

Men's Pocketbooks

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

Call them pocketbooks, purses, or wallets. Men have carried them for as long as they have traveled from one place to another. In 18th-Century America, the pocketbook reached the height of fashion, designed expressly to impress onlookers with the bearer's rank and wealth as he revealed his vibrantly embroidered wallet in the marketplace.

Pocketbook? Purse? Wallet? The entire topic is challenged by semantics. These accessories are akin to bags, pouches, and cases, have been around since time immemorial, and are as common yet individually varied as hats or coats. According to Edward Maeder, one of the country's leading authorities on historical dress, "What is called a 'pocketbook' in one period could be called a 'wallet' or 'purse' in another period. So, unless the time period is defined, and unless you're using period sources, it's nearly impossible to be accurate when applying terminology to this ubiquitous object."

Although not especially well known today, men's embroidered pocketbooks still surface now and then, usually after having survived more than two centuries as family heirlooms. They are of interest primarily to museums and a small number of private collectors—a bright spot of color in an otherwise somber line of accessories that evolved from leather and returned to leather—with prices sometimes climbing to several thousand dollars, depending on style, quality, and current condition.

For the collector, finding these extraordinary pocketbooks is challenging and acquiring them can be especially difficult. Major auction houses encounter them once in a while as part of estate lots, but the pocketbooks are seldom auctioned as single items because of their comparatively low price. Because of their beauty and the fact that someone skilled in needlework can create them, collectors need to be aware of the growing number

THE POCKETBOOK EVOLVED THROUGH MILLENNIA AS A PRACTICAL ACCESSORY FOR MEN, BUT IT BECAME A TRUE FASHION STATEMENT IN 18TH-CENTURY AMERICA.

The name "William Kingsley * 1773" adorns this pocketbook, handed down in the Hyde family of Lisbon, Connecticut. The carnation design is stitched with polychrome crewel and silk threads on linen canvas. It measures about 4 by 8 inches.



COURTESY OF HISTORIC DEERFIELD, DEERFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS



This rare man's hand-tooled leather pocketbook bears the misspelled inscription "In the defence of amaran liberties, 1777." The outside is a single piece of leather about 17 inches long, folded in 4 inches on each end to form two pockets. Another piece of leather is inserted between the end folds to form a closing flap, and the three layers of leather are sewn together with heavy linen thread.

of reproduction pocketbooks now being sewn by and for the re-enactor community.

PRACTICAL AND PRETTY

Men's pocketbooks are rooted in prehistory, undergoing myriad adaptations as they evolved from purely utilitarian accoutrements to elements of fashionable dress.

The man's pocketbook literally can be traced back to the Stone Age. When hikers in the Italian-Austrian Alps in 1991 discovered the naturally mummified, 5,300-year-old "Alpine Iceman," one of the seven articles of clothing miraculously preserved by the glacier was his leather pouch into which he had stuffed a few daily necessities: a piece of sharpened flint, an awl made of antler, a flint flake, and some organic tinder for fire-making.

Man's penchant for carrying his essentials in a bag or pouch continued through the rise of early civilizations. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics depict men with ornate pouches tied at their waists. Romans routinely carried a small leather purse with drawstrings to close it—the god Mercury is often portrayed

holding one in his hand—called a *marsupium*, Greek for pouch.

"Bags and pouches were carried by men and women in the Middle Ages, as we know from representations seen in woodcuts and stained-glass windows, as well as in illuminated manuscripts of pilgrims on quests to places like Jerusalem or Rome or Santiago de Compostalla in Spain," explained Maeder, director of exhibitions and curator of textiles at Historic Deerfield. He has received visiting scholar, adjunct professor, and consultancies at universities throughout the United States and Canada and is an authority on historic costume design in the film industry.

With the rise of the European ruling classes, men of higher social stature no longer personally confronted the dirt of the fields, filth of the marketplace, or gore of warfare. Their clothing became decorative to reflect their elevated social rank, as did their accessories.

"Highly decorated pouches were used by the aristocracy and nobility to hold game, such as birds captured through falconry," Maeder said. "There were many multi-colored bags worn by both men and women in the late 15th Century and throughout most of the 16th Century." He noted that excellent examples of these Renaissance accessories are displayed in the Bargello Museum in Florence and in the Deutsches Leder Museum in Offenbach-am-Main, near Frankfurt.

By the time the first European settlers arrived in the New World in the early 1600s, men carried an array of bags, pouches, and leather wallets. For example, soldiers and frontiersmen carried ammunition bags associated with early firearms—containing mandatory musket balls, flints, wadding, and later, percussion caps—in addition to powder horns. Dispatch cases also were popular in England and France during this period, often of red Moroccan leather stamped with elaborate designs in gold.

Although European bags and pouches most directly influenced the shapes and sizes of those in pre-Revolutionary America, another influence originated much closer to home. "The pouches carried by Native Americans were often elaborately decorated with porcupine quillwork or painting or later, after white contact, with glass beads made in Europe," Maeder said.



Clothing preserved by an Alpine glacier on the 5,300-year-old mummified man discovered in 1991 included this leather pouch, in which he carried such daily necessities as a piece of sharpened flint, an awl made of antler, a flint flake, and organic tinder to start a fire.

Native American pouches decorated with dyed quills are among the precursors of needlework pocketbooks. Colonel Return Jonathan Meigs acquired this skin bag in Ohio between 1787 and 1801. Family tradition holds that it came from a local tribe of Delaware Indians, who moved from Pennsylvania into the Ohio-Indiana region during the Revolution. The shape of the bag and the symbol represent a thunderbird. Recent research suggests that similarly decorated objects belonged to the ceremonial outfit of the *Midewiwin*, or Grand Medicine Society, which honored game spirits in the early days of the fur trade.

Still, most men carried their coins in a small leather pouch—called a *pokete*, from Middle English—tied to their waists, as they had for centuries. Beginning in the late 1600s, likely as a deterrent to grab-and-run thieves, these small pouches were sewn into men's garments for greater concealment. But removing the hidden pouch's contents by reaching down behind the waistband proved difficult, so tailors added a slit in the fabric, and thus was born a new feature with a growing impact on how men carried their necessities: the pocket.

Development of the pocket in men's clothing, coupled with the changing nature of the essentials he was required to carry—more paper, less metal—produced the pocketbook. Characterized by a smaller, flatter, and more rectangular profile than the pouch and bag, it frequently had a flap to protect its contents.

"For fashionable wear, men did not wear belts, so any pocketbook would be carried in pockets in their coats, waistcoats,

and breeches," explained Linda Baumgarten, curator of textiles and costumes at Colonial Williamsburg and author of several respected books on early American clothing, including *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*.

"On late-18th-Century coats, some had pockets in the tails," Baumgarten said. "For the most part, however, coat pockets were at the sides, accessible beneath shaped flaps. Some coats also had interior breast pockets."

Baumgarten pointed out that period fashion trends also favored the pocketbook, adding, "Shoulder bags were not worn with fashionable dress, though I expect that some large wallets were slung over the shoulders for frontier or work wear."

Maeder contended that where colonial men carried their pocketbooks varied. "It's my opinion that most of what we now refer to as 'pocketbooks' were probably worn tucked into some kind of sash or belt, as can be seen from some of the wear and tear on the outer layers," he said. "There were occasionally pockets in the tails of men's coats, but this kind of pocket was only in general use after the 1820s here in the new Republic. There are

Unlike a man's pocketbook with a flap or center fold, a woman's pocket was flat with a slit in the front for access to everyday items such as keys, pins, and scissors. It tied around the woman's waist over a dress or under an overskirt. This example shows fine crewel embroidery on linen.



COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK CITY

JOHN BIGELOW TAYLOR, NEW YORK CITY/THAW COLLECTION, FENIMORE ART MUSEUM, COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK

costume historians who like to claim that they were never seen before a certain date, but there are always exceptions to the rules. I suspect that the pockets found in the tails of men's coats in the 1820s through the 1850s were for thinner, less bulky objects than the heavily embroidered pocketbooks we associate with the colonial period."

As for the pocketbook itself, currency's changing physical form—going from clunky coins to printed certificates in the colonies beginning in the 1690s—had significant impact on its shape. Paper money could now be slipped into the pocketbook alongside letters, bills, and other paper documents, while coins remained relegated to a leather pouch. Baumgarten noted: "Some leather pocketbooks were even fitted with slates or writing papers, complete with pencil graphite holders."

STATUS SYMBOL

Clothing adorned with fine needlework became fashionable in England in the mid-1700s and was similarly appreciated in America, where it helped define the social status of both men and women. "It reflected well on a genteel household where women had the skill and time to execute such work," Maeder said.

Pocketbooks in particular signaled a man's status when displayed in the marketplace. A pocketbook with exquisite needlework could awe onlookers with its color, workmanship, and connotation of wealth. Most were designed, sewn, and stitched by wives, daughters, and sweethearts for their men folk.

"I have never heard that they were made commercially, or as a cottage industry," Maeder noted, "but it is not beyond the realm of possibility." Baumgarten agreed that the finely embroidered pocketbooks were sewn by wives and daughters, but added that some men's leather pocketbooks of the period were imported from England and sold by colonial milliners and other shopkeepers.

Women fashioned cloth pocketbooks of embroidered wool



COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK CITY

Illustrations from John Gerard's *Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes*, published in 1597, became a primary source for needlework patterns, like the basket of flowers on this tiny pocketbook, made c. 1720-50, possibly in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The diamond patterning on Gerard's basket and the cross-hatching of a pinecone-like flower are loosely interpreted here. The flowers on the pocketbook are shaded in silk, a technique used for large-scale projects such as bed hangings but rarely found on such a small piece. Metallic threads and spangles add to its appeal. It measures 4 1/2 by 5 1/2 inches closed.

with a plain wool or linen lining. They often added cardboard interfacing for strength at the front, back, flap, and interior dividers. They secured the decorated fold-over flaps with twill tape, using the tape to finish the edges as part of the pocketbook's colorful exterior design.

For practicality, most pocketbooks are rectangular, roughly four by seven inches. Others fold in half to create more of a square shape. Some are embroidered with the owner's name and/or date, an attribute that substantially increases the value of the antique.

Essentially, women made

pocketbooks from materials they used at home. "There is a preponderance of wool for the simple reason that it's easy to embroider and can be quite easily dyed to brilliant, stable colors—because it is a protein fiber, like silk—and the work can withstand the wear and tear of rough usage," Maeder said. Makers embroidered their designs in vivid colors—bright pinks, blues, creams, greens, reds, yellows, and oranges. Even sober Quaker men in their dark attire flaunted these colorful accessories at market.

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COURTESY OF HISTORIC DEERFIELD, DEERFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS



A c. 1750 example with a flame-stitch pattern. Called "Irish stitch" in the 18th Century and sometimes "Hungarian stitch" in the 19th, this style was easily accomplished and popular in a wide range of designs.

"Nearly every type of embroidery that was popular has been applied to decorating men's pocketbooks," Maeder continued. As for the patterns adorning them, "There are examples in crewel work—a kind of rather free-form embroidery in which most of the wool thread is reserved for the surface of the piece—but what is called the 'flame stitch' is by far the most popular and has survived in large quantities."

He said the counted-thread stitch we most commonly call "flame stitch" dates from the 10th Century. People called it "Irish Stitch" in the 1700s and "Hungarian Stitch" in the 1800s, and sometimes mistakenly the "Bargello Stitch" in the 20th Century because of its similarity to a pair of 17th-Century chairs housed in the Bargello Museum in Florence, Italy.

"Obviously, designs and colors went in and out of fashion, but the repertoire of stitches is centuries old," Maeder said. There was no linear progression of needlework styles during the years pocketbooks were fashionable. Women embroidered them with

the needlework styles and patterns in which they were most proficient, from simple crewel to elaborate Irish stitch, and in various designs to produce the most impressive pocketbook they could.

WOOL IS THE CLUE

Dating a man's embroidered pocketbook is simple when the owner's name and a year are stitched into the flap or interior compartment, but when no date appears, the wool itself affords the best clue.

"Embroidered pocketbooks, for me, were really at their height in the second half of the 18th Century, at least here in the American colonies," Maeder said. "And personally, I think they continued to be made well into the early 19th Century. The most important fact in looking at them is the kind of wool used. By the first decades of the 19th Century, merino wool came into use for embroidery. It was much softer than the worsted wool preferred during most of the 18th Century."

Although the English leather wallet influenced the form of the American pocketbook,



The maker, possibly from Philadelphia, varied her stitch lengths and angles to create different textures on this c. 1740-90 pocketbook, considered one of the finest examples of canvaswork. The background is a tent stitch in silk worked over two squares, with the flowers, stems, and leaves done over one square in the opposite direction. The flower centers are cross-stitch.

COURTESY OF THE CHESTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, WEST CHESTER, PA



A bold diamond-within-diamond pattern in wool on canvas decorates this c. 1760 pocketbook, obtained from a family estate in New Hampshire. The edges are bound in green silk tape, the two-compartment interior lined in green homespun linen. It bears the monogram "BR." Sold in 2006 for \$700, it might have brought \$1,200 had it been in better condition, according to antiques dealer Karen Augusta.

it appears the English were less eager to adopt the more vibrant embroidered rendition. A rare English one did turn up about two years ago at Cora Ginsburg LLC, a renowned textile and costume antiques shop in New York City.

Shop owner Titi Halle said, "Pocketbooks and folding wallets used by men in 17th- and 18th-Century England and Europe were more often worked in silk and metallic threads and beads. Embroidered pocketbooks—worked in wool flame stitch or embroidered with flowers—seem to be more of an American phenomenon, but they did exist in England."

In all his travels, Maeder said he has not run across an English version of the embroidered pocketbook. "My personal opinion is that these accessories were not widely used in Europe and probably went out of fashion more quickly."

Regardless of how long into the 1800s they were made, the brightly embroidered man's pocketbook eventually fell out of fashion in America as well. Women, who also used some types of pocketbooks, shifted to embroidered reticules when the narrowness of the newly fashionable Empire gown eliminated pockets.

"Ladies' accessories became more important," Maeder said.

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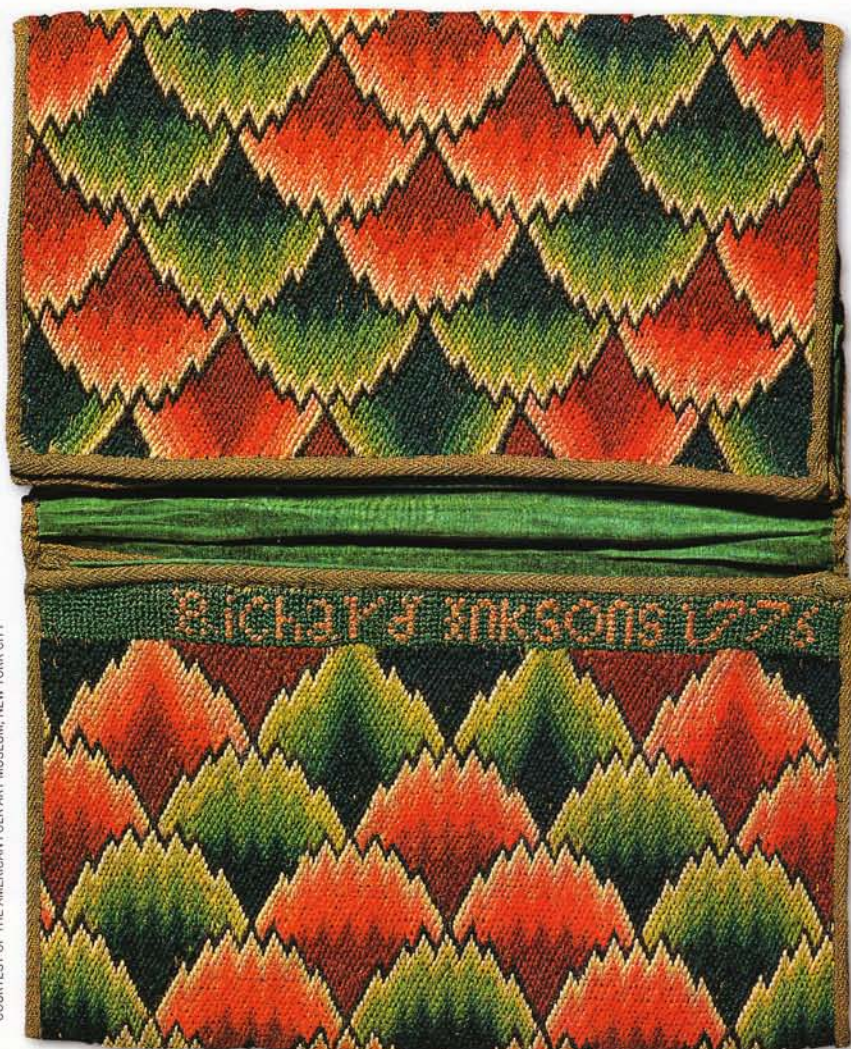


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Like many double pocketbooks, this example, likely made in Pennsylvania, bears the owner's name and date—"Richard Inksons 1776"—along an edge inside the fold. The flame stitch is done in wool on linen, with a silk lining and wool twill tape binding. It measures 10 1/2 by 8 1/4 inches open.

"Also, it was a period in which men wore darker and darker colors, and by the 1850s, black was everywhere in men's fashions." With the darker antebellum fashions and growing industrialization of the nation, black leather became the popular choice for men's wallets, most of which still retained their rectangular shape through the Civil War.

"Ladies were embroidering men's smoking caps and slippers by the thousands at this time," he said, "but there never was a revival of the men's embroidered pocketbook, which had been the pride of a gentleman's wardrobe in the 18th Century."

A CHALLENGING SEARCH

On a 2007 segment of Public Broadcasting System's *Antiques Road Show*, a woman offered a brightly colored, embroidered pocketbook to antiques expert J. Michael Flanigan for his appraisal. It had been in her family for generations, still contained several old letters, and bore the name of an ancestor, Isaac Smith, and a date of May 9, 1769. Flanigan unhesitatingly called it "a fabulous piece of Americana."

In many ways, the Isaac Smith example is the apex of the surviving embroidered men's pocketbooks. A treasured family heirloom for 235 years—the woman's family had traced Isaac Smith back to his birth in 1744 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania—it remained in exceptional condition as a result of the family's care. The letters it contained provided valuable slices of family history. The fact that Isaac Smith was a Quaker and carried a pink pocketbook, Flanigan said, indicated "a surprising fondness for colorful textiles" among the plain people.

All told, he placed the value of the Isaac Smith pocketbook in the unusually high range of \$6,000 and \$8,000 due to its combination of excellent quality and condition,



Fashionable in America from the 1750s through the early 1800s, the embroidered man's pocketbook lacked the same level of popularity in England and the rest of Europe. Extant examples, such as this 1757 English flame-stitch pocketbook, are considered extremely rare.



A vibrant saw-tooth pattern is worked in wool on linen canvas on a c. 1770-1815 pocketbook. Wool twill tape was used for the binding and ties. The lining is worsted satin.

family history, and embroidered name and date.

Prices for most pocketbooks would be lower, lacking the attributes of the Smith example, according to Karen Augusta, owner of Antique Lace & Fashion, a historic costume and textile business serving museums and serious collectors. Also an *Antiques Road Show* appraiser for fashion items and textiles, Augusta partners with the Charles A. Whitaker Auction Company of New Hope, Pennsylvania, for specialty sales that attract an international fashion, museum, film, and textile audience of buyers.

At their October 2006 auction, they sold a man's pocketbook that featured a colorful diamond-within-diamond pattern, two interior pockets lined in green linen, and the monogram "BR" in cross stitch. "It had some damage—in several places the wool stitches were worn through to canvas—and it sold for \$700," Augusta recalled. "One in excellent condition would sell for \$1,200 to \$2,000."

Like any antique, the value of a man's pocketbook depends on quality and condition, said Flanigan, who owns J. M. Flanigan Antiques in Baltimore and has nearly three decades of appraisal experience and a reputation as an antiques writer and lecturer. "The finer the

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Modern quilters will be pleasantly surprised to see a "crazy quilt" pattern of glazed wool scraps made into this man's c. 1760 pocketbook. Textile expert Edward Maeder said the construction method on this example is highly unusual. It is lined with a solid piece of worsted wool and tied with wool tapes.

This intricate example has flame-stitch carnations done in polychrome wool. The name "Nathan Somerby his" is stitched in black near the center fold. The wallet is edged with green twill tape and lined with bright pink and maroon plain-weave wool. It opens to reveal two double pockets.



OPPOSITE This c. 1770 example is backed in deerskin with a deerskin tie. The wool-on-linen design is an abstract flame stitch. It measures approximately 4 by 6 inches.

They're rare in the sense of absolute numbers. There are not thousands floating around in the marketplace. They turn up regularly, but I would never say they are plentiful. They survive as much by accident as by intent, and they are typically saved as family heirlooms more than as great examples of needlework."

Both Flanigan and Maeder note that often men's pocketbooks come up for sale only as parts of collections or estate lots. Flanigan said, "You no longer find these in the major Americana sales in New York because the prices are too low to be included as a single consignment. They occasionally show up as part of a large collection or estate, but rarely."

It's been seven years since Historic Deerfield purchased embroidered men's pocketbooks. Maeder echoed Flanigan when he said, "We bought a collection, along with quite a number of other items. Such purchases cannot always be stand-alone sales. It's usually much more complicated than that, especially for museums."

Because historic pocketbooks are rare and some reproductions are being made, collectors must be wary. "Many re-enactors are now re-creating these items for their own use and some are done with great skill," said Maeder, who admits the authenticity issue is sticky throughout the world of historic textiles. "Sometimes an unfinished piece might have been finished 100 years later by a descendant. Does that make it a fake, or altered, or in a category of its own? It's a complex problem."

Augusta said she mistakenly purchased a reproduction pocketbook twenty years ago. "I thought it was original," she said. "Mistakes are the best teachers." ★

Gregory LeFever is an Oregon writer and a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

work, with dating and marks of ownership included, the higher the price. But condition is the single most important factor. Prices start in the hundreds of dollars for simple examples and into the thousands for early colorful, dated examples."

Titi Halle, who also has done considerable appraisal work on *Antiques Road Show*, agrees. "We've had numerous pocketbooks of the kind you describe and have probably handled more of them than any other dealer in America," she said. "They were rare fifty years ago and are rarer today. It's been a few years since we've had a great American one to offer. Good color, good condition, provenance, a name, a date—they all factor into value."

For the sake of comparison, Halle is currently offering "a superb English mid-17th Century silver-and-silk embroidered folding wallet." It is priced at \$30,000.

These pocketbooks represent a difficult search for collectors.

"There is no rhyme or reason as to where to find them," Flanigan said. "They are more likely to turn up at an estate sale than an antiques mall, and more likely to be found in one of the original colonies than anywhere else."



SOURCES

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FURTHER READING

Eighteenth-Century Clothing at Williamsburg, by Linda Baumgarten (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1986)

Plain & Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1799-1850, by Susan Burrows Swan (Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1997)

What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America, by Linda Baumgarten (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002)



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