

# HANDBAGS: THE MAKING OF A MUSEUM

*Judith Clark*



# HANDBAGS: THE MAKING OF A MUSEUM



Bib. .... 00004417  
Item..... 00005740  
Barcode..... 000010006338  
Call no. .... NK4390  
              H34.C52  
              2012  
Date ..... 2/10/51

# HANDBAGS: THE MAKING OF A MUSEUM

*Judith Clark*

*With contributions by*

*Caroline Evans*

*Amy de la Haye*

*Adam Phillips*

*Claire Wilcox*



**FOREWORD** *Kenny Park* 7

**PREFACE** *Judith Clark* 9

1 —

**A HISTORY OF  
CONTAINMENT** *Claire Wilcox* 11

2 —

**BEGINNING WITH BAGS** *Adam Phillips* 23

3 —

**THE COLLECTION** 33

4 —

**THE MAKING OF A MUSEUM  
OF HANDBAGS** *Judith Clark* 209

5 —

**THE EVOLUTION  
OF POSE** *Caroline Evans* 231

6 —

**THE UNIFORM ON THE  
STREET: THE FASHIONABLE  
HANDBAG IN 1912** *Amy de la Haye* 235

7 —

**SPECIMENS** 243

8 —

**A TERMINOLOGY PERTAINING  
TO HANDBAGS** *Amy de la Haye* 257

9 —

**THE COLLECTION OVERVIEW** 266

10 —

**NOTES TO THE TEXT** 268

11 —

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** 270

12 —

**CONTRIBUTORS** 271



# FOREWORD

*Kenny Park*

When I was small, my father told me of a master shipbuilder who had dedicated his whole life to building wooden ships. He said that the shipbuilder's tape measure contained the wisdom that can measure the world. I have been in the business of making the handbags of designers from around the world for thirty-three years now, and I have figured out a few things. But what my father meant still eludes me.

The year 2012 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Simone's founding, in celebration of which I have opened BagStage, a building located in Garosugil, an area of tree-lined streets in Seoul, whose theme is handbags. At its heart is the Simone Handbag Museum. My original plan was to create a space where the history of eastern and western handbags might be unfolded together, but, because of the lack of material evidence of the history of eastern handbags, I decided to focus in the first instance on western handbags. This does not mean that I have abandoned the original plan; sooner or later, I intend to present the other half of the story and so complete the original project.

In addition to the Simone Handbag Museum, BagStage features the flagship store of onineonefour (Simone's own original brand), a multi-brand handbag shop, rent-free store spaces for promising designers, a workshop where anybody can enjoy the experience of handbag-making, and a space where various leather materials are exhibited and sold. BagStage will showcase the past of handbags through the museum; the present of handbags through the stores that offer the latest innovations and new trends in the handbag industry; and the future of handbags through the display of objects and ideas by up-and-coming designers.

My vision is this: no visitor to BagStage will leave the building without a handbag. Those who shop will leave with a handbag actually in their hands; those who visit the museum will leave with memories and new knowledge in their minds; those who see the displays of materials and the work of new designers will leave with a new-found passion for handbags in their hearts. More than anything else, I hope the building will inspire people to create a bright future for Korean fashion, especially young people who want to

become handbag designers or merchandisers or who want to develop products.

Today's Simone was made possible by the 280 members of the Simone family. For the past twenty-five years, they have been dedicated to their work with leather, putting their heart into every stitch, and creating beautiful handbags by putting their heads together with those of the world's leading designers. The full significance of what my father said to me when I was small can be found in the craftsmanship demonstrated by the Simone family members and in their desire to challenge themselves to become the world's best.

Let me end by thanking the museum project director, Judith Clark, for transforming my vision into a real space. The museum is the result of her expertise and passion. I also thank Stefania and Valeria for introducing Judith to me.

# PREFACE

*Judith Clark*

This book documents an extraordinary collection of bags housed in the newly created Simone Handbag Museum in Seoul. The collection purchased over the past two years has been photographed in its entirety and presented on the following pages in chronological order spanning from the earliest item—a sixteenth-century purse—to the most recent—from Spring/Summer 2012.

In 2010 I was approached by Kenny Park, the founder and director of Simone, and asked to create a museum of handbags in Seoul. He entrusted me to collect, curate, design and install a museum. It extended my practice far beyond its usual parameters of exhibitions that have not, for example, had to engage with the market, or with conservation or permanence. It has raised questions that touch every aspect of museology – the object, its value, its context, the continuities amongst the objects and how to exhibit the objects when their accession to the museum happens (unusually) virtually simultaneously. The book is going to press, inevitably, before the museum has been completed, which explains the absence of images of the museum interiors.

This book has allowed the project however to expand beyond the walls of the museum in Garosugil, through the expertise of Claire Wilcox, Senior Curator of Fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London whose work on bags created a foundation from which we could conduct new research and who here reflects on the collection as a whole; and psychoanalyst and writer Adam Phillips, who in his 'Beginning with Bags', gives them a much earlier significance. Caroline Evans writes about a century of gesture that has been an important element of her recent research and we are privileged to benefit from it here. Gesture was my starting point when creating museum mannequins that have used the whole body to give it essential scale but that specifically needed to draw the visitor's eye towards the bag, towards the way that the body interacted with the bag and the shapes that they choreograph together.

A small exhibition of postcards is placed on the landing between the floors of the museum, a collection of Xavier Sager's dashing urban women. They are

documented here as the dress historian Amy de la Haye takes a snapshot from 100 years ago.

Curators usually inherit captions from museum collections and occasionally add to these new research that has come to light during their tenure, but rarely change the basic facts: the date, the list of materials and the provenance. We have had to create them here for the first time, with bags that have been in private hands and un-examined for many years. Sometimes the photographs in this book are their first moment of documentation. I commissioned Amy de la Haye very early in the process to caption the entire collection. She noted: 'Whilst handling, exploring and scrutinizing each bag, I became acutely aware that the terminology, so critical to precisely describe and define them, might not – over the passage of time – be so meticulously well preserved.'

To archive the bags was to archive the techniques involved in their making, and to archive these was in some way to need to archive the terminology retrieved by De la Haye. Her terminology is recorded in this book: 'The alphabetically sequenced entries privilege design, materials and techniques, as they relate to handbags, with particular emphasis on fashionable designs for women. There are no entries dedicated to individual designers or companies, nor design movements, as in most instances an extensive literature already exists.'

Most of the work creating a museum is necessarily invisible, from fabricating supporting metal claws for the bags (intentionally invisible), to conservation work, which is usually, one hopes, invisible. This book aims to render the process a little more visible.

All decisions that are documented in this book were implemented from the start by Alessandra Grignaschi, the museum's formidable Project Manager, whose voice is not in this book but to whom it is dedicated.



# 1 — A HISTORY OF CONTAINMENT

*Claire Wilcox*



## A CONTAINMENT OF BAGS

I began this essay wondering if there was a collective noun for the miscellany of purses, pockets, *bourses*, *aumônières*, wallets, totes, clutches, vanity cases and designer handbags that come under the umbrella of the 'bag', for that word is so brusque. What is certain is that this beguiling accessory in all its manifestations has enabled and enhanced daily life ever since there were precious things to contain, conceal or carry about. When I began writing about the strange history of bags in 1991, I realized that they are such a familiar part of the landscape that it is easy to miss them. Walking through the galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, for example, bags materialize wherever people are depicted. In the Cast Courts, I often pass by a plaster effigy of Berengaria,

Queen of Richard I, who died around 1230. She has a finely carved 'purs' hanging forever from her fashionably ornate girdle, the faintly discernible coins in it referring to her acts of charity. Even earlier is a small woven panel from a Coptic tunic showing Hermes, the messenger of the gods, with a fat purse in his hand, a symbol of commerce. (How apt that the family who founded the French luxury goods company Hermès should share the same name.) There are endless examples of bags and purses in art – some purely fashionable, some made to contain reliquaries or for ceremonial use; small masterpieces of embroidery and gold work. Others are more modest. A roundel in stained glass of 1480, from a set of labours of the months, also in the Victoria and Albert Museum, shows a young man gathering fruit from a tree into a plump sack while, amid the flower-



**ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT PANEL** *Tapestry woven wool on a linen ground, Egypt, 300-500. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Museum number: 651-1886* **ROUNDEL: 'AUGUST'**, ORIGINALLY PART OF A SET OF 12 ROUNDELS DEPICTING THE 'LABOURS OF THE MONTHS' *Clear and coloured glass with painted details. Norwich, Britain, ca.1480. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Museum number: C.135-1931*



**OPPOSITE 'FALCONRY'**: ONE OF A SET OF FOUR TAPESTRIES KNOWN AS THE DEVONSHIRE HUNTING TAPESTRIES *Tapestry-woven wool, The Netherlands, 1430s. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Museum number: T.202-1957*





strewn ground of a fifteenth-century hunting tapestry, a fisherman hooks a catch, at his belt a flap purse remarkably similar to a carpenter's tool pouch of today.

While manuscripts, miniatures, portraits, fashion plates and, eventually, photography and film depict in extraordinary detail the clothes and accessories we wore, there is no substitute for the real thing. There is a magical quality in feeling the languid weight of a cut-steel miser's purse as it hangs over the hand (p.55) or the fragile weightlessness of an embroidered silk reticule as it rests on the palm (p.66). Equally entrancing is the reptilian touch of silvery mesh (p.113), the snap of a silver and enamel purse (p.78) and the tautness of a leather clutch, its skin against ours. The way a bag operates in the hand offers haptic data and a liminal link to the past. Although bags in a museum cannot be touched or used (unlike those for sale in a smart store which cry out for possession), they have as part of their operational history an essential relationship to the body. This corporeality is one of Judith Clark's preoccupations in the curation of this museum, and in the commissioning of mannequins that privilege gesture.

Unlike more esoteric and long-outmoded fashion paraphernalia, bags, pockets and purses remain recognisable and theoretically usable artefacts, however ancient – even if dress historians are not always sure what went in them. I have yet to acquire a coat without looking in its pockets or a bag or purse without opening it, carefully. They are usually long empty, although the odd calling card will remain, as did the Duchesse de Perigord's in the mother-of-pearl card case (p.78) with its eleven concertina compartments and bright blue silk lining. Others deceive: a note addressed to Mrs Brown I thought long-hidden in a delicately embroidered silk letter case of c1780, was placed there only yesterday (p.51). Both a private

possession and a public statement, bags and pockets carried what was needed and safeguarded what was valued – at home, in society and abroad.

The history of the bag is inextricably linked to the refinement of skill – in fine leatherwork and precision lock-smithing, weaving and ornate embroidery, fiddly netting and fine knitting, all materials that because of their flexibility, strength or beauty have been employed and combined together since the earliest history to make bags. Even today, long established companies such as Louis Vuitton emphasize heritage and old-world craft as an exclusive selling point. The beauty of bags is that, historically, their material characteristics were defined by their function. Going far back in time, one can see in the Petrie Museum of Egyptology, London, amulet bags to hang round the neck, tiny leather bags for kohl, linen bags used for containing seeds or salt, delicate netted bags and baskets, each specific to purpose. Yet, function tempts embellishment, to make things special.

## **HARDWARE**

At their most basic, bags are made from a circular piece of textile or soft leather, the perimeter hemmed or pierced and closed in with a simple drawstring. Such pouches were made over millennia – the bulbous sort illustrated in the ancient tale of Fortunatus, whose ever replenished purse only brought unhappiness. However, the use of wrought metal frames and integral locks gave purses a new edge. The jaws of the frame, through which the hand enters, added weight and security and the relationship between the rigidity of metal and the pliability of material has remained both a practical and a sensual one for an extremely long time. Metal lasts: one of the most beautiful survivors is a gold Anglo-Saxon frame from Sutton Hoo with decorations in gold filigree, cut garnet and millefiori



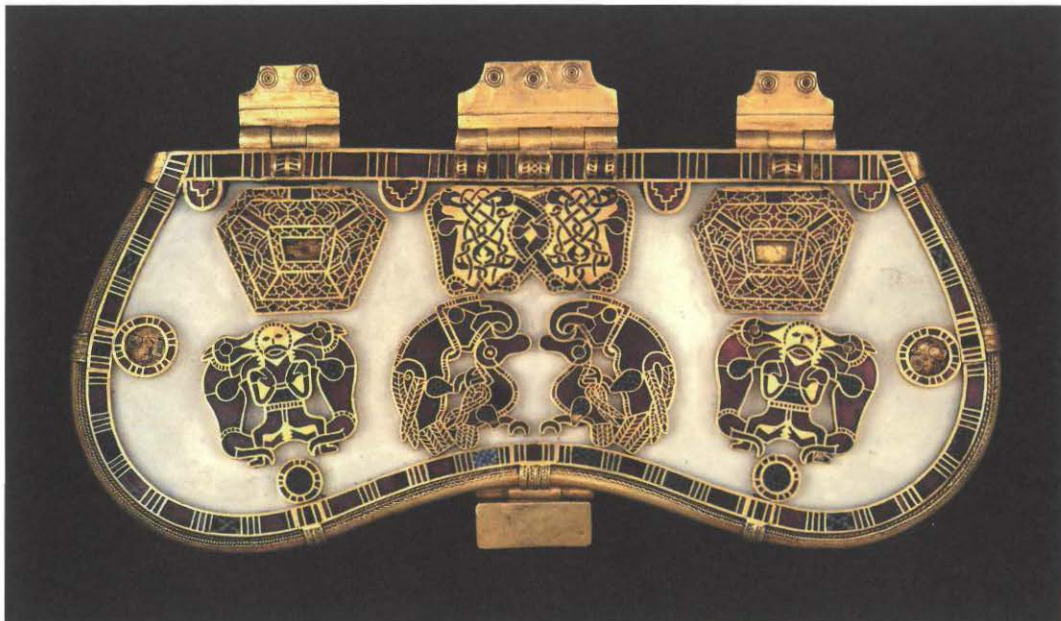
glass, which must have imbued the purse (material unknown) with enormous financial and symbolic value. Metal detectorists find all sorts of strange frames, exhumed from rivers and fields, building sites and shorelines; one, of about 1450, now in the British Museum, London, was found in the River Thames, near Cannon Street. Made of copper alloy, the summit is topped with three towers, perhaps a representation of the chateau of the French noble who owned it. It is pierced with holes to which to sew the fabric body. Another, now in the Museum of London, was found at the corner of Bull Wharf and Queenhithe, Upper Thames Street, London EC4, and is inscribed in Latin DEO HONOR ET [GLO]RIA; LAVS TIBI SOLI ('Honour and glory to God'; 'praise to you alone'). Such large framed purses were worn hanging from the belt and demonstrated both piety and fashionability; perhaps it was this type that the artist Albrecht Dürer, keen on good clothes, was referring to when he mentioned the gift of a brown velvet bag given him in lieu of art works, in his accounts of 1520-21.<sup>1</sup>

In the Simone Museum's corridor of frames, a row of skeletal mounts hang, like jaws. One is intricately jewelled and valuable, with a carved stone clasp, another is brightly enamelled. Several are cast in metal, rich with intricate detail. Others are

formed from plastic – one, sentimental, depicting crinolined figures, another severely geometric, inlaid, Egyptianizing. Bechained, unhinged and exquisite, each frame implies the outline of its missing fabric body parts but survives without it.

## **TREASURE**

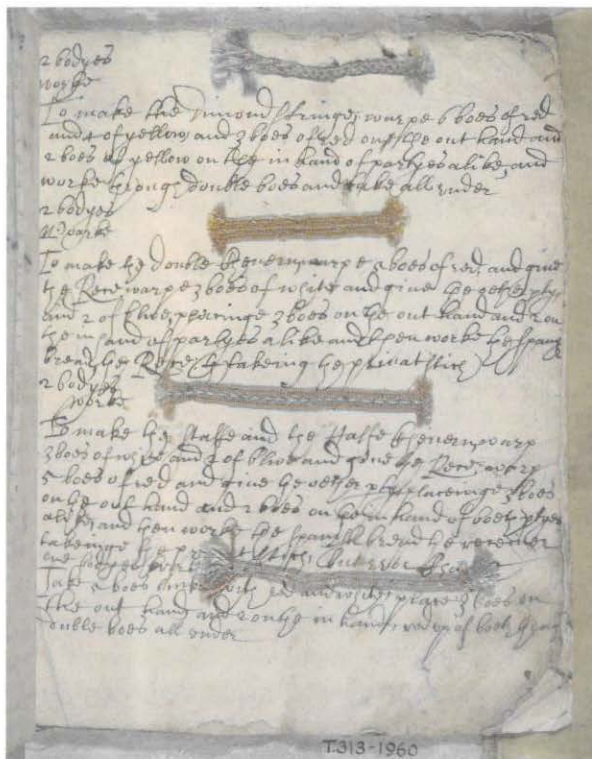
Countless numbers of purses and bags must have been made and lost over time including, presumably, Dürer's. Of those that have survived the erosion of days, years and centuries, many find refuge in private collections and museums such as this, pockets of treasure gathered together from every corner of the globe. Their diversity is astonishing – from drawstring purses with tassels embroidered in gold and silk thread in Paris workshops in the sixteenth century to tiny 'swete' purses once filled with fragrant dust ('damaske, muske Civett and amber gryse') with which to permeate fine linen.<sup>2</sup> One of the stars, a Limoges enamelwork bridal purse, has oversized tassels and a double portrait of the betrothed, each in their matrimonial finery. There are linen pockets in pairs or Kitty Fisher-single (Kitty Fisher was once a neighbour of Dr Johnson in Essex Street, London. She was the daughter of a German staymaker and was a notorious



courtesan, the subject of newspaper gossip, a song and the nursery rhyme 'Lucy Locket lost her pocket, Kitty Fisher found it'. There are delicate netted reticules – one shaped like a Chinese lantern (p.57), another made from prickly pear fibre (p.50); monogrammed letter cases for billets-doux, tapestry woven bags, knitted glass bead bags commemorating long-forgotten sea-faring triumphs. There are mesh bags, each little link joined by hand, petit point, flame stitch and Berlin woolwork, lovingly worked of an evening, and workaday work bags, one containing patchwork pieces for an unfinished cover. Here, one can see monogrammed silk lingerie bags from Princess Marie of Hanover's bedroom; tiny, neat leather frame bags to go with walking outfits from the 1880s that mimic Gladstones, and real Gladstones. Art Deco clutch bags, *Minaudières* (after the French for 'coquettish'), tasselled dance purses the right size for lipstick, Bakelite box bags, American novelty bags (poodles a favourite), bags of Lucite, straw bags, a tote by Fornasetti, bags by Cardin, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Gucci, an Hermès 'Birkin' bag in alligator skin (p.196) and, the most desirable of all, an Hermès 'Kelly' bag, in box calf with silver palladium hardware (p.199).

## **FASHIONABLE, WELL MADE AND IN GOOD TASTE**

In Chaucer's 'The Miller's Tale' in the *Canterbury Tales* (1380–90) the beautiful, lascivious carpenter's wife, with her plucked eyebrows and pursed mouth, carries invitingly (for naturally, purses had a suggestive meaning) a 'purs of lether tasseled with silk and perled with latoun (beaded in bright metal)' from her girdle.<sup>3</sup> With this symbolism in mind, purses were frequently given as romantic tokens in the Middle Ages (with a few surviving examples dotted around French museums, embroidered with courtly scenes or depicting lovers in a rose garden). In the great allegorical poem of courtly love, *Le Roman de la rose*, written between 1237 and 1277, instructions on gift-giving to engender love are precise. She should be given: 'Bonnets adorned with bandelets of flowers,/ Purses and veils and other little things,/ Fashionable, well made and in good taste.' Here, purses can be seen multi-tasking: a man's ample purse 'filled and weighed down with gold' makes women 'run to him with open arms', while alms purses for holding coins for donations to the poor and at church were displayed at the waist, for all to see, or brought out with a flourish.



**OPPOSITE LEFT** THE SUTTON HOO PURSE-LID  
Gold, glass and garnet, Suffolk, England, early 7th century. British Museum, London. Museum number: 1939, 1010.2.a-1

**OPPOSITE RIGHT** PURSE FRAME Copper alloy, Flanders, ca. 1450, Found River Thames, London. British Museum, London. Museum number: 1998, 1001.1

**LEFT** MANUSCRIPT BOOK Ink on paper, vellum, silk and metal thread, Britain, 1625–50. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Museum number: T.313-1960



In the poem Pygmalion attires and re-attires a statue with which he has fallen in love, as if she were a doll, dressing her 'with fine and dainty laces, silk and gold, and tiny pearls ... between her breasts he hangs a jewel rare; then with her cincture does he take great pains, designing such a belt as ne'er before adorned a maiden's waist, to which he hangs a dainty purse well stocked with golden coin'.<sup>4</sup>

## SOFTWARE

If 'dainty', money-filled purses were welcome gifts, bestowing blessings for the enrichment of both wealth and family, then the purse itself also had intrinsic value. Expensive fabrics and precious metal embroidery were used to create purses and bags in a variety only limited by the maker's imagination. Money-filled purses were often given as New Year gifts. In 1561 the Earl of Darby gave Queen Elizabeth I 'a sovereign filled purse of crymsen satten, embraudered with golde'.<sup>5</sup> So important was embroidery that there were numerous professional workshops (staffed mainly by men) for the creation of sophisticated knick-knacks enhanced with precious stones, pearls and silver and gold thread (perhaps like the Earl of Darby's purse). Equally refined were professionally made tapestry woven purses formed of shield-shaped sections, with three or four sides. Some showed scenes from biblical tales like a story-board; others were joyfully secular. One such reflects in fine detail the privileges and pleasures of a gentleman's life – trying on shoes, drinking wine and playing shuttlecocks (p.40). For more run of the mill purposes, ready-made purses could be found from traders in fashionable goods: 'White paper, looking glasses, pins, pouches, hats, caps, brooches, silk and silver buttons, laces, perfumed gloves'.<sup>6</sup>

The Simone Handbag Museum has a scattering of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century purses (p.37). Some are made from scraps of fabric, their oversize pattern a give-away (p.36, p.38), while others are rich with colour and stitch and probably made domestically, for embroidery was an essential part of a gentlewoman's education. These are typically rectangular in shape, with drawstrings and tassels, their surfaces worked with naturalistic patterns – vines, flowers, birds, oak leaves and acorns and super-sized insects – derived from pattern-books such as *The Needle's Excellency* published in 1631 (p.35, p.39). Hand-woven purse strings in a variety of precise geometric designs completed the purse. A rare manuscript book from the 1600s in the Victoria and Albert Museum is filled with such patterns. Remarkably, it contains

samples affixed to the pages, their colours still bright. I first saw this book many years ago and felt a shiver for, holding a purse next to it for comparison, it seemed that its strings had been made by the very same hand.

## A PECULIAR DELICACY

Pockets (a kind of internal purse) are so satisfyingly functional, and so nice to put one or both hands into, that they have remained a constant feature of masculine tailoring ever since someone worked out how to sew pouches into the linings of breeches, waistcoats and jackets in the sixteenth century. From the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century (with a brief hiatus between the 1790s and the 1830s) women also wore pockets but in the form of flat, fabric pouches in singles or in pairs which were hung from tapes tied round the waist and could be laundered separately. Pockets were particularly fashionable in the eighteenth century and were often made to match a petticoat. They were accessed via side slits in the fashionable, fulsome skirts of the time and were intimate objects, worn close to the body like fabric ovaries. People in the past seemed to be fairly careless: there are so many records of pockets being lost or stolen that I was spoilt for choice for a quotation. Some pickpockets took great pride in their calling, with one talented fellow recalling: 'My chief dexterity was in robbing the ladies. There is a peculiar delicacy required in whipping one's hand up a lady's petticoats and carrying off her pockets.'<sup>7</sup> I have always loved his lascivious tone.

Many pockets were beautifully worked. One such from the 1760s–80s is delicately embroidered all over with flowers and a restless vermicular background, echoing fashions in printed chintz from India, while another whitework pair is more restrained. Some were made at home from old clothes or textiles while others were bought from haberdashers. They were often given as gifts, being relatively easy to make, or handed down from employer to servant in that great commoditized recycling of clothing reflected in novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*, of 1740. As Pamela plans to leave her employer's house, she shows the contents of her bundle to Mrs Jervis (the housekeeper) to prove that she has not stolen anything that is not hers. It includes a pair of hand-me-down pockets: 'they are too fine for me; but I have no worse,' she casually remarks.<sup>8</sup> More suitable for her station as a maidservant would have been a plain white cotton pocket, rare in its ordinariness (p.49).

Pockets contained items of value and losing them



or having them stolen was an occupational hazard, as has been seen. While the same novel gives an idea of the jumble of things that a chap kept in his pockets – ‘my snuff-box, my seal-ring and half a guinea, and some silver, and half-pence; also my handkerchief, and two or three letters’<sup>9</sup> – the content’s of one woman’s pocket may be discovered from real court records. On 5 November 1716, Robert Draw of London, a labourer, was indicted for somewhat violently stealing a linen pocket worth 2 shillings from Martha Peacock. Apparently, ‘as she was going along the street, the prisoner came behind her, thrust his hand up her riding-hood, and pulled her pocket off; that upon her crying out, he was followed and knocked down, and the pocket found upon him’. In it was a holland handkerchief (value 1 shilling), a pair of white gloves (value 1 shilling), a pair of scissors and three keys.<sup>10</sup>

### **INDISPENSABLE**

In the 1790s women’s fashions changed radically (suffice it to say that political events took place in France). Full petticoats went out of style and there was no longer any room for bulging pockets. Instead, dresses became columnar, Grecian, with a high waistline and sheer skirts that clung to the body and legs (as the *Chester Chronicle* of 1796 put it, ‘The Ladies’ waists have ascended to the shoulders’). Pockets crept out of the dark and turned into bags that were carried daintily between the fingers or over the arm, as we carry handbags today. The newly revealing gowns caused great mirth, as did the naked pockets, for it was virtually like wearing one’s underwear in the street. Although mercilessly parodied by cartoonists such as Gilray, style won over practicalities (it is no good trying to control fashion – the British Board of Trade tried to ban the New Look in 1947 and that did not go down well). The bag became a visual extension of the new fashion proclivities and soon abandoned the shape of the pocket to try out new forms – lozenge shapes and trapezoids, hexagons and rectangles, pineapple shapes and urns – while strange creations in wood, tortoiseshell and leather emerged, a cross between a pocketbook and a bag, for outdoors. All had long strings, to echo the Neo-classical elongation of line, and were set off nicely by a backdrop of plain fabrics and small prints (p.58, p.59). This brand new accessory went through several name changes – ‘balantine’, ‘indispensable’, ‘new invented pocket’, ‘inestimable convenience’ and ‘ridicule’ – before settling on ‘reticule’, after reticulum, the Latin for a small net, thus etymologically (and neatly for this author)

recalling the netted bags in the Petrie collection.

While pockets co-existed with purses throughout much of the nineteenth century, they were never as important again stylistically as they had been in the eighteenth and became increasingly regarded as old-fashioned, the sort of thing worn by the older generation or by domestic staff. Pockets, however, did have the moral ground. *Eighteen Maxims of Neatness and Order*, written by Theresa Tidy (surely a pseudonym) in 1819, lists the essentials for a pocket: ‘It is also expedient to carry about you a purse, a thimble, a pincushion, a pencil, a knife and a pair of scissors, which will not only be an inexpressible source of comfort and independence, by removing the necessity of borrowing, but will secure the privilege of not lending these indispensable articles’.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps it was a similar sense of virtue that inspired another nineteenth-century craze, as women’s clothing rattled with the sound of chatelaines in imitation of those worn suspended from the girdle by ladies of the castle in the Middle Ages. These modern versions, however, were predominantly decorative; fixed to the belt, they constituted a dangling plethora of minute silver, gold and even iron sewing implements, scent bottles, pincushions, needlecases, scissors, coin barrels and keys. They are included in this museum for interest, while not strictly handbags at all, although it has to be admitted that they inspired a craze for waist bags.

Non-integrated pockets experienced a revival late in the nineteenth century for travelling (the 7 August 1880 edition of the fashion magazine *The Queen* illustrated special leather and cotton pockets for the purpose) but integrated ones properly came in when trousers became acceptable for women. The masculine pocket had been the subject of envy for early suffragettes, and a symbol of emancipation, for they argued that bags perpetuated a helpless femininity by tying up the hands. In an inspired act of civil disobedience, they invaded the pockets of men with defaced penny coins stamped with the cry to arms of ‘Votes for Women’. However, it took several more decades before the pocket became a consistently useful part of the construction of women’s clothing. This was helped by a relaxation in the formality of women’s dress (and a dwindling servant population to service it), the establishment of resort collections by French designers featuring beach trousers and sportswear and, above all, the influence of Coco Chanel who, radically, introduced masculine nuances into her collections. By the late 1930s, Elsa Schiaparelli was exploiting the surreal possibilities of accessories and bags, from



a suggestive fur and leather waist purse with a heart-shaped flap worn by the Duchess of Windsor in this collection, to bags embroidered to resemble locks by the specialist French workshop Lesage, a laborious joke on a symbol.

### **THE SEEDS OF TASTE**

Making purses became the rage for girls and women in the nineteenth century, which explains the many misers purses in museum collections all over the world. As Mr Bingley said in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), young ladies all 'paint tables, cover screens and net purses', while in 1781 Lord Bessborough begged his relation Sarah Ponsonby (of the two Ladies of Llangollen fame) not to send him another purse, for 'I have, I believe, twenty by me which are not of any use. It has been the fashion of ladies to make purses and they have been so obliging as to give me a great many'.<sup>12</sup> One beaded, knitted silk purse in the Simone Museum has two sets of initials but is ominously unfinished, perhaps the relic of a broken heart (p.52). With a long century ahead of them, women made all sorts of things. In 1832, the firm of Wilkes, in Regent Street, London, sold a diversity of goods for the worktable, including 'Floss and other Silks for embroidery ... Sewing, Knitting, Netting and Mending Needles ... Gilt and Steel Beads, Tassels, Slides, Snaps [metal snap frames], etc. for purses'.<sup>13</sup> In the same year, the heroine of Balzac's short story *La Bourse* showed the purity and bounty of her affections by embroidering her lover a purse: fictional, metaphorical and highly charged, the purse's symbolic value had not changed since the Middle Ages.

By the 1830s sleeves and skirts began to swell, the waistline began to drop back to its natural level and bags began to swell out again, in sympathy. Various nineteenth-century purses lie on the table before me, full of brightness and optimism and of painstaking skill, especially in the creation of sablé (sand) work, created, it is said, with a horse-hair rather than a needle. Most take the form of little pouches, some finely worked in cross-stitch and drawn close with a silk tie, others attached to delicate Palais Royale mounts or bejewelled gold frames for, if the framed purse was predominantly a fashionable male accessory in the Middle Ages, by the nineteenth century it had become entirely feminized (by then men had pockets and I am not aware of having seen a man carry a frame bag ever since). The frame provided the armature and handle for delightful dangling purses worked in floral embroidery motifs (now much faded) and glistening

beadwork designs (forever bright). Knitted, beaded, embroidered or netted, purses and bags began to multiply. Berlin woolwork and flame-stitch bags were worked in their thousands, based on patterns imported from Germany. New women's magazines disseminated the latest looks and aniline dyes providing a startling new colour palette. In a reaction to all this, the Royal School of Needlework was founded in 1872 by Lady Victoria Welby, sewing the refined seeds of taste. Initially based in a small room above a bonnet shop in Sloane Street, London, the RSN, under the guidance of Lord Leighton, commissioned designs from leading figures in the Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement, including William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones.

### **THE LIBRARY OF SKINS**

If the textile traditions of embroidery, weaving, beading and knitting provided an infinite number of possibilities for decorative and functional purses, formed either with or without frames, so the production of leather goods ran a parallel course creating carriers of all sizes, shapes, function and cost, from the fisherman's bag of the Devonshire hunting tapestry to luxurious fine white leather pouches for medieval nobility to, ultimately, the gendered handbag of today. In the Middle Ages, professionally produced leather bags were available from pedlars and purse-sellers and these can be seen in contemporaneous prints with bags of all types hanging from every limb, like fruit from a tree. Others are shown festooned on market stalls or small shops, the equivalent today, perhaps, of the smart display stands in Harrods in London or, going downmarket, the street trader with his fake-logo bags (the criminal trade in counterfeit labels is a serious issue for leading brands today). I was surprised to find the trade so important that the Pouchmakers had their own mistery (after *misterium*, meaning professional skill) alongside the Leathersellers and Glovers. The first mention of the Pouchmakers seems to appear in London court records of 1327, following a trial for the production of sub-standard goods:

"on Wednesday before the Feast of St Michael [29 September] Ao 1 Edw. III [1327] there came certain men of the mistery of Pouchmakers [*bursarii*] before Hamo de Chiggwell, deputy of Richard de Betoyn the Mayor, bringing breech-girdles [*braels*] and pouches falsely made and lined with flocks [*pilis*]. The said breech-girdles and pouches were ordered to be burnt at the Cross in Cheap."<sup>14</sup>



Leather varied enormously, in terms of thickness, quality and type. Tanning processes (to make the animal skin usable and prevent rotting) determined quality, colour and smell. The most refined was a soft, light leather known as Cordovan or Spanish, which was tawed or dressed with alum, egg yolk and sodium chloride, and used for hangings and luxury items such as gloves (nicely perfumed), shoes and purses. In terms of pure function, leather transcended all other materials. It provided protection from the elements for travellers (as it still does) and its strength was significant in an age before banks and a regulated police force, and when ‘cut-purses’ lurked on every street corner, knife at the ready. Court records of the time abound with accounts of thefts of purses (as they did with pockets) and, as a corollary, enticing facts on fashion which provide a useful clarity in the absence of much ordinary dress surviving. On 1 August 1598 a spinster, late of London, came to a bad end when she stole ‘two linen-cloth collars called “ruffe bands” worth ten shillings, a leather purse trimmed with golde lace worth two shillings, and forty shillings in numbered money, of the goods, chattels and moneys of Alexander Harrison. Putting herself “Guilty”, Joan Smithe pleaded pregnancy: found “Not Pregnant” by a jury of matrons, she was sentenced to be hung’.<sup>15</sup>

### **COMPARTMENTALIZATION**

Leather’s suppleness and durability meant that it could be formed, moulded and stretched into complex constituents for all sorts of decorative or functional purposes. In Amsterdam’s Tassen Museum, a sixteenth-century goatskin merchant’s bag has eighteen secret compartments for different European currencies

(I am told), melded to a substantial metal frame. Other examples have a little coin sack attached to the exterior, for handiness (because purses always get lost in the bottom of bags) – perhaps an early example of the mother–baby relationship between bags and matching (sometimes chained) purses common in the 1950s. Leather was useful because it protected money but was not eroded by the rubbing of metal coins; think of the tough little *porte-monnaies* that survive from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (p.47), as well as today’s ubiquitous leather purse. The malleability and strength of leather allowed an increasingly sophisticated compartmentalization within the interior of a receptacle, to create order. As coach travel became common (although still dangerous), so trunks and portmanteaus provided essential security for luggage. Internal segments, boxes and dividing devices provided a useful way to organize the insides of receptacles of any size and provided a way to protect delicate items (such as glass toiletry bottles) over the bumps and ruts of roads. Then, in the nineteenth century, as railways began to join up major cities, linking towns and coasts and criss-crossing continents, luggage took on new shapes in accordance with this new means of transport; gone were the rounded tops of carriage trunks. New flat-top trunks could be stacked and became increasingly sophisticated: some opened like portable wardrobes, others provided travelling desks. All were furnished with compartments, locks, keys and buckles, while the exteriors often bore their owner’s initials. Specialist leather companies such as Hermès (founded in 1837) first supplied saddlery, then travel goods, then luxury goods, joined later by Louis Vuitton (1896). From this pragmatic start, a whole new discipline of fine leatherwork emerged, gaining momentum



throughout the twentieth century and responding to further developments in travel – cruise ships, the motor car, air travel – as other companies such as Gucci (1906), Prada (1913) and Longchamps (1948) emerged, fully branded, to cope with the demand.

Perhaps the most valuable item to be transported was paper – legal documents, money, bills, wills and deeds, the offices of civilized order. These were transported from city to city, continent to continent. In Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* (1848), society teems with a restless population on the move and on the take, both socially and physically. Here, one finds descriptions of gentlemen-couriers at inns, acknowledging each other like truckers, all wearing gold earrings and all carrying large morocco money-bags. These may have been not unlike an enormous red leather bag (with lock and key with a maker's mark, 'PICHET') in the Simone collection, perhaps used by an individual in the French diplomatic service to carry documents and papers during the mid- to late nineteenth century (p.99). Metal studs confidently spell out 'COURRIER VF'. I have rarely seen such a bag and do not yet know what 'VF' stands for. Gladstones (an eponym after the British prime minister William Gladstone, 1809–1898) are much more common survivors, a reflection of their practicality and popularity. This type of lightweight travelling bag was built over a rigid hinged frame and divided in two inside, like a prototype suitcase. Another popular style was the carpet-bag. One fine example in the collection is made from leather with tapestry-work sides, bearing someone's initials. Let us not forget the doctor's bag. One such in workmanlike brown leather contains a worrying set of implements, including tweezers and a metal hypodermic needle (p.108).

By the turn of the century, leather work bags, in all forms including the barrel, were popular for women and girls and made the perfect gift for the industrious ('with grandmother's love to dear little Dorothy, April 10 1884' goes a note found inside a miniature version) (p.96). Many were made in Germany where fancy leatherwork and embossing were specialties and they ranged from substantial examples to little *étui de toilettes* (grooming bags), such as a red folding leather one bearing an oversize, ornate lock and lost key (p.46). Other compartmentalized leather creations included opera bags, complete with opera glasses; one such was supplied by Albert Barker of Bond Street, London, around 1900 (p.106). Many were exquisitely wrought and exquisitely expensive: a green crocodile work-bag from Mappin & Webb Cutlers, London, contains sewing and writing implements with mother-of-pearl

handles (p.123), while the pride of the collection must be the Duchess of Windsor's vanity case made by Louis Vuitton, complete with its hand-written label bearing the address of her Paris abode (p.183).

## **AN ABUNDANCE OF BAGS**

Finally, we come to the edge of the century of handbags. The handbag as it is recognized today had a complex genealogy but its moment came with the diminutive leather bags that emerged in the 1880s, mimicking masculine luggage. These were carried in the hand or had shoulder-straps for security when out walking or shopping, for by then the department store had emerged as a respectable arena for women (p.96, p.97). (My favourite bag in the collection is a miniaturized Gladstone; p.93). From then on, the handbag gained confidence; leathers and textiles of every sort, plus new artificial materials, were recruited to respond to the rapidly evolving fashion landscape of the twentieth century and the increasing demand for fashionable goods from all levels of society. While the intrinsic purpose of the handbag remained the same, its imperative was to adapt to the changing needs of women and, in that, to reflect wider stylistic and social change. For the curator, a bag from the past is like a visual précis of prevailing trends. Concise and to the point, a 1920s vanity dance purse like a Japanese netsuke reflects the craze for Asian art (p.128); a svelte clutch with a propeller motif from the 1930s evokes air travel and surely pays tribute to Amy Johnson (p.130). A sensible wartime bag with a shoulder-strap speaks of rationing and gas masks. A capacious bag from the 1950s speaks of postwar boom. Seeing a tiny bag swinging on long straps and a modernist frame by Cardin one feels the 60s. And so follow quilted Chanel bags and Moschino bags dripping chocolate leather; Prada rucksacks, totes, 'baguette' bags and 'Birkin' bags, bags covered in labels and no-label 'stealth wealth' Bottega Veneta bags.

For connoisseurs, the idiom of the bag – its logos and locks, leather and stitching – can be read like a book. For luxury brands, the stakes are high. (It is remarkable that ninety per cent of Japanese women today own a Louis Vuitton handbag, according to a BBC report on 27 June 2011, citing Barclays Capital.) Enticing shop-windows and sophisticated advertising campaigns present sublimely crafted and exceptionally expensive bags, many with long waiting lists that only heighten desire. At an exhibition called 'Leather Forever' in Shanghai, the boundaries between museum and couture house, art and commerce, fiction

and reality, blur intoxicatingly. I quote, admiringly, from *Le Monde d'Hermès* magazine, Printemps-Été 2011:

"In the 'Library of Skins', books opened and their huge pages fluttered, as limber as wings. Like a horn of plenty, a giant postbag spilled a host of small but perfectly formed leather goods – diaries, clutch bags and pouches, and the whole sprawling family of holders of this or that: wallets, billfolds, cardholders, key-holders, purses, luck-bringers etc. In a witty homage to the horse, Hermès' first client, saddles, boots and gloves rode the empty air, as if on a casual canter, while bags balanced weightlessly, seeming to await their mystery date."

### **FOR THE LOVE OF BAGS**

We like putting things inside other things and carrying them about. We like the feel of leather and fabric in our hands. We like the way that handbags can lift a tame outfit and fit any body and any size and we become fond of our bags. While bags are clearly signifiers of fashion – and here is the proof in this collection – they are also expressive objects, forming part of the composition of our individual lives. Although we may have no choice but to co-operate with the dominant trend in fashion of our time, even unconsciously through stance, gesture and expression, it is rule-breaking that gives us a little power back. As John Harvey has written, 'those who are on trend will wear the trend with a difference, with a personal "accent", an individuating touch ... So people show they are alert to life, and know where it's going, while with a scarf or a bag, with eye-liner or a tie, they mark their independence.'<sup>16</sup>

If I had to be pinned down, I would define the bag as an idiosyncratic mixture of the ostentatious and the private. The existence of the bag is predicated on a complex network of semiotic associations that go beyond the curatorial profession, and it is no coincidence that bags (and clothes) permeate literature, as ways of describing character. No wonder that faithless Anna Karenina flings her red bag, emblem of her womb, onto the tracks before throwing herself under a train or that the novelist Katherine Mansfield in *The Escape* of 1920, in the wake of Freud, should describe her characters like analysts:

"The little bag, with its shiny, silvery jaws open, lay on her lap. He could see her powder-puff, her rouge stick, a bundle of letters, a phial of tiny black pills like seeds, a broken cigarette, a mirror, white ivory

tablets with lists on them that had been heavily scored through. He thought: 'In Egypt she would be buried with those things.'<sup>17</sup>

While the exterior of a handbag is undeniably important as one's public and fashionable face, the dark recessive interior is equally potent. Luxury fashion houses put great effort into making the interiors of handbags as sensual and smooth as possible and there is nothing like the feral smell of new suede, released each time the bag is opened. Yet one would never expect a shop (or a museum) to display its bags with all their mouths open, until now, for the interior of the bag is private, another world and only really has meaning when filled with things. Perhaps this is why losing a bag is disorientating and why there are many historical references to thefts, for if those individuated choices of handbags containing individuated assortments of contents represent independence, power and even our innermost selves, we should guard them with our lives.

If we were rational, we would return to pockets, which are harder to lose, or take a cue from the Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto who offered dresses with frame handbags incorporated into their skirts, or that earlier lover of pockets, Schiaparelli, who created collections of pocket-rich clothing. Yet, paradoxically, our irrationality could explain the sexual frisson of the handbag for, while we flirt with its loss, we flirt with gain too: to choose or make something that is attractive and fill it with valuable and necessary possessions both reflects and feeds our soul. Having a handbag or two is the most common and at the same time the most particular thing in the world.