

# The Pocket: Uniting Material Culture, Social and Fashion History

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## **The Pocket. A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660–1900.**

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*Having a fixed identity neither as a garment nor as an accessory, sometimes underwear, neither dress nor quite undress, the pocket was in between. (40)*

In recent years, contributions to the field of material culture and fashion history have been devoted to specific types of garments. The exhibition *Fashioning the Body*, curated by Denis Bruna, first presented in Paris at the Musée des Arts décoratifs (as *La Mécanique des dessous* in 2013), then at the Bard Graduate Center in New York (in 2015), brilliantly focused on undergarments to understand the meaning of their evolution and their consequences on the social body. In so doing, the catalogue analysed and discussed how those fashion items provide us with a sociological, anatomical, and aesthetic understanding of a period.

Barbara Burman (independent scholar) and Ariane Fennetaux (associate professor, Université Paris Diderot) offer a similar perspective on an intriguing and rather unfashionable object: the pocket. From the 1660s to the 1900s, the authors explore the history of this peculiar and neglected object in fashion history in the United Kingdom. They also convey a major insight into gender studies in modern times. The book is beautifully designed and wonderfully illustrated (with both pertinent and high quality images).

## **TIE-ON POCKETS:**

### **SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY**

During this period, the pockets of women's garments were tie-on, meaning they were made independently from clothes and then tied, underneath petticoats, in the hidden parts of clothing. Still, a few pockets were included in the lining of other garments such as whalebone stays, petticoats, muffs and aprons (though they hold a less important place in the argument presented by the authors). Drawing a major distinction, men's clothes had the privilege of being already endowed with structural pockets, included in the pattern of their jackets and *culottes*. This absence in women's garments definitely called for inquiry. The term 'tie-on' pockets was not in use during the concerned period, but the authors needed to make a clear distinction between the generic term and the specific item of their study. The origin story of pockets is virtually impossible to trace: pockets are very informal in essence, easy to make, used on the body and off of it (as containers), easy to move.

Thus, the inquiry starts ca. 1660 with the multiplication of written sources (*de facto* showing pockets were more and more in use). Besides, the "disappearance" of the tie-on pockets is barely impossible to situate in time, though some structural examples help in arguing that they disappeared very early in the twentieth century. The phasing out of pockets has to be put in perspective, as the authors explain, with the birth of the development of bags such as the reticule in the early nineteenth century. This study relies on a large array of written sources such as court reports (especially the Old Bailey's court proceedings, searched in with the help of the 2012 online database: <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>), newspapers, trade cards, advertisements, essays, novels, books, bills, inventories, letters, etc. In addition, visual evidence and extant pockets highlight and serve as steady testimonies to written sources. Relying on a corpus of nearly 390 pockets

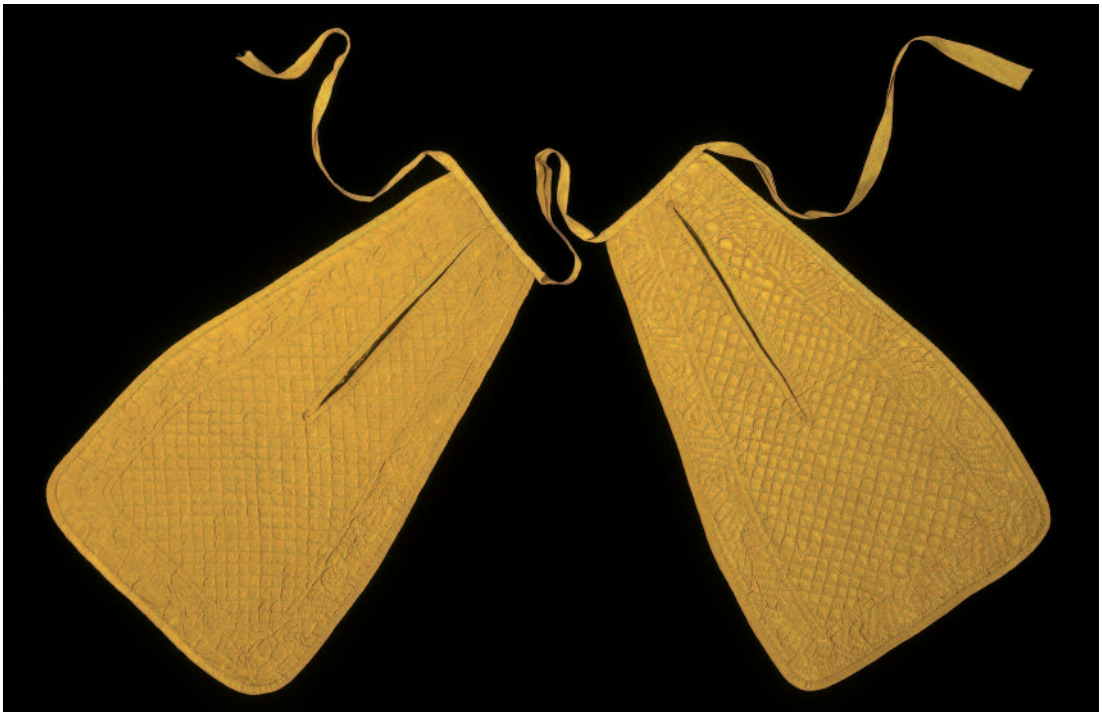


Fig. 1 Pair of quilted silk pockets. London, Victoria & Albert Museum, inv. T.87A&B-1978 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

kept in British museums and private collections, the study addresses a long period of time, characterised by important evolutions in fashion. Covering the period from 1660 to 1900, *The Pocket* perfectly addresses the cultural, global and fashion changes at work in the period by considering incredibly stable elements of accessories.

The authors prevent the readers from many common mistakes made by fashion history, such as the positivist prospect of ‘new’ fashions eradicating ‘old’ ones. The coexistence of both is indeed strikingly evident with pockets and other elements, like headdresses, rightly classified altogether by the authors. While Burman and Fennetaux remind readers of the traditional partition between material culture and cultural history (14), they manage to avoid such an antiquated perspective on the field through their first examples in the book. As early as in the introduction, one can clearly see and understand the method the authors used. On the basis of archival records, they combine the study of a narrated story with extant garments to pursue the reading and the interpretation of the object (11 sq.). The emphasis put on both the written sources and interpretation are a strong point of this book’s method.

#### A MATERIAL APPROACH

The book is composed of seven chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. The chapters study specific aspects of the history of pockets in modern times, from their making to their meaning in private spaces. Each chapter opens with specific content that sets the scene, while it is concluded by a quick summary of the main developed ideas. The conclusion opens the discussion with the disappearance of the tie-on pocket and their transformation into museum objects, a crucial aspect of their survival which made this study possible.

Throughout their work, the authors explore in depth the materiality of pockets. From the fabric they were made from to the shapes they were given, how they could be bought and as well as home-made, the life and after-life of pockets are considered. The matching set of yellow quilted silk satin pockets and bodice in the Victoria & Albert Museum indicates the existence of personal refinement in the selection of the material (*fig. 1*). Pockets are like cats: they have many lives. A pocket that was torn apart can be mended and reused from generation to generation, thus explaining its long lasting shape, as shown by the



Fig. 2 Embroidered pockets, early to mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. National Museums Scotland (Burman/Fennetaux, p. 211)

title of a 1849 book *Grandmamma's Pockets* (Anna Maria Hall, Edinburgh). The materials used often reflect the owners' social rank in society and thus shed light on pockets in different social classes. Pockets' decors can be rudimentary or outstandingly exuberant (see 211, fig. 154, 155; fig. 2). Embroidered at home or by a professional, pockets could be masterpieces of embroidery, encompassing a varied array of techniques (including the famous nineteenth century hair embroidery, see 186; fig. 3).

The archival perspective opened with the consultation of the Old Bailey's court proceedings stems from crucial aspects of pockets: they are mobile by essence. Once tied-on, they could still be untied, cut, or pulled off in order to be stolen. Numerous accounts of stolen pockets indicate how insightful the descriptions given by women (or their relatives) at court allow to shape a proper idea of women's pockets' contents and history. The archeological method used frequently in this volume offers an invaluable glimpse at women's daily lives in the modern United Kingdom. A striking example relies on the pockets exhumed from a vault in the Abingdon Hall County Museum (see 134 sq., fig. 108; fig. 4). The pocket and its contents (a baby's cap, sixteenth-century and

eighteenth-century coins, letters and business receipts together with hops) is a boon for our understanding of how those garments served as a place to keep memorabilia. Hidden in the attic, the pocket was most likely installed there to protect the house, like a talisman. Other examples of pockets are more eloquent on their own. If some pockets played a protective role, some others were claims to privacy. Makers inscribed their authorship on the pockets they made and thus show how intimate the pocket space was for women. So intimate that it could sometimes even be an unparalleled accomplice in crimes (such as infanticide, 187 sq.).

#### WOMEN IN SOCIETY: MULTI-TASKING POCKETS

Pockets are the best reflection of the many roles attributed to women. As wives, they traditionally became mothers; they then evolved with both of these roles, also being in charge of the household and all its related tasks. In this sense, pockets allowed authors to properly relocate and reinterpret women's place in society. Women were on the go (as peddlers or visiting and shopping as would have been the case in upper classes): they would move with public transportation, sometimes even go to a bar to get a drink on their long way home. Those



**Fig. 3** Miniature pocket made by Margaret Deas. Embroidered with and containing human hair. Private collection (Burman/Fennetaux, p. 186)

examples might seem minor, but they show how mistaken our perception of women in public space has so far been. In addition, their well-established position in their dwellings and marriages is stressed in this study. Women were not only subordinate to their husbands, they often shared and became the guardians of two crucial elements in a household: money and keys. One leads the way to consumption and success, the other is the very core of privacy and property. Furthermore, pockets and their contents show the many possible events a woman would attend in a day (from the general such as spectacles, errands, walking, outdoor reading, to the highly specific, such as snuffing tobacco, etc.). Miniature objects, kept in the pockets, like snuffboxes, pocketbooks, and writing kits reflect the expansion of possible activities for a woman of a certain class throughout the period.

At the lower end of the social scale, pockets are also a trove for personal belongings that are utterly relevant to one's self being. A maiden would carry her 'character' – a sort of cover letter written by past employers – in her pocket. The loss of a 'character' was more prejudicial than the one of money: money isn't everything, reputation from former employers mattered most (176 sq.).

The very basis of this study are the pockets themselves. Their conservation has been made possible by a sort of fascination for such strange garments, probably reliant on their lifespan and their (sometimes) particularly ornamented appearance. Pockets underwent a movement from the deepest part of privacy on a woman's body, hidden under skirts or petticoats, to the most secret parts of museums, in their storage, rarely to escape to display cabinets. The secrecy of such objects has pulled them aside and can thus explain the lack of interest accorded to them.

**T**his transition has nonetheless allowed consideration of such material with the help of the countless sources invoked to discuss them and make them speak. The fourth chapter, more conceptual in its approach, relies on one hand on Igor Kopytoff's approach of objects changing significations as they enter different categories (see *The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process*, in: A. Appadurai [ed.], *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986) and, on the other hand, on Michel de Certeau's notion of 'practiced place' (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley 1984). Nonetheless, despite the outstanding quality of this book, more general concepts would have been beneficial to it.

#### REMARKS

*The Pocket* is an important contribution to the field of material culture and gender studies. Still, I would like to formulate some remarks, mostly bibliographical, that would have made insightful additions to Burman's and Fennetaux's study. When discussing the evolution of male clothing (25), it would have been meaningful to quote the research published in 2012 by Irene Groeneweg, which would have offered support to the authors' argument, while their actual phrasing does not refer to recently update knowledge on the basis of the same paradigm they used (see Groeneweg, *Men's Fashion circa 1660: Some Historical Facts Concerning the Introduction of the Rhingrave*,

**Fig. 4 Contents of a pocket, 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Found concealed in the cell of a house in Abingdon. Abingdon County Hall Museum, inv. OXCMS.1997.7.2-19 (Burman/Fennetaux, p. 135)**



Innocent and Justaucorps, in: *Riggisberger Berichte* 19, 2012, 83–92). In modern times, the evolution of the structures of dwellings allowed the “rise of privacy” as written by the author (189). *La Naissance de l'intime* (Paris 1988), by Annik Pardailhé-Galabrun, would have been a good reference to situate the birth of privacy – even though the publication is quite dated nowadays and contains elements that require reconsideration. The 1988 volume explores the same type of sources as *The Pocket*. Burman and Fennetaux unveiled the structural construction around pockets, while Pardailhé-Galabrun did so for the actual new living spaces in Paris houses. Last, it could have been beneficial to use the concept of *sémiophore* theorized by Krzysztof Pomian (*Musée et patrimoine*, in: Henry Pierre Jeudy [ed.], *Patrimoines en folie*, Paris 2015, 177–198). Although dated, *Vies minuscules* by Pierre Michon (Paris 1984) also plays an important role in the interpretation of everyday life objects that is symptomatic of the development of material culture in the Humanities. These texts reflect on new concepts that emerged a few decades before Burman and Fennetaux merged material culture, social and fashion history. *The Pocket* focuses on British territory and it would be insightful in terms of material culture and gender history to conduct parallel research on the Continent. As a sequel or a pendant to this first volume, it would be useful for the purposes of material culture and social history to learn more about what was happening at the same time on the Continent.

#### CONCLUSION

Though pockets appear to be read in a systemic perspective, they fail in the most beautiful way as they allowed the authors to develop the numerous aspects of women’s lives, in all their complexity, that this recension unfortunately cannot study in all their specificities. The smaller things connect us all, and the study of such objects informs better than the constant looking for high-end fashion, couture culture which in fact only refers to very few privileged people in a globalised system. This kind of focused and revolutionary study opens a bright destiny for interdisciplinary research in the Humanities. In the future, a project dedicated to tote-bags, a well-known phenomenon of the early twentieth-century, might be as insightful as the one here provided by the authors.

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