FRC
FASHION RESEARCH COLLECTION

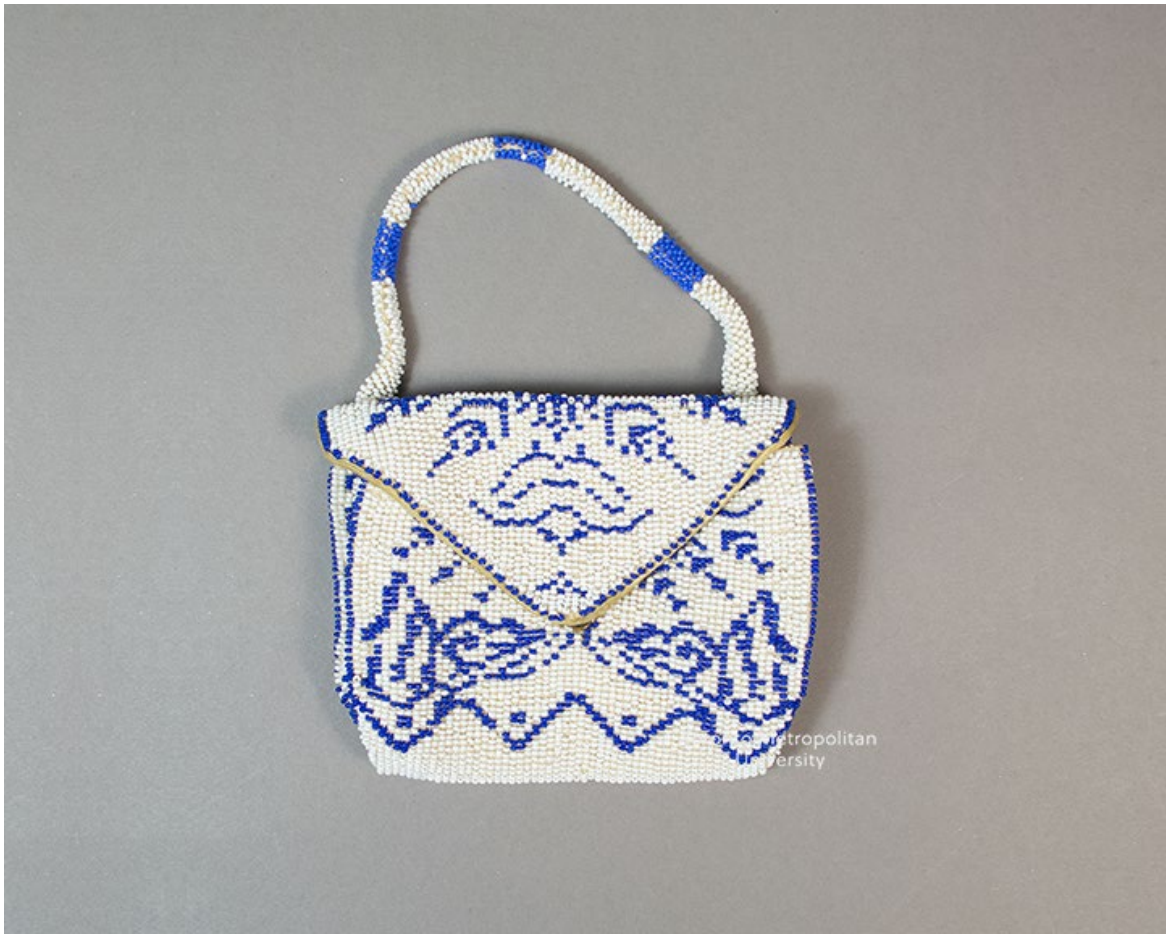

Fig. 1. Beaded evening purse, ca. 1930s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2018.04.002. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.

BEADING A VISUAL PSYCHOLOGY: A STUDY OF AN EVENING PURSE

By Denisa Marginean
MA Fashion Student

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Somewhere in Toronto Metropolitan University's Kerr Hall building sits a small beaded purse (fig. 1). Among high school reminiscent lockers, bright fluorescents and 3,500 other objects, the 1930s white evening purse stands out with its odd pattern. The design of beaded bags in the early twentieth century focused on floral, bird, diamond and triangular shapes, none of which perfectly describe the item that we see (Higgins & Blaser 166). Additionally, the beaded evening purse's simple blue and white colour palette does not fit with the notion that Eastern Mediterranean purses had a varied and bright colour scheme (166). Instead, the purse is reminiscent of the famous monochromatic Rorschach prints. Besides their shared connection with the early twentieth century, are these two items truly interconnected, or are we putting our twenty-first-century perspective onto them? I argue that they both belong to a larger visual shift of the period towards abstraction.

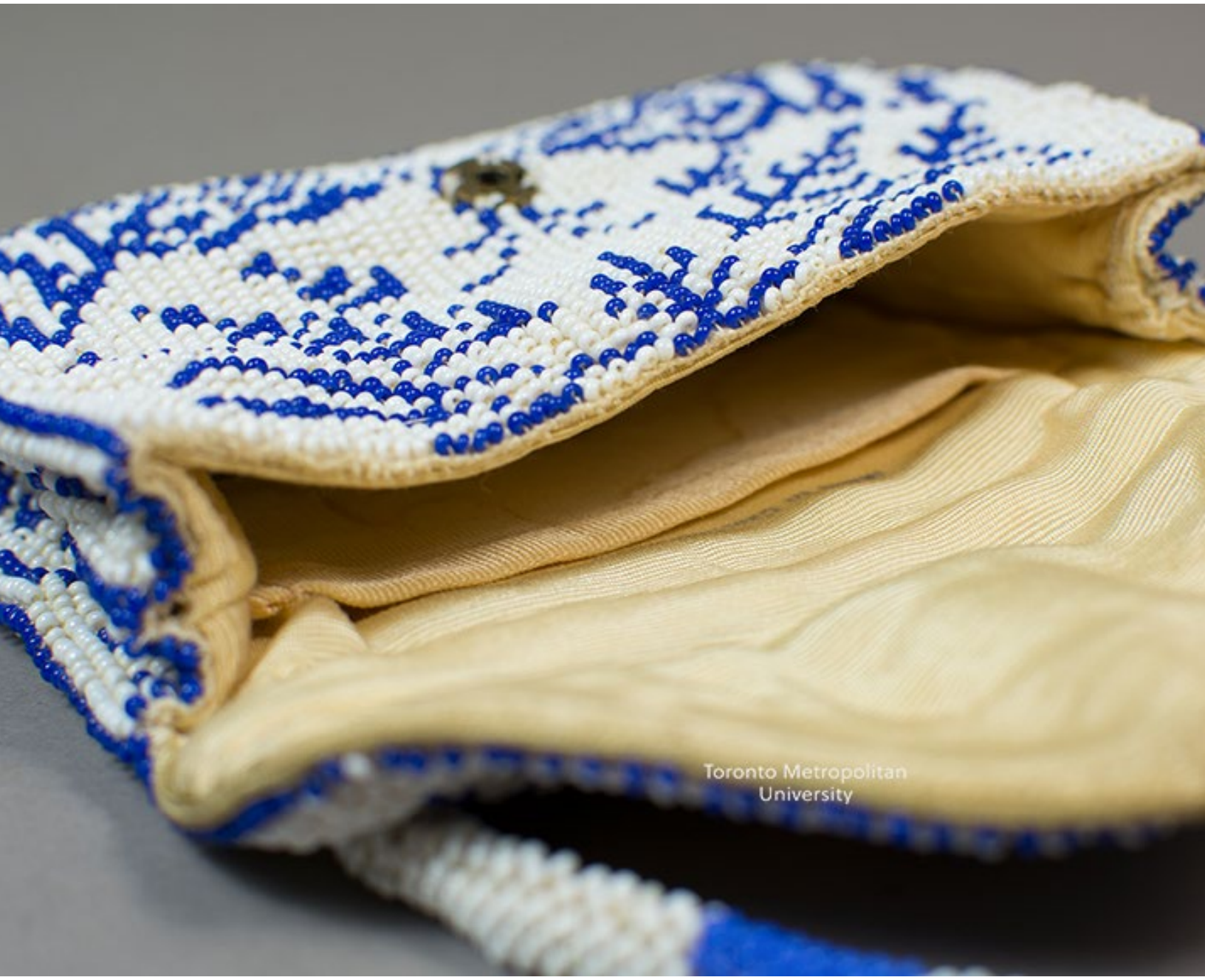


Fig. 1. Beaded evening purse, ca. 1930s. Inside of purse. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2018.04.002. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.

BEADED EVENING PURSE: A CLOSER LOOK

There are only two beaded evening purses in Toronto Metropolitan University's Fashion Research Collection, and both originate from the 1930s. The one being studied is made of white and blue glass beads, has a front opening envelope flap and is lined with cream silk (fig. 2). Although created with natural elements, the bag's overall shape is rectangular and echoes a structured leather bag. The other beaded evening purse is smaller and curved with black and grey seed pearls and black nylon lining (fig. 3). Remarkably, both purses have the same label 'Made in Czechoslovakia,' but no artist, craftsperson, designer or brand is associated with either of them. Significantly, the second one contains a price tag that reads "Black Beaded Bag 15.00" ("Object Record Beaded Evening Purse with Zip Closure"), which would be the equivalent of $276.50 in 2020 ("Inflation Rate between 1935-2020").

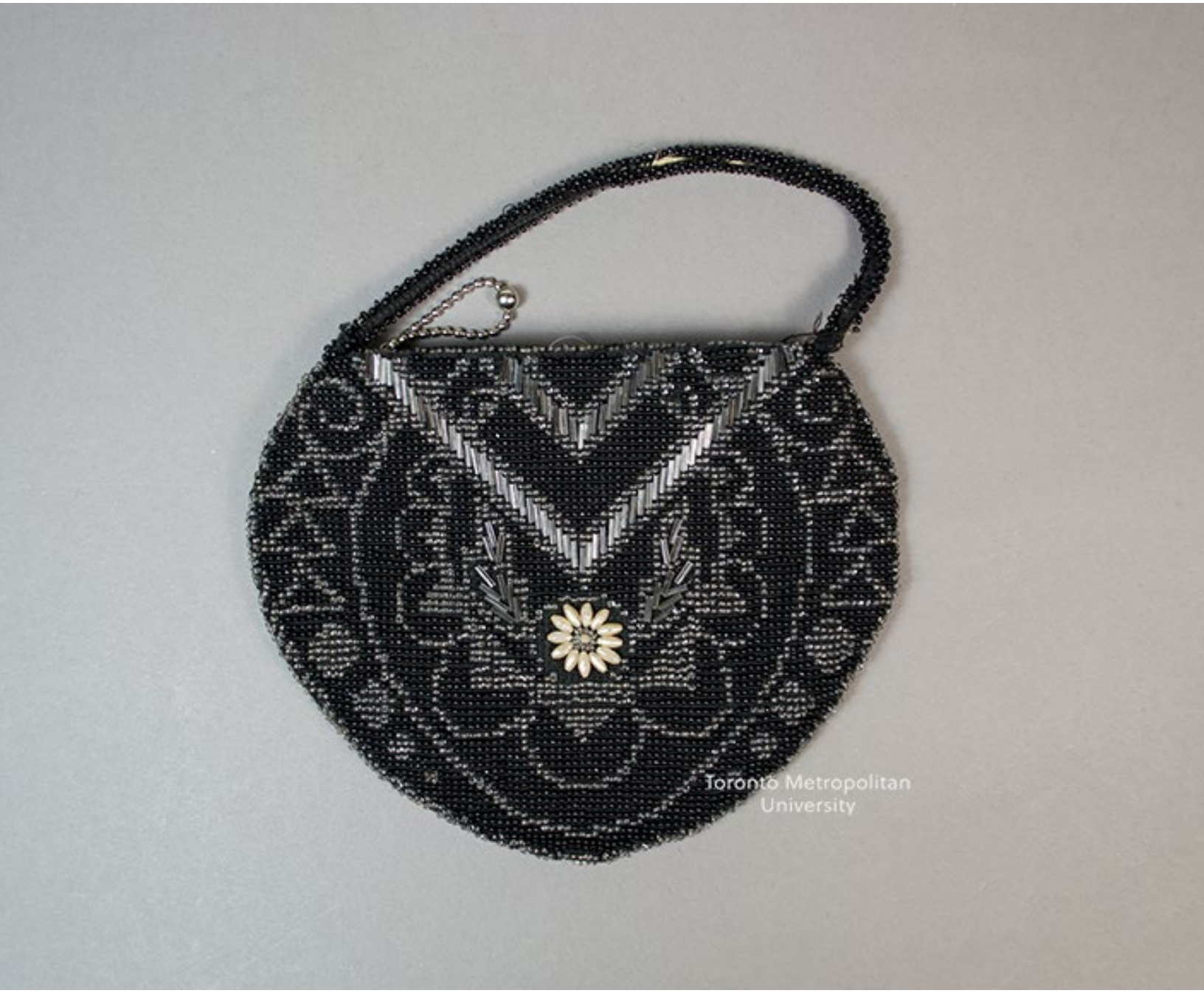


Fig. 3. Beaded Evening Purse with Zip Closure, ca. 1930s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2018.04.003. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.

Historically, various techniques have been used for beading, such as looming, embroidery, knitting, and weaving. However, most purses made in the early twentieth century were made through mounted frames (Higgins & Blaser 165). There is also a hierarchy within beaded bags in which a "colored, cut steel loomed purse in good condition might be more attractive and valuable than a bead knitted purse of no particular merit" (165). Within that context, our simple blue and white evening bag is less highly-regarded. During the time the bag was made, Turkish and Eastern Mediterranean beaded bags became popular in North America; their designs were so angular that people often confused them with Indigenous people's beadwork (165).

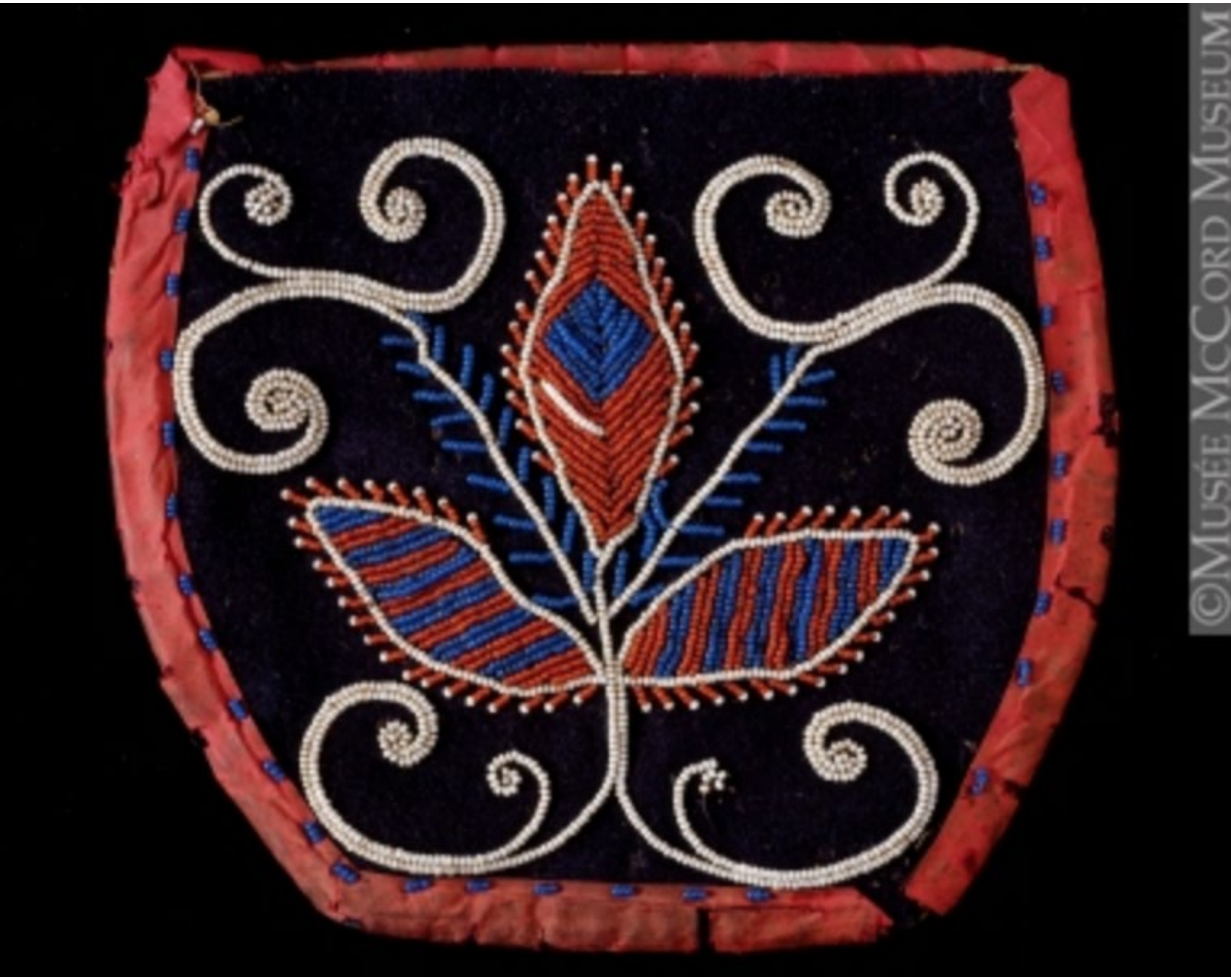


Fig. 4. Anonymous, "Medal Pouch Eastern Woodlands, Aboriginal: Mi'kmaq." c. 19th century, Wool cloth, silk ribbon, glazed cotton, birch bark, glass beads, horsehair, thread, 14.5 x 16.2cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada.

This practice fits within the broader phenomenon of mass collecting Indigenous-like items by white settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century due to a fascination for the "vanishing race" in the face of modernization and genocide (Riley and Carpenter 8). Owning beaded objects in Canada is directly linked to racist and colonial practices that romanticized and trivialized Indigenous people's experiences. If we look at a nineteenth-century example (fig. 4), the floral and geometric beaded pattern is visually similar to our purse. Although it was not made with the intention of copying Indigenous beading, it is important to remember that the act of wearing the beaded evening bag in the Canadian context is related to the problematic recreation of an Indigenous aesthetic that still affects people in the 21st century (Riley and Carpenter 8).

Interestingly, the beaded quality of the item makes the tactile experience much different than that of a regular purse. The desire to touch the bag's rocky exterior contrasted with the soft silk is hard to resist (and if it is indeed natural silk, it suggests luxury since rayon also known as artificial silk was often used by this period as a cheaper replacement). Instantly, we are drawn to tracing the pattern, the various lines joined through little beads, and to hold the malleable handle. Yet, it feels as though if we were to pull on the wrong thread or touch the wrong bead, the entire purse would collapse in itself.

> *This raises the question: who owned this bag? Who could afford to buy an evening bag in the 1930s during the worldwide impact of the Great Depression that began in 1929 (Fiell & Dirix 9)?*

The card in the bag's inner pocket reads, 'Mr. T. Arthur Rogers' ("Object Record Beaded Evening Purse"). Even though the owner's name is fairly generic, there is one T. Arthur Rogers with some prominent fame in Ontario. On June 9, 1934, *The Ottawa Citizen* published a portfolio on "Outstanding Personalities Of The Ottawa District," one of which was Perth Mayor and lawyer Mr. T. Arthur Rogers, a conservative man from significant family money with links to fraternities and various city committees.

Although the 1930s presented a more 'womanly' and elegant stylistic appearance despite the financial collapse (Fiell & Dirix 9), it is hard to imagine that Mayor Rogers wore this beaded purse at events around Perth. A few months after his personal profile was published, *The Ottawa Journal* announced his daughter's birth on October 22, 1934 ("Births Rogers"). Two possibilities arise, either the purse was acquired for his wife, Mrs. Rogers, in the 1930s and her successful pregnancy, or Rogers acquired the purse for his daughter's birth in preparation for her ensuing marriage in 1959 which is more unlikely since it was not recorded in her wedding outfit ("Newman-Rogers Wedding"). The beaded evening bag was nonetheless kept decades later which suggests a value either physical or emotional was attributed to it. The bag was also referred to as an evening purse, which means it was worn within the context of going out at specific and expensive events in the evening. Bags became more practical in the 1920s with added compartments for lipsticks and mirrors, but small purses continued to be distinct pieces performing different roles for the wearer (Campbell). What is clear is that the purse is linked to white high social status in early-twentieth-century Canadian society. Purses have been used throughout time for functionality, to carry items from one location to the next (Campbell). However, the blue and white beaded bag's size, fragility and simplicity provided the wearer with a chance to adorn themselves and to establish wealth and subsequent status.

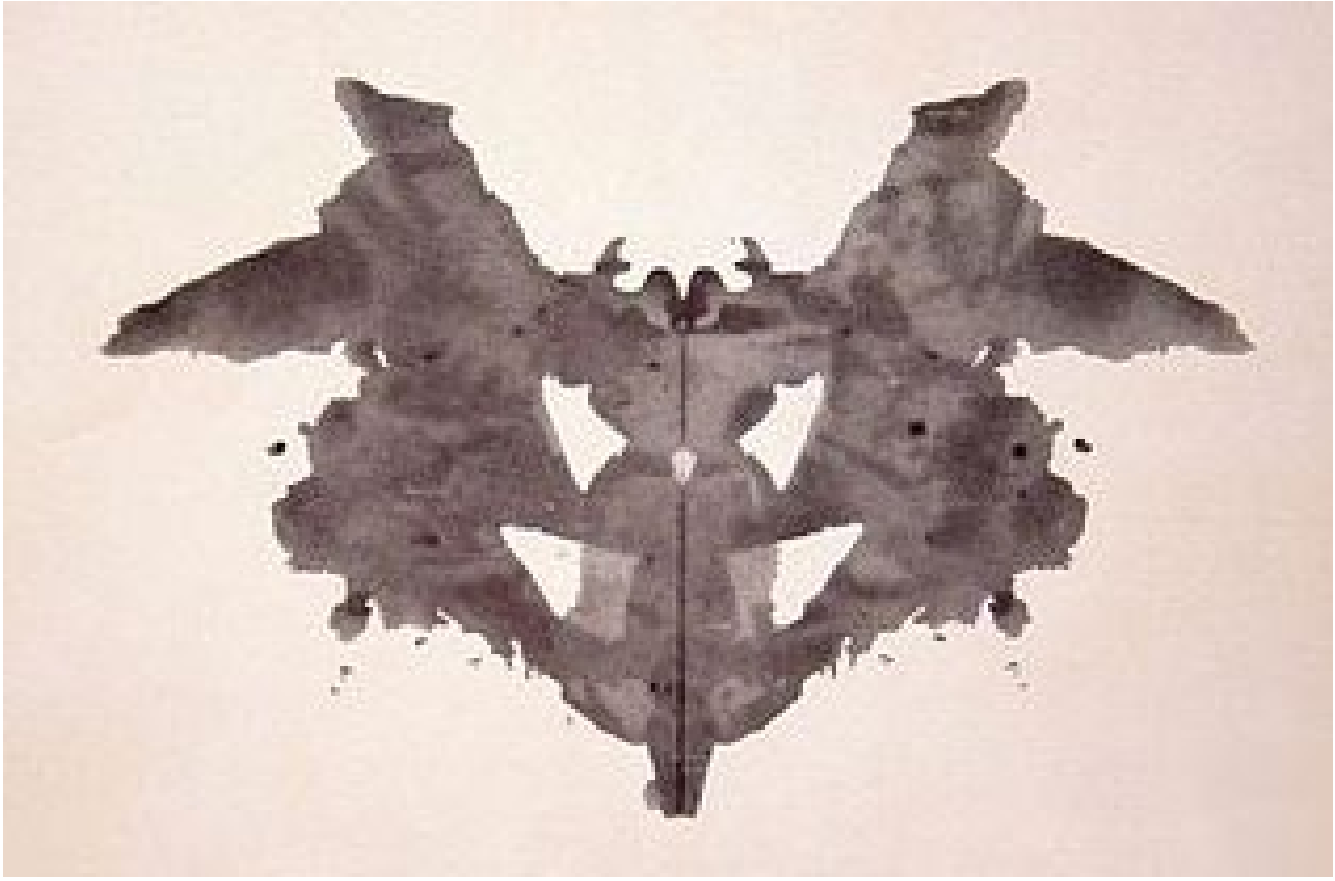


Fig. 5. Rorschach, *Blot 1*, 1921, Digital Photograph, Web Archive https://web.archive.org/web/20070820233339/http://ar.geocities.com/test_de_rorschach/

WHAT ARE THE RORSCHACH PRINTS?

Why does the bag evoke inkblot patterns? Is the bag connected to the Rorschach inkblots? If so, how? American writer Damien Searls claims that the Rorschach inkblots created by its namesake Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach in the 1920s are the ten most analyzed paintings of the twentieth century (Searls IX). They have been so widely used in art, film, marketing, and fashion that some psychologists have discredited the experiment altogether because the images are so ingrained in popular culture (IX). Some say that the ten official inkblots, each made for the viewer to interpret a different animal and the psychologist to diagnose said responses, are not compromised and that the pictures we see are often modified as not to reveal the full extent of the paintings (IX).

Although most Western cultures know what the Rorschach test is (fig. 5), none of us, or rather only a handful of us have experienced the real thing. According to Searls, the parlour trick quality of the test feels as though it has already been condemned. However, it is sitting in that chair, looking at the 9.5" x 6.5" cardboard card, holding it in your hands and moving it around while someone records every answer you are willing to give that makes the Rorschach test what it is (X). Intimacy is essential here; it is a vital aspect of this psychological test and is in many ways similar to the act of analyzing an archived object, one on one, with careful questions and a close reading (Mida & Kim 62).

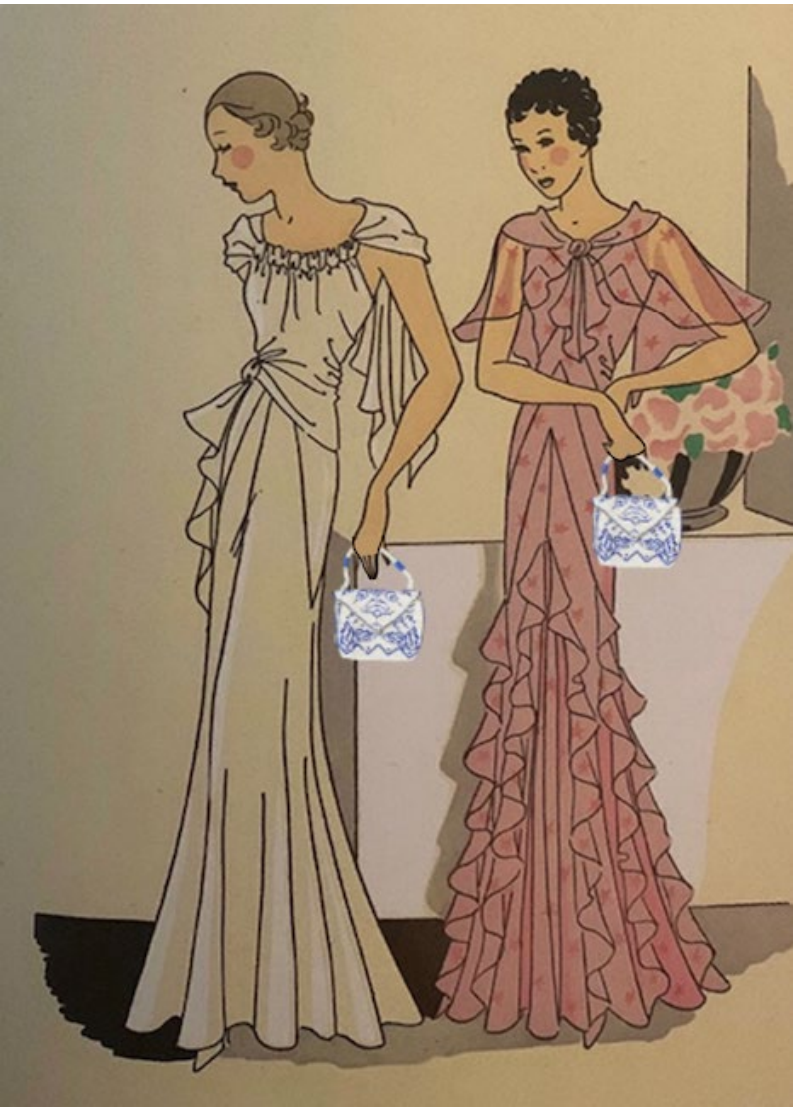
Reaction and interpretation are also part of the experiment, but there is also something more simple at play (7). The Rorschach prints look good (7). Besides psychology, analysis, and history, there is something visually appealing and mystical about looking at the inkblots. There is a reason why they gained notoriety in the 1950s, described by historians as 'Rorschach fever' (7).

> *Hermann Rorschach himself came from a family of artists and aimed to give the images a sense of what he called 'spatial rhythm,' which he achieved through abstraction, symmetry and a black-and-white colour palette (8). He wanted the inkblots to visually read as paintings.*

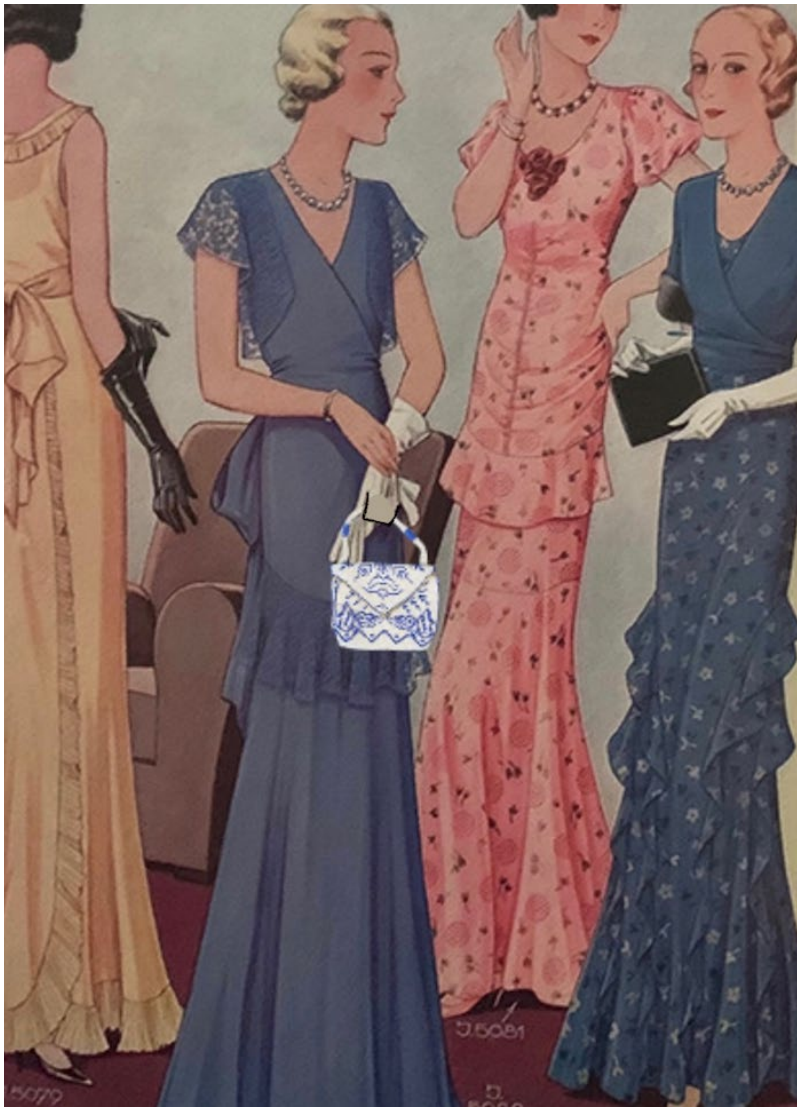
Even in the narrative of his life, it is believed that he theorized the experiment after visiting museums with his friends and noticing everyone's different interpretations (Searls 33). While Freud famously created word slips and literary psychoanalysis, Rorschach created visual psychology (307), and it is precisely the visual that links the beaded evening purse to the Rorschach test.

However, both items do not exist in their respective visual echo chambers. It is hard to imagine that an artisan shop in Czechoslovakia beaded a purse in reference to recent developments in psychology. Nonetheless, the bag does distinctively follow the Art Deco movement that was characterized as flat, sleek and geometrical, which the envelope purse represented perfectly (Campbell). The Rorschach test, on the other hand, was created "in the birthplace of modern abstract art" (Searls 8), and art historians have recently started to connect the test with Art Nouveau and Modernism (307). It is undeniable that both the bag and the test represent a larger visual shift, either Art Deco, Art Nouveau, or Modernism towards abstraction (Harrison 185). By abstraction, I mean non-figurative art where motifs are being emphasized and the subject is harder to identify (185).

So, to go back to our initial question, are the bag and the prints interconnected? The answer could be solved with an extensive explanation of early twentieth-century visual culture, but does it truly matter? Even if we were to imagine ourselves as objective 1930s viewers, the actuality is simply implausible. We are, without a doubt, biased viewers. Searls argues that a "line between psychological assessment and the inkblots' place in culture" (Searls 8) is impossible to draw. The culture that we see on every screen around us and every novel, film, and advertisement constructs a fictional world that generates synthetic experiences. They reinforce and produce identities that affect how people think and behave (Daniel III and Musgrave 503). In more precise terms, thinking beyond popular culture is nearly unachievable. Once the connection is made, we cannot look at the bag without seeing the Rorschach print. In the 1980s, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai famously claimed that commodities, like human beings, have social lives in that they are encoded with significance and exist in various societies at once (Appadurai 6). If we hold these words to be true, then regardless of what we want, objects will project what they see fit and exist in both the 1930s and 2020s as an object of social significance. The beaded evening purse links two previously separate entities as part of a larger visual conversation where abstraction, psychology and popular culture are entangled.



Très Parisien, Fashion Plate, c. 1933 from Dirix, Emmanuelle, and Charlotte Fiell. 1930s Fashion: The Definitive Sourcebook. Goodman Fiell an imprint of the Carlton Publishing Group, 2015.



Chic Parisien, Fashion Plate, c. 1933 from Dirix, Emmanuelle, and Charlotte Fiell. 1930s Fashion: The Definitive Sourcebook. Goodman Fiell an imprint of the Carlton Publishing Group, 2015

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Out of context, it is hard to imagine what the purse looked like in the 1930s. Without any information, one could easily mistake the object for something found at an overpriced vintage store or sold by an Etsy seller. What if we took fashion illustrations from the period and added the beaded evening purse onto them?

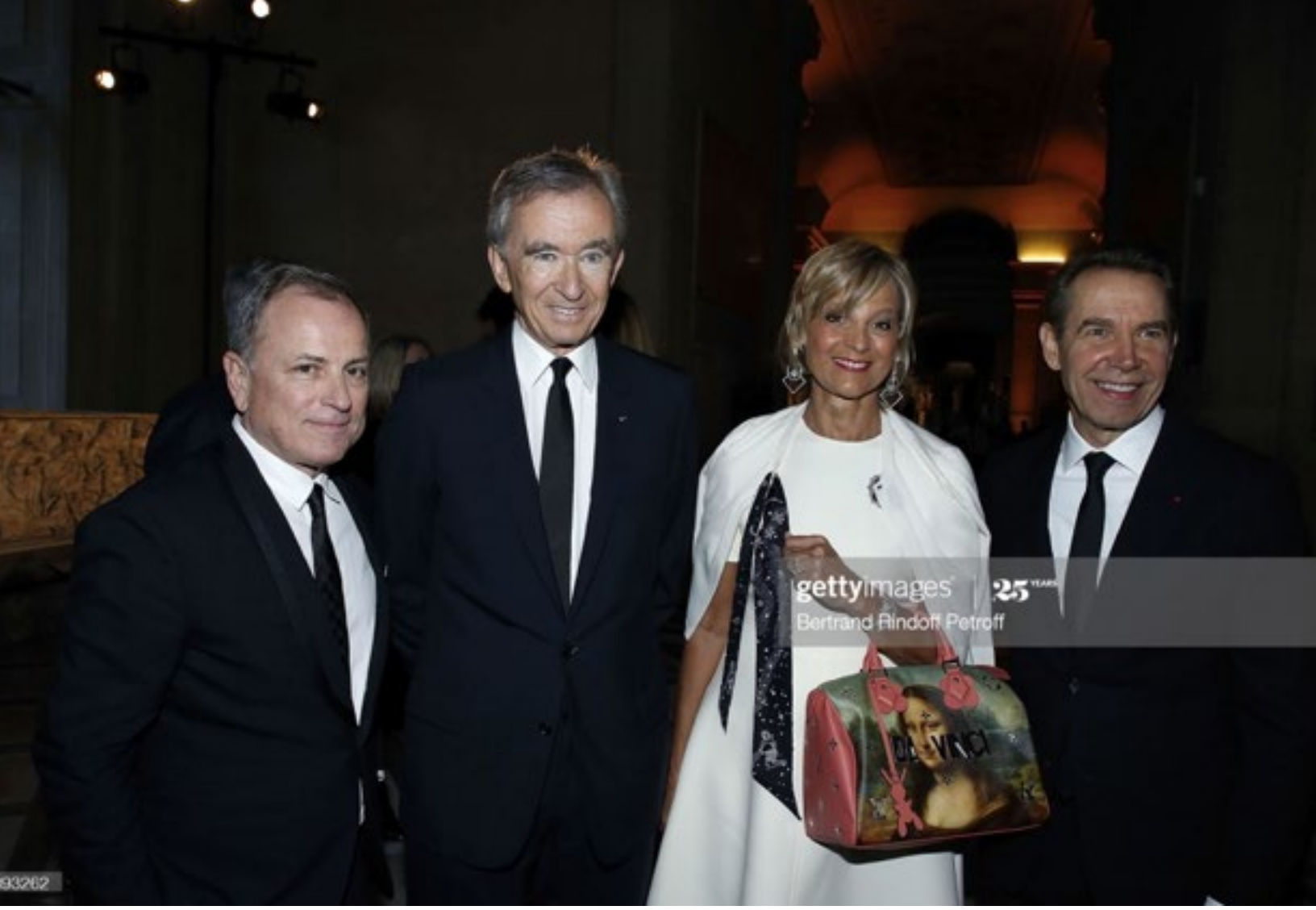


Fig. 4. Bertrand Rindoof Petroff, Michael Burke, Bernard Arnault, Helene Mercier Arnault and Jeff Koons attend the "LVxKOONS" exhibition (Louis Vuitton and Jeff Koons Collaboration) at Musee du Louvre on April 11, 2017 in Paris, France

Already viewing these digital images gives us a feel of what this object truly is: a purse meant to be worn by a wealthy upper-class white woman. These images, although glamourous and visually pleasing, reinforce the functionality of the bag. In some ways, it also reminds one of the photographs of wealthy women wearing the Jeff Koon x Louis Vuitton collaboration (fig. 4), where famous paintings and venerated artists' names were superimposed onto handbags (Friedman). These illustrations also raise questions of artists' rights, veneration, and visual plagiarism, making the simple purse part of a more complex conversation.

In conclusion, while the small beaded evening purse is a small object in the Fashion Research Collection at Toronto Metropolitan University, the context it is a part of is extremely multifaceted. The bag evokes the famous Rorschach inkblot prints, and together both the bag and the experiment are part of the visual abstraction of the early twentieth century. Historian Steven Conn claims that we live in a museum age and are experiencing a second "golden age" of museum building (1). Although institutions are modifying their platforms to "compete for entertainment dollars" (57), objects still endure. Seeing and being in the presence of three-dimensional objects is still thrilling to human beings (57). Without objects like the beaded evening purse, how would we pull the threads that connect everything together?

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