

## Fashion Is in the Bag

### A History of Handbags

From the ancient beaded bags of African priests to the haute couture tote of the modern lady of leisure, handbags have historically been both the carriers of secrets and the signifiers of power, status, and beauty. As the keepers of the equipment of daily life, handbags have been strongly influenced by technological and societal changes, such as the development of money, jewelry, transportation, cosmetics, smoking, cell phones, and the role of women in society.

Embracing its paradoxical role as both signifier and concealer, the handbag gestures toward a myriad of tantalizing psychological interpretations. The contents of a handbag have been seen as representing part of the Freudian unconscious, and the bag itself (as an empty receptacle) can be interpreted as female genitalia or even the womb. Indeed, the word “purse” was a slang word for the female pudenda from the seventeenth century (Steele and Borrelli 1999). Ancient, symbolic, and indispensable, the handbag has been a chameleon object, expressing (and carrying) the needs and tastes of both its wearer and its time.

#### Purse Precursors

Purses, pouches, or bags have been used since humans have needed to carry precious items. While “handbags” as a term did not exist until the mid-nineteenth century, ancient pouches made of leather or cloth were used mainly by men to hold valuables and coins (Foster 1982). Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs show men wearing purses around the waist, and the Bible specifically identifies Judas Iscariot as a purse carrier.

#### Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: Girdle Pouches

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, both men and women would attach pouches to the most important feature of medieval garb: the girdle. Because pockets would not be invented for several hundred more years, wearers would also attach other valuables to their girdle, such as a rosary, Book of Hours, pomanders (scented oranges), chatelaines (a clasp or chain to suspend keys, etc.), and even daggers (Wilcox 1999). The drawstring purse would hang from the girdle on a long cord and would vary according to the fashion, status, and lifestyle of the wearer. Women particularly favored ornate drawstring purses which were known as “hamondeys” or “tasques” (Foster 1982).

Medieval purses were not strictly used for carrying money, but were also associated with marriage and betrothal, often depicting embroidered love stories. Purses, known as “chaneries,” were also used for gaming or for holding food for falcons. Ecclesiastical purses were highly significant and were used to hold relics or corporals (line cloth used in mass). The most important bag at this time was the Seal Bag which was made for the Keeper of the Great Seal, later known as the Lord Chancellor (Wilcox 1999)

### **Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Pockets and "Swete Bagges"**

During the Elizabethan era, women's skirts expanded to enormous proportions. Consequently, small medieval girdle purses were easily lost in the large amounts of fabric. Rather than wear girdle pouches outside on their belt, women began to wear their pouches under their skirts, and men would wear pockets (called "bagges") made of leather inside their breeches (Foster 1982). Peasants and travelers might wear large satchel-like leathers or cloth bags diagonally across the body, as in Peter Brueghel's painting, "The Elders Two Peasants" (Wilcox 1999).

In addition, in a time when personal hygiene was lacking, many aristocrats in the sixteenth century would carry what was called "swete bagges" or bags that were filled with sweet smelling material. Just as pomanders hung from the girdle in the fifteenth century, these swete bagges were filled with powder from sweet-smelling herbs and spices, such as lavender, or with perfumed balls of cotton. Swete bagges might also be stored with clothes and linens or set among sheets and pillowcases (Wilcox 1999).

Like their immediate predecessors, both men and women in the seventeenth century rejected the obvious use of bags and preferred to hang long embroidered drawstring purses under their skirts and breeches (Foster 1982). Purses were not only functional but they were also often used as conspicuous decorative containers for gifts, such as money, perfume, or jewels (Steele and Borrelli 1999). Toward the end of the century, purses became increasingly sophisticated, moving from a simple drawstring design to more complex shapes and materials.

### **Eighteenth Century: The Revolt against Underwear and Pockets**

After the French Revolution, the full skirts of the ancient regime became less popular in favor of a more slender and narrow dress. These slender dresses left no room beneath for pockets and, consequently, pockets were discarded. Purses came back out into the open in the form of "reticules" or "indispensables" as the English tended to call them, suggesting that women had already largely developed a dependence on their handbags (Steele and Borrelli 1999). The French often parodied the women who carried the delicate bags that resembled previously hidden pockets as "ridicules" (Wilcox 1999).

### **Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Handbag**

Developments in science and industry during the Victorian era created a vast array of styles and fabrics which women could coordinate with the rest of their outfits. Though pockets returned in the 1840s, women continued to carry purses and spend an enormous amount of time embroidering them to show off for potential husbands, often marking the date and their own initials on their bags (Wilcox 1999). In keeping with the ideals of domesticity of earlier times, many women wore chatelaines that attached to the waist belt by a large decorated clasp (Foster 1982).

However, with the advent of the railroad, bags were about to experience a revolution. In 1843, there were nearly 2000 miles of railway lines in Great Britain. As more people traveled by train and more women became more mobile, professional luggage makers turned the skills of horse travel into those

for train travel, and soon the term “handbag” emerged to describe these new hand-held luggage bags. Indeed, many of the top names of today's handbags got their start as luggage makers (in contrast to the previously made purses and pouches which were made by dressmakers). For example, Hermes bags were founded in 1837 by Thierry Hermes, a harness and saddle maker, while Louis Vuitton was a luggage packer for the Parisian rich. Modern handbags still allude to luggage with their pockets, fastenings, frames, locks, and keys (Steele and Borrelli 1999).

### **1900-1920s: The Swinging Pochette and Egyptomania**

Handbags in the early twentieth century became much more than just hand-held luggage. Women could choose from small reticules, Dorothy bags (now called dotty or marriage bags) with matching robes, muffs, and fitted leather bags with attached telescopic opera glasses and folding fans. Working women often used larger handbags, such as the Boulevard bag, leather shopping bags, and even briefcases which could be worn around the shoulder (Wilcox 1999). Handbags also included folders for the newly invented pound note which replaced the gold sovereign in 1914 (Foster 1982).

After WWI, and as more activities and travel opportunities became available for women, the long constricting layers and rigid corseting disappeared. Perhaps the most important development during this period was the “pochette,” a type of handle-less clutch, often decorated with dazzling geometric and jazz motifs, which women would tuck under their arms to give them an air of nonchalant youth. Rules for color coordination grew lax and novelty bags, such as doll bags, which were dressed exactly like the wearer, became popular. The discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1923 inspired Egyptomania and purses began to reflect exotic motifs (Wilcox 1999).

### **1930s: Art Deco**

By the 1930s, most of the bags used today had been invented, including the classic handbag which had a handles and a clasp frame, the clutch (a variation of the pochette), the satchel, and the shoulder bag. The 1930 bag reflected the Art Deco style which highlighted abstraction and celebrated new industrial materials, such as plastic and zippers (Wilcox 1999).

### **1940s: WWII and the Rise of Shoulder Bags**

The war saw the smooth contours of the 1930s fashion change to a more military look. Bags became larger, squarer, and more practical, reflecting a desire to appear self-sufficient. As zippers, mirrors, and leather became scarce, designers turned to wood or plastic for frames and employed new synthetics such as rayon. The drawstring bag reappeared and was often homemade. Bags in Great Britain were made both to carry gas masks and to match an outfit. In France and America, as more women entered

the workforce, they turned to shoulder bags (Foster 1982). After the war, the shoulder bag was relegated to country and travel features until its revival in the 1970s (Wilcox 1999).

### **1950s: Handbags Reach Cult Status**

The post war economic boon of the 1950s catapulted handbags into cult status. Major designers such as Vuitton, Hermes, and Chanel enjoyed a culture where accessorizing and color coordinating were held to an almost moral standard. In addition, Christian Dior's new style, introduced in 1947, emphasized long skirts and tiny waists. As the antithesis of the military style, this new look signaled a new decade of femininity where a very small bag implied beauty and sophistication. The tiny handbag, like Cinderella's tiny shoe, represented femininity and submission. Indeed, a woman holding a smaller handbag sends a different sexual message than a woman carrying a huge shoulder bag (Steele and Borrelli 1999).

### **1960s-1970s: The Rise of the Youth Culture**

During the 1960s, rules of "appropriate" dress relaxed in response to the women's' movement and the rise of the youth culture. As the rules of correct dressing began to breakdown, the narrow long clutch was one of the earliest types of handbags to make the transition into the age of informality and youth fashion because it had always been thought suitable for a youthful look. The small and dainty shoulder bag with long chains or thin straps also began to dominate because it kept with informal child-like qualities of the miniskirt (Steele and Borrelli 1999). Such handbags highlighted the 1960 "swinging" fashion that was in stark contrast to the posed 1950s models.

Influenced by young travels to India in the late 1960s, larger satchels and fabric shoulder bags began to be popular. As opposed to machine-made goods, Afghan coats and bags, patchwork and embroidery, and former army shoulder bags also became popular (Wilcox 1999). In less than a decade, individual expression became popular and psychedelic patterns and later "flower power" introduced a romantic and ethnic look to fashion. By the end of the 1970s, slung shoulder bags returned with lots of buckles and zippers, suggesting that women were equipped for anything in the new age of feminism (Steele and Borrelli 1999).

### **1980s-1990s: Conspicuous Consumption and the Unisex Bag**

The 1980s' handbags became associated with conspicuous consumption--and for the first time, a concern with health and fitness sports bags and shoes were an additional group of accessories that influenced high fashion. In addition, as technology introduced the calculator and filofax, work bags were designed for order and control. In 1985, Miuccia Prada introduced the black nylon knapsack that became the first totally unisex bag, and it remains ubiquitous. One of the brightest stars of the 1980s was the rise of Vera Bradley's classic quilted handbag that reached sales of over \$1million in just three

years. By the early 1990s, small designer bags with giant Hs and CCs were all over London and New York, and only the trained eye could tell the real from the fake (Steele and Borrelli 1999).

### **Twenty-First Century: Anything Goes...Even a "Man Purse"**

Handbags are currently made in a bewildering array of styles and materials, such as waterproof canvas, space age synthetics, and faux reptile skins. Designers continue to play with the paradoxes inherent in the handbag with transparent materials that both expose and conceal the contents of the bag. And handbags, which for so long had been associated with the feminine are now becoming more popular with men. Both the modern man and woman can strap on or sling over a hands-free bag and go. Its variety and adaptability highlight the handbag's extraordinary potency and staying power.

### References

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