Left: **A late-17th-century heart-shaped bag, probably from Nuremberg in Germany.** *Below:* **An immediate classic: Jane Birkin's Birkin**

Handbags at dawn

Jane Austen's ladies knitted them, Queen Victoria's bore a golden poodle and Margaret Thatcher's was seen as a weapon. **Matthew Dennison** roots around in the history of the handbag and other receptacles of note

MY attention was chiefly attracted by a voluminous object which she carried on her arm,' wrote François Certain de Canrobert of the arrival of Queen Victoria at the Palace of Saint-Cloud, outside Paris, in 1855. Veteran of the battles of Magenta and Solferino, the war-hardened general was nevertheless astonished by the Queen's handbag. 'It was an enormous reticule—like those of our grandmothers—made of white satin or silk, on which was embroidered a fat poodle in gold.' Possibly intended as a compliment to her hosts, the poodle-decorated royal handbag was reputedly the handiwork of one of Victoria's daughters and was, for a time, among her favourite items in her wardrobe. In French eyes, it compounded other fashion crimes of the diminutive monarch: a 'sunshade of crude green' that, in combination with her white frock, gave Victoria the appearance of 'an untidy cabbage', and what the Queen described in her journal as a 'Paris-made white net dress embroidered with gold and trimmed with red geraniums', which, significantly, Victoria's host Napoleon III assumed must be of English design.

The handbag occupies an unusual place in women's wardrobes, being an object that is both public and private. It is as visible as Queen Victoria's poodle-sequinned reticule, yet its contents are neatly concealed from view. Throughout its history, its manufacture has reflected this duality: form and structure address the bag's practical purpose;

When a bag is power: Churchill carries Gladstone's 1853 despatch box, made by Barrow Hepburn & Gale, to present the Budget in 1929

external appearance its role as a component of dress. In our own time, according to curators at the V&A Museum—at which, when circumstances allow, an exhibition titled 'Bags: Inside Out' wll open—handbags have become a 'global obsession', the most coveted recommended by business commentators as investments. This year's Knight Frank Luxury Investment Index indicated that, over the past 12 months, the market in collectable handbags outperformed those for whisky, wine, watches and furniture.

Among factors contributing to the handbag's rise and rise through the past half century is the demise of other feminine accessories, notably hats. Today, handbags inhabit that hinterland between function and whimsy that was once millinery's territory: the V&A's selection includes a horse chestnut-shaped bag that opens to reveal a conker-shaped purse, made in 1996 by Emily Jo Gibbs, and a small, 17th-century metal-thread bag of a variety known as a 'sweet purse', probably made to contain sweet-smelling herbs, in the shape of a frog.

Handbags emblazoned with slogans—political, feminist or environmental—are a modern equivalent of fans that previously unfolded to reveal painted or printed scenes commemorating military and political victories, royal anniversaries and even advances in technology, such as the Montgolfier brothers' hot-air-balloon flights. Fashionistas acclaim Anya Hindmarch's new eco-conscious 'I AM a plastic bag' tote, made of a fabric spun from recycled plastic bottles.

Rewind 200 years and a white-silk reticule made by Samuel Lines in 1825, for the Female Society for Birmingham, formerly the Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves, also packed a powerful punch. It was printed with an image of a black slave mother and her baby. Next to them, a slave overseer carries a whip and gestures in the direction of work to be done. Below the picture are the lines 'The Driver's whip unfolds its torturing coil/She only sulks—go lash her to her toil'.

Newspaper columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown has described today's handbags as symbols of 'politics, economics, social mobility, pre-feminist proclivities or post-feminist liberties, advanced capitalism, the ebb of socialism and possibly the end of history'. In truth, this apparently apolitical accessory has always had the potential to communicate visual messages. Margaret Thatcher's Asprey handbags, with their ➤

rigid outline and sharp corners, became a well-known symbol of her uncompromising approach to government. Those the former prime minister worsted in debate referred to being 'handbagged'.

In Europe, the handbag evolved from drawstring fabric 'pockets'. Loosely pear-shaped, before the incorporation of fixed pockets into skirts or dresses these were worn on top of the wearer's petticoats, suspended from the waistband by fabric ties. Although accessible to the wearer, they were concealed from view.

> 'The handbag occupies an unusual place in a wardrobe, being both public and private'

Among the collections of Los Angeles County Museum of Art is a handful of examples of 18th-century English pockets. The crewelwork-style floral decoration of one indicates the degree of elaboration that, from the outset, characterised pockets made for wealthy clients. For almost two centuries, tie-on pockets of this variety provided women with the ability to keep with them at all times small, indispensable items.

PMQs in an accessory: ministers dreaded being 'handbagged' by Margaret Thatcher

A satirical print published in London in 1777, called *Tight Lacing, or Fashion before Ease*, depicts a wasp-waisted young woman being laced into her corset through the combined efforts of her beau, her mother and a black page. Suspended from her waist is an enormous white pocket capable of accommodating any number of essentials, from beauty preparations to love letters.

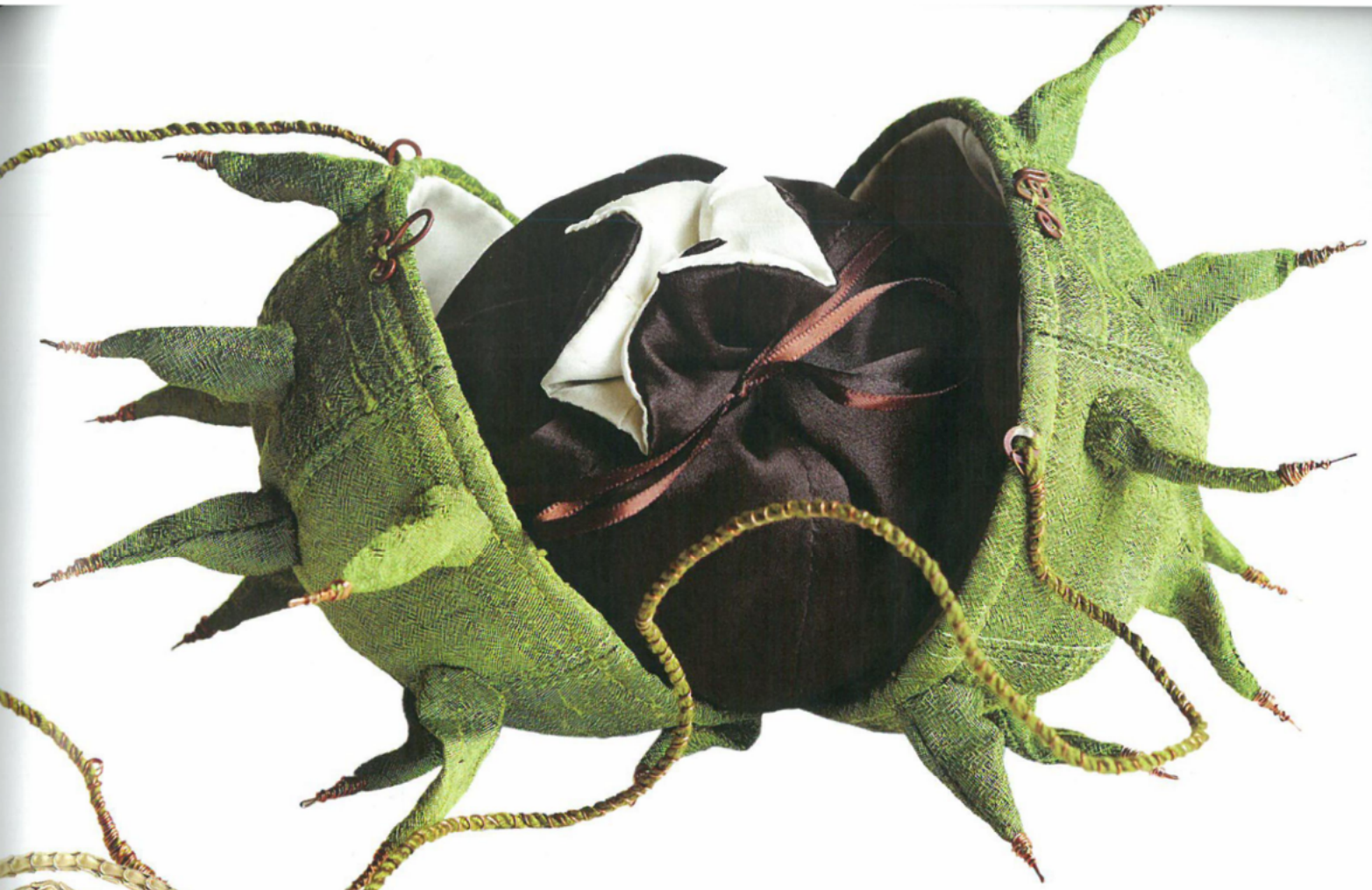
The narrower silhouette of women's dress at the end of the 18th century spearheaded the transition from pockets as a form of 'underwear' to receptacles more closely resembling modern handbags, which the wearer carried in the manner of a purse or bag. Detachable pockets were too bulky for the close-fitting frocks of the Regency. In their place evolved fabric pouches termed reticules or 'indispensables', often with a handle, sometimes a drawstring fastening. A fashion illustration for a 'Walking Outfit', published in *Ackermann's Repository* in February 1811, showed a full-length, fur-trimmed coat with military frogging in old gold, complete with matching tiny reticule with a chain-link handle.

Women frequently made reticules of this sort themselves. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Bingley applauds accomplished young women who 'paint tables, cover screens and net purses', the last a reference to small reticules that were knitted,

Left: **A late-19th-century carpet bag.** *Above:* **A coin purse of the same date, probably French**

Fine embroidery on an Italian pocket book of about 1720–40

Anya Hindmarch's famous We Are What We Do (now Shift) movement tote bag of 2007

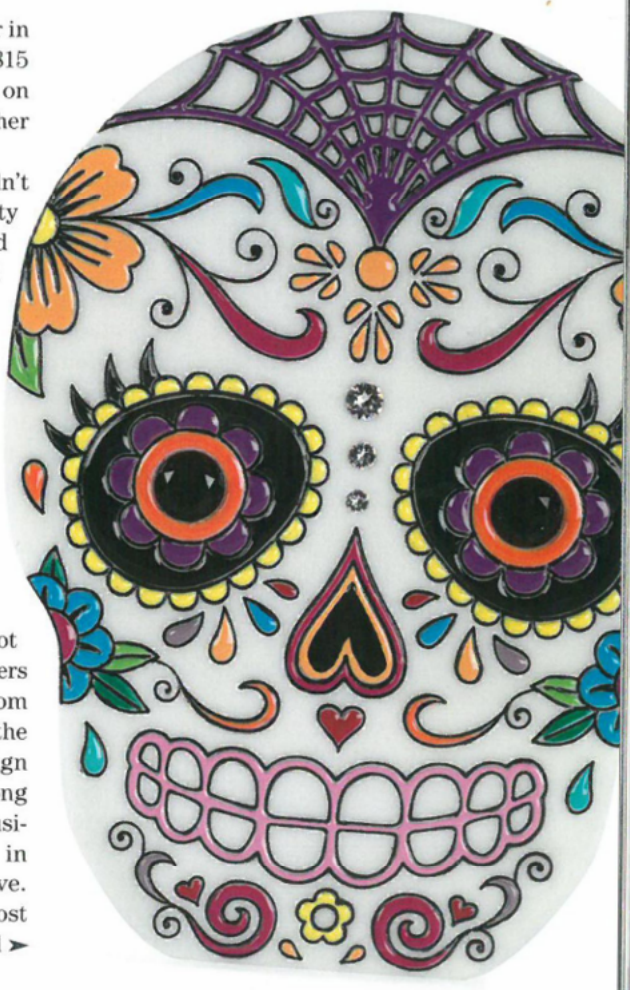


Above: **Emily Jo Gibbs's horse-chestnut bag, with concealed conker.** *Below left:* **A bag by Nils Herrmann for Cartier.** *Below right:* **Calavera skull clutch bag by Charlotte Olympia**

netted or crocheted. Advertisements produced by a watch-chain and purse maker in St James's Street in this period indicated that 'Ladies may be accommodated with a great choice of Purse-Twist, Tassels and Sliders' to help in their reticule making. Plain fabric reticules afforded opportunities for decoration and, in some cases, for display of the maker's skill as a needlewoman or in painting silk. A silk reticule of about 1815 in the V&A's collection is embroidered on one side with a flower basket, on the other with a basket of strawberries.

In cultures where forms of dress didn't undergo such shifts, such as Qing dynasty China, pockets evolved into so-called girdle bags, which were suspended from the waist and worn outside clothing. As in pre-19th-century European dress, the absence of integrated pockets in Chinese costumes necessitated these tie-on receptacles. Often highly decorated, they remained, as did earlier pockets, an aspect of the wearer's clothing, rather than an independent accessory in the manner of the Western handbag.

European and American women did not long remain chief makers of these containers for their private belongings. A shift from fabric reticules to leather carriers over the course of the 19th century created a design template that has proved remarkably long lasting. It also made the handbag the business of the leatherworker, invariably, in previous generations, a male preserve. Hermès, creator of some of the world's most iconic handbags, began as a harness and ➤



Left: **Falconers adorn an Austrian bag of 1755.** *Right:* **An 18th-century Chinese girdle bag**

Left: **A purse for the Great Seal of England from the reign of Elizabeth I**

A Limoges marriage purse of pink silk brocade, with enamel portraits, of 1700–50

> ‘A shift from fabric reticules to leather carriers created a long-lasting design template’

bridle maker in Paris, diversifying in the first half of the 20th century with the demise of the horse-drawn carriage.

The pre-eminence of the handbag among today’s accessories detracts from the diversity of portable receptacles manufactured historically. Bag- and baggage-makers have manufactured items from letter cases to document wallets, opera bags to satchels and even, during the Second World War, a protective bag in which to carry Queen Mary’s gas mask. In the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York is a selection of late-17th-century French gaming purses—highly decorative, metal thread-embroidered, drawstring leather pouches, intended for gaming counters and coins. In Limoges, at the same period, enamel-makers produced cameo-shaped enamel portraits to ornament elaborately stitched fabric purses: these were filled with money and given as wedding presents.

The Queen and senior members of the Government continue to use the distinctive red leather-covered despatch boxes manufactured by Barrow Hepburn & Gale, which supplied similar boxes to The Queen’s great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria and more recently created a replica for use in the TV drama series *Victoria*. More than 50 men who served as Chancellor of the Exchequer used the same red despatch box, originally made for William Ewart Gladstone, in 1853, by Wickwar & Co, until its retirement on grounds of fragility in 2010.

The French company of Louis Vuitton, by contrast, first manufactured trunks, before diversifying into handbag-making. That the term ‘handbag’ was previously a more catch-all term than currently is clear to audiences of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The handbag against which Lady Bracknell protests, on learning that it was the receptacle in which Mr Worthing was abandoned as a baby, is evidently a piece of hand luggage in the manner of a Gladstone bag or small portmanteau.

A recent survey found that the average British woman will spend £4,000 on handbags over the course of her lifetime and own 17 bags at a time. It is, of course, possible to spend considerably more than this on a single bag. In the era of the smartphone, water bottle, sunglasses and multiple bank cards, what is not possible is a return to the pocket. ➷

‘Bags: Inside Out’ will open at the V&A Museum, London SW7, as soon as circumstances permit. Tickets from £12 (020–7942 2000; www.vam.ac.uk)

It’s in the bag

- The world’s oldest handbag is thought to be a 700-year-old clutch-style bag found in the Iraqi city of Mosul
- Handbags, or their equivalents, became exclusively a feature of women’s dress following the incorporation of pockets into men’s clothing in the late 17th century
- The term ‘handbag’ is largely a 20th-century usage
- The highest price currently achieved by a handbag at auction is £293,000, at Christie’s Hong Kong in May 2017. The bag was made by Hermès, with white-gold and diamond detailing