

OLD PURSES

DISPLAYED AND CARRIED



1950s Lucite purse. (Photo courtesy of Ellen M. Collier of DECODAME in Houston, Texas, www.art-decodame.com.)

Surprisingly, many purses made in the 18th and 19th centuries still come to auctions and the Internet, often on eBay®. Some can cost over \$1,000.

Purses have been collected for decades. Rightly so, when many can be considered works of art as well as antiques. However, interest has grown in vintage items of all categories made from the 1930s through the 1970s; when it comes to purses from that era, made of Lucite® and plastic, in many instances “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

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Have you ever heard of Moon Bags? For collectors of vintage bags, these purses, designed by Patricia Smith from the 1970s through 1997, are something special. You’d be surprised what you can learn on the Internet. Check out The Antique Purse Collectors Society (www.antiquepursesociety.com).

Historically, the most elegant

purses were those embroidered with heraldic or floral patterns in silver, gold, and pearls on expensive silks. Made from the mid to late 1700s, they are mostly in museum collections.

Many techniques were used in making the beadwork bags in the 18th century. Colorful glass beads were popular and were used to create unusual designs and translucent effects. They were sewn onto fabrics and integrated into knitted or crocheted bags. At that time, souvenir pocketbooks were brought back by European travelers from the near East and Mediterranean. They were made of silk with silver-gilt embroidery in an envelope style. They are known as Constantinople pocketbooks. The name is embroidered along with the date. A century later, visitors to Niagara Falls brought back a similar style beaded bag, often made by native Americans.



French deco bag, 1920s. Cut steel and beaded. (Photo courtesy of Ellen M. Collier of DECODAME in Houston, Texas, www.art-decodame.com.)



Antique micro-beaded, scenic bag. Jeweled frame. (Photo courtesy of Ellen M. Collier of DECODAME in Houston, Texas, www.art-decodame.com.)

By the end of the 18th century, fashionable travelers brought home delicate lace bags made from refined plant fiber. Motifs included exotic animals, flowers, and berries.

Embroidered bags, made to give as gifts, were a custom from the 18th to 19th centuries. They often had embroidered inscriptions. Others were made by schoolgirls.

Victorian purses were as overdone as Victorian homes. They combined knitting, beading, and crocheting techniques with floral, geometric, and exotic ethnic motifs in vivid and dark colors. Silver and gold accents were often added.

The 19th-century carpet bag was a far cry from the small, decorative purses. Popular beginning in the mid-19th century, they were made of power-woven Brussels carpet. Patterns were generally floral. By the 1870s, they were out of fashion.

In the 1920s and '30s, metallic and beaded designs reflecting the motifs

of the Art Deco era. They were fashionable evening bags.

When men began carrying purses in the 1980s, it seemed a bit odd. Now they are mainstream. Yet, when men carried pocketbooks in the 19th century, it was quite commonplace. These offer another collecting possibility.

CLUES: Like every popular collecting category, there are reproductions of antique and Art Deco styles. In the 1970s, there was a revival of interest in Victorian mesh and beaded bags. They were reproduced in the 1970s, as were needlepoint examples. Look for signs of wear and nylon linings.

Anne Gilbert has been self-syndicating "The Antique Detective" to such papers as the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Miami Herald* since 1983. She has authored nine books on antiques, collectibles, and art, and appeared on national TV. Gilbert has done appraisals for museums and private individuals. 🚗

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