

Tweet jacket ca.
2012s. Ryerson
FRC2012.02.001.



SMYTHE LES VESTES: THE STORY IS IN THE NAME

By Jennifer Braun

March 28, 2016

Designer Elsa Schiaparelli once wrote; "A dress has no life of its own unless it is worn." According to this statement, a one-button women's blazer which now resides in the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection (FRC) has had a dejected biography and a short-lived one at best. From the manufacturer straight to the FRC, the blazer adorned with a houndstooth pattern and caramel leather elbow patches has never been worn or owned by a particular individual. Instead, it has been stored in the archives since its production in 2012 in order for students and researchers alike to study its craftsmanship and the unique history of a Canadian company - [Smythe les Vestes](#) - who found success through its popularity.

Designed and manufactured in Toronto, this fitted blazer was coveted by FRC Collection Co-ordinator Ingrid Mida with good reason. As fan of the brand from its launch in 2004, she asked the designers at Smythe to donate something to the collection in 2012 and chose this jacket as well as another piece from the same collection - a black wool tuxedo style womenswear jacket FRC2012.02.002 (Note 1).

The fine tailoring and quality that went into creating this jacket are evident at first glance. Sold for the price of \$695 and stamped with the celebrity approval of the likes of Kate Middleton, January Jones, Charlize Theron, Blake Lively and more - who would expect anything less?



Tweed jacket ca. 2012s.
Ryerson FRC2012.02.001.
Button detail.

The piece currently housed in the FRC was a part of Smythe's pre-fall 2012 collection and was one of three one-button variations that made-up the season's line. The blazer has a classic cut and is fastened at the waist with one brown button. Three same-coloured surgeon cuffs also adorn its slightly cropped sleeves. On the front of the jacket, to the right and to the left, two diagonally-cut flap pockets can be found.

This timeless staple - the jacket - is the pillar of Smythe's success. **The company was founded in 2004 by lifelong friends Christie Smythe and Andrea Lenczner when they discovered a gap in the market to perfect and bring the women's blazer outside of the office.** At the time, 200-dollar statement jeans were having a moment and women needed a third piece to finish off this easy-going look. They believed a jacket was the solution. Evidently, women everywhere agreed. More than 10 years later, Smythe can be found on the racks of high-end retailers like Holt Renfrew, Barney's New York, Bloomingdales and more.

At its inception, Smythe was the only company who specialized in the one garment category. Before their introduction, shoppers bought tailored jackets as part of a full suit and not a separate. By specializing, they were able to perfect this garment type and reach mass appeal.

Their first collection was sold at Holt Renfrew and was an instant success. Their first shipment included a one-button blazer which became the brand's foundation. **"The one-button blazer was one of the pillars of our very first collection and we really built our brand on that silhouette,"** Lenczner explained to me in a personal phone interview.

The one-button blazer did not come about without several fittings and challenges, however. **Besides a bra, a jacket is the most complicated garment in terms of construction and pattern work.** "Part of our challenge was that we really wanted to establish our own fit," Lenczner says. To explain further, she said:

"We were frustrated that we would see this amazing jacket or blazer on a mannequin and then we would go into the store and discover that the whole back of the mannequin was pinned [...] So we really challenged our pattern makers to break those rules and to really heavily tailor our garments so that the fit that we saw and wanted for so many years is actually what they received."

They worked with several different pattern makers and went through 20 to 30 different drafts before getting the right fit. The process ended up taking about six months.

The Smythe jacket which now resides in the FRC was modelled off of that first one-button blazer. There have been slight modifications since they first introduced it, such as a minor modification of the lapel width and the sleeve length. Like the first version, the FRC's rendition also has a double-back vent and a typical menswear inspired print.

Adopted from men's fashion, the tailored jacket for women was not always deemed an appropriate choice for the opposite sex, however. According to Diana Crane, upper-class women first adopted suit jackets as early as the seventeenth century to be worn as part of their riding habits and for walking in the countryside. By the nineteenth century, it was still considered an 'alternative style' of dress for women along with ties, men's hats, waistcoats and men's shirts. The fashionable style originated in England, and was apparently later adopted by the French. And though by the nineteenth century the suit jacket was considered "the symbol of the emancipated woman", it was still not appropriate to be worn with trousers (Note 2). Instead in the 1860s and 1870s, women wore tailored but skirted suits modelled after masculine styles (Note 3).

By the 1930s, the 'mannish trend' swept all forms of women's apparel. The heightened popularity of men's inspired women's wear was due to women entering the workforce during World War I. Marketti and Angstman explain: "Women adopted tailored clothing to convey a message of ability and professionalism and as a means of communicating the social change of women entering the workforce." In addition to working, more women participated in sports like cycling and hiking. Women's magazines such as Vogue declared suits an indispensable and "essential garment." Popular culture and Hollywood stars helped create an environment in the 1930s where masculine clothing for women was accepted, including the adoption of tailored jackets (Note 3).



Tweet jacket ca. 2012s.
Ryerson FRC2012.02.001.
Cuff detail.

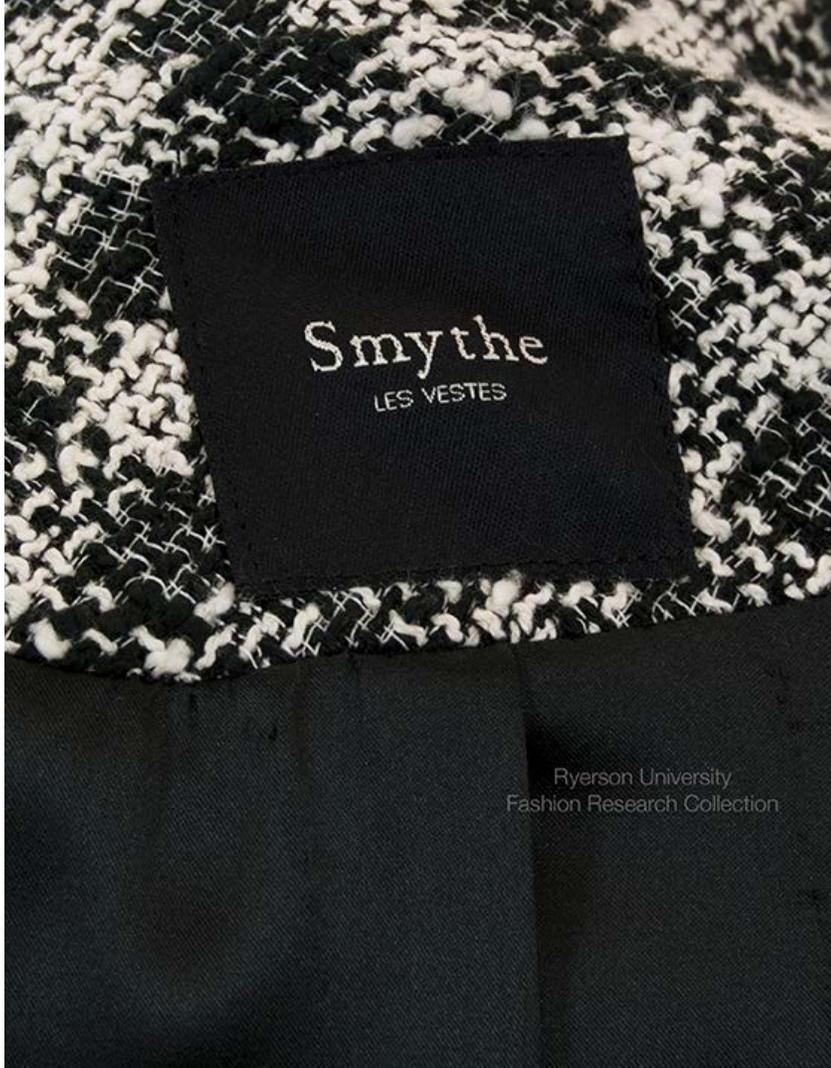
The 1970s and 1980s saw a new dress-for-success craze. According to Patricia Cunningham, by 1978, women comprised 41 percent of the work force and the fashion industry took note. Once again, suits and the tailored jacket was reinforced as a sign of power. Women's magazines and books like John Molloy's 1977 *The Women's Dress for Success Book* promoted the importance of maintaining an appearance of authority in the workplace. The suit jacket was a common clothing item that was promoted as a garment that would help women achieve such a look.

Ironically, in 2004, after decades of media effort to put women in suits and limiting power dressing to the board room, Smythe hit a gold mine when they decided to take the suit jacket out of the workplace and into a contemporary, fashionable world.

Still, just like the fashions of the 1930s that advised women to choose "clothes that would appear neither offensively 'mannish' nor dangerously feminine" as a way to "appear professional and avoid unwanted attention" (Note 4), the Smythe jacket also offers both feminine and masculine details. **"We love that mix of our fit is really feminine, it's very tailored to the body, and we love the juxtaposition between a tailored really feminine fit with a menswear driven fabric,"** Lenczner explains.

The houndstooth pattern chosen for this particular jacket appears many times throughout their collections, as well as other typical men-inspired textiles like herringbone, Donegal tweed and pinstripe.

Their pre-fall 2012 collection as well as previous collections are often inspired by fabrics as opposed to a particular theme. "We're very lifestyle driven so when we design every collection, we come from a lifestyle point-of-view as well as we are inspired by textiles."



Tweed jacket ca. 2012s.
Ryerson FRC2012.02.001.
Label.

Following the dress-for-success craze of the 1970s, in our culture, blazers and other suit-like jackets are often considered to denote professionalism, seriousness of purpose and formality (Note 5).

For the Smythe designers, the one-button blazer has come to represent something similar:

"I think to us it represents confidence [...] Our customer, she's driven by fashion, she is very conscious of value, you know, she's not into fast fashion, she is conscious of her body and she wants to show her body off and a customer who likes to show her figure is interested in our line because of the tailoring and because of the fit."

In 2011, Smythe began introducing other garment types like blouses, pants, and dresses. "There came a time where we just wanted to flex our design muscles and have fun, and introduce new categories, and show people that we can do other things," Lenczner says.

Still, it is the jacket that continues to define the Smythe brand and is reflected in the name of the company since Les vestes translated from the French means 'the jackets'. This garment type is the brand's DNA and is what makes Smythe a truly sought-after name, coveted by celebrities and fashion research collections alike.

NOTES

1. See an earlier post on this blog dated November 8, 2013 called "A Made in Canada Success Story: Smythe Jackets."
2. See Diana Crane, "Clothing Behavior as Non-Verbal Resistance: Marginal Women and Alternative Dress in the Nineteenth Century." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 3.2 (1999): 241-45.
3. See Sara Marcketti and Emily Thomsen Angstman. "The Trend for Mannish Suits in the 1930s." *Dress* 39.2 (2013): 135-52.
4. Ibid: 138.
5. Monica M. Moore and Gwyneth I. Williams. "No Jacket Required: Academic Women and the Problem of the Blazer." *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* 1.3 (2014): 360.

WORKS CITED

- Atkinson, Nathalie. "Full Mettle Jackets; Tired of the Hunt, the Duo Behind Smythe Figured it would be Easier to make their Own Outerwear than to Try to Find it in Stores." *National Post*, September 12, 2009.
- Cunningham, Patricia A, "Dressing for Success: The Re-Suiting of Corporate America in the 1970s." *The Berg Fashion Library*, 2005. Accessed: 6 Mar. 2016.
- Crane, Diana. "Clothing Behavior as Non-Verbal Resistance: Marginal Women and Alternative Dress in the Nineteenth Century." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 3.2 (1999): 241-68.
- Lenczner, Andrea. Personal interview. 11 February 2016.
- Marcketti, Sara B., and Emily Thomsen Angstman. "The Trend for Mannish Suits in the 1930s." *Dress* 39.2 (2013): 135-52.
- Moore, Monica M., and Gwyneth I. Williams. "No Jacket Required: Academic Women and the Problem of the Blazer." *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* 1.3 (2014): 359-76.

Jennifer Braun is a freelance fashion writer from Montreal, currently completing her first year in the MA Fashion program at Ryerson University. When she isn't writing about the fashion scene, she's watching *Sex and the City* or planning her next big story. Follow her on Twitter @justbejealous.

This post was edited by Dr. Ingrid Mida.