

The progress of pockets and purses (or #whatsinyourbag)

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Abstract:

Exhibitions exploring bags, purses and pockets have tended to focus on the receptacles themselves, noting changes in size, shape and material and linking them to developments in fashion. They have spent less time considering the contents these containers were used to carry and the relationship between broader social and technological change. A small exhibition at a community museum in Toronto, Gibson House Museum, which aimed to explore buying and selling in rural nineteenth-century Canada, provided an opportunity to think about the development of bags and purses through the changing nature of their contents. We presented the changing contents of women's bags and men's pockets through five chronological points - 1800, 1850, 1900, 1950 and 2000. This presentation aims to discuss the scope of the exhibition, the challenges of research and display and the way in which this small display demonstrates the intertwined innovations in the development of bags, purses and the contents they held.

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What's in your bag?

In a memorable scene in the 1980s cult classic film, *The Breakfast Club*, the character Allison unceremoniously dumps her life in her bag onto the library chair in front of her fellow detention partners. Many might feel that it offers a realistic illustration of their own bag and over the last few years articles about the weight of bags carried around by women have appeared frequently as our relationship to possessions comes under ever-greater scrutiny (Ducharme, 2017). It might provide some comfort (or not) to know that this worry about too many personal items is nothing new, as a quotation from Lady Viola Greville suggests:

'The average woman ... still carries her purse in her hand, and dives into the recesses of an impossible receptacle, situated somewhere in the back breadths of her gown, for her pocket handkerchief, her letters, her notebook, her card-case, or her money – the whole forming a disagreeably hard aggregation on which she patiently elects to sit'. Lady Viola Greville, 1892 (Foster, 1982: 50)

Gibson House Museum

A proposed exhibition in a small community museum in Toronto presented the opportunity to explore this idea of the contents of bags, purses and pockets further. Gibson House in Willowdale, North York, Toronto, Canada was built in 1851 and became a heritage museum in 1971. Now run by the City of Toronto Gibson House Museum interprets nineteenth-century domestic arts and rural life skills, including culinary and textile arts, gardening and farming. This elegant farmhouse reveals the evolution of the North York community through the experience of David Gibson – a Scottish immigrant, land surveyor, farmer, politician and rebel – and his family.



Figure 1: Gibson House Museum, the former home of David Gibson, a land surveyor who helped map early Toronto. © City of Toronto

David Gibson (1804 –1864) was born in Forfarshire, Scotland in 1804. He apprenticed with a land surveyor in Scotland and came to Upper Canada seeking employment. In 1825, he was named a deputy surveyor of roads and, in 1828, surveyor of highways in the Home District. In 1831, he became associated with the political firebrand William Lyon Mackenzie and played a leading role in an 1837 rebellion, demanding a reform of government. As a result of his involvement his house was burned down and Gibson fled to Lockport, New York, where he was employed as an engineer for the Erie Canal. In 1848, having been pardoned in 1843, he returned to his farm and was hired as a provincial land surveyor. In 1853, he was given the post of inspector of crown lands agencies and superintendent of colonization roads in Canada West. He also supervised the surveying of roads in the Algoma District from 1861 to 1862. For a time, he also operated a large sawmill in the Parry Sound region, which was later taken over by William Beatty. He died at Quebec in 1864.

As well as the family home the museum is fortunate to have a number of Gibson's diaries. The diaries' brief and matter-of-fact entries offer important information about the goods David Gibson bought, prices he paid and life in a small rural community in nineteenth-century Canada. Visitors regularly ask the interpretative staff questions about the buying and selling of goods, the prices paid for goods, and the money used to buy items.

Pennies and Purses: Buying and Selling in nineteenth-century Willowdale: Exhibition Content

As a response to these questions the staff team developed an exhibition proposal which would delve into the world of mid nineteenth-century shopping in rural Upper Canada and the communities surrounding Toronto, like Willowdale, to understand the role of money in people's everyday lives, how they shopped and what they bought. In doing so we hoped to deepen our visitors' understanding of a crucial aspect of the Gibsons' lives. We also wanted to:

- Provide a brief overview of Canadian currency in the 1850s, offering a sense of different ways of buying and selling (money and the range of methods of exchange were various and confusing in nineteenth-century Canada, partly based on the American and English systems, with Spanish dollars and Halifax accounting thrown in for good measure).
- Show nineteenth-century purchasing habits and the role of the general store in communities like Willowdale, concentrating on the experiences of the Gibson Family. In particular we were keen to debunk the myth that those living in nineteenth-century rural communities were hardy but unsophisticated pioneers, largely self-supporting, with few purchasing options at general stores.
- Compare prices of mid nineteenth-century and twenty-first century goods, as a way of helping our visitors relate the experiences of the Gibsons to their own lives.

- Highlight objects from the City's collections, including bags, purses and the types of objects that might be found in them.
- Create links between displays in display in the exhibition and artefacts in the historic house.

The exhibition was divided into three distinct sections: Then (1851) and Now, The General Store and What's In Your Bag?

Then (1851) and Now

This section compared prices for a range of items and services in 1851 and 2018. Some items were chosen because we felt that they were everyday items that would be commonly purchased in the nineteenth century, or easily recognised in the modern world, like a pound of sugar. Others were chosen because they had a connection to David Gibson's life, or were mentioned in his diaries, like different types of livestock.

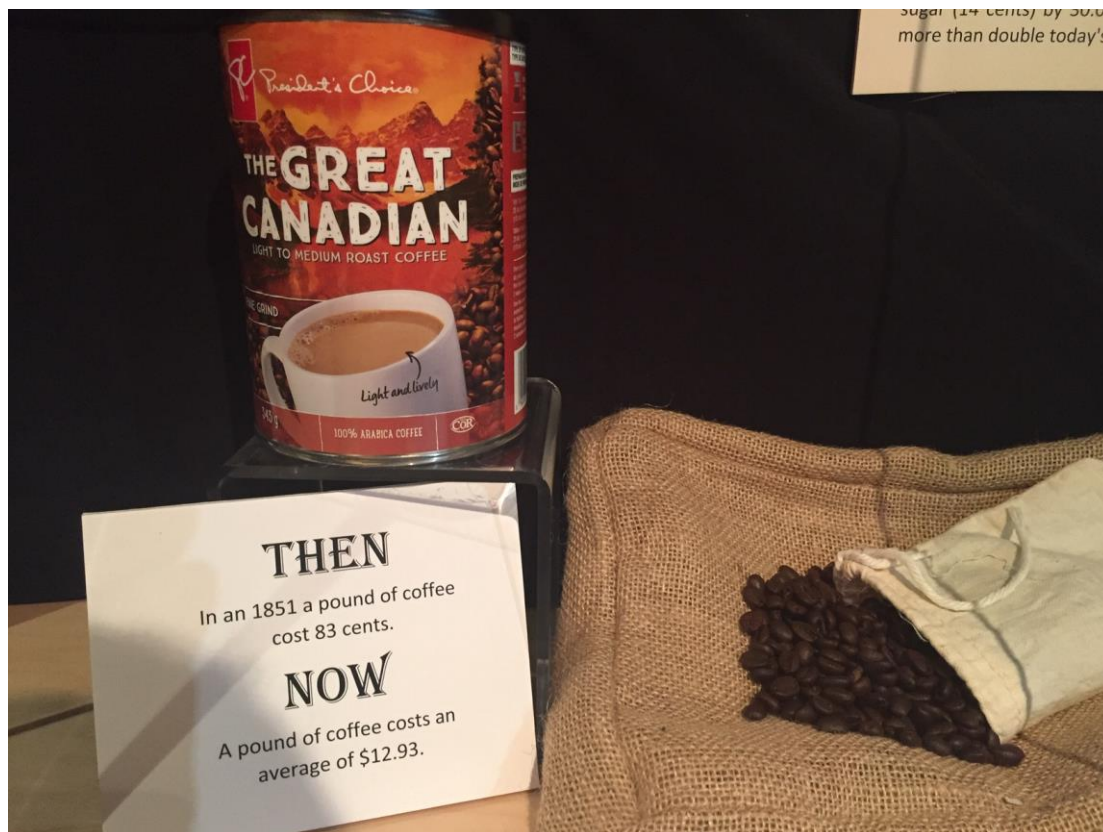


Figure 2: Detail from the Then and Now case, showing the price of a pound of coffee in 1851 and in 2018

The General Store

This section demonstrated the crucial role played by general stores and the complex web of supply that existed in mid nineteenth-century rural communities. We set up two cases to look like the interior of a general store, to give a three-dimensional illustration of the variety and sophistication of goods that could be purchased there.

What's in Your Bag?

Most of the bags in the City's collection fell into the category of decorative evening or fancy bags from the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. While these were aesthetically interesting we needed to find a display rationale that would help to link these bags to the main themes of the exhibition, and allow the different sections of the exhibition to sit together cohesively.

The Progress of Pockets and Purses

This display conundrum led to the development of the idea of showing how bags had changed over time and the types of items that people might have carried in them. We chose five time markers – 1800, 1850, 1900, 1950 and 2000. We wanted to look at men's items too so for each time period there was an exploration of men's pocket contents/bags as well as women's bags. In the case of the 1900s and 1950s we had so much good material we displayed two bags for each period. We also displayed contemporary visual material to offer context and give a sense of how bags were held and carried at different times. This section was completed by a photography station where visitors were encouraged to take a picture of the contents of their own bag and share it on social media with the hashtag #whatsinyourbag.

Other exhibitions about the development of bags

In considering how to develop our display we surveyed past exhibitions exploring bags, purses and pockets. We discovered that these tended to focus on the receptacles themselves, noting changes in size, shape and material and linking them to developments in fashion. They have spent less time considering the contents these containers were used to carry and the relationship between broader social and technological change.

Always at hand. Bags from the Middle Ages to the Present, National Museum, Krakow, Poland, 2009

This exhibition was the first in Poland to explore women's bags and to look at their connections to the personality of their owners, as well as reflecting the increasing emancipation of women. It moved from a time when bags for carrying needlework were considered sufficient for a woman to bags aiding independent travel, to the twentieth century, when the bag became the symbol of an independent and professionally active woman.

Taschen, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, München, 2013

<http://www.bayerisches-nationalmuseum.de/index.php?id=616>

In 2013 the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum's exhibition *Taschen* brought together some 300 bags, purses and letter cases from the sixteenth to twenty-first centuries, displaying a wide variety of uses and materials. It included a number of royal bags, like Elector Maximilian I's gaming bag, and through a series of carefully chosen paintings, sculpture and illustrations demonstrated the relationship between bags and the fashionable aesthetic and contemporary culture.

Pockets to Purses, Fashion Institute of Technology Museum, New York, 2018

<http://exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/pockets-to-purses/#grid-page>

This exhibition was curated by graduate students at FIT and sought to explore both pockets and purses, in particular the relationship between the two different types of receptacle. It looked at the gendered nature of pockets and purses, including examples used by both men and women and considered the way in which these have contributed to the user's identity. The students made a conscious commitment to bringing a more diverse narrative to the exhibition and appointed a member of their team as a diversity advisor. The exhibition included a gallery guide which looked at the changing and gendered nature of pocket and purse contents.

Tassenmuseum Hendrikje, Amsterdam

<https://tassenmuseum.nl/en/>

There are a handful of museums that focus on bags and perhaps the best known is the Museum of Bags and Purses (Tassenmuseum Hendrikje) in Amsterdam which houses the significant collection of collector Hendrikje Ivo. The museum demonstrates the evolution of bags and purses both in terms of style, material and use.

Examples of the bags and contents on display in What's in Your Bag Woman's 1800 bag

In creating the exhibition we faced a number of challenges. One of the biggest of these was not having bags or pockets for each of our time periods in the City's own collection. We were able to draw on a relationship with Seneca Fashion College which has a wonderful collection of fashionable dress c.1850-c.2000, which it uses to enrich its fashion teaching. From the Seneca collection we were able to borrow items for some of the later periods.

The bag which proved most difficult to source was the earliest, the 1800 bag (figure 3). As relatively rare items there was no institution from which we could easily borrow a bag for the exhibition so one of our very talented team members, Dyan Laskin-Grossman, made a reproduction bag, with carefully sourced, period-appropriate materials and using a pattern from the *Lady's Magazine*, February 1781, as her guide.



Figure 3: Detail of reproduction 1800 bag, worked by Dyan Laskin-Grossman, who used a pattern from an 1781 edition of *The Lady's Magazine* for the embroidery.

1900s men's pockets (Fig 4)

Men's clothing developed increasingly specific pockets for an ever-growing range of personal items; watch pockets, pockets for tickets and cards (What's Inside, 2018).

- Cream Leather Gloves – At the start of the twentieth century gloves, reaching to the wrist, would have been considered essential for all fashionable gentlemen.
- Keys – Small keys for private desk compartments, personal luggage or deposit boxes might all be carried on the person.
- Toronto Railway Nightcar Schedule – trains brought with them standardized times and printed schedules, which provided details of train times and frequency.
- Boot Hook – by 1900 most men's boots were laced but some boots were still buttoned and would have needed a button hook to fasten them.
- 1886 Canadian Penny

- Toronto and York Radial Railway Company ticket – the late nineteenth century saw the arrival of a range of local railways in Toronto, connecting outlying areas to the centre and taking people into the city for working and shopping.
- Calling Card – Men’s calling cards were simple and plain in design, printed with a man’s name and address. An indispensable aid to elaborate customs surrounding the business of social calls, in 1905 an advertisement in the New York Times asserted ‘We’ll execute calling cards to your order in conformity with the very latest requirements’. (New York Times: 1905)
- Pocket watch – it wasn’t until after the First World War that pocket watches were replaced by wrist watches. Pocket watches and the railways were closely linked, and pocket watches were often used by railways to regulate their time; ‘railroad’ and ‘conductor’ were frequently used as style names for watches in advertisements and mail order catalogues.
- Silver metal cigarette case – cigarettes became increasingly popular in Western Europe after the Crimean War, when British soldiers copied their Turkish counterparts rolling tobacco in pieces of newspaper, and the growth of the Egyptian Cigarette export industry.

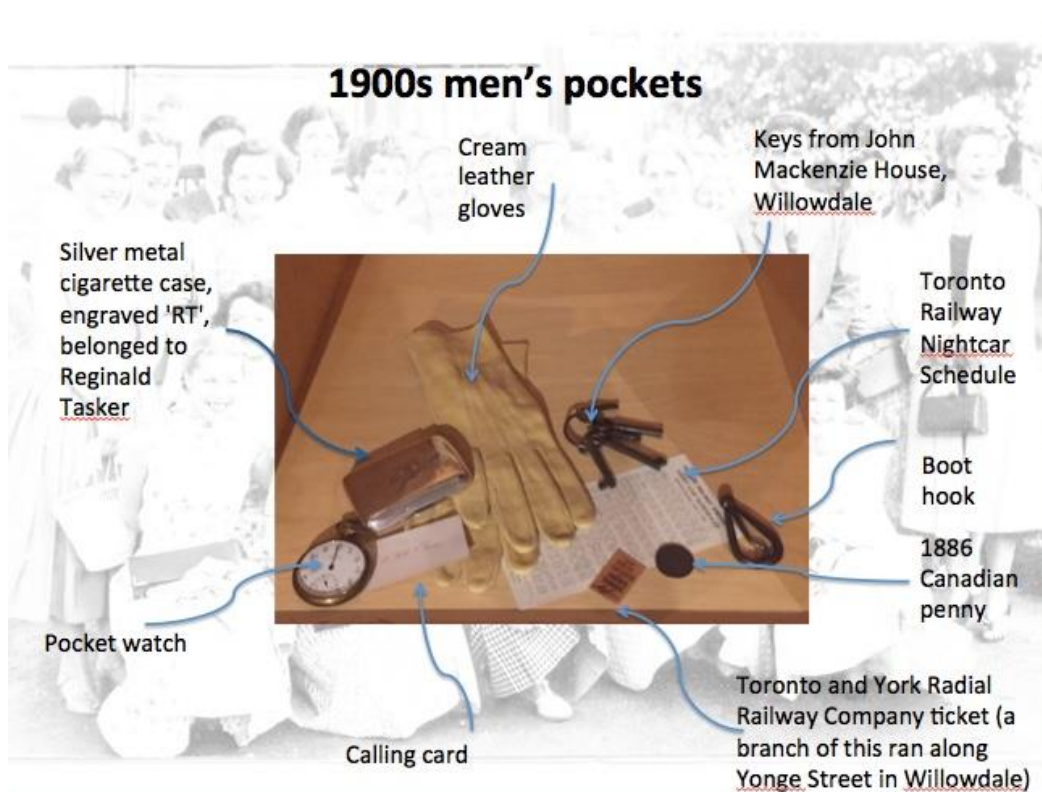


Figure 4: 1900s men's pockets and their contents, as displayed in the exhibition

1950s women's bags

In the 1950s a bag was an essential accessory for women, not only as a way of complementing an outfit but as an important receptacle for an ever increasing variety of personal items that needed to be carried. The clutch shape, like this red leather bag, was popular for daytime outfits, and although a range of new and innovative materials, like plastics, were being used for bags, leather remained the most widely used material (Wilcox, 101). Bags also developed interior pockets so that all these personal accessories could be neatly arranged and they often came with matching coin purses or ready fitted with a compact mirror.

- Gold plastic sunglasses – The first step in the rise of sunglasses was the increasing popularity of sunbathing in the 1920s and 30s when they helped to protect the eyes of sunseekers. With the ascendancy of Hollywood and the glare of publicity film stars like Marilyn Monroe helped to popularize the wearing of sunglasses for fashion rather than health purposes.
- Cream leather gloves – Gloves remained an important part of a woman’s wardrobe, not only as an indicator of social etiquette but also as an opportunity to complete an outfit in terms of colour, pattern and texture; a mid-century etiquette brochure, produced by Paris Gloves declared ‘Gloves should be worn on the streets of cities and large towns, when going to church, to a luncheon, dinner or reception; to a dance, a wedding or an official function. They are also worn to a restaurant and in the theatre’ (Paris Gloves, undated)
- Postcard of Sunnyside Beach Park, *from Wayne to Norman Cary*, postmarked 28 August 1952 – in the days before social media postcards offered a quick and easy way to communicate and would often feature places of local interest.
- North Yonge Railway Ticket – By the 1950s cars were much more affordable but forms of public transportation in cities, like radial railways, streetcars and buses, remained popular, carrying women to work and shop in city centres.
- Match book advertising *Saraccini Construction Co.*
- Bayer Tablets of Aspirin tin – In 1950 aspirin was the most popular form of painkiller and had first appeared in tablet form in 1915, but its popularity declined after the development of acetaminophen/ paracetamol in 1956 and ibuprofen in 1962.
- Gold metal powder compact with rouge and lipstick – By the 1950s make-up was an necessary element of the sophisticated woman’s appearance (American navy nurses evacuated in submarines from Corregidor in 1942, during World War Two, included a lipstick among the few personal items that they took with them. Portable make-up, like compacts and lipstick cases, allowed women to ensure their face remained fresh throughout the day.



Figure 5: 1950s woman's bag and its contents, as displayed in the exhibition

Conclusion

Exploring the contents of bags and purses through the ages not only offered a fascinating glimpse into the evolution of these key fashion elements over time. It also proved to be an excellent way to unite elements of the exhibition, including shopping, commerce, daily necessities and consumer sophistication. Similarly it formed a complement to other sections of the exhibition which sought to help people understand the role of money, buying and selling in the lives of the Gibsons and their neighbours. It also helped to make the exhibition content more relevant to modern day lives by demonstrating continuity and change in the contents of bags and purses, allowing people to place them in the context of their own bags, purses and pockets. As a display strategy it was arresting, visual appealing and relatable, and allowed visitors to see that bags and their contents offer a fascinating window into the social, cultural and technological changes that have shaped our lives.

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