



Ruth Dukas brocade evening gown, ca. 1963.  
Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2013.02.001.

# EVENING GOWNS & CANADIAN DESIGNER RUTH DUKAS

**By Dr. Ingrid Mida**

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Ruth Dukas (b.1929) is a retired Canadian fashion designer who in the 1960s was well known across North America for her evening wear designs with their luxurious beading and embroidery. This pale yellow, green and pink brocade evening gown by Ruth Dukas with banded beaded collar and beaded trim down the front of the dress and a bow at the bust-line is lined in silk. The Ruth Dukas label is now largely unknown, except amongst those who keep these finely crafted gowns from the 1960s in the back of their closet as treasured memories of a special event.



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Collar detail.

Although Ruth Dukas was an award-winning designer who exported her fashions to the United States, little has been written about Ruth Dukas and her place in Canadian fashion industry. In April 2011, I conducted an oral history interview with Ruth for the Royal Ontario Museum archives, supplemented that interview with correspondence with Ruth by email, and also examined newspaper and magazine clippings, photos, letters and telegrams from Ruth's personal archive. I have also examined a handful of garments designed by her (Seneca College Fashion Resource Centre has several) and also kept in touch with Ruth, who recently shared her personal archive of sketches and other photos with me.

Ruth, was the daughter of a sample maker and grew up in Toronto, attending Ryerson Public School and then Central Tech high school from 1942-1946 where she studied art (the painter Doris McCarthy was one of her teachers). Although she had hoped to become a commercial artist, she found work as an embroidery designer on Spadina Avenue and in 1952 started her own business *Ruth Embroidery Co.* In 1962, she founded a dress manufacturing company called *Ruth Dukas Limited* located at Adelaide and Spadina.



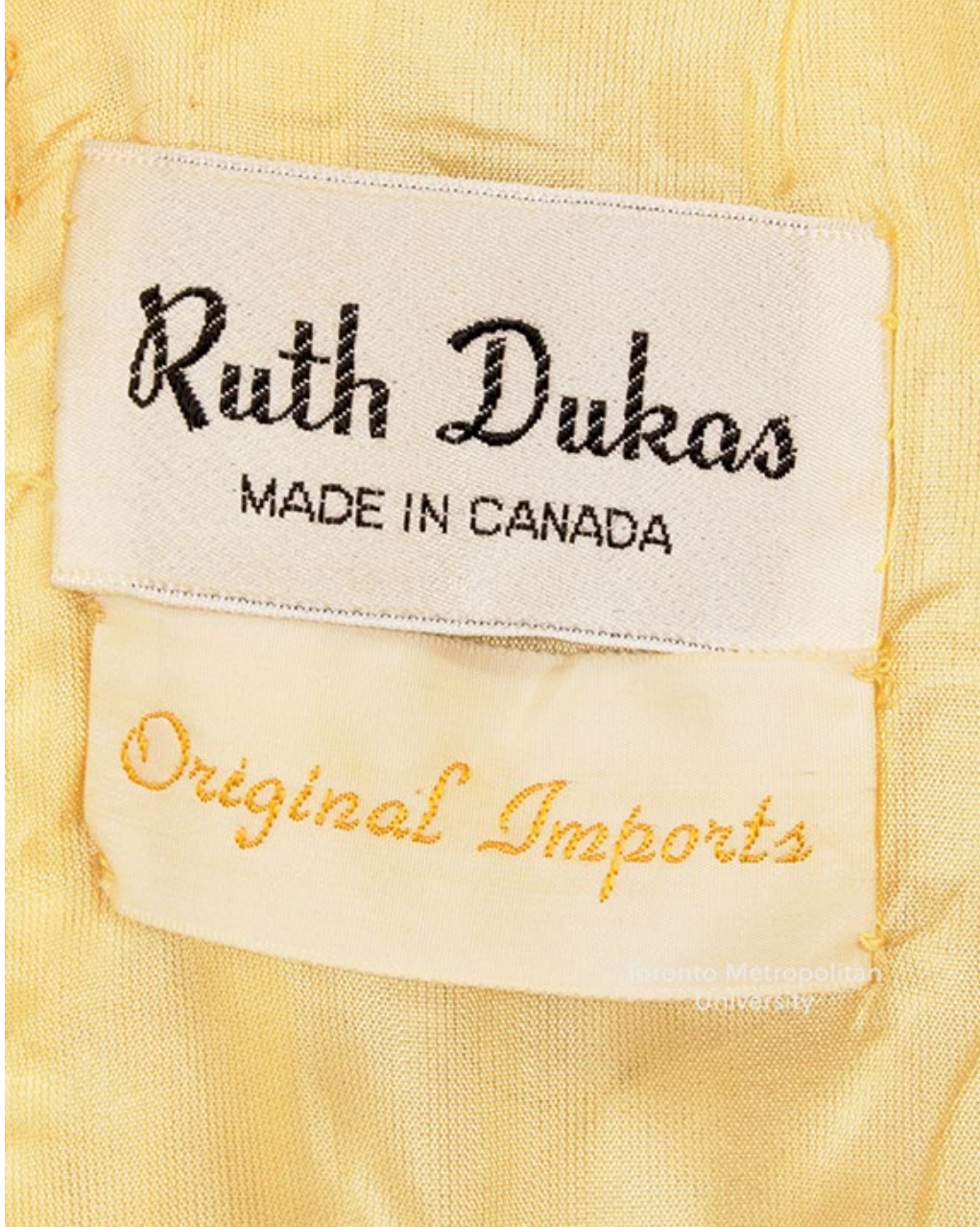


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Beading detail.

Evening wear comprised the majority of the garments. At the time, the styles, according to the book *In Style: 100 Years of Canadian Fashion* by Caroline Routh, were “relatively austere and surprisingly modest. The strapless fifties gown gave way to more covered, classical, and narrower lines, often in solid colours in finely draped chiffons or simply styles carved in crisper fabrics such as rich brocades. Decolletage and sometimes even the bust-line hardly existed. Neat jewelled edgings and bands were used, often as part of the high-waisted neoclassic style. Evening separates of long skirts and various tops were an acceptable formula.” Designs were exclusive and Ruth estimates that “90% of the work was one of a kind.” She would “not make the same dress for anyone else.” She generally would only make three different colours and three different sizes, but would adapt designs to customize the look by changing the neckline and the sleeve.

*Ruth Dukas* label dresses were priced for a well-to-do customer with a price tag of \$150-\$450 in the 1960s. (In 1969, the average annual expenditure per family on Dresses by Women, 14 years and older, was \$46.80). In a full page ad for the department store Simpson’s in the *Globe & Mail* dated Thursday, September 15, 1966, there is a Ruth Dukas gown described as “C-opulent splendor inflow of ball gown and matching coat of brocade. Lacquer red, extravagantly jewel banded by Ruth Dukas, Size 12, \$495.”





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Label.

Although she won many awards for her work and sold successfully across Canada and into the USA, Ruth closed her manufacturing business in 1972, and from 1973-1976, Ruth ran a store on Eglinton Avenue West called *Ruth Dukas Today*. In the years that followed, she also taught fashion design courses at Sheridan College and elsewhere. She ran the workroom for Jean Pierce, was a buyer and managed stores for *Riche*, designed knitwear alongside Alfred Sung, was a salesperson and buyer for *Alan Cherry*. In more recent years, she has devoted her time to oil painting, and the fine detail of her paintings continues to illustrate her meticulous attention to detail.

#### FOR FURTHER READING:

Routh, Caroline. *In Style: 100 Years of Canadian Women's Fashion*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Ltd., 1993. Print.

Advertisement for Simpson's in *The Globe & Mail*: Thursday, September 15, 1966. Print.