

500 years of bag design

Author: drs. Sigrid Ivo (M.A.)

Suspended from the girdle or belt

For centuries now, the bag has functioned as the woman's essential little home for storing her private attributes. The bag as an indispensable accessory is not only a phenomenon of recent years, but has been a useful implement for both men and women from the early days of their existence. Featured in paintings, prints and carpets and as realia in various museums throughout Europe, a variety of bags and purses came into existence in the late Middle Ages.

In addition to the necessary sheaths, the bags and purses were already functioning as practical accessories to the clothes that had yet to be equipped with inside pockets. Made from wonderfully embroidered leather, linen, silk and velvet, they contained compartments for carrying money and other personal necessities. There was a wide range from tough-looking buckle bags with no less than eighteen hidden pockets, leather purses with metal adornments to pouch-like purses on long drawstrings. The buckle bags typically featured ingenious clasps so that no one other than the owner could access them. With the exception of several early examples of bags that were intended to be hung from the shoulder, such as some hunting bags, bags and purses of that period were generally worn on the belt or girdle. This method of carrying them was fashionable for both men and women. The small purses suspended from the belt via a long cord formed the object of attention of many a thief. Which is why thieves were often referred to as 'purse cutters'??

With the advent of inside pockets in men's clothing at the end of the 16th century and in the 17th century, the bag for men gradually fell into disuse. With the exception of the briefcase in the centuries to follow the bag became the exclusive domain of the woman.

In addition to bags and purses for daily use, there were also smaller bags and purses designed for special purposes. As a marriage bag, toy bag, alms bag, perfumed bag or New Year's gift, they all fulfilled their own special role. Made from small glass beads, embroidered with silver- and gold thread or enamelled, they possessed the allure of jewellery and were welcome gifts in the wealthier circles.

Visible or hidden: the harness, the buckle bag and the pockets

In the 17th and 18th centuries, women had various practical accessories at their disposal for carrying their personal belongings. As well as bags and purses for the belt, women could also hang their purses on the harness. Today, the harness is better known under the name 'chatelaine'. In around 1830, the name chatelaine was given to the hook with chains and the accessories suspended from it. In the 17th century, next to their purse, women hung their keys, a pomander, a thimble holder, a needle holder, a pincushion and a knife sheath on their harness. A century later, the sewing attributes had taken up a more prominent role on the harness. Visibly suspended from the skirt band or belt, for the aristocracy and the wealthier classes, the harness made of silver or gold was not only a practical accessory but above all a precious piece of jewellery that was intended to be flaunted. As with many fashion phenomena, over time the harness became more widely accessible among the population, and its use spread.

In the Netherlands and some parts of Germany, a common alternative for carrying one's personal requirements was the bag with a silver buckle and hook that could be hung from the skirt band. The buckle bag was worn in the Netherlands from the 17th century till the beginning of the 20th century. The priceless silver buckles were often handed down from mother to daughter. In line with the fashion of the day, the daughter transferred the buckle to a new bag made from textile or beads.

In addition to the accessories mentioned, the woman also had a cheaper alternative that she could easily make herself for carrying her personal requirements. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, and for a large part of the 19th century, women's clothing was so wide that it was easy for them to hide one or two loose bags under their skirts. The bags were in the form of a droplet or a pear and were made of silk, linen or cotton, and occasionally elaborately embroidered. On the upper side of the bags was a ribbon with which they could be tied around the waist. Typically, these pockets, as they were called, were worn in pairs, one hanging from each hip. The women wore the pockets on top of their undergarments. And the pretty dress was worn on top of this. A split in the dress afforded her access to her personal possessions that lay buried deep in the pockets. The pockets were the woman's treasure, in which she stored her purse, portfolio, love letters, handkerchief, keys and sewing attributes.

The reticule, the chatelaine and the handbag

Under the influence of the discovery of Pompeii and the rediscovery of the Greek temples, in the course of the 18th century, anything to do with Ancient Greece or Rome became immensely popular. The architecture changed character as well as the furniture, but fashion changed too, and the bag with it. Away with the wide colossal dresses. The dress became straight, the waist was raised to just under the breast and a fashionable dress was preferably made of fine linen or muslin. There is no place now for the generously filled pocket under these gossamer-thin dresses. The contents of the pocket now move to the first real predecessor of the handbag, the reticule. The reticule had a drawstring or chain so that it could be held in the hand.

For several decades it was fashionable to hold the bag in the hand. The French referred to it scathingly as a 'ridicule', because who in their right minds would walk around with all their possessions in their hands? The English called it the indispensable. The reticules were made from all kinds of textiles, quite often in the home industry, and with much enthusiasm. With the Industrial Revolution (approx. 1760-1830), 'new' materials like papier-mâché, iron and polished steel also found their way into the bag. A wealth of bags in distinctive forms and materials are the true 'samples' of a new era. With the rising popularity of the reticule, it appeared that the role of the pocket had been made redundant. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The consequence of skirts reverting to the wider model led to the rebirth of grandmother's pockets – the pockets - around 1830 being warmly welcomed Even into the 20th century, some women continued to opt for these pockets The harness with accessories suspended from them, familiar sights from previous centuries, regained their popularity with the advent of the wider fashions of the 19th century. Under the influence of Romanticism, it was given the new name of 'chatelaine' after the French word for lady of the manor, and referring to the keys that the medieval lady of the manor wore on her belt, as a symbol of her function. As well as the chatelaine with sewing attributes, the 19th century woman also hung a variety of useful accessories on the chatelaines. A practical alternative for the chatelaine was the chatelaine bag. This became popular with the advent of crinoline, which resulted in the fashion of wearing a bag suspended from the skirt band. The increased popularity of travelling results in a wide range of bags for the modern traveller. The small hand luggage for train travel was to become the true predecessor of the handbag, which is not only taken along on trips, but is also used on visits and shopping expeditions. In line with its new role, the bag was referred to as the handbag. The start of the 20th century sees the handbag definitively take over the role of the chatelaine and the chatelaine bag.

20th century

The elegance of the bag is still of great importance, but women's emancipation, her increasing participation in the labour market, and the rise in mobility result in a greater demand for practicality. The woman now has a bag for every occasion. The reticule or the buckle bag has the elegance for going to the theatre, for the afternoon she has a bag for walking and one for visits and for work there is the briefcase. Under the influence of film stars on the silver screen, the use of cosmetics and cigarettes increases tremendously. With their various compartments for cigarettes and make-up, the 'vanity-case' in the 1920s and the 'minaudière' in the 1930s cleverly meet the need for a special bag in an elegant manner.

Made of metal, including silver or gold, or in synthetic materials decorated with strass, it is a key accessory for the fashion-conscious woman of that era.

Never before has there been a greater variety of choice in both use and materials. Bags made from textiles, tiny petit point, chain mail and beads of glass or polished steel are extremely popular in the early decades. Leather and synthetics vie with each other for the bag's favours. Leather is popular due to its distinctive structure, its durability and choice of colours In the 1920s, the synthetic materials celluloid, caseine and cellulose acetate are used in the first place as cheap imitations of the exclusive buckles in tortoiseshell and ivory. In the 1930s, they were especially valued for their rigid structure, which was deemed appropriate for that period. All kinds of new synthetic materials such as PVC, perspex and nylon are invented in this period, but it is only after the Second World War that they are noticeably incorporated into bags. Box-shaped bags made of hard synthetics, transparent in so-called lucite or in brilliantly shining colours, and bags made of synthetic telephone cables and tiles are all the rage. In this era, the United States plays a dominant role in these fashion hypes. As imitation leather, the soft synthetic materials become the biggest rivals for genuine leather.

The rise of the bag

In the 20th century, the variety in models of bags expands enormously. The handbag becomes a permanent element within the bag genre in the 20th century. A popular model from the past is the flat

rectangular under-arm bag or 'clutch', which is worn, tucked under the arm or in the hand. They are also referred to as pochettes or envelope bags. They make their first appearance in the fashion magazines around the time of the First World War. Next to the handbag, it was the most popular type of bag in the 20s and 30s. Around the time of the Second World War, it had to briefly make way for the practical shoulder bag. But with the elegant fashion of the New Look in 1947 and the 1950s, it wins back its position and is once again in demand as an elegant bag. Currently, it is predominantly favoured as an elegant evening bag.

The shoulder bag has become the fashion accessory for the practically-minded woman. With its long strap, we hang it around our necks and keep our hands free for conducting our busy lives. For its ancestors, we need to go back centuries to Ancient Greece and the late Middle Ages. A key turning point is the shoulder bags that the Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli designed in the 1930s. With their functional and military look, they were particularly popular in the time of the Second World War. Although the handbag and under-arm bag came back into fashion after the war, the shoulder bag retains its role as a sporting and practical bag. Its definitive breakthrough came in the 1960s when the young generation of fashion designers like Mary Quant, Pierre Cardin, Paco Rabanne, Courrèges and Yves Saint Laurent allowed themselves to be inspired by the youth culture of the time.

The youthful and nonchalant fashion demands a practical and youthful bag, the shoulder bag. An extremely well-known shoulder bag is the Chanel bag with its characteristic little cushions and gold-coloured chain. With its short shoulder strap tucked neatly under the armpit like French bread, the 'baguette' of the Italian brand Fendi is the first hit of the 1990s. Since its introduction in 1998, the bag has helped to establish the fashion look through the way it is worn as well as through its form.

The rucksack, which is so popular today, is a recent fashion accessory. The exclusive Italian bag brand Prada launched its black nylon rucksack in 1985 as a fashion accessory, thereby helping to set the trend. Known especially as the faithful companion of the hiker and the adventure-seeking traveller, its stuffy image was now a thing of the past. Both for young and old, the rucksack has become a cherished no-nonsense fashion accessory, effective in function, and practical to wear.

In the 20th century, the branded article has come to play an increasingly greater role in society. This also applies for the bag. Hermès, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Fendi and Judith Leiber are brands that have an international reputation, originally through their connection with handbags, or in any case with exclusive leather goods. Some brands are known purely due to a specific bag. The 'Kelly' bag by Hermès is a classic with allure. The leather Kelly bag with strap was developed in 1935 from the saddle bag, which existed as long ago as in 1892. It owes its name and aristocratic image to actress and Princess Grace Kelly, who wore the bag constantly after her engagement to Prince Rainier of Monaco in 1955. The model is still being made today by Hermès. Today, the bag is also an important fashion accessory for well-known fashion designers and/or fashion houses such as Chanel, Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Versace, Donna Karan and Dolce & Gabbana. In contrast to previous centuries, when fashion trends took their time to catch on, the bag has become a fashion accessory that changes with the seasons.