

THE PURSE & THE PERSON

EXHIBITION OUTLINE

THE PERSON



1. The Edwardian Matron

The Edwardian woman's purse, like the woman herself, had one foot in the 19th century and another in the 20th. Her calling cards showed her to be a woman steeped in the manners and customs of the Victorian era, but her bankbook revealed a person who managed a thriving enterprise – her household. Her purse was a long way from the portable office and salon that hangs over the shoulder of her 21st century counterparts, but it was also much more than just a pretty reticule in which to stow a hanky.



2. The Flapper

The carefree existence symbolized by the bobbed hair and higher hemlines of the “flapper” generation called for new slimmed-down purses. The boyish silhouette of the 1920s was often paired up with tiny clutch handbags. Small beaded and metal-mesh bags that shared a sense of movement with the fashions of the day were also popular. Inside the flapper's purse, there were new essentials -- cigarettes and make-up. This was NOT her mother's bag.



3. Art Deco Lady

Clothes and shoes must conform, at least somewhat, to the shapes of women's bodies, but purses can often give a fuller free expression to a new aesthetic sensibility. The stark geometry of the Art Deco movement was prominently displayed on purses across the country. Bold patterns and colors highlighted some bags while others took on new Deco shapes.



4. Rosie The Riveter

Wartime placed many restrictions on everyday life, but it also put women into new roles and consequently loaded their purses with new items from ration books to flash lights. Her purse might not even hold everything. If she was volunteering for the Red Cross a work bag filled with knitted items for the troops might fill one hand while one of the new shoulder bags hung on her other side. The woman working swing shift in a shipyard might pair her purse with a lunch box and thermos. For many women, the wartime shortages spurred creative new purses made at home from alternative materials such as cordé, crocheted gimp or fabric remnants.



5. Homemaker

The post-war decades were filled with pop culture images of homemakers from Donna Reed to June Cleaver to Carol Brady. Whether on TV or in real life these mid-century mom's were expected to take care of every household detail while providing perfect maternal care. For many children of this period, the secret to mom's success seemed to be in all the things she carried in her pocketbook.

6. Counterculture / Youth

Hand-freeing shoulder bags first gained popularity during the war years of the 1940s, but mainstream styles quickly reverted to clutches and wrist-carried bags in the following decade. The freedom of shoulder bags returned with a new generation of women seeking to change their world and explore freedoms far beyond their choice of purse. Unstructured cloth bags slung over one shoulder could be embroidered or otherwise embellished to carry the statements of their generation.

7. Superwoman

For the working mom of the late twentieth century, *having it all* – a career, a home, a family – often meant *carrying it all* in your purse. Her purse had to take her from business meetings to soccer games and everything in between. Like a boy scout, she had to be prepared, and her purse grew to accommodate all the various roles she played each day.



8. Fashionista

Fashion over function sometimes rules the day and it can transform the purse into a mere bauble. Tiny, high style bags designed to make a statement and carry only the most essential items found great popularity with fashion conscious young women in recent years. Like the flappers of an earlier era, these women have pared down their purses to carry only the essentials of the carefree lifestyle.

THE PURSE



9. Day

For many women today, it takes a force of nature such as the changing of the seasons to make them change from their favorite daytime handbag. For some, it might even take being victim to a purse snatcher. For these woman, it is difficult to imagine a time when they would have matched a particular purse to their hat, shoes and gloves before they ever dreamed of setting out for the day. Even more daunting would be the idea of repeating the entire selection process again the next day. The fashion for specialized purses for every outfit and activity kept both designers and consumers busy coordinating styles.



10. Night

Throughout the most of the 20th century, a night on the town demanded a special occasion bag to compliment the transformation from day to evening wear. Purses, like hats, gloves and shoes had to fit a specific set of criteria for the occasion whether it was just cocktails and dinner or a formal ball. Choosing a purse, like the picking out jewelry, was also an opportunity to add a little glitter to an evening ensemble. As formal nights out became less and less formal, the lines between day and evening bags have blurred. By the end of the century, a woman could take off for many evenings out without any consideration of switching into a different purse.



11. Travel - Grand Tour

Whether setting out on a grand ocean liner, or stepping onto a cross-country train ride, the slower pace of travel in the first half of the 20th century meant that a purse had to be carefully outfitted. These elaborate excursions put a traveler on the road for lengthy periods. Little bits of home often filled their purses. On the return trip, souvenirs from foreign destinations could compete for space with post cards, passports and photos of loved ones. For those who could not actually go abroad, the numerous expositions and worlds fairs brought the exotic ports of call closer to home and filled their bags with commemorative items to celebrate the event.



12. Travel - Car Culture & Fun in the Sun

Since World War II, Americans have been known as a society on the move. With all our moving around, the line between a purse and a piece of luggage has sometimes blurred. When it's time to hit the road, the traditional women's purse can sometimes morph into a picnic basket, a beach tote or a backpack. The contents of this purse may even resemble the contents of her car's glove box. Americans' roaming instinct and their love for the automobile fostered go-anywhere informal purses to suit a changing lifestyle.



13. All Shapes & Colors

In a century of design that runs the gamut from monumental skyscrapers to tiny computer chips, the architecture of 20th century purses covers almost as much ground. There is hardly a shape or strap or clasp that has not been tried. The practical concerns for a purse as a carrying device don't always win out. Conversely, design ingenuity has also brought about customized pockets, pouches, lids and handles that try to keep up with the times.



14. The Skin You're In

Generations of humankind have sought out sturdy animal hides for making all manner of containers. It's no wonder that 20th century woman's handbags would encompass skins from alligator to zebra. Even after wildlife conservation concerns came into play in the later decades of the century, purses continued to appear using both real skins and highly realistic

fakes. Of course, some of these materials are dyed in colors nature never thought of.



15. Just For The Novelty

A purse is an opportunity to make a statement. For some, the purse may be a bold choice, almost a portable sculpture featuring unusual materials or motifs. By contrast, a purse may also speak to the familiar elements in our lives, perhaps it is a reflection of its owner's hobbies, some memorable family moments or even her pets. Unlike other types of apparel, the purse only has to fit the personality and not a particular body part. It can become a billboard advertising almost anything about the woman who carries it.

THE PURSE & THE PERSON

EXHIBIT NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

Purses, like all clothing, reflect both the society and aesthetics of their time. Their use is determined by the need to carry along certain items, but their form is not limited by the requirement to fit a portion of the human body. So, purses and the accessories that fit inside them can offer designers free rein for creativity while serving as barometers of changing social mores.

Although men and women alike have used pouches to carry coins and other necessities with them for many centuries, the woman's handbag as we know it developed from the drawstring fabric bags called reticules or ridicules that came into fashion in the 1790s and 1800s. Bags were needed because the fashions of that period were too slender and lightweight to allow for the use of the pockets tied on beneath the skirt that most women had worn in the eighteenth century. And although pockets reappeared when skirts widened and became heavier in the 1830s, reticules remained popular. Leather frame bags, now so familiar, did not come into use until the second half of the nineteenth century. These large, sturdy handbags were modeled after luggage and were eagerly adopted for activities like train travel by passengers wanting to keep food and small personal items with them to ease the discomforts of a long trip. By the turn of the twentieth century, a wide variety of shapes and colors of

purses were available, made of materials ranging from leather to fabric to metal mesh, and often styled, outfitted, and marketed for what were seen as gender-specific activities like shopping or *matinée*-going.

Clearly, purses are far more than containers for life's necessities: they are private repositories of the stories of everyday lives – ours, our mothers', and our grandmothers'. This exhibition, developed from a single private collection, uses beautiful purses to look at these indispensable accessories' evolving shapes, styles, and materials, and the workaday artifacts found buried deep within them to glimpse the lives, personalities, and customary activities and concerns of 20th-century women from Edwardian matrons to flappers, wartime workers, suburban housewives, hippies, and contemporary businesswomen.

THE PERSON

The Edwardian Matron

Women in the years prior to World War I were beginning to taste the fruits of fifty years of struggle for women's rights. Although most women still concentrated on the domestic sphere of home and family, and the hard-won right to vote would not finally be granted until 1920, upper- and middle-class Edwardian women could own property and many had access to higher education. By 1900, an estimated 20% of American women worked outside the home. Although the majority were employed in textile and clothing production, women were beginning to enjoy a wider range of job opportunities than were previously available. Women were also becoming more physically active, as sports like cycling and tennis became popular pastimes, and had more social opportunities outside the home. The shift from the nineteenth-century woman's purely domestic sphere to the present woman's complex mix of public and private life was underway.

While some Edwardian society women still chose not to encumber themselves with purses during this period, most women used a handbag. Both small cloth, leather, or metal mesh bags, often carried dangling from the wrist or attached to the belt, and large leather bags used for shopping, were popular. As handbag design became more sophisticated, bag interiors were often divided into compartments each designed to hold an essential item. Cheek by jowl with her bankbook, cash, house keys, and tin of the effective new over-the-counter

medicine called aspirin, were her calling cards, scent bottle, and dainty handkerchief. The Edwardian woman's purse, like the woman herself, had one foot in the nineteenth century and another in the twentieth.

The Flapper

The modern woman of the 1920s increasingly shifted her activities from the private to the public sphere. With greater independence and activity came the need to take more and more items along when she left the house, including new essentials like cigarettes and makeup. Yet the carefree existence symbolized by the era's bobbed hair, boyish silhouette, and higher hemlines called for new slimmed-down purses, so the flapper's accessories were designed to fit. The linings of many purses of this period contained small pockets designed to hold a makeup mirror but some went further and added a pocket sized for a lipstick tube. Others divided the interior space into separate compartments that could be used to keep rouge, lipstick, perfume vial, and powder, cigarettes, holder and lighter in their proper places, separate from each other and from the taxi fare or the handkerchief. Purse and makeup manufacturers also made beautiful enameled or bejeweled compacts and tubes for lipstick for women to carry inside their bags or rigid vanity cases with fitted compartments for toiletries that could be carried in lieu of a purse. The look of such accessories was doubly important because they might be openly on view in the course of the evening, it being considered perfectly proper to repair one's makeup in public.

The handbag of the era was the clutch, also known as the pochette, an elegant rectangle worn either purposefully tucked beneath the arm or dangling from a wrist strap. For day, the pochette might be executed in luxurious leathers

and suedes; shining beads or gleaming metal mesh were popular for evening wear. Frame bags with soft bodies remained a fashionable alternative to the clutch, many embellished with fringe that echoed the sense of movement founded in the clothes themselves.

The Art Deco Lady

Purses can often give a fuller expression to an era's aesthetic sensibility than clothes or shoes, which must conform at least somewhat to the shape of the body. In the 1920s and 1930s, Art Deco, with its rounded shapes, bold patterns and colors, and enthusiastic use of new materials, permeated the design of purses and accessories from combs to scissors.

Early synthetics – rayon, imitation leather, and plastic – had appeared in purses by the early 20th century, used to imitate expensive materials like silk, leather, ivory, and tortoiseshell. Simulated ivory and tortoiseshell were first used for handbag frames and applied decorations. Beginning in the 1920s and increasingly in the 1930s, plastic was used for the body of the bag itself. Both the plain, streamlined 1930s dress aesthetic, which eschewed the busy, glittering surfaces popular during the 1920s, and the Depression-induced need for manufacturers to make less expensive bags promoted the trend, and many beautiful plastic bags with sleek, rounded Deco shapes were produced. Many of the fitted vanity cases for makeup were also made of the new plastics – celluloid, Bakelite, or Catalin – often carved or molded and perhaps set with paste. Equally popular and effective were enameled items, such as metal mesh bags and accessories like compacts that combined bold Deco colors and motifs with rounded shapes.

Rosie The Riveter

Materials shortages during World War II affected American women less sharply than Europeans, but commercially manufactured bags became more expensive everywhere as leather and metal were siphoned off into the war effort. Women mended and made do with what they already had, but many also were inspired to create their own bags at home from alternative materials such as cordé, crocheted gimp, felt, or fabric scraps. Dark colors were practical, but both homemade and commercially made purses also made use of light or bright colors to cheer up dark clothing. Big bags were in favor, durable, roomy, flat ones with sturdy handles and clasps. The shoulder bag, which first emerged in the late 1930s, became especially popular during the war for both civilians and women in the armed forces.

Wartime placed many restrictions on everyday life, but it also offered women unprecedented opportunities to work outside the home in factory and office jobs formerly occupied by the now-absent men overseas. Consequently, their purses were loaded with essential items, from ration books to sewing kits to hairnets. A single purse might not even be big enough to hold everything. A Red Cross volunteer might carry a work bag filled with knitted items for the troops in addition to her chic leather envelope or shoulder bag, while a woman working swing shift in a shipyard might pair her purse with a separate lunch box and thermos.

The Homemaker

The end of World War II signaled the beginning of a period of American growth and prosperity that lasted until the early 1970s. Handbag styles in the late 1940s and 1950s, like the rest of women's apparel, seemed to be trying to distance themselves from wartime modes. Although large bags would reappear in the 1950s, post-war handbags generally became smaller and sleeker in style, designed to hold slender accessories instead of bulky ration books. As elegant and formal as many of these bags were, there was also a ready market for novelty bags that reflected popular culture or the continuing fascination with new materials. The trend towards matching the handbag to the shoes and gloves, which began in the 1930s, was in full swing, with both retailers and fashion magazines full of helpful advice for women on how to coordinate their accessories.

Many women who had held important jobs outside the home during the war were stuffed back into domestic roles as returning G.I.s took over in the workplace and June Cleaver replaced Rosie the Riveter as a feminine icon. Television's model post-war wives lived an idealized suburban life, finding fulfillment in making their homes sparkle and their families happy. Reality may often have fallen short of the lives depicted on the small screen, but many women in those years did accept a destiny as homemakers. This cultural

pressure towards domesticity as much as the contemporary passion for matched sets may have promoted the idea of the mother-daughter bags popular in the 1950s. The children's purses were large enough to hold a small pair of white gloves, a handkerchief, or a dolly's bottle, and encouraged girls to model proper womanly behavior.

Homemaking meant not only keeping up the house and caring for the children but managing the family budget. The stereotypic housewife juggled multiple responsibilities while striving to keep herself attractive for her breadwinner husband. So makeup, by now a must-have commodity, might share space in the homemaker's pocketbook with trading stamps and coupons, notepad, pencil, and address book, keys, cash, checks, cigarettes, candy and toys for the kids – and perhaps an antacid for Mom!

Counterculture

Many members of the Baby Boom generation coming of age in the 1960s broke sharply with the politics, mores, and culture of their parents. Filling many women's handbags were items that reflected popular culture or many of the causes of the era's profound upheavals – Vietnam war opposition, a cresting civil rights movement, sharp increases in recreational drug use, liberalizing attitudes about sex, marriage, and divorce, and the militant idealism of many young people. The rise of feminism, which promoted equal rights and opportunities for women and the dissolution of the boundaries dividing traditional male and female roles, empowered many women to seek higher education and careers outside the home and encouraged men to take a more active role in domestic matters. Perhaps symbolically, men's appearance took on feminine aspects – bright colors, luxurious fabrics like brocade and velvet, and long hair – and handbags for men became available, though few carried them.

Young women, who were taking more of their fashion cues from the street than the runway, began carrying casual handbags more widely, as the elegant 1950s gave way to the mini-skirted Age of Aquarius. By the mid-1960s the carefree, hands-free shoulder bag had emerged as the pocketbook of choice for this new and adventurous generation. Stiff, tooled leather or unstructured cloth were equally popular as materials. The use of exotic skins, such as ostrich and various reptiles also continued, although in the 1970s alligator and crocodile became Federally protected and therefore unavailable. "Space Age"-style purses

made of new synthetics like vinyl rubbed shoulders with vintage purses scrounged from thrift shops and those of ethnic , handmade, and recycled fabrics with psychedelic colors and swirling patterns favored by the hippie look. The size of the typical bag shrank in line with the period's short skirts and slim silhouette, but those festooned with buttons and stickers might still make an outsize statement of their owners' social and political sentiments.

The Superwoman

The legacy of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s led 1980s women to believe that they not only could but *should* have it all – beautiful home, family, high-powered career – *and* keep to current standards of fitness and beauty, which became ever harder to achieve as the American obsession with diet and exercise ratcheted into high gear. The superwoman's high-stress, multi-faceted life led her to rely ever more on her purse, which grew in size so it could take her from baby's room to gym to boardroom, from executive meetings to soccer games, to after-work drinks. For her, having it all often meant carrying it all; it's no wonder the practical, many-pocketed backpack crossed over from hiking gear to fashion in the mid-1980s. Some bags grew so heavy and capacious that designers devised cunning subdivisions, in which a single tote might contain three or four smaller bags that could be extracted and carried on their own to specific activities.

Status dressing as marked by adherence to designer clothes was an idea that emerged in the later 1970s and blossomed fully in the 1980s, in reaction to the era's prosperity and the prior generation's rejection of couture. In handbags and accessories, this was often marked by the external display of designer logos like the instantly recognizable Louis Vuitton trademark, Gucci's distinctive double G, or the interlocked C clasp used by Chanel. Bags for working women abounded, many modeled on the male briefcase. Country-style pocketbooks influenced by equestrian leather fittings, like those made by Dooney and Bourke,

were emblems of the upper-class preppie look, alluding to issues of social mobility and the aspirations of professional women. And, true to the period's favored rich hues, purses, whether of expensive leather or cheap and cheerful nylon, came in many colors, from elegant black to fire-engine red.

The Fashionista

The idea of the fashionista – someone whose life and/or work revolves around fashion, to which he or she attaches undue importance – grew from the fascination with supermodels that began in the late 1970s and the simultaneous rise in the importance of designer labels. The term is sometimes applied to men, but most who are so labeled are women. The quintessential fashionista is a hip trendsetter, attractive, well-heeled, sophisticated, and independent. These positive attributes are balanced by some negative connotations; *fashionista* also suggests those who are enslaved and victimized by fashion or, at the very least, deemed hopelessly frivolous because they can find nothing more worthwhile on which to focus their energies. Despite the considerable advances western women have made since the beginning of the 20th century, the persona of the fashionista suggests that their association with fashion remains double-edged, as it has been for the 250 years since industrialization shifted responsibility for fashion consumption away from men and towards women.

Stylish daytime bags in the late 1980s and 1990s from hot designers like Kate Spade and Bottega Veneta were often roomy, but tiny, high style bags that also sported major designer labels found great popularity with fashion-conscious young women. Most were designed to make a visual statement and are too small to carry more than the most essential items – lipstick, keys, cell phone, condoms, and a credit card. Like the makeup-only bags carried by flappers in

the 1920s, the delightful implication of these pared-down purses is that their carefree owners need be concerned only with enjoying themselves.

THE PURSE

Day

The practice of carrying different bags during the day and evening emerged in the late nineteenth century and the criteria for daytime bags crystallized. Day bags historically were influenced by luggage design; earlier examples include box-shaped and round- or dome-topped handbags based on steamer trunks and shopping bags based on train carryalls; more recently, it was the hiker's backpack, which crossed over into fashion in the mid-1980s.

Throughout the century, whatever its design, a woman would place – or cram – into her handbag *everything* she felt she would need with her in the course of her day, be it a pack of cigarettes, a deck of cards, or a rain hat.

The changing fashions – and economics – of the twentieth century were also reflected in daytime purses' shapes, sizes, materials, and numbers. Modest bags with cloth bodies hung from heavy chased metal frames or celluloid handles, purses of exotic reptile skins fringed and beaded confections, tailored pocketbooks of smooth calf and sleek suede, amusing synthetic novelty bags, capacious straw carryalls, and kicky shoulder bags large and small – all have had their day. Waves of consumerism corresponding with boom times encouraged women to add to their growing handbag wardrobes, while in lean times one or two sturdy bags might be expected to last for years. The pressure to match one's handbag to one's belt, scarf, or shoes, which first appeared in the 1930s, covered

both situations. Depression-era women were urged to use matching accessories as an ingenious way of making a single dress or suit fit for a wide variety of occasions. In the prosperous 1950s, the same practice was just one way that the handbag industry aided by the fashion press helped to persuade women to acquire multiple handbags in a broad range of materials for every possible daytime occasion. The practice was gradually abandoned after the mid-1960s and today it is difficult to imagine many women bothering to change out of their lone favorite daytime handbag.

Night

Throughout the most of the 20th century, a night on the town demanded a special occasion bag to compliment the transformation from day to evening wear. Like evening dresses, evening bags and the accessories that go inside them are made of richer, more formal materials, and may be bejeweled, embroidered, enameled or otherwise richly decorated. Most are also considerably smaller than bags for daywear, an acknowledgement that their primary function was decoration.

Some evening purses, particularly in the earlier part of the century, were specially fitted to carry certain items, such as makeup. Others contained more esoteric items, like an early 20th-century opera purse that came with a built-in case for opera glasses and a swansdown powder puff. In mid-century, evening bags like their daytime counterparts were often coordinated with shoes or gloves. But as the century progressed, formal nights out became less and less formal. More and more women went out for the evening directly from the office and the lines between day and evening bags blurred. By the end of the century a woman could go out for all but the most formal of evening activities without bothering to change her daytime purse.

Travel – Grand Touring

Travel was still fairly expensive in the first half of the 20th century. Nonetheless, during that period increasing numbers of people chose to go away on vacation. Commercial flights were a costly novelty, but boats, trains, and cars were readily available to transport holidaymakers to familiar or exotic settings. Modest trips to nearby beaches or mountains were within reach of most people and those with means could consider traveling cross-country or abroad. The Fair Labor Standards Act, passed in 1938, established the five-day, 40-hour work week and its companion, the two-day weekend – just enough time for a quick get-away to a nearby tourist destination.

Whether setting out on a grand ocean liner, or stepping onto a cross-country train ride, the slower pace of travel in the first half of the 20th century meant that a purse had to be carefully outfitted, since such excursions put a traveler on the road for lengthy periods. Little bits of home often filled women's purses. On the return trip, souvenirs from foreign destinations might compete for space with postcards, passports and photos of loved ones. Both for travelers to Europe and those who could not spare the time or money to go abroad, the numerous expositions and worlds fairs in exciting cities like Paris, New York, Chicago and San Francisco brought the exotic ports of call closer to home. To celebrate their trip, many women filled their bags with readily available commemorative items ranging from bookmarks to cigarette lighters.

Travel - Car Culture

Americans' love affair with cars began in the early 20th century and blossomed after World War II. The automobile industry, well-established before the war, was at the top of its game in the 1950s and 1960s. Federal Highways built in the teens and twenties were augmented by the Interstate Highway System, which the government, lobbied by the auto industry, began to build in 1956. These systems of well-paved, high-speed roads changed Americans' living and driving habits. Families seeking the post-war American dream moved to the suburbs, whose existence and expansion was made possible by the highways. There, they enthusiastically embraced a way of life that relied on cars, exemplified, perhaps, first by drive-ins and then by drive-throughs. Not even the energy crisis and gasoline shortages of the early 1970s or current concerns over oil supply and politics has dampened Americans' enthusiasm for driving.

When it came time for vacation, it seemed natural to put the kids in the car and take off for the beach, the grandparents', or perhaps an attraction like Disneyland. Vacation-time purses tended to be casual, often coming in the form of a picnic basket, beach tote or backpack. Along with the usual, purse-like contents, they might have been crammed with vacation needs like steamy novels and a camera, useful equipment like driving gloves, tire gauges and mileage

calculators, and a wide variety of souvenirs.

All Shapes & Colors

Appropriately in a century of design that runs the gamut from monumental skyscrapers to tiny computer chips, the architecture of 20th century purses covers a lot of ground. Since purses need not fit any specific portion of the body, designers can simply let their imaginations soar. Although the best-designed purses are arguably those that let the best qualities of both color and materials shine through, designers have experimented with virtually every hue, shape, strap and clasp ever developed, with varying results. Certainly, practical and aesthetic considerations don't always win out, as purses wrought in odd shapes or from strange materials or with befuddling closures attest. Conversely, design ingenuity has also brought about many wonderful features, like customized pockets, pouches, lids and handles, that are functional and also beautiful to look at.

The Skin You're In

Early nineteenth-century purses were most often made of fabric. But by the second half of the century, encouraged by the development of new tanning and dyeing techniques, the balance had begun to tip towards fine leathers – morocco, calf, and sealskin, among others. Many leather purses, from the housewife's large-scale shopping bag or the miniature suitcases dangled by besuited women between thumb and forefinger, were modeled after luggage of the period.

In the 20th century, woman's handbags were made in all shapes and sizes of virtually all kinds of skins, from alligator to ostrich to pony to python to zebra, that were dyed virtually every color of the rainbow. Popularity in fashion, unfortunately, can spell trouble for the animal whose skin is in vogue; by the late 1950s, for example, the demand for alligator and crocodile hides for the purse and related fashion industries had sufficiently depleted the population that both were named endangered species and brought under Federal protection – alligators in 1967 and crocodiles beginning in 1970.

Concurrent with the popularity of leather was the development of imitation leathers. Initially a way to make a fashionable bag for the middle and lower end of the market, imitation hides were also a convenient fallback for the purse industry during wartime, when the fine leathers it usually obtained from Germany were unavailable. They remained in use in the latter decades of the

century, valued sometimes as spiffy examples of space-age materials, sometimes for their ability to replicate the exotic skins that growing wildlife conservation concerns had rendered off-limits.

Just For The Novelty

The surrealist love of *trompe l'oeil* (“fool the eye”) effects and recontextualization – surprising their viewers by taking things normally found in one walk of life and shoehorning them in another – found a joyous expression in purse design and materials beginning in the 1940s and continuing to the present day. Dog- or lobster-shaped bags in woven straw or bead embroidery, a purse rendered as a pair of dustpans, clutch bags masquerading as rolled-up fashion magazines – all are a result of surrealism’s pervasive influence in fashion. Many such purses make tremendously creative use of materials, often recycled ones. The discarded flip tops from aluminum cans, for instance, combined with multicolored embroidery make an elegant mesh bag. The richly colored flowers on a wide-mouthed basket prove on closer inspection to be made of sponges. An eye-catching shoulder bag is clad in brightly colored telephone cords.

Novelty purses like these come in an endless variety of forms and their choice may reflect specifically on aspects of the wearer’s life and personality. A woman may carry such a bag as a nod to her favorite hobbies or her love of animals, advertise her favorite football team, or demonstrate her concern for the environment. Whether commercially produced or made at home, the purse can become a billboard advertising almost anything its owner chooses.

THE PURSE & THE PERSON

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THE PURSE & THE PERSON

GLOSSARY

PURSE — In the last century, the term purse came to mean the container or bag carried by women to hold personal items while traveling outside the home. Historically, however, purse has also been used to reference the container used by both men and women to carry money. Today we more often refer to these items as a coin purse, and for those forms used by men they have largely evolved into wallets, billfolds and money clips.

POCKETBOOK — Depending on how old you are and/or where you grew up, you may also use the term pocketbook when referring to a woman's purse. This term likely grew out of the purse's role as a replacement for the voluminous pockets tied inside women's dresses in earlier centuries.

Some purses are described by how they are carried:

CLUTCH — a handle-less purse that is carried clutched under the arm or held in the hand

BACKPACK — a purse designed to be worn on the back with two straps over the shoulders

FANNYPACK — a purse designed to be worn around the waist either to the front or back

FINGER RING BAG — a purse that is carried by a small ring or rings designed to slip over a finger

HANDBAG — now used as generic term for almost any kind of purse, but originally meant purses carried in the hand or over an arm

SHOULDER BAG — a purse with a long strap or chain suitable for carrying over one shoulder

Some purses take their names from objects whose shapes they mimic:

BARREL BAG — a cylindrical purse with a stiff shape resembling a barrel

BUCKET BAG — a round flat-bottomed purse, often open at the top

ENVELOPE BAG — a flat, rectangular form of purse shaped like an envelope, usually with a flap closing at the top

LUNCHBOX BAG — a purse shaped like or made from a traditional oblong lunch box with a domed lid

MELON BAG — a purse with a rounded bulging shape resembling a small melon

PANCAKE BAG — a purse constructed of two flat circles resembling pancakes

Some purses have names that evolved from French fashion terms:

CHATELAINE — a purse worn clipped to the belt much like the key rings worn by the head of the household or chatelaine of the castle

MINAUDIERE — a small, metal or jeweled, box-like purse usually carried in the evening

POCHETTE — a very small purse resembling a little pocket

RETICULE — a pouch shaped purse closing with a drawstring, usually referring to the style carried in the 19th century

Some purses have names that evolved from their resemblance to certain pieces of luggage:

HOBO BAG — a soft-sided somewhat oversized purse that can be easily slung over a shoulder like the bag a hobo might throw together

MESSENGER BAG — a purse designed to be worn across the chest like a bicycle messenger's bag

SADDLE BAG — a purse with a form resembling bags carried over the back of a horse

SATCHEL — a purse shaped like a small suitcase, usually made of some type of leather or skin

VANITY BAG/ VANITY CASE — a stiff-sided box-like bag with specially fitted compartments for make-up, usually with a mirror inside

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