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# WORLD OF WONDER

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# POCKETS AND PURSES



Iroquois beaded bag  
19th century

People have been carrying their personal and essential items in pouches or purses since ancient times. Today, pockets are found in most men's and women's clothes, but historically pockets sewn into clothing are a relatively new innovation, first appearing in 13th century Europe.

## Ancient times

Forty thousand years ago, hunter-gatherers used bundles and pouches made of hide or fibers to carry food and tools.

The 5,000-year-old mummy of Ötzi the Iceman was discovered with a pouch sewn to his belt. It was filled with many useful items.

Men and women of ancient Rome wore drawstring purses hung from their belts, a convenience that continued for centuries across many cultures.

## The pickpocket

Over time as towns and cities grew, it became ever more dangerous to carry money and belongings in a little pouch dangling from a belt. Because thieves were known to cut the strings of purses, people began to wear their purses under their clothing. In the 17th century, men began to have their purses sewn into their clothing — and the pocket was invented.

This may have deterred some thieves, but others became experts at distracting victims while reaching into their pockets.

Pickpocketing still thrives in crowded tourist spots.

## Battle of the sexes

17th-century men's clothing was created with utility in mind, and pockets were sewn into coats, waistcoats and trousers. Men could carry their personal items such as money, keys, weapons, tobacco, writing pencils and little notebooks in their pockets. Men's pockets allowed for more freedom of movement than those of women.

17th-century women's clothing was designed for appearance, and tied-on pockets remained under the skirts. Large, highly decorated pocket bags were hung from the waist under layers of petticoats, panniers and bustles. The pockets were reached through slits or openings in the gown and undergarments. Women of this time carried sewing kits, food, keys, spectacles, watches, scent bottles, combs, snuffboxes, notebooks, Bibles, diaries, money and jewels. Ladies' pockets tended to be large, heavy and difficult to access.



Embroidered pockets, c. 1760  
These items were worn underneath the petticoats.



This modern faux fur bag and muff has pockets to warm your hands.

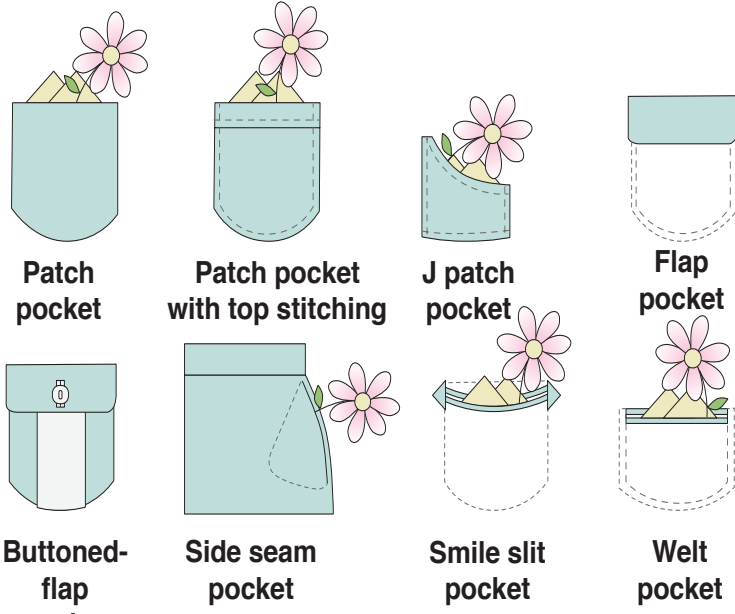
## Types of handbags

Today, shoulder bags and cross-body bags with long straps are popular, functional choices for everyday use. The backpack purse is popular with college students. Fashion may dictate style, but comfort defines the perfect handbag.



## Types of pockets

After pockets evolved from small bags or pouches, they became part of clothing sewn into and onto garments. Modern pockets include the kangaroo pocket, often sewn onto the front of a sweatshirt or hoodie.



SOURCES: World Book Encyclopedia, World Book Inc.; Victoria and Albert Museum; <https://www.vox.com>; <https://www.folkwear.com>

## In a word

American English tends to use the terms **purse** and **handbag** interchangeably, but things did not start out that way.

Originally, a purse was a small bag that held coins, and a handbag referred to men's hand-luggage. Later, in the 19th century, as women's bags got bigger, they were also called handbags.

A purse or handbag might also be referred to as a pocketbook, bag, clutch, pouch, receptacle, reticule or wallet.

A **pocket** is a purse or receptacle sewn into clothing to hold small items. Pockets can also be found on or in luggage, handbags and backpacks.

## Changing times

In the 1790s, ladies' Western fashion made a dramatic change from layers upon layers of skirts to a much thinner silhouette (like a Greek goddess). Heavy silk and brocade fabrics were replaced with thinner cotton and linen fabrics.

During the French Revolution, pockets (inside or out) were banned from women's clothing, and women began to carry tiny, impractical, decorated purses called reticules.

By the mid-1850s, the fashion changed back to bigger skirts and crinolines. Some dressmakers began to sew discreet pockets into dresses, but generally men continued to have the exclusive on pockets.

In the early 1900s, pockets became a symbol of independence and equality for women, and how-to manuals for sewing pockets into clothes gained popularity. The 1910 "suffragette suit" had six to eight pockets!

During WWI, women's clothes became more practical, with large pockets as the norm. During this time, Coco Chanel was designing simple, practical ladies' clothing, often inspired by menswear.

In the 1940s, the handbag industry tried to convince women that pockets were unattractive and that the pocketbook was a better fashion statement.

Today, women enjoy both clothing with pockets and a variety of handbags, some of which are large enough to carry groceries.

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