Vintage cool in the capital



JESSICA JOHNSON SHOPPING ATLAS

hen most people think about Ottawa's fashion sense, "cutting edge" doesn't come to mind. Not to say that the capital doesn't have its aesthetic strengths - take Governor-General Michaelle Jean, whose love of Canadian fashion has become part of her public image. Or the wedding gowns of Justina McCaffrey, whose Sussex Drive flagship produces couture for women around the globe (and once, even, a liturgical vestment for Pope John Paul II). But when it comes to the city's most famous shopping, one word usually comes to mind: traditional.

There's the Rideau Centre, perhaps more noteworthy for its proximity to the canal than the collection of mall chain stores inside. Or ByWard Market — which must be respected for its status as one of Canada's first public markets, and is good for groceries and regional specialties, such as maple syrup, but a bit of a disappointment when it comes to original souvenirs.

A couple of blocks away, however, but still in la Basse-Ville (Lower Town) neighbourhood, a new, independent fashion scene is thriving. Although it has some of the Montreal fashion industry's spunky nature and Toronto's commercial bent, it's uniquely itself and seemingly reflects Ottawa, a place that is, after all, accustomed to compromise.

"We're a community," explains
Katie Frappier, one of the owners
of Victoire, a pretty, well-stocked
boutique on Dalhousie Street.
Among Ottawa's independent boutiques — Victoire is located along a
strip of one-of-a-kind stores — the
shopkeepers organize evening
events for charity, and they cheerfully send customers to one another; most have MySpace pages, and

In some ways, Victoire (238 Dalhousie St., 613-321-1590; www.myspace.com/victoirebou-

they link to each other.



BILL GRIMSHAW/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Victoire, a pretty shop on Dalhousie Street, carries local designers, as well as interesting labels from across Canada and the United States.

tique) feels like a big sister to them all. It carries local designers, but presents them in context within-teresting labels from across Canada and the United States. It all results in an authoritative guide to style: There are even related vintage pieces, such as handbags and costume jewellery.

Next door, I ♥ Milk (234 Dalhousie St., 613-789-6455; www.myspace.com/iheartmilkshop) takes more of a one-of-the-boys approach (and it has guy's clothes, in the form of cool shorts and tees.) For women, it offers ladylike skater-wear, such as a sweater that would not look out of place in *The Great Gatsby*: white cotton, with a green-and-black tennis stripe.

The store that's most conventionally feminine is Amuse (246 Dalhousie St., 613-562-2229; www.amuseboutique.com). It offers a tasteful survey of the trends you might find in magazines this spring: cotton sundresses by the relatively affordable Ted Baker line, sexy-but-good-quality Mura stockings, and one-of-a-kind pieces, such as a wool sweater with a twist (a cardigan that opens at the back).

In general, Ottawa style is feminine, with an edge. Where Montreal might show up in tight jeans and high-heeled boots, and Toronto in its all black, slightly gothic uniform, Ottawa never pushes the envelope too far in any direction. It feels oldfashioned and romantic rather than ironic.

Nowhere is that more clear than at Aunt Olive's (209 Gilmour, 613-565-0564; www.myspace.com/crankyjumblees). In contrast to the buzz that surrounded its recent opening, the room is a small, laid-back café with Formica tables, the menus made out of old pulp paperbacks. On the walls and in the back, there's a selection of vintage clothing and accessories, but it



My souvenir

This leather purse from Victoire was a steal at \$14.

feels more thoughtfully curated than you might expect. For instance, when is the last time that you saw an entire collection of eyeglasses cases, wallets and passport holders in Gucci print?

The city's appreciation for fine vintage items might have been helped by Orange (145 York St., 613-731-5550), a store like no other in the country, if not the world. Many vintage shops can feel anachronistic and disorienting, a clash between contemporary digs and old finds. This one, which is nestled into the first floor of a 1970s apartment high-rise, is a fantastic showcase - like stepping into Austin Powers's mind. Here is the vintage that you've always wanted to find: a set of boots with the tights built in (very Factory Girl), an original Playboy Playmate jigsaw puzzle (\$45), a skirt printed with the word "LOVE" in the same font as Robert Indiana's iconic 1966 sculpture in Philadelphia. The shop has a following among the young and old in fact, Joan Rivers recently cleared out the jewellery selection.

Orange is masterminded by Sylvie Poitevin, who doesn't come lately to these clothes as a trend—she never stopped wearing them when they were first released. What's the secret to great style that lasts? "I don't like vulgarity," she says. "And I can't stand mediocrity." You could say the same of much of Ottawa, these days.

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