

Preserving the Past: a Textile Analysis of
Victorian Petit Point Purses
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Introduction

- Victorian Petit Point Tapestry Handbags were the staple of 19th-century French fashion, these handbags were produced using petit-point, or diagonal tent, stitching (Treganza 1).
- Common themes depicted on handbags included court scenes, mythical beings, florals, and pastorals, all displayed in vibrant colors (Stewart). These patterns were frequently woven with wool and silk (Dublio).
- Within aristocratic circles, its complex patterns symbolized social status. Contrastly, it represented the domestic sphere of less wealthy women. In a situation where they were treated less than, they allowed the needle to be their voice and the purse their canvas (Mitchell 186).
- Aim of analysis: To analyze three distinct styles of Victorian Petit Point Tapestry, including identifying the style description, relevant period, design characteristics, and the story within their weaving. This includes photographing each piece, and highlighting trends within the era, historical significance, and the value of preservation.

Methodology

- Accession, organize, clean, label, and photograph items in the Historic Costume Collection.
- Through visual analysis and research, I noted vital design details, fabrication, fiber type, identified time period, medium, and dimensions of purses in the Historic Costume Collection.
- Examined the woven imagery story on petit point and crossed referenced with collected sources of the Victorian Era
- Upload data to the digital database for proper accessioning of items.
- Review peer-reviewed sources and archives to develop a better understanding of the historic context of the handbags, investigating their significance within the time period.

Background

- In the 18th century, women’s clothing lacked pockets, so they wore small purses under their dresses for necessities. Visible purses had to match their outfit and occasion, often containing items like rouge, face powder, fans, and scent bottles (Nyambura and Nyamache 24-25).
- In the 1850s, William Henry Perkins accidentally discovered aniline dyes while trying to cure malaria, leading to the commercial production of synthetic dyes, including Mauve and coal-tar dyes (Travis 36). Synthetic dyes replaced natural dyes due to their longer-lasting color, cost efficiency, and consistency, likely contributing to the vibrancy of these handbags (Affat 3).

Analysis

Purse 1

Title: Marie De Camargo By Granger & “La Berger Galant” by François Boucher
Date: Late-19th Century
Medium: Metal hardware, chain link strap, kiss-lock clasp closure; cotton, silk demask; demask covered mirror & coin wallet
Dimensions: 8 1/8 x ½ x 7.5 in. (20.64 x 1.27 x 19.05 cm)
hardware only: 7 x .2 x .39 in. (17.78, 0.51, 0.99 cm)
Classification: Textiles- Purses/Bags
Object Number: P-31

Purse 2

Title: “The Cage” by François Boucher
Date: Late-19th Century
Medium: Metal hardware, chain link strap, push clasp closure; wool, silk, silk covered coin wallet
Dimensions: Overall: 6 ½ x ½ x 5 in. (16.51, 1.27, 12.7 cm)
hardware only: 5 ½ x .2 x .2 in. (13.97, 0.51, 0.51 cm)
Classification: Textiles- Purses/Bags
Object Number: P-58

Purse 3

Title: Floral beaded petit point purse
Date: Late-19th Century
Medium: Hetal hardware, chain link strap, kiss-lock clasp closure; beads, linen, suede
Dimensions: Overall: 7 1/16 x .2 x 5.5 in. (17.94, 0.51, 13.97 cm)
hardware only: 6 7/16 x .05 x .2 in. (16.35, 0.13, 0.51 cm)
Classification: Textiles- Purses/Bags
Object Number: P-52

References



Conclusion

- Analysis of fibers and hardware suggests these petit point purses date back to the late 1800s, evolving from earlier "reticules" or drawstring bags.
- The shift from intricate tapestries to simpler floral patterns may reflect France’s transition away from aristocratic power structures.
- Further studies could use advanced fiber testing, examine a wider range of purses, and analyze more historical fashion sources.