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The Historical Depth of Pockets

Carrying things is integral to being a person living their life; pockets are the first choice for many people. Women have been struggling with pockets for years, but it hasn't always been this way. Pockets have existed for centuries, their functionality being unreplaceable by anything else.

Prior to the 17th century, both men and women wore pouches on the outside of their garments to carry items about. During the beginning of the new century, men's pockets were sewn into garments and continue to be for centuries to come (Jerome 1). Women's pockets, however, go through a rollercoaster of iterations.

The first account of pockets being used was during the mid-17th century which historians call "tie-on pockets"; however, people of the time would simply use the term "pocket" to describe the same item. The Victoria and Albert Museum details that many of these tie-on pockets were typically made of durable linen, cotton, or even leather; some women even added embroidered decoration with silk or wool to customize their pocket to their liking (see fig. 1). Each pocket was a general pear shape in varying sizes up to 15 inches in depth, large enough to even smuggle 2 live ducks! ("Women's Tie-on Pockets" 3, 14)



Fig. 1. Photo of pair of pockets. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1796.

Tie-on pockets were a very personal item for women, as they tended to be the only secure way of storing their most prized possessions. While pockets were used to carry useful items like scissors, pin cushions, and keys, a lot of women also chose to keep any valuable items like letters, perfumes, and money in their pockets as well (“Women’s Tie-on Pockets” 6, 8, 10). During a time where a woman could not own property on her own, these tie-on pockets were typically a women’s only source of independence and mobility.

The beginning of the 19th century saw a drastic change in the fashionable silhouette for women: waistlines rose from the natural waist to right below the bust and skirts became straighter with less layers of fabric – a silhouette highlighted in the show *Bridgerton*. This slimmer silhouette did not allow for the large pockets of the 17th and 18th centuries to be used seamlessly underneath, and so a new accessory was brought into fashion. The reticule was a small bag with a strap to be carried in one’s hand (see fig. 2). Some early reticules were made from a woman’s existing pocket to maintain the current fashion without having to buy a new item (see fig. 3). This disappearance of the pocket in fashionable women’s clothing greatly

impacted their ability to be independent. Caroline Stevenson, programme director of Cultural and Historical Studies at the University of the Arts London, concludes that having a small bag one must hold as opposed to a large pocket tied securely around your waist and hidden away made a woman more vulnerable and more dependent on male escorts, especially when in public (qtd. in Thorp 10-11).



Fig. 2. Photo of a pineapple reticule. KCI Digital Archive, 1800.

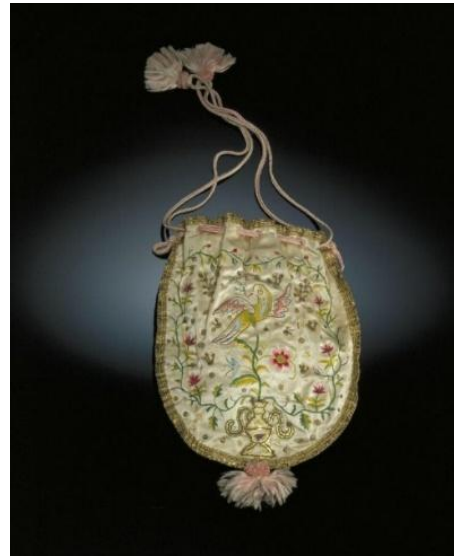


Fig. 3. Photo of a pocket turned into a bag. Victoria & Albert Museum, 1790-1800.

Nearing the middle of the 19th century, women's skirts slowly became fuller once again, allowing for the well-awaited return of the tie-on pockets; some dresses even had a sewn in pockets for easy access to a handkerchief (Jerome 4). However as soon as the female silhouettes had finally exited the slimming trend of the early 1800s, the late 19th century and early 20th century saw the rise in the new Edwardian "Gibson Girl" silhouette which hugged the waist tightly. These new trends did not accommodate tie-on pockets once again, so they slowly fell out of fashion -this time being the last time in history. A few pockets could be sewn into this new

style as pockets were sewn into dress early in the century, but nothing compared to the previous size of the tie-on pockets.

Stevenson goes on to state that the Women's Suffrage movement in the United States was a large turning point for women's pockets. Gaining the right to vote and having more independence gave rise to pocket equality as well (qtd. in Thorp 12). Having pockets meant having independence, which was the main rhetoric of the Women's Suffrage movement: being able to live without depending on a male figure.

During both World Wars, women had to step up into typically masculine roles and jobs not just to help with the war efforts, but also to keep their countries running during the wars. New wartime styles included large pockets for working women during WWII. Again, pockets are seen as a functional and progressive addition to women's clothes allowing them into jobs and social spaces previously kept segregated by gender.

As men returned home from abroad after the end of World War II, traditional beliefs, like the nuclear family, soon seeped into parts of American and European cultures. This, of course, was soon reflected in the new women's silhouette that was intended to bring femininity back to women. This silhouette was Christian Dior's New Look; many will know this look as the typical 1950s housewife dress with an hourglass shape and full skirt. Mr. Dior even was quoted saying, "Men have pockets to keep things in, women for decoration" (qtd. in Thorp 22). The push for women's clothes to become more aesthetic and less functional was obviously rooted in traditional ideals.

Emily Keller, a knitwear fashion designer, provides needed context for modern women's pockets: Modern women's silhouettes have become more figure hugging, leaving little room for

pockets without interrupting the outline of the fitted clothing (qtd. in Picton 5). Even clothing that hides pockets well are missing pockets entirely due to the increase in mass production of clothing in the modern age. Many designers today must take into consideration the added costs of good functional pockets. Between increasingly fast fashion and slimmer silhouettes, women's clothing has become increasingly likely to be missing pockets or have very pathetic excuses for pockets.

Pockets have been an essential part of clothing for centuries. The new revolution of pathetic pockets comes from factory manufacturing and aesthetic ideals being placed onto women. While there are some clothing stores that try to maintain the inclusion of women's pockets, between manufacturing costs, clothing aesthetics, and changing social norms women's pockets have been greatly reduced or disappeared entirely from mainstream clothing.

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