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Dennis Adamidis' House of Vintage.
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FASHION

Is fast fashion driving us retro?

A look at how the proliferation of cheap, chain-store duds is affecting the supply at Toronto’s vintage retailers.

BY: KIM HUGHES

In her recent book, *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, author Elizabeth Cline examines how the ruthless march of H&M, Forever 21, Joe Fresh, and other dirt-cheap, “fast-fashion” retailers has not only flattened the North American garment industry but radically changed how well we dress, seducing us into disposable rags while simultaneously (and somewhat ironically) creating a cult of desire around anything with a designer label.

This puts second-hand shops like Goodwill and Value Village—and, especially, well-curated vintage and consignment shops—in an intriguing position: They’re no longer places where only bohemians and budget-seekers shop but also, potentially, the last refuge of genuinely well-constructed, high-quality threads. Or are they?

This got me wondering: Are Toronto’s vintage retailers capitalizing on this worrisome fast-fashion trend or are bona-fide top-drawer retro finds a thing from a pre-”made-in-Bangladesh” past? I made the rounds, notebook in hand. The answers may surprise you.

Store: House of Vintage (1239 Queen St. W.)

’Hood: Parkdale (#PRK)

Fast Facts: Owner and long-time vintage dealer Dennis Adamidis’ west-end shop (it used to be further east at Portland) is a study in airiness and selectivity; racks are filled but not bursting—which means shoppers don’t have to steamroll each other to find something. Adamidis’ recent expansion to the U.K. augurs well for a continued supply of unusual pieces.

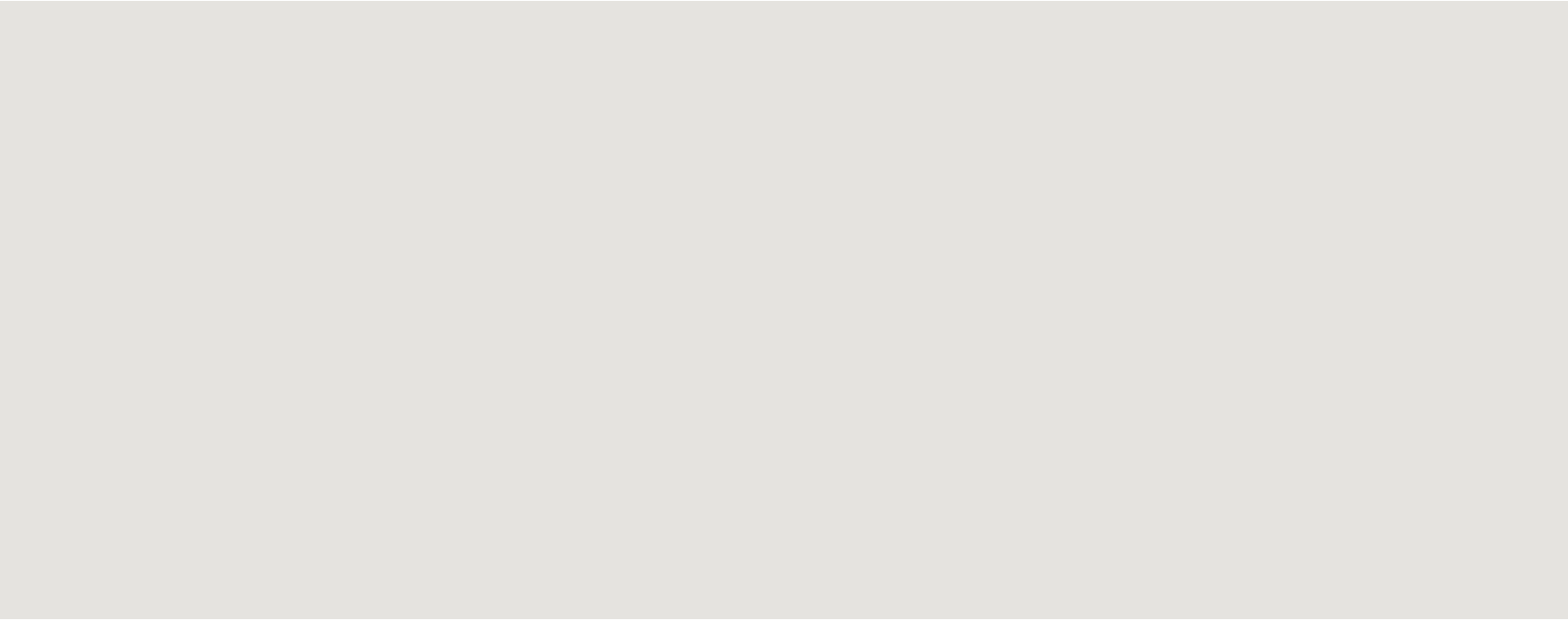
Come Here if You Need: Boots—combat, cowboy, biker, and fashion for guys and gals—or black rock ‘n’ roll Ts (White Zombie, Springsteen, AC/DC, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Elvis Costello et al).

Signs of Fast-Fashion Encroachment?: Minimal. A Polo by Ralph Lauren green-and-white checked shirt hangs forlornly (\$30 and constituting pretty much the ugliest thing in the place), but

the presence of Prada flats levels the field.

Killer Find: A jaw-dropping selection of vintage leather Coach handbags with brass and silver detailing in not-quite-mint but sexily worn-in condition, about \$100.

Verdict: Adamidis’ staff cheerfully admit he’s picky as hell about what he sells but his fussiness is our gain. And while no two shopping days at House of Vintage will be quite alike (a truism with all the stores we visit) this is a place where Joe Fresh receives no asylum. In other words, the store is as quirkily cool and throwback as the neighbourhood it serves.



Store: Courage My Love (14 Kensington Ave.)

’Hood: Kensington Market (#KNM)

Fast Facts: The undisputed granddaddy of Kensington’s bustling vintage scene (and family-operated since the 1970s), this legendary shop offers visitors a through-the-looking-glass experience with so much stuff on offer that it’s advisable to set aside an hour or so to browse.

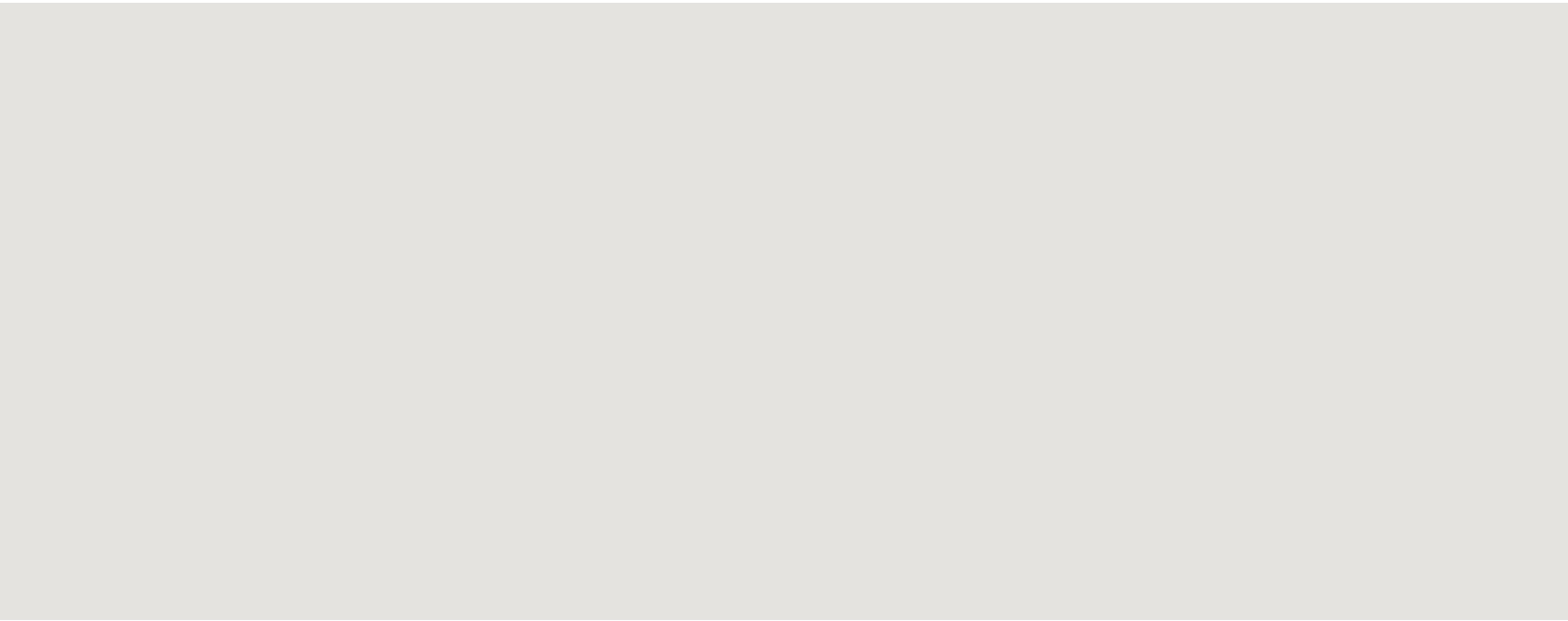
Come Here if You Need: A note-perfect head-to-toe ensemble for about \$150, possibly less.

Signs of Fast-Fashion Encroachment?: Small. A \$22 Joe Fresh cotton sundress is spotted as are Laura brand and Generation Gap shirts. But even these pieces (clean, pressed, and gently used) could be paired with something retro or wild to create a distinctive look.

Killer Find: A circa-1938 black rayon house dress with salmon-coloured flowers sporting magnificent details (fabric-covered buttons, exquisite darting) for \$80. Pair with tights and presto—

you're belle of the ball!

Verdict: In addition to offering great vintage, CML also repurposes textiles into new pieces—ergo, singular blouses made from silk scarves and cashmere sweaters with nifty striped piping. *Overdressed* author Cline suggests consumers go DIY with their clothes, adding buttons, beads, or other accents. This is the place to find that stuff, plus wallet-friendly accessories like jewelry, hats, shoes, sunglasses, belts, etc. Operator Cece Scrivener is generous with her vast knowledge; smart money says she won't let you walk out of her store looking like a clown... and you can't say that about Forever 21.





Store: Shoppe d’Or Limited (18 Cumberland St.)

’Hood: Yorkville (#YRV)

Fast Facts: This is where enterprising rich ladies de-clutter their closets. And talk about a smart idea: owner Norma Victoria King-Wilson’s word-of-mouth consignment institution accepts items according to season, pricing them aggressively (half of retail for new garments, one third for used). Items are date-stamped, and prices drop by 25 per cent after 30 days, 50 per cent after 60 days, and 75 per cent after 90 days. Profits from sales are shared 60/40 (shop-to-consignee) and unsold, unclaimed items go to charity. It’s common to see things with the original store tags still attached and, while vintage isn’t the chief driver, the prevalence of name designers ensures quality is high.

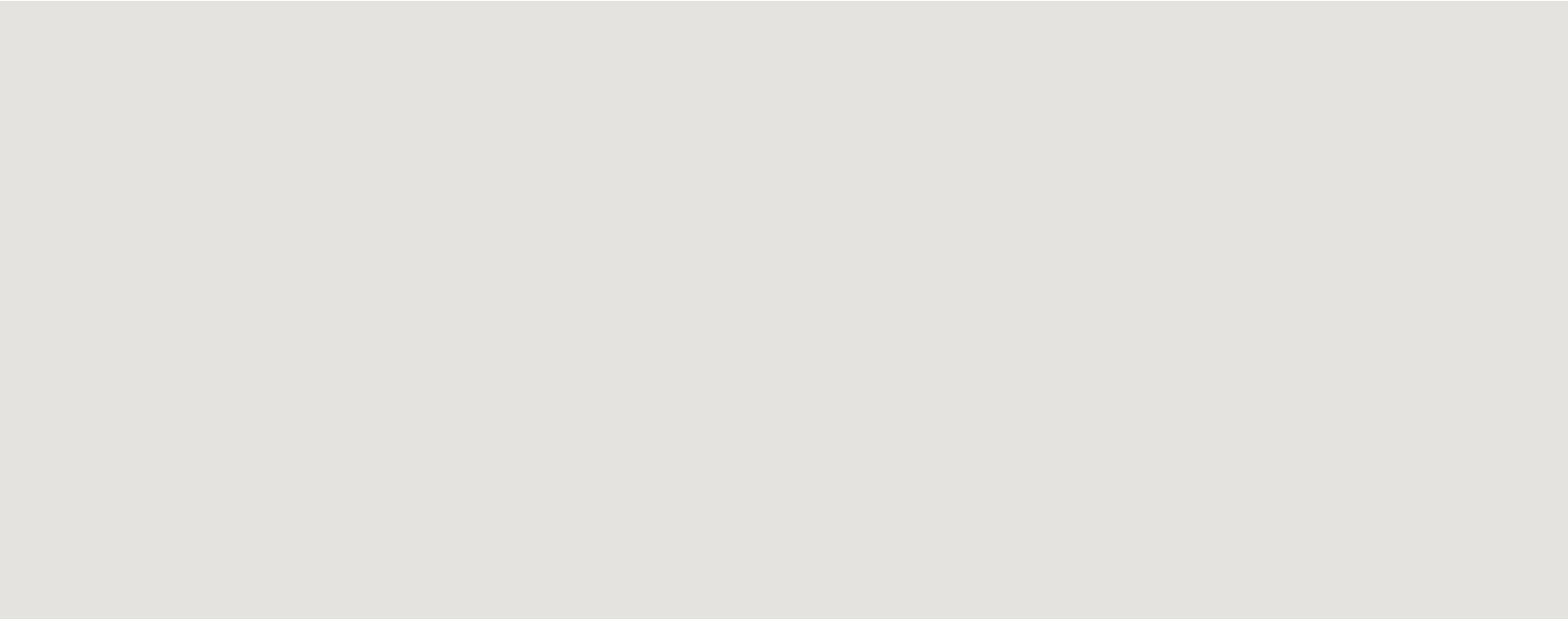
Come Here if You Need: A smart outfit for a job interview (Armani and Calvin Klein skirt suits for well under \$200 and one—a DKNY—marked down to \$22.50) plus wildly impractical but hugely fun designer shoes and threads (Prada, Chanel, Emilio Pucci, Oscar de la Renta) at sane prices.

Signs of Fast-Fashion Encroachment? Kinda-sorta—we spotted labels by Aldo, Anne Klein, Ann

Taylor, and Talbots, among others, but it's frequently brand new stuff that's obviously languished in the back of someone's closet. Example: a Jacob short-sleeve blouse bearing its original \$39 ticket going for \$5.

Killer Find: Never-worn Valentino open-toe pumps, size 8.5, for \$147.50... probably closer to \$1,000 down the street at Davids.

Verdict: It's hard to argue with success—this year, King-Wilson celebrates 68 years in a business built on trends. She's obviously onto something.





Store: Cabaret (672 Queen St. W.)

'Hood: Trinity-Bellwoods (WQW)

Fast Facts: Tao Drayton launched this shop with his dad in 1996 with a focus on high fashion dating from the 1920s to the '70s. To-die-for dresses, shoes, and suits are Cabaret hallmarks. (And did we mention those dresses are gorgeous, flouncy, girly-girl dresses bound to unlock your inner princess? *Sigh.*) More recently, Cabaret has added its own collection of hand-made dresses; an unexpectedly flattering, authentic-looking series of flapper-style pieces are a current highlight.

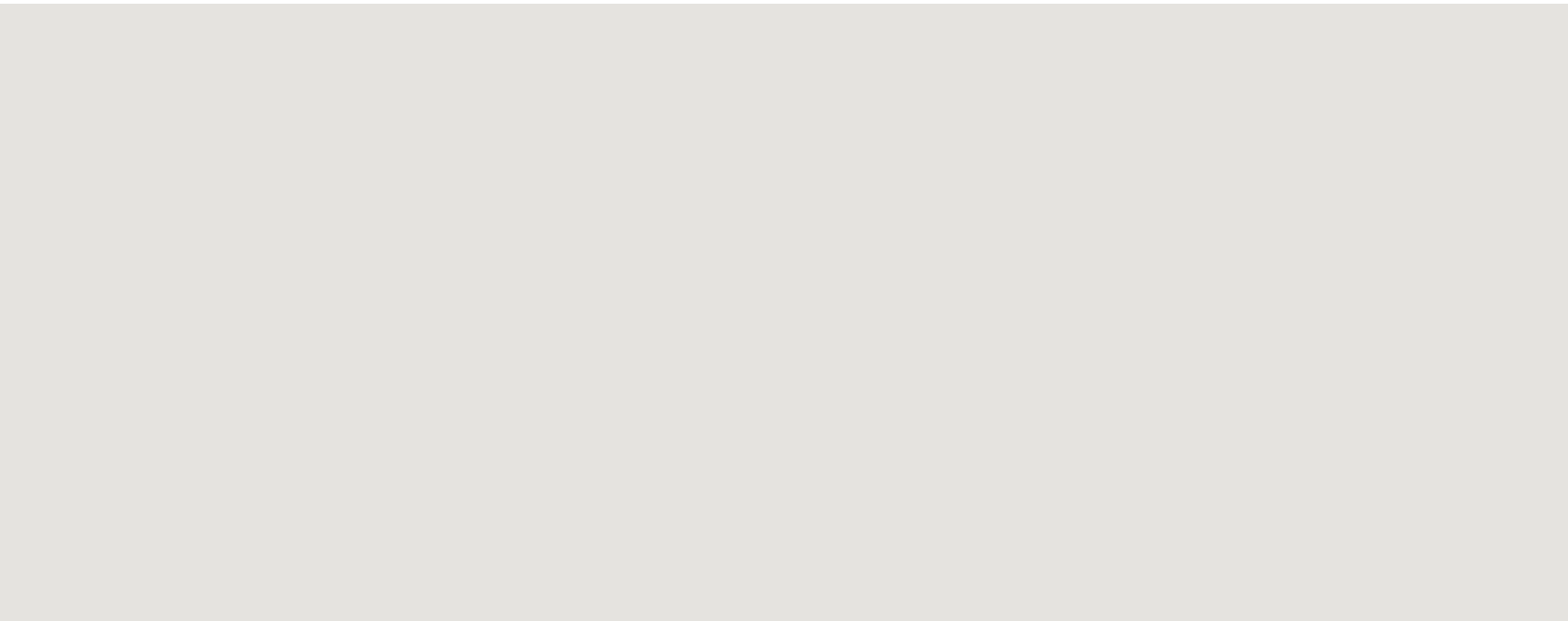
Come Here if You Need: A prom dress, jaunty cocktail frock, or wedding gown (for gals) or a Don Draper-worthy suit for your upcoming, make-or-break PowerPoint presentation (for guys).

Signs of Fast-Fashion Encroachment?: You're kidding, right?

Killer Find: 1950s-era, Marion Cunningham-approved orange day dress with a full skirt and bosom-

framing neckline for \$85.

Verdict: Unless you happen to work at an exceedingly hip office—or an outrageously formal one—Cabaret likely isn’t your go-to store for work duds. But that’s not what it aspires to be. This is a one-stop shop for special occasions, right down to the fancy hats and hankies. And even though the quality is high, the prices generally aren’t.



Store: Thrill of the Find (1172 Queen St. E)

’Hood: Leslieville (#LES)

Fast Facts: Ask owner Mireille Watson how vast her lifetime-in-the-making collection of stuff is and she’ll tell you with a wry smile that it’s probably sitting “at about 10,000 pieces... maybe 11,000” of what she terms “new-to-vintage women’s clothing,” with a bias towards European designers. That means haute but surprisingly affordable blouses, dresses, skirts, suits, and shoes from Emanuel Ungaro, Jean Paul Gaultier, and Emilio Pucci, plus Theory, Michael Kors, Max Mara, and others. Talk about truth in advertising: You don’t know thrills until you spot a Prada tank for \$75 or Gucci mules for \$160.

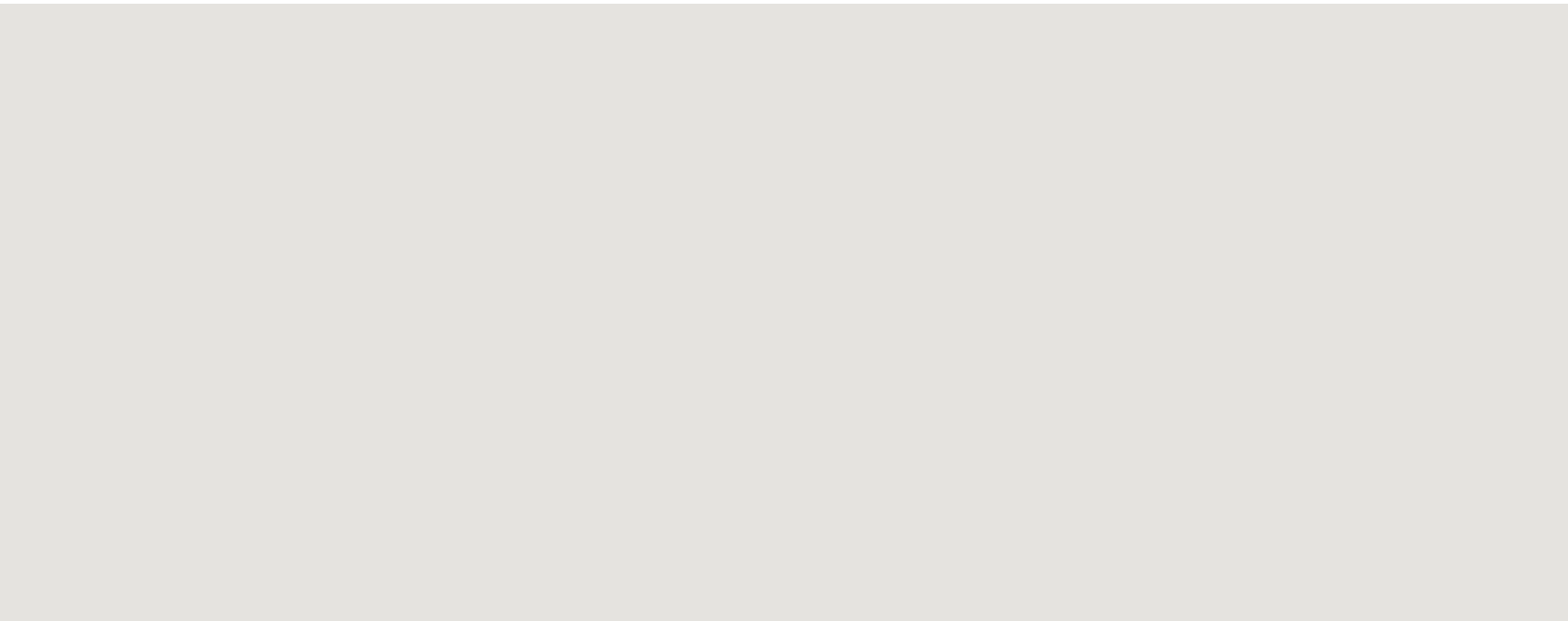
Come Here if You Need: A show-stopper piece to elevate your workaday wardrobe and maybe something a smidge outrageous that won’t condemn you to eating carrots for a month (though that would make your ass look hotter in the awesome Diane von Fürstenberg wrap dress).

Signs of Fast-Fashion Encroachment?: Minor. A sale rack at the back of the store finds a J. Crew dress but beside it hangs a Betsey Johnson skirt and a Jean Paul Gaultier sheer black

stretch shirt, so we’re not throwing stones. And Watson proves highly reasonable on price-point.

Killer Find: Pink-and-white Christian Dior high-tops (yes way) for \$180.

Verdict: Watson celebrates 10 years on Queen East this year—that’s a lifetime in up-to-the-minute Leslieville—but her store has clearly won the hearts of those seeking Fellini looks at Farrelly Brothers prices.



Conclusion: Toronto vintage retailers, give yourself a hand! I was skeptical about quality and quantity at the outset, but these five stores convinced me good stuff exists among dodgy heaps of fast-fashion castoffs, if you know where to look.

In each case, discerning proprietors are key to keeping the crap at bay. How long great items will remain in wide circulation against the swelling tide of imported chain-store duds is anyone’s guess. But, for now, there really is no excuse to head out in the morning in rags, no matter how cheap or chic.

TAGS *cabaret, Courage My Love, Elizabeth Cline, House of Vintage, Shoppe d’Or Limited, Thrill of the Find*

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