



Dior brown boucle wool jacket, ca. 1956. Ryerson FRC2013.99.007. Photograph by Jazmin Welch.

DISSECTION OF A WOOL JACKET BY CHRISTIAN DIOR

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It is impossible not to be intrigued by the deceptively simple design of this garment. Though it appears uncomplicated, the process of creating its perfect drape and elegant angles required mastery. Such is the beauty of couture. This wool tweed cropped jacket with $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeves was designed by Christian Dior for Holt Renfrew and is from the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection (FRC2013.99.007). Initially the jacket was dated as originating from 1958-1963, but further research has revealed that there is a high probability that it is from 1955-1956 and that there was once a matching dress or skirt.

There are many subtle and complex details to be noticed. For example, the front and back of the jacket are cut on the bias, which results in a soft chevron effect. The sleeves are cut as part of the body of the jacket with a seam that follows the shoulder line. There is a diamond-shaped gusset under each underarm. In couture tradition, there are bound buttonholes on the front of the jacket and three metal weights concealed in the lining towards the hem of the jacket to help it hang properly.



The jacket is very angular in shape, with sharp straight edges along the hem, collar, pockets and sleeves. The collar of the jacket is flat and wide. There are three large textured round buttons at the front that hold the jacket closed. These buttons are very large at 2 inches (10 cm) across and appear to be made of plastic. Two 5-inch (13 cm) wide tailored pockets sit on either side of the centre front, towards the bottom of the jacket. The pockets are lined but would have limited functionality due to their very shallow depth. The selvedge is not visible in the garment, because the jacket is fully lined with facings at the neckline and centre front. The gusset under the arm appears in both the shell and the lining of the jacket. There are no reinforcements to the jacket, in terms of boning, padding, or wire. This garment was made with a combination of machine and hand stitching. The care taken with construction is apparent, and this affirms the quality and cost associated with a Dior garment.

Dior brown boucle
wool jacket, ca. 1956.
Ryerson FRC2013.99.007.
Button and collar detail.
Photograph by Jazmin
Welch.

The fabric of the jacket gives it the appearance that it would be very warm. The wool tweed has been matched with a silk satin lining. The outer shell of tweed has a number of colours in its pattern, with brown and a greyish green being the most prominent as well as some flecks of white. The silk satin lining is reddish brown.

The garment has a label at the neckline that reads: "Christian Dior Original in Canada Exclusive with Holt Renfrew and Co. Limited." It was in 1951 that Christian Dior and Holt Renfrew made an agreement for exclusive Canadian reproduction rights (Palmer 117). The label does not indicate the season or exact year that the jacket was made. There are no care labels, name tags or size labels within the garment. There is no information on the owner as the jacket was donated to the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection anonymously.

This jacket is a truly beautiful piece. Constructed to sit lightly on the body, it is boxy but would not overwhelm the frame. The design of the jacket is both clever and subtle: a perfect marriage between couture quality and everyday versatility. It is a classic jacket: something proper to wear in a professional setting or for formal occasions. Though a serious piece of clothing, its cropped length, big buttons and the 3/4 length sleeves of the jacket present as anything but austere and boring.

Studying this garment requires some historical context, which is most easily provided by considering comparable garments. There are several other Dior pieces in the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection, but the most directly comparable examples can be found in the collection of the [Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). An online search reveals that there are 797 garments by Christian Dior in the collection of the Costume Institute. From this sample, the general patterns and trends in Dior's early designs are apparent. Dior is most known for *The New Look*, which date from his first collection in February 1947 and the silhouette features a padded bust and hips, sloping shoulders, and a dramatically nipped-in waist. As the 1950s move along, the shape of Dior's jackets change too. Collars are wider, sleeve lengths are often shorter and the slim waist is often integrated into the matching skirt or dress: many of Dior's jackets from the late 1950s are cropped and boxy, much like this particular garment from the FRC.



One of the most similar dress artifacts in the collection of the Costume Institute is not a suit jacket but a coat. The coat is dated to 1956, almost ten years after Dior's first collection (Met Accession Number: 2002.262). Like the FRC jacket, its design is a bit of a contrast against his earlier designs. The jacket is 44 inches (112 cm) long at the centre back, and has a sack-like shape. The shoulders are unpadded like the FRC jacket, and the sleeves are not set in at the shoulder, but appear to be almost kimono-style. Similarly the FRC jacket does not have traditional set-in sleeves. The 1956 Dior coat also has three wide, round brown buttons as a closure. Beyond the obvious similarities in shape, one of the most important and exciting resemblances is the fabric: the wool used for both the coat and the jacket appears to be a very similar (if not the same) greyish-brown tweed. This similarity makes it highly likely that the FRC garment was produced in the same year, as a similar-looking self fabric suggests that the two garments are from the same collection. Like the FRC jacket, the design of this coat appears all at once very simple yet also masterfully conceived: this is the beauty of a Dior garment.

Dior coat, ca. 1956.
Metropolitan Museum of
Art, The Costume Institute,
[2002.262](#).



"Virevolte" ensemble, ca. 1955. Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Costume Institute, [2009.300.443A-D](#)

Another comparable artifact found in collection of the [Costume Institute Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) was the “Virevolte” dress and matching jacket from the Fall/Winter 1955 collection (Met Accession number 2009.300.443a-d). Like the FRC garment, this ensemble is made of a very similar looking brownish-grey wool tweed. The jacket is a little shorter than the FRC garment: at centre back it measures 17 1/2 inches (44.5 cm) whereas the FRC jacket selected is approximately 21 1/2 inches (54.5 cm). The “Virevolte” outfit features a cropped wool tweed jacket with set-in sleeves and a built-up collar, with a matching wool tweed dress to go underneath. Beyond the obvious similarities in fabric and cut, what is most interesting about the “Virevolte” ensemble is the dress underneath. It is reasonable to assume that the garment from the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection would have at one point been accompanied by a matching dress or skirt. The “Virevolte” gives a good idea of the garment that might have been worn with the jacket from the FRC. It, too, is beautifully designed and it features short sleeves constructed in a similar fashion to the sleeves on the Dior jacket from the FRC. The sleeves are cut with the front panels and widen under the arms with a gusset insert. There are two darts that bring in the waist on the front of the dress, and these darts widen into two box pleats down the skirt of the dress. A thin brown leather belt cinches the waist and matches the buttons down the bodice of the dress. The curatorial notes provided with this artifact read: “No matter which silhouette (Christian Dior) chose, the slim sheath or the bouffant skirt, the narrow waist recurs in nearly every garment.” It seems probable that the skirt or dress that accompanied the jacket from the FRC might have been quite fitted at the waist to contrast the little jacket’s boxy shape. In seeing the photographs of this ensemble on a dress form, it becomes a lot easier to see how the garment from the Fashion Research Collection might have looked as a complete outfit. After seeing “Virevolte” one could imagine that it would have been a very trim, smart look.

After a thorough analysis and comparison to similar garments, many mysteries still surround this garment. Who purchased this jacket? Who wore it? What secrets lie inside the garment, beyond the silk-satin lining? Though one can only speculate at the answers to these questions, this garment offers the opportunity to study the masterful construction of Dior.. The House of Dior is known to guard the secrets of the design and construction of their pieces. Each clue gathered in a close study of such pieces is a step towards understanding the ever-intriguing Christian Dior’s work.

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Notes on Comparable Garments in the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection

Note 1: Green and cream tweed wool jacket and skirt suit by Maggy Reeves
FRC 1998.06.007 A+B

A similar garment from the Fashion Research Collection is a Maggy Reeves tweed jacket and matching skirt. Like the Dior garment, the jacket is made of a woollen material with a silk lining. There are many similarities in cut, too: the Reeves jacket has a flat collar, button closure and a slightly cropped length. The bold look of the large round buttons, the soft cut of the collar and the matching skirt nipped in tightly at the waist compare well to the Dior jacket, too. One major similarity between the Reeves jacket and Dior jacket is the flawless job of concealing darts and seams. Both garments appear to be only one piece due to a delicate balancing of the tweed fabric.

Note 2: Citron yellow cropped jacket with sleeveless dress by Bill Blass for Maurice Rentner FRC 1986.01.001 A+B

At first glance it does not appear that the Bill Blass for Maurice Rentner jacket and matching dress have much in common with the Dior garment: the Bill Blass ensemble is a citron yellow colour with a pale blue lining. Its fabric is a brocade silk, and appears to be a formal outfit. Though quite different in colour and fabric, in many ways, the cut and design of the Bill Blass ensemble resembles that of the FRC Dior jacket. Like the Dior garment, this jacket does not have traditional set-in sleeves: its centre front and centre back panels were cut in a T-shape. With the Blass jacket, there is a side panel that continues and becomes the bottom-half of the sleeve, resulting in princess seams along centre front and centre back that curve into the sleeve seam where the armhole should be. Like the Dior jacket, the yellow jacket also has a gusset under the arm.

Note 3: Yellow Boucle wool belted coat "143C Dior SANFRAN" by Christian Dior for Holt Renfrew FRC 1997.04.044

In a beautiful saffron yellow, this coat has a striking fitted waist and an a-line skirt. A wide belt with a fabric-covered buckle secures the middle. Like the Dior jacket, this coat has many couture quality details. For example, both garments have bound buttonholes. Both garments also have a subtle topstitching done along each edge of the garment: pockets, centre front, sleeve hem and jacket hem. This garment is closer in cut to Dior's iconic New Look silhouette: with its belt and darting, it cuts an hourglass figure. If the Dior jacket had a matching skirt or dress to accompany it, it might be possible to compare the shape of the entire outfit to the shape of the yellow coat. Like the Dior jacket, the coat is lined with a matching silk fabric. Both garments are made of very fine materials.