

CHIC REVIVAL

Kathryn Saville talks to an up-and-coming designer who is breathing new life into the best of the last century's fashion

Claudia Orrell, 35, is a London-based entrepreneur with a unique approach to fashion. Having lived and worked in Thailand a few years ago, she now spends her time between Bangkok and London developing and selling her collections.

KS: *You used to work in publishing for many years... what led you towards fashion and when did your interest in it start?*

CO: My mother always says that I was addicted to fabric from the moment I appeared on earth. I used to commandeer her silk scarves to use as my comfort blankets! Luckily she's a wonderfully patient woman and used to turn a blind eye. From there, I started playing around with her sewing kit and old manual sewing machine, and made my first skirt out of a sheet when I was about six. I insisted on wearing it to school, and thought I was the cat's pyjamas after I'd teamed it with a little red belt [laughs].

Later, in my teens, I'd make dresses for friends and family for special occasions – bridesmaid dresses, party dresses, prom dresses. I'd always dreamed of having my own fashion range, but it seemed somehow completely unrealistic, and I was also put off by the arrogance of some in the fashion world. Dressmaking was something that was personal to me, and so it remained just a passionate hobby.

But in 2007 and 2008, when I was living in Thailand working for VSO, it occurred to me that maybe this was something I could fill my days with. South East Asia is awash with wonderful tailoring skills and stunning fabrics... and spending time over there freed me up to think creatively about how I could run my work life and really follow my dreams. It was a real inspiration.

KS: *But Silk & Sawdust is more than just a regular fashion label, can you tell me more about the vintage twist?*

I guess, in recent years as a woman in my thirties, I'd stepped beyond disposable fashion as a consumer and was always looking for shops that sold timeless, feminine but funky pieces – clothes that had thought behind them and clearly were made with attention to detail. But finding that isn't easy. Vintage clothes always have a story to tell, and are sexy in an understated way, which is why so many women love them. And yet, sometimes they can be too worn, or it's hard to get the right fit. I wanted to recreate the charm, quality and attention to detail of the vintage dress with Silk & Sawdust, but develop the classics by using the stunning fabrics available today.





All the designs are based on vintage pieces or patterns from the 20th Century, recreated in new fabrics. They are hand-tailored by wonderfully skilled dressmakers in Bangkok and each design is only available in small numbers, giving customers that sense of discovery and exclusivity.

KS: *Where do you source the fabrics?*

Oh that is something I spend literally hours on. I love it! I found some in London, including the Liberty prints and Paul Smith linens from a wonderful retailer who lives near me. I also went to the Paris fabric fair, *Première Vision*. Being a small set-up, I was met with some frosty reception by some of the sellers, but one Turkish brand seemed un-fazed by the quantities I needed. Of course, Bangkok and Thailand have a whole world of stunning material.



During my recent trip I spent days and days there, becoming familiar with what is available, who sells what. On each visit, I'd start with a small bag of clippings, and within a few hours, end up with huge sacks stretching my arms out of my sockets, trying not to bash people in the shins! I think the vendors at Pahurat Market were extremely amused by this funny 'farang', who kept coming back to the market buying large quantities of cloth.

KS: *Where does the inspiration for the individual pieces come from?*

The dresses are interpretations of classics from the 20th century. I spend a lot of time researching vintage patterns on the net and going to vintage fairs for inspiration (and accidentally buying a few pieces on the way). From these I sketch out designs and spend hours picking out the fabrics that I feel will bring them to life.

I get ideas from all over the place – for instance, I happened to see an amazing image of Grace Kelly in a dress she wore for *High Society* that made my heart leap. This became the Silk & Sawdust Grace Kelly dress. It's caused quite a sensation already – even thought it's made to order only, people seem to be chomping at the bit!

But the creative process certainly involves some trial and error. It's not all plain sailing. Sometimes, when we make up samples I realise the fabric is not going to work with the design. It's got to have the right weight for the cut, so it flows and works with the body in the right way. I'm learning everyday though, which is all part of the fun.

I'm also lucky to be working with some fantastic dressmakers in Bangkok who really get what I'm trying to achieve – that makes the development of each piece so much easier. It's really fun as well – they're so gorgeous. In the future, I'd love to set up a social enterprise element to the company, providing disadvantaged people in Thailand with the opportunity to have a paid apprenticeship in tailoring in a friendly and encouraging environment. That's my next dream.

The new Silk & Sawdust Collection is available at www.silkandsawdust.com. Prices from £59, most sizes available.

