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How to spend it

womenswear special

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A few minutes with vintage-fashion dealer Virginia Bates illuminates the enduring appeal of the 1970s maxi dress. "Fashion had such a sense of energy and freedom back then – it was more laidback than the so-called Swinging Sixties," says the former actress, who opened her renowned west London boutique in the '70s and today runs a by-appointment business. "The longer, fluid lines were flattering and feminine. We used to pick up wonderfully decorated 1920s and '30s items from Kensington Market. It was all very ad hoc, but today luxury brands are mixing things up in a similar way."

At the fore of this trend are Alessandro Michele at Gucci and Hedi Slimane at Celine. Their bright, embellished versions of the '70s "mash-up" take inspiration from increasingly sought-after originals by iconic designers such as Ossie Clark. Known for his outrageous shows, Clark collaborated with his print-designer wife Celia Birtwell on flattering dresses that now fetch upwards of £1,000. Bates has a silk-chiffon "Christmas tree" style (£1,800), named for its layered shape that would, she says, "appeal anywhere" – yet it's also quintessentially British.

"London's designers understood boho-luxe better than anyone. They made it look effortless and opulent but not overdressed," says Cameron Silver, founder of Los Angeles store Decades, whose stock includes a silk Zandra Rhodes dress (\$1,900) in a vivid turquoise print, as well as a beaded one-shoulder number (\$3,200) by Halston. "Dresses

by Clark, Rhodes, Lisa Porter and John Bates are relatively rare."

Porter is an insider favourite. The designer, whose clients included Talitha Getty and Bianca Jagger, is a trophy find for vintage experts and "collectors such as Kate Moss", says Sophie Hersan, co-founder of online luxury resale emporium Vestiaire Collective, which has a pink Porter dress (£2,204) in a paisley design. Bates is also a Porter aficionado: "She was a total original who created kaftans and dresses from patchworks of floaty and embroidered 'found' fabrics." For Stelios Hawa, head of Liberty's designer vintage department, Porter's work is "among the most evocative of the era". Another name to look out for, he says, is Jean Varon – "the label by designer John Bates, which people are just discovering now" – by whom Liberty has a high-waisted example (£895) in a gloriously graphic print.

But it's not all niche names; the leading French houses espoused the maxi style with panache. Dior, for example, had a '70s moment under Marc Bohan. "He wasn't the most innovative of designers," says Pénélope Blanckaert, head of fashion at auction house Artcurial, "but his dresses were very pretty." A floral butterfly-sleeved chiffon design recently sold for €850. But for many, Yves Saint Laurent remains the ne plus ultra of '70s design, especially his opulent, folkloric Russian and Marrakech haute couture collections – now vanishingly rare and held mainly in museums. "But ready-to-wear Rive Gauche also creates great interest," says Blanckaert, pinpointing a 1972 checked silk-chiffon dress worn by

