



GALLERY GUIDE

# What's Inside?

Fashion

**Pockets  
TO Purses**

+ Function

## Gallery Guide

### RESOURCES

**"1773 Virginia Gazette Advertisement."** Teaching Newsletters, *The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*.

[www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume6/images/oct/va\\_gazette\\_ad1773](http://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume6/images/oct/va_gazette_ad1773)

**"A History of Pockets,"** *Victoria and Albert Museum*.

[www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/history-of-pockets](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/history-of-pockets)

**Deita, Paula.** "The Pocket." *Esquire*, March 1985, p126-27.

**"Pockets for Women,"** *Vogue*, September 1918, p114.

**"Primary Source: Folding Men's Pocketbook."** Teaching Newsletters, *The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*.

[www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume6/oct07primsource.cfm](http://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume6/oct07primsource.cfm)

**Wilcox, Vivian.** "Let's Look Into Your Purse," *Chatelaine*, March 1957, p40.

Image credits: Front and back (detail) - Chanel, 2.55 Bag, circa 1965. The Museum at FIT, 78.57.67. Gift of Ethel Scull.



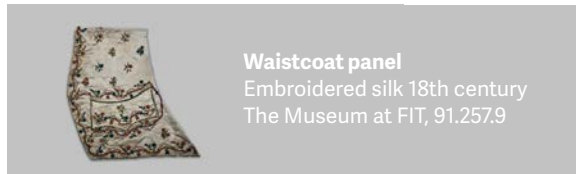
# What's Inside?

## GALLERY GUIDE

The objects men and women carry in their pockets and purses reflect the lives led in a particular time and place. A closer look at the objects included in **Pocket to Purses: Fashion + Function** uncovers shifts in social norms, gender roles, and technology. While this exhibition examines these objects as items of fashion and function, this guide highlights their contents as signifiers of identity. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, women gained greater social and financial independence, which affected what they carried with them. Similarly, men's portable belongings shifted alongside travel and leisure. Throughout this time, the contents in men's and women's pockets tended to be gender-specific. A 1918 *Vogue* article stated, "The likenesses and dissimilarities of the two sexes will never be revealed until the contents of their pockets may be compared." However, by the twenty-first century, these distinctions diminished.

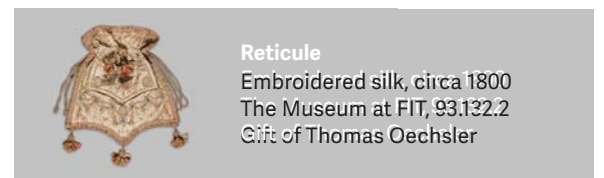


During the eighteenth century, men's pockets were built into their coats, waistcoats, and breeches. Pocket contents communicated one's status and importance. The slim silhouette of menswear didn't allow for bulkier items, while similar items may have gone unnoticed in a woman's tie-on pocket hidden under her voluminous skirt. Men's pockets were able to fit small objects such as books, spectacles, and money—indicators of literacy, leisure, wealth, and an elevated social standing. It was common for both men and women to utilize a folding pocketbook, an object similar to what we now refer to as a wallet, that held some of these valuables. Rectangular and flat, a gentleman's pocketbook was important enough to be mentioned in wills, inventories, and other records. A 1773 newspaper lost and found ad for a man's pocketbook was reported as containing notes, bonds, and "other sundry accounts," along with valuables such as a gold ring.

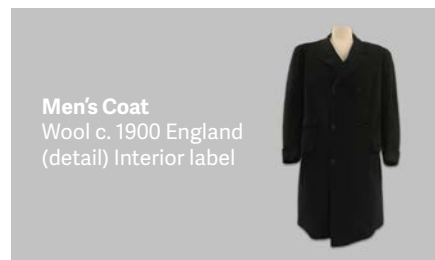


**Waistcoat panel**  
Embroidered silk 18th century  
The Museum at FIT, 91.257.9

Sentimentality and social decorum dictated what an upper-class woman would have carried during the nineteenth century. Items such as calling cards and dance cards were kept on hand for socializing. Calling cards were given to suitors who were invited to visit a woman at home and dance cards were a way of organizing a lady's dance obligations while also providing an easy place for her to list her suitors' names. There were strict rules surrounding the use of these cards, which conveyed one's social position.

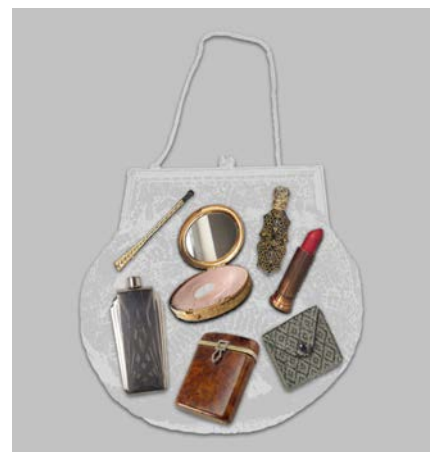


**Reticule**  
Embroidered silk, circa 1800  
The Museum at FIT, 93.132.2  
Gift of Thomas Oechsler



**Men's Coat**  
Wool c. 1900 England  
(detail) Interior label

Men's clothing developed specialized pockets for various objects. A small outside pocket on the left side of this coat is made to hold a single train ticket, demonstrating the prevalence of the quicker, easier travel opportunities of the time. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a man's standardized three-piece suit would have enough pockets to carry anything he needed. According to a 1985 issue of *Esquire*, "As pockets proliferated, form followed function; for each pocket devised, there is a designated use...The point is to place the outer and particularly the inner pockets in such a way that bulk is distributed evenly and a man looks trim even with as many as twelve pockets..."



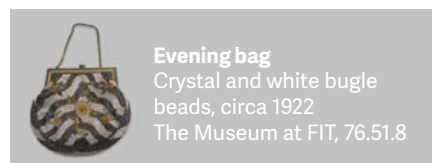
During the twentieth century, cosmetics, cigarette, alcohol, and perfume were close at hand for nights out, demonstrating a growing freedom for women in the public sphere. Bags also contained coin purses, showing women had greater control over how their money was earned and spent. A 1957 editorial in *Chatelaine* magazine cites eight must-have items for women: wallet, keys, change purse, diary-notebook and pen, compact, lipstick, comb, and handkerchief. Other additions depend on the carrier, but overall the items should "tell an attractive story about you."



**The New Yorker Tote Bag**  
Canvas 2017



Today's tote bag has gained acceptance as a unisex object of versatile use. New technologies have emptied our bags of paper planners and phone books and replaced them with laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Neither bags nor their contents are gendered; rather, they demonstrate the necessities of modern life for both sexes. These uniform objects are today's indicators of status and wealth, echoing a similar sentiment communicated by pockets in men's coats and waistcoats during the nineteenth century, but now open to both men and women.



**Evening bag**  
Crystal and white bugle beads, circa 1922  
The Museum at FIT, 76.51.8

*For further consideration...*

How do the contents of your pockets and purses reflect your lifestyle? What evidence of recent advancements in technology do you carry with you?