

***VINTAGE BAGS – USEFUL CONTAINERS
and OBJECTS OF BEAUTY***

Pat Rinebarger
16324 East Carmel Drive
Fountain Hills, AZ 85268-2255
Four Peaks #1207

VINTAGE BAGS- USEFUL CONTAINERS And OBJECTS OF BEAUTY



“From the earliest times, some type of bag, (almoner, pouch, purse, reticule or handbag), has been carried or worn to contain money, keys and other personal items.”

An almoner carries alms for the poor and a reticule is a woman’s drawstring bag used as a carry-all. In the middle ages, purses, pouches or bags were attached to or slung over the

belt or girdle to carry valuables. (A girdle was a cord or fabric band that hung loosely around the waist.) Since they attracted thieves who could easily cut the cords that held

them, they were eventually attached or hung to undergarments so they weren’t visible on

the outside. These bags were made of leather, silk, wool or linen and were occasionally embroidered, fringed or tasseled. Early garments were bulky and very easily

accommodated several pockets to contain a person’s valuables or money. These

garments were worn well into the early nineteenth century (Holiner 6). The fashionable

handbag has remained a female accessory because of the numerous pockets in men’s wear and it seems that carrying a bag in the hand is seen as more feminine (Wilcox 11).

Girdles and purses were worn in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Some of the women’s bags were described as embroidered and jeweled. Very few bags survive

from the medieval period, but they are mentioned in articles and seen in artwork. Purses

were also associated with marriage and some have survived. Betrothal purses were

popular into the seventeenth century and were given to the bride by the groom, usually

containing a coin to represent his wealth. The French town of Limoges was famous for

its betrothal purses. The French town of Caen was famous for its rich bags in the Middle

Ages, but the fashion of embroidered or woven drawstring purses is thought to have derived originally from the Far East (Wilcox 15).



In the early sixteenth century, women wore pouches made of leather, velvet, satin and silver or gold cloth suspended from the waist on strings. Large, satchel-like leather or cloth bags were worn diagonally across the body by peasants and travelers. Most of these humble articles have disappeared. As fashions changed and garments grew fuller around the hips, the large girdle pouches went out of fashion. Men replaced them with soft leather pockets set into the sides of their breeches, and women began to carry small bags concealed in the folds of their skirts. In an age when sanitation and hygiene left much to be desired, unpleasant odors were a part of daily life. Many items of clothing were perfumed and ‘sweet bags’ filled the air around a person with perfume. The bags were filled with sweet-smelling herbs or perfumed wads of cotton. Sweet purses were used in storing clothes and linen, as well as to deter vermin (Wilcox 20).

Purses were small in the first half of the seventeenth century. Many survive that are thought to be made by professional workshops, but some appear to be domestic work. The most luxurious embroidered purses were used by both men and women. Men carried theirs in pockets, sleeves, or hose. Women’s purses were similar but smaller and were tasseled with drawstrings. They were usually embroidered, and white beadwork on leather was also popular. Purses were used primarily to carry money, but were also used as decorative containers for gifts, such as money, perfume or jewels. They were also used as gaming purses. Gambling and cards were enjoyed by both men and women. They were associated with saving as well as spending. Many embroidered or beaded

bags in the seventeenth century were decorated with acorns as a reminder to ‘save and prosper.’ Many early seventeenth century purses have survived in very good condition, suggesting that they were valuable keepsakes (Wilcox 23).



From the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, needlework in Europe was hand done primarily in monasteries and convents. The embroidery was executed by experts or students learning the art. In the seventeenth century, needle-lace and embroidery patterns were available through pattern books such as *The Needle's Excellency* published in 1631 by James Boler. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States, learning and practicing needlework became fashionable for young girls and young ladies. Because of its popularity, many ladies were embroidering something in the Victorian era. Petit point and needlework purses became beautiful objects, which were used for personal enjoyment (Schwartz 113). These objects provided an opportunity for women to display their skills, and offered wealthy, genteel women the chance to show off their beautiful needlework.

Purse styles in England became more sophisticated towards the end of the seventeenth century. They changed from a simple drawstring bag to more complex shapes and used a larger variety of materials. Knotting and netting became popular and tassels became larger (Wilcox 27).

Women's skirts were full and pockets were hidden among the folds of fabric for most of the eighteenth century. Purses were held, looped over the waist or kept in the pocket. Large drawstring workbags were important to wealthy women's lives, as they reflected the importance of their needlework. The emergence of the reticule developed in

part from the workbag, as women had already taken advantage of its size to hold a fan or purse. Pockets were separate articles from skirts in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. Flat or pear-shaped pockets were made in pairs and tied around the waist with tapes over the petticoat and were reached through side slits or openings in the skirts. They were deep and roomy, made with linen or cotton and lined for strength. These pockets were for personal use or given as gifts and many were embroidered, dated and initialed. (Fig. 1) The lady's pockets contained many of the basics of daily life: money, keys, cosmetics, perfume, needlework tools and a fan (Wilcox 33).



Fig.1, Pair of linen tie pockets
"Bags"

In the late 1790's, fashions became more fitted and slender making purses more popular. Women were left with the problem of where to carry purses and fans. The stocking purse was popular with women...a long knitted purse which had a good capacity. They also favored the reticule in the late 1700's and early 1800's. Reticules were daintily made of velvet, silk or satin and were embroidered or beaded, occasionally being made of the same fabric as their dress. They usually contained a handkerchief, perfume bottle, a fan and a purse. By the turn of the century, slim, high-waisted fashions

became firmly established and pockets were banished for the next twenty years (Wilcox 51).

In the late eighteenth century, small reticules were attached to a ladies belt or waistband with a brooch. This brooch ultimately became a decorative silver or gold pin with hooked ends called chatelaines on which the bags were hung.

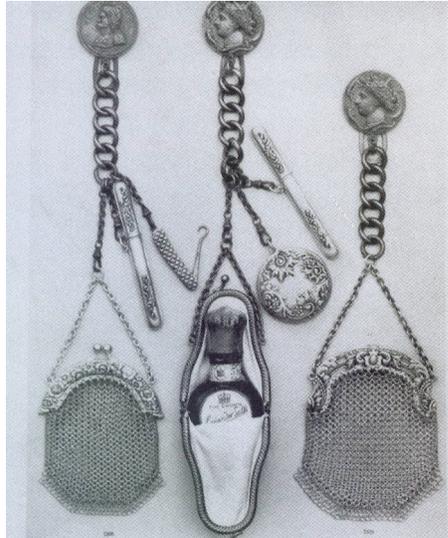


Fig. 2, Chatelaine Accessories
“Vintage Purses at Their Best”

Chatelaines later evolved into having four or more linked chains with swivel ends made to hold such items as keys, sewing tools, thimbles and other items useful in everyday activities (Holiner 6). They were usually made of German silver, plated silver or gun metal (Fig. 2). The frames were usually very elaborate with castings or stampings of snakes, cherubs and other figures. Later purse frames revealed ladies with flowing hair and flowers of an Art Nouveau appearance with metal beads and elongated drops attached to the bottom of the purses for decoration. Their popularity continued through the turn of the twentieth century (Schwartz 53).

From the middle of the nineteenth century on, purses were made of leather, plush, reptile skin, and fur. German silver mesh purses and rigid hinged purses were imported. From the 1860's, muffs often contained a small inside pocket for handkerchief, card case or change (Wilcox 71).

Steel beads were manufactured in round or faceted shapes and were used on purses. These beads were colored using an electrolytic chemical process which shaped a beautiful array of hues and gave the purse a special sparkle. The bags were made in the United States, Austria, Germany and France. Bags made in America and France are more commonly found (Schwartz 106). Magnificent bags with extraordinary fringe were made by the French and they weren't common in this country until the early 20th Century (Ettinger 71). French purses were generally more colorful with sophisticated designs and often contained a silk or satin lining with a label that states: "Made in France." Most American purses are rarely found signed, although some German and Austrian bags have been found with identifying labels sewn into their linings. The heaviness of steel beaded purses makes them easy to identify, plus they can be tested with a magnet. Similar to glass beaded bags, their patterns include scenes, flowers and geometric shapes. Some have drawstrings, frames with attached chains or envelope style with a flap over the top and many have fringe attached to the bottom. (Schwartz 106).

Flat, metal mesh bags were fashionable in the late 1800's and continued until the 1930's. In the 1890's some mesh bags were produced with silver, gold and gilded tops that opened and closed in an accordion manner. They were often small with a chain and a ring that could be attached to a chatelaine, or some had a chain and ring that could slip over a finger. Held in the hand with the ring on the finger these would be unseen and

quite secure (Holiner 6). By 1912, mesh handbags were so popular that they were advertised as free premiums in magazines to subscribers (Ettinger 97).

The Whiting and Davis Company of Plainville, Massachusetts, and the Mandalian Manufacturing Company of North Attleboro, Massachusetts made many of the finest mesh bags found today. Whiting and Davis was founded in 1876, but was then known as the Wade Davis Company and specialized in jewelry. In 1880, an ambitious teenager name Charles A. Whiting joined the company and was continually promoted from his nine cents an hour job to New York sales manager. He became a partner in the company while still in his twenties, and in 1896 he raised enough capital with his partner, Edward P. Davis, to buy the company. They changed the name to Whiting and Davis and began to produce the famous mesh bags, which are produced to this day (Fig. 3). In 1907, Whiting purchased Davis' interest in the company, but continued the name as a tribute to his longtime and loyal partner.



Fig. 3, Whiting and Davis Mesh Bag
“Vintage Purses at Their Best”

The first mesh bags were made entirely by hand and demand steadily increased. Whiting was eager to find a faster, more efficient method to manufacture the mesh. In

1912, he sought the help of an inventor, A. C. Pratt, to build the first automatic mesh machine. Each machine could produce 400,000 links a day compared to 1,000 links a day when made by hand. All the links were soldered individually by hand in the beginning, but eventually Whiting used self-soldering metal. When the mesh was placed in a furnace, the thin trace of solder on each link melted and flowed together. The purses were joined to the frames with separate delicate links, but later, the company used a fine spiral wire to join the mesh body to the frame. This method was called *hanging up*. This *mesh to the edge* feature gave a smooth silhouette at the hinges and added to the originality of the bag. The Whiting & Davis logo was impressed into the purse frame and/or a small metal tag was attached inside the bag. Whiting & Davis guaranteed their purses' durability and dependability with a well-maintained service department. Damaged bags were mailed to them for repair and they were made as good as new without charge or for a fraction of the cost (Schwartz 74).

Purses from 1912 to 1925 made of the fine mesh were almost entirely made of sterling silver, 14 karat gold or gold vermeil. They were tiny, silk-lined little wrist bags (Holiner 7). Clothes in the 1920's were liberating for women. Gone were the long, constricting layers and rigid corsets. Fewer items were worn and the effect was lighter (Wilcox 82). Skirts grew shorter and the flapper was born (Wilcox 90). Women bobbed their hair and long sleek evening dresses were accented with bracelets worn high on the arm. Women wanted a delicate bag that could be worn over the wrist or arm (Schwartz 53).

Frames were hand engraved, not machine stamped, and most of the clasps were set with small sapphires. The gemstones used were genuine, not synthetic (Holiner 7).

Appealing designs were created with variations in the frames, linked carry chains, mesh straps and with a variety of uncommon fringe that were given the names of Venetian, Egyptian and Bacchus. The Venetian design had a fleurette insert just above the fringe (Fig 4). Spanish influence provoked the use of metal fringe (Schwartz 75). Whiting and Davis created over 1200 purse frames (Schwartz 95). During the twenties, Whiting introduced a stunning array of Dresden fine colored mesh purses. They were made with a colored silk-screened process done by hand which gave them a water-colored look. Gradually, he attempted to broaden the appeal and lower the price by using base metals; silver or gold-plated brass; copper and nickel-silver. However, some higher priced bags were available in combinations of silver and gold in stripes and they continued to improve their methods (Holiner 7).



Fig.4, The “Princess Mary” bag with Fleurette insert above Venetian Fringe
”Vintage Purses at Their Best”

Also started in the 1920’s were their fabulous enameled flat mesh purses known as Armor Mesh (Fig. 5). They were offered in varied colors, designs and patterns. Single tiles or links were sometimes referred to as *spiders*. Links used to make the flat mesh

bags consisted of a small piece of flat metal plate in the shape of a diamond with tiny “arms” at each point. The arms were used to connect with a small metal ring at each corner in order to produce a flat surface. These purses were made in a constant procession of new patterns. Many were made with attached compacts a part of the frame.



Fig. 5, Whiting and Davis Flat Mesh Bag with attached Compact
“Antique Purses”

The Art Deco style, popularized by the 1925 Paris Exposition, promoted a new look with geometric shapes, and vivid colors in furniture, clothing, jewelry and, of course, purses. Its look was short lived, but its influence can be seen for decades.

Company representatives kept a constant vigil on the world of fashion in Paris and New York. They tried to anticipate ever-changing modes of fashion. Their product was advertised in magazines, newspapers, catalogs and jewelry stores, extensively near the holidays, Mother’s Day, June weddings and graduation. The economic prosperity of the twenties was overshadowed with the onset of the Great Depression and Whiting and Davis changed their product to accommodate more discriminating customers (Schwartz 75).

In 1940, Charles Whiting died at the age of seventy-six. About this time, purse styles became simplified, as practical clothes, shoes and accessories were the norm when the world was preoccupied with war. The company was sold to Certified Pharmaceuticals

in 1966, but continues today under the name of Whiting and Davis. They still produce beautiful fashion accessories such as purses, coin purses, wallets, checkbook covers, lipstick holders and eyeglass cases, as well as industrial items of shark-proof diving suits, belts, and metal safety gloves for meat cutters (Schwartz 77).



Fig. 7, Mandalian Mesh Bag
"Antique Purses"

The Mandalian Manufacturing Company was started by Sahatiel Mandalian an immigrant from Turkey, and started producing bags around 1906. Originally, like Whiting and Davis they produced jewelry and were called the Casper and Mandalian Company. In 1906, Eugene Hawkins replaced Mr. Casper and the firm was known as Mandalian and Hawkins until 1915, when Mandalian purchased Hawkin's interest and changed the name to Mandalian Mfg. Company. They made a complete line of mesh bags from the finest link to the coarsest (Fig. 7).

After the 1915 name change, the new name was stamped on the inside of the metal frames. They invented and perfected a fish scale mesh machine that produced a furnace-fired enameled link with an unusual glow called 'pearlized mesh.' The trademarked name was imprinted on celluloid and paper tags as well as on the boxes for

the purses. Purses found with the original tags or boxes are highly prized and more valuable.



Fig. 8, Gloria Bag by Mandalian Mfg. Co.
"Antique Purses"

The Mandalian purses differ from those made by Whiting and Davis who were their primary competition. Mandalian designs were mainly florals influenced by the Victorian era and Near Eastern carpet patterns that reminded Mr. Mandalian of his native Turkey. Others were naturalistic interpretations of birds and butterflies, with jeweled and enameled frames combined with enameled armor mesh to create superior purse designs (Fig. 8). Ornate frames with stamped openwork and elaborate etching, and the use of fairly heavy teardrop or round-shaped metal drops instead of fringe were used for dramatic effect. Bags can be found with original silk linings, tiny pockets, and, sometimes, a beveled glass mirror still attached to the lining. Their goal was high quality. They also produced a specialty called Baby Mesh which was a special armor link, half the size of the average armor link, and more difficult to enamel. The small link allowed a more supple flow to the material. Baby Mesh purses were usually made into larger, superior and more costly purses.

The Mandalian Manufacturing Company continued with their purses until 1944 when the business was sold to Whiting and Davis. Mr. Mandalian died on June 6, 1949, at the age of 80 (Schwartz 98). Rumors circulated that Whiting and Davis had owned Mandalian from the start to avoid a monopoly anti-trust suit started by the government, but this has not been proven (Holiner 7).

Other companies that manufactured fine mesh purses were Evans, R & G Company, Bliss, Napier and lesser-known European companies. Mesh was not a new product in the 1920's. It had been used by ancient Egyptian and Greek soldiers, and knights in the Middle Ages wore entire outfits which included face masks, gloves and boots of metal mesh to protect themselves in battle. It is not known when the first mesh purse was made, but early examples were the gun metal purses of the late 1700's. Not until the late nineteenth century did mesh bags increase in popularity. Even with all the petticoats, corsets, stylish hats and proper gloves, there was always room for one more embellishment to a lady's outfit. Mesh bags designed to dangle from a chatelaine, wrist or pinkie, helped to make a lady a stately sight (Schwartz 53).

The Bliss/Napier Company was founded in 1875 and produced men's watch chains and small gifts. The company was purchased in 1882, changing the name to E. A. Bliss Company and they acquired stones and beads to accentuate purse frames and produce jewelry. In 1893, Bliss moved the main factory to Meriden, Connecticut, and hired skilled designers and stylists, including William R. Rettenmeyer who had apprenticed at Tiffany & Company. They began to manufacture sterling silver giftware and novelties, and eventually the city became to be known as *silver city* throughout the world. E. A. Bliss produced silver match safes, brushes, buckles, shoe horns,

buttonhooks, lorgnettes, trays and lovely chatelaine purses (Fig. 9). The early company trademark was “EA CO” in script with an imprint of a bee in flight above the letters, set inside a circle.



Fig. 9, Chatelaine Purses and Handkerchief Pockets
"Vintage Purses at Their Best"

In 1919 they introduced a fine mesh material called Nile-Gold and advertised in jeweler magazines, *Vogue* and *Red Book*. Bliss mesh bags included a complimentary silk pouch to be used in place of a lining. The company trademark was changed again to a block with the word “Bliss” inside. In 1920, Napier was elected President and General Manager and the company name was again changed to The Napier-Bliss Company. In the spring of 1921, the company introduced a vanity bag that combined a mesh bag with a finely detailed powder case that was attached to the mesh bag with a strap. The name was changed to The Napier Company in 1923, and in the early 1940’s, they transformed their facilities to manufacture war-related materials. Military items replaced jewelry, purses and accessories in the factory. Over the years, the company has continued to grow and continues to the present time (Schwartz 59).

Vanity bags were also known as compact purses. Purse collectors as well as compact collectors, both seek the desirable, difficult to find bags. They are usually made

of mesh, include a compact somewhere on the purse, frame or handle and were made in the 1920's and 1930's. Some can be found in metal or sterling silver, and a small number in cloth. Well-dressed, discriminating women purchased these for late-afternoon and evening wear. They were produced by the major American purse manufacturers and were sold at prestigious jewelry stores and fine department stores ranging in price from five to five-hundred dollars (Schwartz 127). Today these are difficult to find and very expensive.

Handmade beaded bags have been popular for over two hundred years. Today these wonderful bags are treasured for their beauty and workmanship, and are very collectible. The time and effort spent in creating these beautiful bags is incomprehensible. Around 1800, the price for a beaded bag was a costly \$5.00. By the early twentieth century, European beaded bags of the crochet-type were \$100, an extravagant sum for that time. This type of bag was never an inexpensive accessory and today is still demanding high prices (Ettinger 61). Beaded bags from the middle of the nineteenth century were almost always made up of tiny, fine beads. Certain colors were also unique to earlier bags such as cornflower blue and brick red. In the late nineteenth century beads became slightly larger.

The early beaded bags were usually made in the drawstring type called the reticule. Early 1800 features were three distinct horizontal sections of the pattern. The bottom section was usually beaded in a star pattern with a tassel, especially if the bag had a rounded bottom. Usually, square bottomed bags had fringe. The middle or largest section of the pattern often contained a floral or scenic pattern. The third section or top of the bag, was often a sawtooth edge, scalloped border or floral design. The basic

construction was knitted in this manner. The knitted body of the bag was attached to a silk section known as the header. Ribbon, cord and occasionally a metal chain were drawn through small rings, which became the closure and handles of the reticule (Ettinger 62).

In the early 1800's, frames were beginning to be used on beaded bags. Elaborate frames of gold, silver and lesser metals were embellished with enamel, filigree and stones and usually made in France and Austria. Some bags of the 1820's and 1830's were made in a pie shape with up to one dozen wedges knitted together to form a circle. They were also fringed from one end of the frame to the other (Ettinger 63).



Fig. 10, Venetian Beaded Reticule
"Vintage Purses at Their Best"

The ultimate choice of many purse collectors is the Venetian scenic purses made with tiny glass beads, and the most difficult to find. Their scarcity and appeal, creates a great market and value. Since the twelfth century, the production of these beads for these special purses has been a regular industry in Venice and other European countries where people are actively involved in bead production (Schwartz 47). Many of the popular themes were the Rialto Bridge, the Grand Canal, Italian villages and waterways (Fig. 10).

Also castles, floral, figural, geometric and Egyptian themes were highly prized. When King Tut's tomb was discovered in 1922, the world clamored for anything with an Egyptian motif. The designers were caught up in the intensity of this special historic discovery. French celluloid purse frames were pressed to recreate the images of the boy king and his followers. Beaded and mesh bags depicted the lily of the Nile, the symbol of eternal life, pyramids, the sun God Ra and the winged sun God Horus. Other designs were the cobra, the vulture and the Sphinx.

Small purses embroidered with pearls and beads were produced in France in the early eighteenth century. Their finest work was their beadwork using up to 1,000 beads per square inch of small and fine Bohemian and Venetian glass beads, which were available at that time. Home embroidery and beadwork was less sophisticated, but compared to today's standards, was brilliantly skilled. Patterns for pockets and purses from the 1770's, which could be attached to ready-made, top-closing metal frames, were available in *The Lady's Magazine*. Before this time, designs were derived from professionally designed patterns or existing work. Very fine bead knitting was popular for purses. From the early eighteenth century, fine steel needles were used to knit purses and small bags in patterned silk, and their skill was exceptional (Wilcox 43).

From the middle of the nineteenth century on, women were encouraged to make their own purses with patterns and supplies advertised in newspapers, books and magazines. By the turn of the century, the Brainerd & Armstrong Company of New London, Connecticut, was one of the leaders in publishing lessons and instructions for knitting and crocheting silk bags and purses. Designs were clearly written by skilled workers who experimented and created new designs, making the bags prior to

publication. Bags could be made with and without the beads. Thread, crochet silk, metal beads, crochet hooks and glass beads were available in most large cities, or directly from the company (Schwartz 143). Crocheting was enjoyed by young and old and many crocheted purses found today date back to this period in time (Ettinger 47). In 1903, crochet and embroidery were recommended for women to relieve stress and other ailments that did not require ‘pills and potions’ (Ettinger 42).



Fig. 11, Booklets of Beaded Bag Instructions
“Vintage Purses at Their Best”

In the 1920’s, new beaded bag manuals were offered to the public. Usually sold for ten cents, they included patterns to make over ten bags. Illustrations showed fashionable ladies of the era holding alluring purses and jewelry. Simplicity of design and a refined product were promised along with patterns and handy bead charts. A wide range of products included metal filigree and early plastic purse frames with carry chains, yarn, pure silk, crochet hooks, knitting and sewing needles. Many companies were involved with this fabulous new home craft (Fig. 11). Each of these homemade beaded bags was truly beautiful and unique. (I believe a substantial number of these bags are available on today’s market.)

By the Depression era of the 1930’s, yet another craft appeared on the home purse market. Wood Bead crafts were offered by Walco Bead Company. The beads were

large, easy to string, colored and provided organizations with opportunities to raise money for charities. Schools, camps, and girls' and boys' groups were taught the new hobby. Many young people made belts, bracelets and costume jewelry as well as bags. The results were not of the quality or beauty of their earlier counterparts. Sadly, the tendency to make those wonderful old purses was swiftly becoming a dying pastime (Schwartz 145). Kits to make small, beaded bags are back on the market and copies of vintage patterns are available on the internet. Today, vintage beaded and mesh bags can be found at estate sales, garage sales, antique shops and on the internet. Prices increase every year, but a few bargains are still out there waiting to be found.

The purse has gone through a long evolution throughout time from bags and pouches of embroidered cloth and leather, to the revolutionary lucite and plastic purses that created a fashion statement in the middle of the twentieth century. "Although the terms pocketbook, purse and handbag have been used synonymously throughout the ages, their basic purpose has remained constant" (Ettinger 157).

Works Cited

- Ettinger, Roseann. Handbags 2nd Edition, Revised & Updated. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pbl., 1998
- Holiner, Richard. Antique Purses. Paducah, KY: Collector Books, 1987
- Schwartz, Lynell K. Vintage Purses at Their Best. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pbl., 1995
- Wilcox, Claire. Bags. London: V & A Publications, 1999