

HANDBAGS AND GLADRAGS ACCESSORIES FROM THE ULSTER MUSEUM COSTUME COLLECTION

HANDBAGS

The evolution of the handbag has documented the change in the status of women and their role in society today. In the 18th century a lady often kept a pocket hidden in the folds of her dress for love letters and the like, and in the 19th century a handkerchief and a coin purse was the most a lady needed. However, as women became more independent towards the beginning of the 20th century the handbag became an essential accessory - after all a bulging pocket tends to spoil the outline of a dress!

Early handbags were generally small and unobtrusive – very often made of fabric to blend with the costume or of leather which could be attached to a belt. Bags for evening wear were embellished with needlework, elaborate beading and paste stones – a fashion which continues today.

With the advent of travel and after the 1st World War – women began to move into the workplace and needed something more substantial in which to carry their possessions and personal necessities. These were often beautifully constructed in leather or glazed kid or the more exotic crocodile and lizard skin.

The style and design of the handbag reflects the changes in women's fashionable dress and will mimic the same proportions. The 1930's Art Deco period used geometric design motifs, the austerity of the 1940's made for a more practical and larger shape (some were designed to fit a gas mask) The 1950's fashions brought the bag into focus by matching the colour of the shoes to co-ordinate the outfit. In the 1960's the widespread use of new fabrics and plastics gave us wildly colourful and exuberant handbags. In the 1970s the loose and extravagant clothes of the hippies led to soft embroidered bags often influenced by foreign travel.

Today, the fashionable "it" bag changes each season with designers competing to produce the most desirable bag. (These can be wildly expensive and have become the female equivalent of the sports car.) The contents of today's bags are very different to those of our predecessors. Where before it used to contain at most a purse, gloves, a compact and a lipstick – today's bag can hold the entire contents of a small chemists shop in make up, as well as a wallet, nappies, mobile phone, car keys and often a lap top! No wonder they are our most necessary accessory...

SHOES

Although shoes obviously have a practical function, they have also become objects of desire and a means of completing a fashion "look". The design of shoes throughout history has always included an element of the extreme – for example the elongated curled up toe of the medieval shoe and the height of the Venetian "chopines". These make the so - called impractical styles of today seem positively tame by comparison!

Women's shoes tend to survive in great numbers and the museums collection has benefited from this. Sometimes shoes are kept for sentimental reasons, because they remind us of a particular event such as a wedding day or a spectacular party – sometimes because they are beautiful as objects – and sometimes they're kept in pristine condition because they were unbearably uncomfortable to wear however irresistible they looked in the shop!

Shoes enhance the beauty of the foot and complement the clothes we wear. They can be embellished with jewels, decorated with embroidery or have decorative punching. The heels have often been a focal point for even more elaborate embellishment, including being set with diamonds, gilding and even a live goldfish inside each transparent heel! The heel of a shoe and the shape of the toe is what usually indicate its fashion style. These are the elements which will match the proportion of the fashion of the day. A 1970's wedge shoe could not be worn with a 1950's suit and a stiletto heel would look completely out of place with a 1980's Armani suit.

The shoe has also been an indicator as to the wealth and status of the wearer. Delicate fabrics and impossibly high heels often demand that the wearer has to travel by taxi, or in the case of film stars, by limousine. In the 18th and 19th century too, the thin soles and fine kid or satin shoes of the lady of the house, differed dramatically from the sturdy boots of the serving class.

The aesthetic appeal of the shoe has always inspired the designer and the infinite varieties of stylistic possibilities have brought out both the best and the worst in their work. The shoe is after all a simple format with seemingly endless potential, which will no doubt prove both appealing and tempting to the women who collect them.

HATS

Although the hat is not currently a popular accessory for everyday wear, it has always been an important symbol of self expression and forms an essential role in dress.

In the 18th and 19th century women wore hats most of the time and a lady was considered "undressed" without one. As well as the wearing of hats with outdoor costume, caps trimmed with lace and fabric flowers were worn indoors, and nightcaps would have been worn in bed to keep hairstyles in place. Re-styling a bonnet was a favourite activity and suited the needlework skills of women and young girls of the time.

The hat making industry was at its peak with the constant demand for top hats, bowler hats and sporting caps for men, and milliners employed small children to plait straw for bonnets. However there were risks in hat manufacture too, as the mercury used to produce felt eventually took its toll on the poor hatter causing dizziness, madness and eventually death.

In the 20th century hats continued to be popular and styles ranged from wide crowns and exaggerated brims in 1910, to the neat cloche hat of the 1920s, when women cut their hair short in order to wear them. In the 30s hats remained on the small side but were worn at interesting angles and many were influenced by those worn by the film stars of the day.

Hat fashions in the 1940s were dictated by the constraints of war, with working women in need of practical and serviceable headwear, and military styles were also imitated.

In the post war 1950s, the fashion for cocktail dresses meant that hats again became small concoctions of feathers and net. Style icons such as Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly made dramatic statements with their turban inspired creations, but the 1960s and the freedom of the new casual dressing became the deathnell of the hat.

Apart from a brief revival of the cocktail hat in the 1970s, the regular wearing of hats has never really recovered. Hats are now worn for special occasions such as weddings, christenings and race meetings. In the 1980s a new breed of designer emerged – one for whom the hat became a vehicle for artistic expression –such as Stephen Jones and David Shilling. In recent years anyone who has seen the work of Philip Treacy will agree that his hats are works of art and have graced many of the finest international catwalk shows. Hopefully his continued success will now inspire others.