FIAT LUX: CHARTRES CATHEDRAL’S REPRESENTATION OF MEDIEVAL CULTURE SEEN THROUGH 21ST CENTURY DESIGN

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Abstract:
Cathedrals are some of the last remaining artifacts that communicate life and values from the Middle Ages. Chartres Cathedral in France exists as a time capsule of its culture, an exhibition of material, religious, and social values, and a testament to the expert craft guild that flourished in the city. Capturing the structure of the society and the cathedral in a 21st century men’s and women’s wear collection was the objective of this project. The menswear collection focuses on the architectonic aspects of the patriarchal society and the cathedral itself. The women’s wear expresses the similarities between the cathedral’s stained glass and the cultural paradigms women faced in medieval society: the didacticism of stained glass presents the juxtaposing values and positions of women in the medieval culture. To grasp the complexity of the topic, I spent time at Chartres Cathedral and explored several other French medieval cathedrals. My field research was reinforced by texts from both UC Davis and the University of the Arts London. The final product was exhibited during the Fashion and Design Society’s sponsored fashion shows during the 2012 UC Davis Picnic Day and in San Francisco on May 6th to both a public and professional audience.

Project Description:
This project studies medieval artists' representations of human values. The product of this research is a fashion collection that communicates medieval culture through the societal lens of the 21st century. The cathedral at Chartres is the ideal subject for this research because it uniquely captures medieval thoughts, morals, and fashions from the time of its creation (1193-1250) (1). Chartres Cathedral is praised for being the most stylistically homogeneous structure of the era (2). Chartres was an affluent fashion capital of what was loosely called France in the Late Medieval Period, and its cathedral was a major center of spiritual, intellectual, and social thought. As such, Chartres Cathedral exhibits more than expensive materials: it displays the medieval perspective of individual value in society, beauty, and values described below. With fashion and the medieval visual language as media, I produced ten looks to communicate my commentary on medieval ideals.

Medieval Values, Style, and Symbolism
Much of medieval thought, social structure, and culturally ascribed value is well documented in a variety of texts and media. Individual human figures were never portrayed realistically in art; they were depicted following a set of rules about what the culture valued in representation. Adornments were specifically chosen to portray the family and status the individual came from. Portrayals of people had nothing to do with making a likeness of them; rather, individuals were represented by a paradigm or recognizable character that everyone knew. Human women were portrayed as Mary-like or Eve-like, or any other prominent characters easily identifiable by the lay person by associating symbols from the stained glass.

Medieval philosophy defined women in human, biblical, and divine senses (3). The Virgin Mary, “Queen of Heaven,” represented utopian womanhood. Chartres Cathedral was the center of her worship during the medieval influx of Christian belief. After a devastating
fire, Chartres received countless donations from Mary's followers to rebuild her church and shrine. Though a woman, she held ultimate power, acting as an intermediary between her followers and God. Her power was never questioned; her guidance of sinners never viewed as weakness. These views of Mary are astonishing, considering the predominant view of women of the time; the medieval woman was a daughter of Eve: manipulative, desiring, and predestined to be damned (4). Medieval belief states that secular men were responsible for restraining women from their bestial impulses (5). Women thus worshiped Mary, the “New Eve,” as their savior from the path of temptation. In religious society, a similar inequity unfolded. Religious women of Chartres wore coarse, chafing clothing that diminished their sexuality, punishing them for their innate temptations. The priests however, could wear auspicious materials often rivaling those of their secular counterparts (6). The fabrics in this collection address this range of materials and standards through two distinct lines of clothing for men and women.

In its physical presence, Chartres Cathedral depicts these values using a visual language of symbols comparable to contemporary society's practices of accepting brand logos as transparent expressions of identities (2). This analogous symbolism helps us understand medieval education because the modern viewer reads the images and understands the iconography much like a medieval churchgoer would have. The Cathedral's artist(s) used didactic visual literature based on human forms in place of the pagan decorative imagery used previously (2, 7). These biblical human figures were represented in the height of fashion and with the most prestigious textiles, styles, and colors. In the stone carvings and stained glass, the Divine were no longer depicted as humble beings, as they are described in the Bible, but as royalty dressed in the most lavish of contemporary fashions. Fashion is a visual language that represents cultural values and an invaluable resource for research. We can learn everything there is to know about a culture by examining how individuals articulate fashion. Medieval art and design valued statements of power and power relations, rather than realistic portraiture, in conveying characters (7). Family, materials, and fashion were the most important identifiers of individual representation, which largely challenges our modern preconceptions of realistic portraiture for individual portrayal (8).

The Garments

My ten stylized fashion looks focus on specific archetypes that convey medieval ideals using medieval visual language. The menswear seeks to stand as a homogenous character representing the male dominated social conventions and the physical structure of the Cathedral. Digital textiles were created by mixing images of the stone carvings and the wear the cathedral has endured over the centuries to incorporate the image of the cathedral in the dialogue. Much research went into engineering and choosing fabrics to mimic the architectonic qualities of both the cathedral's physical presence and the negative space the stone structure created. Modern visual symbols of power and social status, such as the suit, paired with a material both cultures consider auspicious, silk, and the textile image of stone all blend together to create a thesis statement for the menswear argument. I incorporated the male frame, medieval and current men's garment shape, and make up to strengthen the arguments the textile materials conveyed in this dialogue of correlation.

The four women’s garments become a conversation on medieval and current Western views of women’s behavior in social structure. The number four reflects the symbolic power of the Holy Trinity supplemented by the human experience, and is significant in the medieval divine, biblical, and human
philosophies about women (5, 2, 6, 3, 4). These garments are styled after the stained glass at Chartres. Stained glass' purpose in the cathedral was to tell stories visually, with recurring characters, about how to live one's life according to the medieval interpretations of the Bible (1, 2). The inherent nature of representing stained glass requires a juxtaposition of light and dark (9). Stained glass, as a medium, requires an overwhelming ratio of darkness to light for its didactic mysticism and artistic value to be fully exhibited, and thus strongly depends on its surroundings to convey its meaning.

Each womenswear piece takes on an identity and tells a story paralleling the role of stained glass at Chartres. Six menswear pieces will take on the dark, architectonic aspects of the Cathedral and the role the Catholic Church played as an institution in medieval society to create the environment of viewing the “stained glass” womenswear. Together, the pieces open a dialogue on medieval and current Western views of correct men's behavior and interaction with women in society. One collection cannot exist without the other; much like a cathedral is not a cathedral without stone and glass.

The four female paradigms in the lives of medieval women inspired these pieces. Eve as the innocent beginnings of womanhood is represented with clear glass to tell the story of her nudity. A corset's symbolism of female sexuality and oppression was added to this piece to foreshadow the later archetypes and exhibit the character's temporal beauty. The Fallen Eve as a manipulator of men, usurper of power, and mother of all medieval woman's evil intent is represented in green fabric and glass cut to mimic snake scales and foliage. The shape of the garment uses a modern interpretation of the qualities of Eve to disseminate the medieval identity. The Medieval Woman, torn between the archetypes of the Fallen Eve and Mary the Queen of Heaven, is represented in red to symbolize the blood that makes her human and physically separates her from these paradigms. This piece has a digitally printed textile that is a collage of glass pieces from Chartres depicting her struggle. The final garment represents the Virgin Mary who was so powerful in medieval belief that they depict her as the Queen of Heaven. Chartres is famous for their blue glass color used throughout the Cathedral to portray her. This piece has a blue glass brassiere to identify the quality that made her all powerful: femininity. These pieces aim to educate the viewer of the juxtaposition of medieval paradigms and to remind the viewer that women were also a medium of story telling in medieval society. Women were used to display the identity, worth, and social position of the patriarch of their family in medieval society and are used in this collection to exhibit medieval identities, values, and paradigms of social position.

This research project aims not to be a costume recreation but a dialogue between cultures. Visualizing the imbalanced dichotomy of light and overwhelming dark in the collection strengthens the research, the quality, and the overall experience of the collections presentation. Through their juxtaposing color and silhouette, the six menswear pieces both overwhelm and set off the meaning and visual brilliance of the four womenswear garments. They speak of the societal and philosophical pressures and expectations that enveloped medieval women (3, 5, 8). The more visually the men's dominance is represented, the clearer the imagery of the women's pieces become.
Project Procedure:

1. **RESEARCH** the following questions: What did medieval culture value; spiritually, socially, physically, metaphysically? How/why did medieval artists represent figures and express cultural values via the most important artistic expressions of the time: cathedrals? What story is being told from the cathedral in the 21st Century? Learn the visual language and meaning of materials and art at Chartres Cathedral. From the research, sketch men’s wear, women’s wear, and textile designs to process/grasp/respond to the concepts.

Figure 1 (left): This is an image of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child from the initial bookwork. I noted the materials, garment shape, composition, content, and intended location for the textile works to gain insight into their culture, beliefs, and how figures of importance were regarded. (Image from Madeline Ginsburg, *The Illustrated History of Textiles* [11].)

Figure 2a & b: stone (left) and graphic (right) flower. This flower, located at the courtyard entrance to Temple Church in London, England, is a symbol representing the Virgin Mary. It reminds the viewer that the Virgin Mary was the patron of the Knights Templar and that this is her church. I studied how the motifs were used at the church, and how the same meaning could be translated to fashion. The second photo shows sketching from life/images to grasp the 21st Century’s perspective on this ancient logo.
2. **VISIT** the cathedral to collect primary source images and impressions of the medieval art, materials, and values represented. Develop a sketchbook: a compilation of research images, notes, and fashion and textile sketches to develop the final ten looks that preserves the impression of the research and cathedral itself. This sketchbook will be used to communicate the research, thesis, and objectives of the collection throughout the project.

![Stone carving and window](image1.png)

Figure 3a & 3b: stone carving and window These are two examples of the raw materials from the Cathedral. The stone and the glass both tell stories about structure and value but in their difference of visual and physical impact we find the story of the sexes. Also to note that many of the fashions that appear on the cathedral do not follow the laws of textiles. The stone carving’s collar cannot be made with actual textiles.

All photographs in this article were taken by the author.
3. **DEVELOP** looks by working fluidly between experience, sketch, image, and textiles/materials. Create garment mock-ups and develop fabrics using medieval and modern design techniques, including stained glass composition and digital printing, to best represent the cathedral and its dialogue on worth and social structure. After garment mock-ups and textile samples were completed, final product materials were donated by Dharma Trading Company.

Figure 4: Draping and developing a garment’s shape. This garment’s folds are being studied for the quality of the light on the final textile to actuate the hue of the glass but also the artisanal differences in saturation. Combining not only color as an identity marker but also shape of garment to visually represent the dialogue between today and then.

Figure 5: Men’s shirt. The shirt shows the finished process featuring a digitally printed fabric made from an image of the cathedral’s wall. This piece uses image, color, and shape to embody the architectural structure and negative space created by the vaulting and draw a parallel to the male dominated social structure.
4. **PRODUCE** fabrics and execute final garments/shoes. Fit garments to models checking for comfort and wear-ability. Finish documenting the research process in the sketchbook with illustrations of the collection. Photograph the collection to document the product of the research.

**Figure 6:** The men’s suit is made of digitally printed fabric depicting a manipulated image of the cathedrals external wall. The shirt is made of backed satin and rip stop nylon. The complex pattern is perfectly matched. This piece uses the modern symbolism of masculinity and structure, the suit, and pairs it with the Cathedrals outward appearance.

**Figure 7:** The glass corset and feather skirt is a piece representing the original Eve without sin. The women’s pieces tell a story of each character in the social paradigm and are thus represented in glass. Stained glass in medieval time was the main source of story telling and social education. The clear glass represents the nudity and purity of Eve in the garden.
Figure 8: The men’s casual jacket draws from the shape of the clergy’s robes and echoes the print from the suit. This is one of the two men’s digital prints. The eye makeup of the men is drawn from the years of pollution accumulated by the slowly corroding statues on the exterior of the cathedral. I wanted to capture the gaunt and exhausted atmosphere of the aging Cathedral as it stands in the 21st century.

Figure 9: The blue women’s piece uses Chartres blue glass on a bra to identify this character as the Virgin Mary, Queen of heaven who was worshiped for her femininity. The garment shape is inspired by the blue robes Mary is always identified in and the feather bolero incorporates her court of angels.

5. **DISPLAY** the collection. All garments were displayed at the Spring 2012 Fashion and Design Society fashion show at the UC Davis Picnic Day, and at the Undergraduate Research Conference in May 2012 for viewing by public, academic, and professional audiences. A selection from the collection was shown in San Francisco at the Fashion and Design Society’s Industry fashion show on May 6 2012 and at the Women’s Resource Center’s Ellen Hansen Memorial Prize Exhibit in June 2012. Images of the entire collection are disseminated in an online portfolio under the Current Work and Sketchbook at www.miqdesigns.com.
Visiting Chartres

Medieval pilgrims would travel to Chartres to experience the colors, materials, and imagery, and approximate the promises of heaven (2). I visited Chartres Cathedral, with the aid of the Presidential Undergraduate Fellowship Grant, to complete my research. In the time of their creation, the cathedrals were meant to be an overwhelming sensory and spiritual first hand experience. Visiting the Cathedral as a pilgrim became an integral part in understanding the lessons Chartres had to offer. Feeling the cathedral's scale, seeing how the statues interact with the space and experiencing the light of the windows were all essential parts of this research. This project built upon my study abroad experience, bilingual research, and offered an opportunity utilizing resources unavailable at UC Davis that included a history of teaching stone carving and staining glass. Visiting the Cathedral and using the University of Arts London's Cathedral Arts Library made it possible for me to create a collection of higher quality and greater intellectual depth than I would have been able to create solely at UC Davis.

After visiting the Cathedral, the project blossomed into two portions of work. The womenswear was executed in the Capstone Collections class, DES 179. The menswear was executed as a Department of Design Honors Thesis, supervised by Dr. James Housefield and department chair Tim McNeal. This project represents the culmination of my undergraduate education and showcases my potential for future successes. The multisensory experience of physically visiting the cathedral and the surrounding town brought the bookwork to life. Reading and sketching from first or second hand accounts of the cathedral was a pale comparison to the cathedral's impact on the thirteenth century. The presence of the cathedral and its preserved values brought out a deeper understanding of medieval philosophies and social structures. The philosophies are still alive in the structure today and analyzing them brings us a greater understanding of Chartres Cathedral's profound impact on human history.

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References


