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**Designing and Producing CITRINE:
A Reflective Essay on Designing a Fashion Collection and
My Personal Fashion Philosophy**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2012

Honors Capstone Project in Fashion Design

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Renee Crown University Honors Program
CAPSTONE PROJECT
May 2012

**Designing and Producing CITRINE:
A Reflective Essay on Designing a Fashion Collection and
My Personal Fashion Philosophy**

CITRINE: A 6-Look Spring/Summer Women's Ready-to-Wear Collection



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Abstract

After four months of extensive creative research and material sourcing, a 6-piece spring/summer ready-to-wear fashion collection came into creation to celebrate the modern woman. Bold, graphic, versatile, and feminine describe both the collection and the woman of today who balances discipline and a vivacious passion for life and humanity. All-natural textile fibers of silk, cotton, and various laser cut leathers were utilized to create the collection of day-to-evening wear constructed by Samantha Davis.

Beginning Stages of a Collection: Visual Thinking and Problem Solving through Sketching

Curled up on a couch, unaware of my surroundings, I get lost in the world of designing. The way we can imagine Mozart getting lost in the creation of his music or Einstein in the throws of a solution, I lose myself in the pages of my sketchbook. Not that I am any particular prodigy, but I allow the creative process to overtake me in a similar fashion—although not yet at the same intensity—as these creators.

It does not matter what music sounds or what movie plays, I will create and imagine regardless; although, I seem to create best when complete silence and stillness exists in the room. It is in this quietness that the symphonies of thought and the textures of my imagined designs fill the room. Colors shoot out from my head on onto the walls, they ricochet onto the dress form and bounce around until a dress is formed. Streams of fabric flow from the windowsills and drape beautifully over the female body. Surface pattern designs loosen their hold from a tin button box and reaffix themselves to a high-waisted pair of crochet shorts. This is the imaginative playful world in which my thoughts live in.

My only boundaries are physical—my hand refuses to separate from its pencil, my body must remain in the comfortable curled state of which it has

found itself. My sketchbook is a recent addition to my collection of appendages and it will remain connected to me until these designs have emerged from my head and come to fruition on paper—ultimately to be fulfilled in material form before me. But before any of this creation, my physical nature seems anchored down so that my thoughts can explode. My body is the wrought iron jungle gym of which the wild kite of my mind is tied to. On a long, taught string, the streaming colors of the kite ripple and rip through the tumultuous winds on this sunny day in June—they make playful, unexpected dips and dives and turns, choreographing a dance to music imagined.

What seems like days of visual work pass—scribbling and writing and drawing far too long past the confining times for sustenance or rest. But creators don't rest when they are creating. When producing, sure. It's tiring to paint the same strokes over and over again or to sew the twenty-eighth seam on a jacket in one sitting. But during the creation, the visual thought process that torments the mind until a solid idea is finally birthed? There is no resting until the work is complete. It's a projectile of which no force is strong enough to halt. Or if it is, creative consequences ensue.

Sketching is a planned and scheduled discipline and also still an impromptu practice of problem solving. In the introductory phases of designing, most sketching sessions are carefully planned with an end goal in mind. While

many designers work in a studio environment around a desk or table, I feel most creatively relaxed propped up in my bed or on a sofa. I situate myself in an environment of comfort in which the least amount of distractions exist. I am behind closed doors, the lighting is bright, but not without ambiance. I wear comfortable clothing and my hair is out of my face. My computer is usually charged and open to provide music, films, and access to online image searching for research. Stacks of cut paper, all the same dimensions to provide consistency, will sit around me. The fresh and clean stack of untouched paper kneels in anticipation my right while the ones filled with the graphite scribbles of particular thought lay strewn on my left.

I often times gather printed papers found in scrapbooking sections at craft stores for inspiration and pattern research; these and any other items of visual research would lay scattered around me. With a bundle of mechanical pencils and an array of colored markers perched in a pencil bag, the scene is set for creation. My goal: to use researched images, songs, moods, colors, themes, histories, narratives—anything—to develop a single, concise inspiration from which to draw from (pun intended) in the creation of the first 150 looks of my collection. From there, I would whittle away looks that didn't make the cut—let's say to around 75. Then I would start the sketching process over again, now with a more narrow focus. Then narrowing to 50, re-sketching if need be, and narrowing to the final 25. After the necessary edits and cuts had been made, the 25 looks standing would comprise my

collection. Changes to the final 25 looks would occur naturally, of course, based on the materials found and the possibility of better ideas coming along.

This process exemplifies the planned idea stages of designing. However, sketching sessions are not always black and white. Ideas can strike at any time; in which case, the environment is a toss up and cannot be controlled.

Whether they occur spontaneously or by careful scheduling of time and location, the process still resembles a similar format. In order to get thoughts on paper quickly, a loose rendering is created which hints at certain details with a personally established designer's shorthand. The heaviness and fluidity of a single pencil stroke, for example, communicates the fibers of the particular fabric. Lightweight silk chiffon will billow around the model as she walks while 4-ply stretch georgette will "snap" as it moves. While some drawings will only capture the clothing from various angles to communicate construction, most sketches include a fashion figure, or a "croquis." This stylized figure of the female form is an exaggerated height of approximately nine-heads tall, while realistic proportions are only seven heads tall.

Portraying a look on the croquis is not done for the purpose of an attractive final image of which to showcase or market, but the drawn-in form communicates the way in which that particular garment is to fall, or hang, on the form; how it is to move when she walks, the loose or snug fit around each curve of the body. A flat drawing simply does not do it justice.

At various points throughout the creation and production of my senior collection I found myself with pencil and sketchbook in hand, deep in thought. Redrawing, rethinking, finishing new ideas with a pencil in hand or redefining old ones that needed their details worked out. I would spend a few spontaneous hours sketching.

My favorite part of the entire creative process is the sketching. Although it is a close call between this initial thought process and the final photo shoot. What I love about the sketching process is its ability to take the melancholy and anxiety that brews in my mind for days or even weeks at a time regarding what to do with a particular collection, and in one sitting, can plummet me into the beautiful, enthusiastic world in which a collection is born. Sitting down at my sketchbook is like going in for a deep tissue massage or aromatherapy, an appointment with a therapist—all things that are considered great stress relievers to many that bring about a transformation upon the task's completion. A weight has been lifted or emotions properly sorted out, tension erased. Before I sit down to my sketchbook, nothing seems to make sense. Disconnected thoughts and shredded bits and pieces of ideas stack high on the messy floors of my mind while I stand amidst the piles in my fuchsia pumps, helpless. But when I am working things out on my sketchbook—tirelessly drawing all the little thoughts and details and seemingly brilliant ideas out on paper, the stacks of

mental clothing become cleaned and pressed sweaters categorized neatly in the closet with coordinating shoes accounted for in neat little rows. The “light” starts to shine, thoughts begin to make sense, and everything is clear. This usually happens well into the drawing stages—be in twenty minutes or a few hours! I will have at this point wrestled the loose and tangled thoughts into a logical, coherent line up of creative genius. The conceptual bull has been tackled, trained, and now walks with pride as a new man.

While such creative strife may seem trivial to the fashion apathetic, I pardon myself not. It is this creative struggle, this journey which leads all great designers to the thought that made a mark on our cultural history through fashion. Who knows how many hours of thought and preparation—be it surprisingly little or not—developed into Gabrielle Chanel’s simplified look in the 1920s or Christian Dior’s New Look in the 1950s or Lee McQueen’s haute couture dresses in the 2000s which all shaped not only the scene for fashion, but dramatically influenced the cultural fabric around them.

Who is The Samantha Davis Woman?

Renowned illustrators, artists, and designers throughout history have been known for creating signature styles or types of women. Charles Dana Gibson, a prominent illustrator in the early twentieth century is known for his creation of the “Gibson Girls,” his series of two-dimensional renderings of glamorous hat-wearing, eyebrow-raising, sophisticated beauties. The Tom Ford woman, the fashion muse and/or the ideal customer for the GUCCI brand, is a sexually prolific woman who both exudes class and an affinity for certain trends. She puts modernity at a high priority, although she entertains the significance of tradition. In fact, any artist, designer, brand, or company that caters to women glorifies a particular woman—be she imagined or real and walking around London and starring in movies—as the brand’s mascot, the spokeswoman, the star.

The woman who inspires me, the woman that I visualize throughout my creative process is what I don The Samantha Davis Woman. While she likely exists, I have not met her yet outside of my own dreams and ideas.

She is a young woman in her thirties, established in her career. She comes home to her husband and young children in their flat in New York City. While the weekdays are full of hectic workdays and event scheduling, she spends as much time with her family and close friends as she can. Weekends include

lounging around the city or on the waters of a friend's vacation house. She is a philanthropist and her sights are set on the needs of others locally, across the state, and across the globe. Perhaps this woman seems no different than the modern glamazon-superwoman we see in fashion advertisements and as the leading lady in romantic comedies. But to me, she is all real and all woman. She is flawed and knows it, but she also exudes the same poise, style, and grace that we swoon after in movies from the 1940s. Yet her boldness and passion rivals that of political advocates and anarchists known for their ruthlessness.

Her home is exquisitely designed—modern, graphic, with vintage pieces and remnants from the couple's international travels. Pictures of smiling faces fill the white walls of the apartment. Some faces familiar by relation, others of different skin tones and foreign garments that she photographed on her excursions to visit friends new and old in Namibia, Africa and Thailand. She fills this home with healthy and hearty food, passed over the table to friends. And lively music surrounds the scene.

Ironically, this woman does not think excessively about fashion. Style is a given—she was bred and groomed into a stylish woman by the mother and the community that raised her, and is pruned by the philanthropic community which demands her time and attention, and by the bustling city that she calls home. She wears what she loves and what makes her happy.

Whether it is a vintage sack dress she found in a resale shop along the coast of South Florida, a designer jacket given as a gift, a gold cuff from her grandmother. Style has no brand name or price tag, not a time period or a season; style is a few socially and personally accepted rules of colors, shapes, and patterns and otherwise a grab-bag mixture of looks that bring her individuality and personal expression to material fruition.

When presenting my collection to others, the question concerning my inspiration is anticipated. However, most are expecting a traditional answer—some type of music or a historical figure or a piece of visual text. “The sinuous lines of a Russian ballerina” or “the silhouette of the Himalayan Mountains at dusk.” My inspiration for this spring/summer collection is far more direct than the typical source.

The Samantha Davis Woman was not a figure I imagined just for purposes of making a marketable collection, she served as my inspiration. Her life, her travels, her balance between personal and professional life, her dedication to her family without the sacrifice of her own goals. She is the woman that so many of us dream of becoming and her life serves as an inspiration to me with my own creative, personal, and professional pursuits.

Inspiration Manifests into Design

From the initial conceptualization of this woman and her life came the color decisions and visual texture of my collection. The electric yellow-green color, which I call citrine, in contrast with the deep browns and black in my collection served as a visual summary of the boldness and insatiable passion of the modern cosmopolitan woman, a supermom and a visionary.

The graphic design that was laser cut into the lamb and pig skin leather is a modification from a design found on the back of a wrought iron chair at a bed and breakfast that I stayed at in the city. I chose this design for its beauty and boldness, of course, but also because its connection to New York City served as a visual scrapbook for me of my creative journey and a nod to the city woman who would eventually wear the finished garment.

The versatility of many of the looks also resembled not only one of my strengths as a designer, but the likelihood that the wearer's lifestyle would be demanding and require that her clothes not be another limiting factor in her life. The citrine coat can be unzipped in the back for a fuller look, and each of two collars can be popped up or worn folded. One of the tops can be worn backwards, inside out, and with straps loose or tied. This versatility allows a single look to go from day to night with a seamless ease. It also expands the possibilities of a woman's wardrobe with the same number of pieces—her

mood and time limitations can affect how the garment is worn at any particular time.

The style origin of many of the pieces also stems from professional wear with elements of active wear—both of which metaphorically define the life of the wearer as a professional woman on the go. A classic pencil skirt with center back kick pleat becomes trendier with black French lace and the neon yellow-green waistband. A little black dress is all business from the front underneath a spring coat or a blazer; but on its own, takes cues from active wear with curvilinear style lines and cut outs across the back. The classic white, collared button-up is dramatically reworked into a deep V blouse with an elasticized waist and open back. And a cropped cream pant can be styled with the right shoes and accessories for work, a weekend brunch, or a casual day with friends.

Every detail of the design process determines a garment's versatility for day, evening, work, special occasion, and many different environments. The fabrication is the crucial determinant, but the style lines, presence and style of pockets, zippers, and other closures, the finishing techniques (full lining or serged seam allowances), form and shape of the garment, all play a role in the garment's wearability. In essence, when a woman looks through her wardrobe to select a look for a certain occasion, she takes cues from fabrication and styling before colors or prints. Sequins are not likely her first

choice for a picnic just like cotton is not a go-to for an evening affair. The majority of these elements were determined in the initial sketching and designing stages, and were solidified with the purchase of the materials and closures.

Today's Market

Designing versatile pieces is crucial for today's competitive women's wear market. Fashion is a global industry not just for production purposes, but on the consumer's end as well. Any American consumer can order a bespoke garment custom created for them overseas or submit their own design for a garment online only to receive the finished product in the mail a month later. With online shopping and discount retailers, stores are not the only ones that are competing for the dollars of American fashion consumers—clothing brands are as well.

The history of retail provided closed environments for consumers to make their purchases. Options of stores were limited, and limitations existed even more so within a particular department and dress size. For a woman to purchase a dress for her daughter's wedding meant to select one of perhaps twenty options found at the retailers in her community. The present and future of retail provides literally thousands of options across the globe to be

brought to your doorstep. That one dress you were looking at in Store A is now competing with thousands more online.

Regardless of the competitive nature of retail, women still deserve the highest quality of design, materials, and construction in the clothing they will live their lives in every day. It has always been my passion and my self-ascribed duty to provide women with durable, functional, expressive, stylish, and beautiful clothing regardless of their body type or age.

Fashion Philosophy

Fashion is an art form, a methodology of design, and a business.

It is the only means I can imagine that both satisfies the spectrum of creative self-expression while also meeting basic human needs and functionality—it's wearable.

The relationship between creativity and functionality, while always in existence with one another in fashion, vary in proportion and intensity with each classification of fashion. At the highest end of the fashion spectrum—the avant-garde haute couture—fashion is an art form, created by hand and strictly for the glorification of fashion and the fulfillment of that particular collection's inspiration. Functionality is an accessory and by no means mandatory. Farther down the ladder is ready-to-wear, or the perfect pairing

of creativity without sacrificing wearability. It's a 50/50 split between uninhibited style and still being able to venture to work or a party without sacrificing comfort or social normalcy. Then there is mass-marketed fashion, which is barely considered fashion at all by the industry, because the emphasis is on creating apparel products that satisfy the bottom line. The business overpowers style by dictating design and production details.

Each designer trained in the field whether at a university and/or in a fashion house finds his or her place, professionally speaking, at one of the ladder rungs of fashion. Whether determined by individual circumstances or a personal philosophy, their place in the industry of fashion determines the varying influential forces of design and business. Both understanding tactful business moves and encapsulating quality design in accordance to my philosophy of elevated design for all people directly influences my creative process.

Collection Conclusion

Some designers may joke that the creative process of designing and producing a collection is similar to pregnancy. I find this comical parallel to be ironically accurate. While not enduring the latter experience myself, it seems that the timing, anticipation, the planning and the unplanned events, the obstacles you should have expected although there was no way you could have—the series of events from inception to birth of a fashion collection seem wildly familiar. And we all know that fashion is a child anyway. Exceptionally youth-focused and changing it's mind on a moment's notice, fashion is constantly growing and evolving in the same way as an adolescent human. It takes its cues from the surrounding environment and makes its reactions accordingly. Fashion learns from us as we learn from fashion.

The designing and conceptual creation of a fashion collection tests one's mental endurance, creative discipline, dedication to one's personal philosophy, and perception of the industry, culture, and the world. Through the conceptualization and creation of this spring/summer collection, each of these areas has not only endured testing, but refining into a sharper skill set of which to utilize in the future realization of my goals for innovative, quality fashion for the women of today.

Capstone Summary

Before material sourcing for fabrics or selecting a color palette, the initial stages of the fashion collection development process commence with a conceptual overhaul. The season to be designed for is already determined by the present time of year, as the fashion industry designs at least two seasons (approximately a year) ahead of time in order to account for production and manufacture. In the case of this collection, I was designing for spring/summer of the following year. Whether an inspiration is already determined or must be decided on, the initial stages of the process involve finalizing a source of inspiration, collecting visual examples of said inspiration, and from there beginning the initial sketching and designing process.

After sketching hundreds of images of potential looks for the collection, traditionally this is when the editing process begins. I began my drawing and designing process with 150 looks and then edited and redrew until I eventually decided on 25 final looks. From this stage, I selected the six looks which best summarized what my collection aimed to communicate; these looks I would fully fabricate.

Amidst the designing process, fabrics and other materials are sourced. The exact timing in which this search for the proper materials depends on how

specialized the materials are. For example, the design process of a black silk chiffon dress can come to conclusion before any swatches of said fabric are even located due to the commonness of the material. However the acid dyed and treated pony skin leather which I used for a spring coat is not something that could have been imagined or even fully drawn due to the uniqueness of the material and the organic, inconsistent look to the leather.

For this collection, I searched for fabrics at the beginning stages of designing and continued both the sketching and material sourcing well into the production stages of my collection as new and better ideas arose.

After a four-day stay in New York City to purchase fabrics, I began draping fabric as a method to finalizing designs and creating pattern pieces. At this time I also scouted models that had the physical proportions, look, and hair type that I was searching for. My finalized line up of models took weeks to solidify, so I fitted the models I was certain were working for me early on.

After sewing a muslin, or a sample garment typically sewn out of unbleached woven cotton fabric, I would fit it to a model, make the appropriate revisions to the patterns, and then cut and sew my final fabric for the garment. A final fitting occurred once the garment was created; at this stage the appropriate hem length and fit could be double-checked before any hand stitched finishings occurred.

In the last week prior to the fashion show, I organized a group fitting for all of my models in which they would try on their entire look at one time with the proper shoes and accessories, rehearse their walk, and get their pictures taken as reminders to my assistant and I as to what adjustments were needed to each look.

In the days before the show, countless hours of hand stitching buttons, waistbands, and hooks and eyes filled the day while rehearsals filled each evening. Volunteer models learned appropriate walks and timing for each designer, while the technicians set cues for lighting and music. I sampled the hair and make up look, which I would execute for each of my six models one-by-one prior to stage time.

Finally, show day arrived and on April 26, 2012, I diligently worked backstage with my assistant to steam each article of clothing, tease the hair of each model, dress each model in the proper accessories, apply make up, and fix unanticipated hurdles as they arose for both the matinee and evening shows.

After the show date, I scheduled a photo shoot with two new models and a photographer to capture the garments in a controlled environment. These high-resolution images will be present in my professional portfolio to summarize the months of work I spent researching, designing, drawing,

material sourcing, creating, producing, and styling a spring/summer ready-to-wear fashion collection.