamvintage.com](http://williamvintage.com)

RED CHIFFON GOWN.  
BALMAIN, 1968, DHS10,020

LIKE NET-A-PORTER FOR VINTAGE,  
THIS IS A LONG WAY FROM FLEA  
MARKET RUMMAGING



ORANGE MAXI SKIRT,  
UNKNOWN, 1970, DHS935



BLACK COCKTAIL DRESS, YVES SAINT  
LAURENT AT CHRISTIAN DIOR,  
1958, DHS52,780



WHITE GODDESS GOWN,  
MUGLER, 1980, DHS33,550