

Pockets of Power: A Look into Women's Pockets and Agency in the 17th to 19th Century

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In the vast history that follows seventeenth and eighteenth century clothing, many garments are well known, and well researched: stays, petticoats, farthingales.¹ Over that time, we have seen the evolution of silhouettes, fabrics, and the transformation of outfits for both men and women. But one thing that people tended to overlook are pockets, a part of clothing that is still seen in outfits today. They are still a crucial part of nearly every garment we wear now, and widely used. We see them in jeans, pants, hoodies, dresses, skirts, jackets. The list goes on. They vary in shape and size, and the conundrum of contemporary women's pockets being far too small to carry even a cellphone is universally known. Even worse are fake pockets which are stitched shut and cannot actually carry anything, there for purely decor reasons, almost mockingly. Girls still get excited when they reach deep into the pleats of their skirts and discover that it has pockets. In clothing today, men's pockets still tend to be bigger and are able to hold more things, and the jealous envy women feel over men's clothing due to their spacious room to hold items still exists. So, it is fair to ask: what is the gendered history behind pockets? Why do women's pockets never seem to be as good and consistent as men's pockets, and were pockets always so designed?

Pockets served as a functional and convenient storage space that allowed for an easy way of carrying personal belongings. They also may enhance the look of a garment and give it an element of personality. Historically, this was also the case for some garments, in some forms. But there were always gendered distinctions to pockets. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, unlike men's pockets which were tailored into the garment, women's pockets were a separate piece which would be tied on under the skirt, making for an easier alternative to carrying a purse. These tie-on pockets came to be during the seventeenth century, lasting until the end of the

¹ Sarah Bendall looks into this in her article "Take measure of your wide and flaunting garments".

nineteenth century, despite the increased use of other options such as purses. Their stability and convenience made them deeply popular.² Tie-on pockets were also an important part of fashion and often contained elaborate, flowery designs that were hand embroidered by the owners. These pockets were valued by the wearers, valued as a symbolic object or a symbolic space. Pockets were also a significant part of gendered material culture, they were able to carry items with emotional significance but could also have been a keepsake in themselves.

We as humans have a shared habit of becoming attached to things. Often, these things end up being objects we keep nearest and dearest to us, and those with significance or sentimental value. In this paper I will talk about the intentionally hidden garment: women's pockets. I will discuss how these were gendered apparel and due to this, were always very political. I will look into the freedom and oppression entangled with these accessories, and how they fashioned social ranks and the different roles women played in society. Pockets often shaped the lives of women from an early age, as girls learned to sew, mend, and embroider. Embroidering and personalizing these pockets were an important part of the garments themselves and sometimes contained the names of the owners; I will look into the sentimental aspect of these and the significance and meaning behind some of the designs. Objects were often very sentimental and held memories of things or acted as a memory cache or proof of an important event, for example the birth of a child. Because of this, we have and always will endow a lot of importance to objects and material culture. Pockets were just another one of these meaningful objects which acted as both an important item, but that also enabled the carrying of other important items. (Figure 1) Tie on pockets brought women many freedoms, such as the liberty to carry multiple useful things with them throughout their days, and get jobs done. They also incorporated a show of social status and personality through the materials, build, and decor of the pockets themselves. In addition, they

² Victoria and Albert Museum, "Women's tie-on pockets," T.697.B,C-1913.

were the focus of a wave of various crimes, much of which circled around the theft of pockets and their contents. This can be shown through seeing the existing pockets of women from the time, along with their contents and the stories they tell of their lives. As historian Leora Auslander observes: “Artifacts, therefore, are differently informative than texts even when texts are available; texts, in fact, sometimes obscure the meanings borne by material culture.”³

Figure 1



Pair of women's pockets of linen twill fabric with crewel embroidery in worsted (wool) thread. T.697.B,C-1913. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

What do objects mean to us?

Through the lens of pockets, material culture shows us a side of history revolving around functionality and women's freedom. Pockets which were a concealed garment, hidden under layers of clothing were more than just an efficient way of carrying objects around. They offer a

³ Auslander, “Beyond Words”, 1017.

glimpse into the lives of these women, through their creation, mending, decorating, and above all the wearing. Pockets help to trace the timeline of fashion, and we are able to look at its history, down to the materials which were used. Material culture study of these objects helps provide insight into seemingly mundane areas, unravelling an entire lifetime passed.

Leora Auslander argues that human history can be learned, and knowledge obtained, through the examination of specific material sources. She argues for the importance of material culture. According to Auslander, “material culture embraces the class of all human-made objects. This includes hand- and machine-made, unique and mass-produced, durable and ephemeral, expensive and cheap things.”⁴ This of course, would refer to each and every object and the way everything has some sort of relevancy to its time, which would mean a lot of objects to discuss. To avoid this, Auslander limits her arguments to two categories; objects with thought out, aesthetic designs and three-dimensional objects with which people had routine bodily contact. Pockets from the seventeenth through nineteenth century fall under both of these categories, both being aesthetically thought out with their floral embroidered patterns and colours, but also would be considered a physical object with which women’s bodies interacted daily. Pockets were also an intimate item because of their location, being tied on around a woman's waist, hanging close to the hips. They could also be considered intimate because of the nature of what could be stored inside them.

Auslander discusses the use of the five senses when it comes to defining material culture which they use in their “intellectual, affective, expressive, and communicative practices.”⁵ This usage creates experiences for the five senses which can only be felt properly through the intended sense. “The aroma of roasting coffee cannot be put into words; the feeling of cashmere

⁴ Auslander, “Beyond Words”, 1016.

⁵ Auslander, “Beyond Words”, 1016.

or burlap cannot be expressed in music.”⁶ Auslander says that because we exist in this world with our five senses, we are a part of this material world. And a need that comes out of this is the need for objects in order to individualize and differentiate ourselves. Objects become like an extension of our bodies in order to identify ourselves and to solidify our existence. Poignantly, these objects might also end up being some of the only proof we existed after our death. We use these objects to cope, they end up being symbols of grief, after death or loss. They help carry key moments of our lives, the way wedding rings mark the joining of two people, all of these can be considered kinds of items that can be considered ‘transitional objects.’ Auslander observes that most scholars and historians rely mostly on written sources and words, treating them as the most informative sources. Images or objects are often only treated as supplementary sources. But she argues that by expanding the range of sources, we will be able to learn more and obtain better answers to questions about the past, expanding our range of knowledge, potentially learning to ask better questions.⁷ The study of material culture gives us an invaluable approach to research.

Objects as Proof of Our Existence

Material culture defines the relationship we as humans have with objects, and gives us a look into the lives of people past through the objects they lived their lives through. A good example of this can be seen through art and portraits. Portraits are some of the best representations of visual and material culture and were the primary way for a person to be remembered. These portraits often included the sitter along with the display of the most important work they had completed or created in their lives or their most prized possessions, some sort of object either way. The objects and the poses had a lot of meaning in these paintings

⁶ Auslander, “Beyond Words”, 1017.

⁷ Auslander, “Beyond Words”, 1015.

which a historian may be able to analyze to understand the portrait further. An example used in the edited collection, *Writing Material Culture History*, is the portrait of Paul Revere from 1768, painted by John Singleton Copley.⁸ (Figure 2) This portrait consists of the silversmith Revere who sits with his hands in a V shape, pointer finger and thumb around his chin, in a thinking pose that would be more common to a philosopher than a working man.⁹ He held a teapot in his hand, resting on a small cushion. It has been suggested that silver teapots were some of the most complex objects that Revere had made, and the date which was inscribed on the portrait relates to the date where there was a decline in Revere's production of tea pots due to the duties that were imposed on imported goods that included teas, during the aftermath of the 1767 Townshend Act - a crisis in colonial American history.¹⁰

Figure 2

John Singleton Copley, Paul Revere, 1768. Oil on canvas, 89.22 x 72.39 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Joseph W., William B. and Edward H. R. Revere. Photograph © 2013, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



⁸ Coltman, "Material Culture", 18.

⁹ Coltman, "Material Culture", 17.

¹⁰Coltman, "Material Culture", 18.

Objects also have a sense of life and afterlife to them. They can go through decay, deconstruction, and destruction.¹¹ But instead of being a two-way street, dead or alive, they can also be maintained rather than ruined. Upkeep of clothing can be an overlooked strenuous activity, but was obviously important to prolong the life of garments and objects. This could include washing, ironing, pressing, and darning to keep the garment clean and in shape, mending, repairing and patching to repair any wear and tear.¹² It was like delaying the death of these objects, caring for their wellbeing and making them last as long as possible, just as you would do for something you loved or cared for. As Auslander puts it, “humans expect things to outlive us, embodying and carrying a trace of our physical selves into a future in which we are no longer present.”¹³ An object which has been mended or repaired, or even upcycled in a way can be considered to be in its ‘afterlife.’¹⁴

Here are old things:
 Fraying edges,
 Ravelling threads;
 And here are scraps of new goods,
 Needles and thread,
 An expectant thimble,
 A pair of silver-toothed scissors.

Thimble on a finger,
 New thread through an eye;
 Needle, do not linger,
 Hurry as you ply.
 If you ever would be through

¹¹ Kelley, “Time, Wear and Maintenance,” 191.

¹² Kelley, “Time, Wear and Maintenance,” 193.

¹³ Auslander, “Beyond Words”, 1020.

¹⁴ Kelley, “Time, Wear and Maintenance,” 193.

Hurry, scurry, fly!

Here are patches,
 Felled edges,
 Darned threads,
 Strengthening old utility,
 Pending the coming of the new.
 Yes, I have been mending...
 But also,
 I have been enacting.
 A little travest on life.

Above is a poem called 'Mending,' published in 1921 by Hazel Hall who was a seamstress.¹⁵

This poem is not just a mark of what she did in her lifetime, a record of her time as a seamstress but also provides a sense of character or personification of the tools and clothes she talks about. She describes her tools as expectant and silver toothed, she seems to be talking to her tools, telling them not to hesitate, to hurry, to fly. This could also refer to the tedious and constantly ongoing gendered task of mending clothes, as this was a labour that many homemaker women would have to take care of, unpaid, unless it was your job – which was not always the case. She seems to refer to mending clothes as a task that never ends, much like laundry, you finish and are on to the next, it is a never-ending cycle.¹⁶ The life cycle of a garment never really seemed to have much of an end due to the constant repairing, care, and recycling that goes into maintaining them, prolonging and keeping them alive for as long as possible.

¹⁵ Hall, "Mending", quoted in Kelley, "Time, Wear and Maintenance," 193.

¹⁶ Kelley, "Time, Wear and Maintenance," 194.

Material Culture: Dress, Gender and History

Material culture has a deep history and pockets were not the first material trend to have strong political connotations or catch historians' attention. Evelyn Welch discusses the physical extremes of the body (hair and hands) and the political power around accessories for the head (including hair), and hands in Renaissance Italy. She introduced another aspect of material culture that is focused more on accessorizing the body through hair and handheld objects, accessories which, according to Welch are still seen as "on the edge of our discussion just as they lie on the margins of the body," even as interest in body and dress increases.¹⁷ Welch had previously covered material culture in dress, earlier on, in her book *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Culture in Italy, 1400-1600*.¹⁸ But she chose to focus on "the interconnections created by fashionable dress," especially through accessories.¹⁹ Hair was a very important part of gendered fashion among the elites, because you could do so many different things with it. It could be curled, shaved, moulded, decorated with headdresses, braided, veiled.²⁰ Different political powers promoted different fashions, always contentious. It sparked a lot of controversy when men of the Renaissance period in Italy started to grow out their hair as well, being compared to either women or barbarians by critics. Long hair for men was even condemned at one point, and the sight of their long beards and chest hair peeking through collars was considered dirty and unkempt.²¹ Accessorizing and styling long hair provided a certain liberty for women that was not accessible to men, much like men had the liberty and accessibility to pockets, yet it was incredibly limited and far more inconvenient to women. But hair was only an example; and though hair was considered one of the most powerful parts of expressing individual

¹⁷ Welch, "Art on the Edge", 242.

¹⁸ Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*.

¹⁹ Welch, "Art on the Edge", 243.

²⁰ Welch, "Art on the Edge", 242.

²¹ Welch, "Art on the Edge" 242.

and group identity, hands were powerful too and a lot of time was spent caring for these two parts, including visits to the barber for haircuts, shaving, and nail care.²²

Many of the tools that may be needed for these practices of self-care and grooming could also be found on a chatelaine, which I will discuss below. It is also important to note that these areas of the body played a social role as well. “It would be easy to describe this investment of both time and money as frivolous (as it often was). But in creating a very visible area for display, women were also creating very public social identities that both emphasized their status and displayed their connections to other women.”²³ Additionally, many possessions and handheld accessories were also seen as items which could be easily modified to fit the times, and these included gloves, fans, and handkerchiefs, all which would be considered valued items. They were rapidly spread and changed, modified according to style and trend, such as when in 1533, the Venetian government believed women should be wearing simple veils without changing the method of covering with a hat instead.²⁴ These ideas were able to be spread across many social and geographical boundaries, reaching wider audiences, making the use of these accessories more widespread and accessible.²⁵ Much like hair and accessories are an under-researched portion of fashion and women’s dress, so were pockets. And the same way hair, accessories, and grooming practices differed from men to women, the idea of pockets in garments also varied vastly between the two genders. Men’s clothing always seemed to have the more permanent and reliable space to carry items and this was an advantage to them, it gave them a purpose in this world, giving them a way to be out and about while being able to have anything you could need through your day, right on your person. This raised the attention and envy of women.

²² Welch, “Art on the Edge” 244.

²³ Welch, “Art on the Edge” 245.

²⁴ Welch, “Art on the Edge” 242.

²⁵ Welch, “Art on the Edge” 242.

Figure 3



Gentleman's coat, waistcoat and breeches, 1740s, made in Scotland. T.250 to B-1934. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Men's tailored garments had pockets long before women's garments. (Figure 3) And these pockets in the articles of clothing had such an effect on the wearers and the experience of the clothing, that it was a detriment to be without them. Figure 3 depicts a mid-eighteenth century gentleman's ensemble which included a coat, waistcoat, and breeches, all of which contained pockets. The large pockets on the jacket show outwardly and are beautifully decorated, allowing the pockets to add an aesthetic element to the garment. There are less visible pockets on the waistcoat as well. The breeches alone on this outfit have seven lined pockets, making the

total pocket count of this outfit easily fall into double digits.²⁶ Pockets have a history. Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux produced an important investigation of this history and in chapter one of their book *The Pocket; A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660-1900*, they recount a short story from 1914 'If I Were a Man' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Tie-on pockets had long disappeared from women's dress at the time she wrote this piece, where Gilman imagines a girl who turns into her husband and spends her day as a man. The story recounts the strange thoughts and feelings she had while wearing his outfit to work. "Of course she had known they were there, had counted them, made fun of them, mended them, even envied them; but she never had dreamed of how it felt to have pockets."²⁷ The story showed her feeling assured, powerful, and independent in a way she had never been able to before because of the newfound accessibility and convenience of these pockets.

[...] realizing the armored assurance of having all those things at hand, instantly get-at-able, ready to meet emergencies. The cigar case [...] the firmly held fountain pen, [...] the keys, pencils, letters, documents, notebook, checkbook, bill folder - all at once, with a deep rushing sense of power and pride, she felt what she had never felt before in all her life - the possession of money, of her own earned money - hers to give or to withhold; not to beg for, tease for, wheedle for - hers.²⁸

This was written in 1914, at a time where feminists were actively demanding dress and political reform, and the story served as a good example of the "gendered politics of pockets."²⁹ Burman and Fennetaux also share a story from the 1989 children's book, *Bill's New Frock*, where a boy is

²⁶ Victoria and Albert Museum, "Coat," T.250 to B-1934

²⁷ Gilman, "If I Were a Man", quoted in Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 24.

²⁸ Gilman, "If I Were a Man", quoted in Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 24.

²⁹ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 24.

made to wear a girls dress for a day, and complains about the abundance of decor, frills, bows, but no pockets.³⁰ Let us take a step back to explore this history.

Since the end of the seventeenth century, men already had the luxury of pockets as a part of their everyday lives, tailored into their lined garments, making women's tie on pockets seem like a less specialized, less permanent version.³¹ Yet these pockets still created an opportunity for women which was not there before; it gave them a way to carry quantities of things without creating extra weight or pull to the dress due to the fact that it was a separate garment. These facts could be contributing reasons to why the tie-on pocket outlived the sewn-in pockets or the reticule bag which may have coexisted in women's dress.³²

Men's pockets were adjusted to the things they might do throughout the day, their work, and their hobbies and tailors created extra pockets for anything a man thought necessary for his day to day. But, as watches became essential male jewelry, they also had the luxury of what was called a 'fob pocket.' This was an additional pocket located in the waistcoat or breeches. This pocket was often used for a personal pocket watch, as it was becoming more widespread at this time, a pocket to create easy access. And as the authors put it, the gestures of removing the watch out of the pocket and all of its casings before reading the time represented a particular privilege. But in contrast, women's pocket watches were often left unpocketed, hanging from a chain or a chatelaine, from their waists.³³

Chatelaines were a clever substitution for the lack of pockets on women's clothing, enabling them to carry items with them throughout their day. Chatelaines were beautiful, ornate functional jewelry that were clipped on and hung at the waist, and could also be compared to a

³⁰ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 23.

³¹ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 23.

³² Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 24.

³³ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 26.

long and beautifully decorated keychain. These chains were a gendered accessory that were made to symbolize social status or sometimes the domesticity of women.³⁴ The functionality was similar to a small purse that could be carried throughout the day, except it was more like the inner contents of a purse hanging outside freely. When it came to genteel women of the home, their chatelaines would often carry small household items, but mainly keys which would be able to get around to all the important parts of a home including the linen closet, pantry, and tea chest. Because of this, chatelaines could have been seen as a symbol of power for women.³⁵ They were evident in many different cultures, with their designs and structures changing slightly. In ancient Rome, women mostly wore them to carry small toiletries, and in China and Japan they wore embroidered purses and pouches which served the same purpose.³⁶ European-made chatelaines were often decorated with biblical scenes or scenes of mythology and other elaborate designs with metal carvings or enamel. Elements of this accessory could also be inlaid with stone such as agate or precious gems.³⁷ The metal the chains were made of included various metals, the finer ones made of gold, or a yellow alloy called pinchbeck, which was named after the inventor of the material.³⁸ Chatelaines were made up of multiple dangly chains that allowed small items to be hooked on and hung, conveniently available whenever needed. Items that could be found on these chains included small scissors, a notebook and pencil, a small coin purse, a watch, keys, locket and so on. (Figure 4) These could also include small toiletry items such as nail clippers, tweezers, nail cleaners, and even small perfume bottles, along with anything else that could be used to groom oneself.³⁹ None of these items are particularly gendered, including the grooming

³⁴ Women & the American Story, “Symbols of Accomplishment.”

³⁵ Women & the American Story, “Symbols of Accomplishment.”

³⁶ Oatman-Stanford, “The Killer Mobile Device for Victorian Women.”

³⁷ *Britannica*, “Chatelaine.”

³⁸ *Britannica*, “Chatelaine.”

³⁹ Long, “Historical Jewelry: The Chatelaine.”

tools which would all have been gender neutral for elite men and women. It was in fact, more common to see a man with items like keys and watches because their clothes had a built-in place for them. But the moment these objects are placed onto a chain and hung from the waist, regarded as jewelry or accessories, the objects become gendered, they become feminine. Could this be due to the nature of the accessory itself, or the placement of the jewelry on the body, or maybe a combination of both? It seems like objects do not become gendered until they are used by women, especially when it comes to the way these items are to be carried.

Chatelaines in cheaper materials became especially popular for certain middle-ranked working women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who needed their things close at hand. This included mothers, nurses, and seamstresses, among others. Their chatelaines would consist of items that would be useful for their work. A seamstress and nurse chatelaine might contain similar things like scissors and notebooks which would come in handy for both careers. A nurse's chatelaine may contain a thermometer while a seamstress may have needles and a pin cushion, tape measure, and a thimble. Ultimately, the chatelaine was a way for women to keep worldly possessions close at hand.⁴⁰ This is something humans tend to do in whatever way possible, keeping their prized and sentimental possessions close to them as a way to mourn, to remember, to celebrate or to get jobs done. It is this material culture which allows us to delve into object history and surrounds our day to day lives.

⁴⁰ Long “Historical Jewelry: The Chatelaine.”

Figure 4



Chatelaine, 1850, made in England.M.10:1 to 9-197. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The Making and Individuality of Pockets

Let me return now to tie-on pockets, a phenomenon that lasted nearly two centuries. What constituted the personalization of pockets to make them unique and discernible to each of their respective owners? First, many of these pockets would have been handmade but were also often hand embroidered and decorated, often by the wearer. People could be recognized by their pockets by intimate family members, during washing and repairing, not only because of the recognizable designs but also because these pockets could be made for women and given as gifts, recognizable by the maker as well. Burman and Fennetaux tell a story from 1832 about an elderly street seller called Caroline Walsh who mysteriously went missing, and all that was found as evidence were her clothing and pockets. The missing woman's two granddaughters were able

to recognize her pockets, which were made by one of them, made out of some of her other clothing which her granddaughter had made, making it memorable. In this sense, the clothing seemed to be an extension of her as a person, and just as identifiable as a person may be.⁴¹

Many different fabrics could be purchased or acquired to make these pockets; “–hollands and cambric from the Low Countries, Bengals, calicoes and muslins from India, silks, linens which were probably dyed in England, Scotch cloth as a cheap alternative to calico for the new-fangled window curtains.”⁴² By the eighteenth century, cotton was a popular option too. Pockets were often made of smooth and durable cloth that did not disrupt or chafe against the fabric of other garments. Because of this, pile fabric, metal thread, and flimsy cloths were avoided due to their abrasive nature. Knitted or crocheted pockets were also not common as they were too stretchy and prone to snag and often did not last.⁴³ Silk pockets might be preferred by those women who were well off (Figure 5); though for most of the population, silk was saved for garments that were able to be seen on the outside. Leather was also used for some pockets; but these were even less likely to survive than more precious silk.⁴⁴ Pockets made of the hardwearing linen dimity material were the most common for poorer women, and came in a variety of different styles that could include corded or striped. From these, striped dimities were more popular due to their ease of weaving, making them cheaper. These pockets which were made of dimity also went through advanced chemical bleaching and soap treatments to achieve a dazzling pure white colour.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 53.

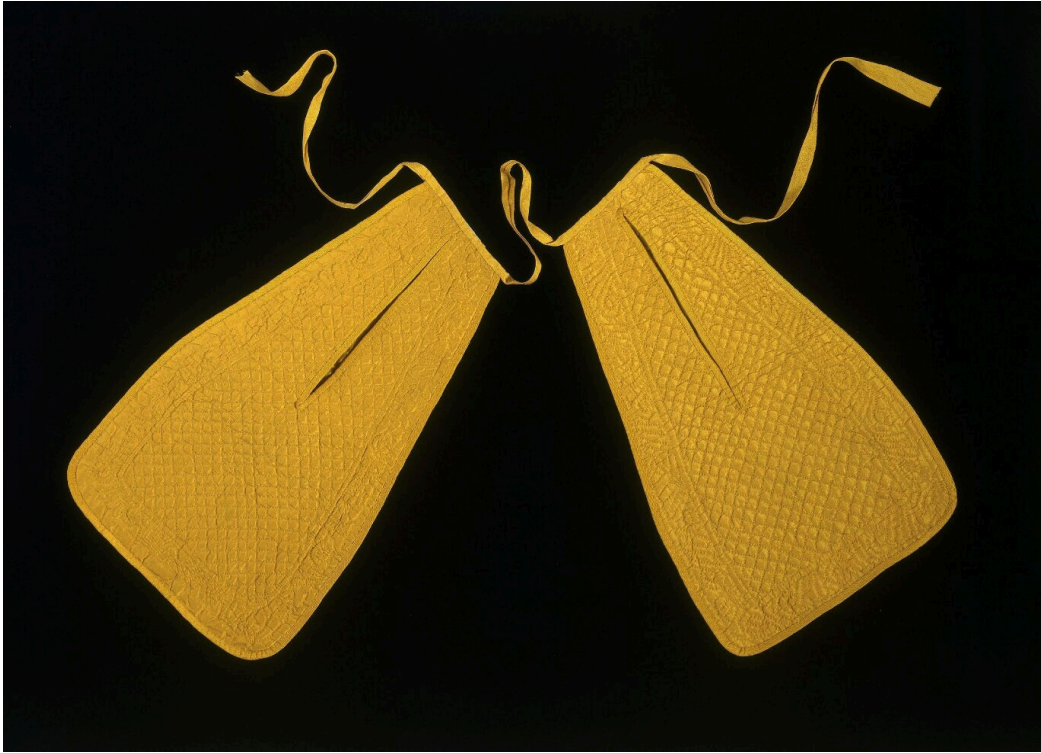
⁴² Spufford, *Great Reclotting of Rural England*, quoted in Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 54.

⁴³ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 55.

⁴⁴ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 55.

⁴⁵ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 57.

Figure 5



Pair of women's pockets of silk fabric. T.87A&B-1978. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Recycling material to turn into new garments, in this case pockets, was also very commonly done. Pockets could be made from old bed covers with specific details like corded quilting to help strengthen them. Sometimes holes and tears from needles and other sources such as pleating could provide evidence of a previous life to the material which was now being fashioned into pockets. Patchwork, which would involve scraps of fabric put together, was also a nifty way of reusing fabrics to shape into pockets. (Figure 6) These scraps of fabric could be collected from around the home or be obtained in markets, being sold for the sole purpose of making patchwork. The reused fabrics could have carried personal meanings, making them important to the maker, all of this leading to these various designs making these pockets more

discernable. Though patchwork started as a fashionable activity, in richer households, it gradually went out of fashion among the elites and became a sign of the poorer families. Following patchwork, the ragbag became a sign of self-sufficiency and was found in many homes, regardless of being rich or poor.⁴⁶ Textiles were valued in virtually every stage of their lives, as these authors note.

A rag bag is a desirable thing to have hung up in some conspicuous part of the house, into which all odd bits, and even shreds, of calico, print, linen, muslin, &c should be put, as they are useful to come in when a gusset or chin stay, or some other small article is wanting. Those bits too small for this purpose may still be used by school children, for practicing stitches of needle-work upon; or at all events, may be disposed of to the rag marchants, and thus prove of some value at last.⁴⁷

The front of pockets provided a canvas for design and could consist of parts of printed and vibrant cottons that would make up cheaper beautiful and intentional designs, while the backs, which could be considered the more private part of the garment, would consist of the more ‘odd bits’ and unusable pieces because they would not be on display.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 61.

⁴⁷ Kilner, “A Lady”, quoted in Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 61.

⁴⁸ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 62.

Figure 6



Pockets with patchwork design, Maryland Historical Society, Gift of Dr. William S. Hall

Another crucial part of creating these pockets was the decorating of them, especially when plain cloth was used. This was usually done by embroidering motifs and most commonly included various floral patterns; but themes could sometimes involve various animals, particularly birds, and other designs. Sometimes they would include designs of humans as well. Either way, flowers and floral patterns were the most prevalent, showing knowledge of the botanic, a woman's realm. Another design that would have been fairly common were ones inspired by Asian textile, such as vases or baskets full of flowers, taking on a more exotic aesthetic.⁴⁹ The fact that so many of these designs were so similar and consisted of such similar ideas was direct evidence that these women shared aesthetic ideas when it came to designing their pockets. They would exchange patterns that would end up travelling from person to person,

⁴⁹ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 70.

or they would draw patterns for each other to use.⁵⁰ There was a sort of intimate culture or sense of sisterhood amongst these designs. Figure 7 shows an incomplete design, drawn with ink on pieces of linen, which were then intended to be hand embroidered. These pockets were drawn by hand for personal use by Hannah Haines, but never completed.⁵¹

Figure 7



Incomplete pocket fronts of linen fabric in red silk thread, 1718-1720, made in England. T.41&A-1935. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In fact, pockets could be seen as a symbol of the perfect housewife, as they required every skill involved in hand making garments. The maker would know how to darn, sew, embroider. Girls started to be taught these skills from an early age, by their mothers. They would learn how all elements of needlework and pockets were the perfect way to practice all of these skills. A young girl finishing her first pair of pockets usually developed a sense of pride as this

⁵⁰ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 72.

⁵¹ Victoria and Albert Museum, "Pocket Fronts," T.41&A-1935

was evidence of a fine feminine accomplishment. And it is no surprise that some surviving pockets were obviously done by younger girls still learning, evident in the craftsmanship. Many women became fairly skilled at these kinds of needlework, so the range of surviving pockets show a stark difference between those who were beginners versus tenured at the craft.⁵²

Stolen Pockets, Stolen Lives

Pockets also provide insights into what women thought to be important enough to carry with them throughout their day. Though not many surviving pockets have been found with their contents still inside, written records help us to understand what these women may have carried with them day-to-day. The contents also made them a good target for assault and robbery. Many of these cases have been recorded and can be found online through the records of the London Old Bailey court transcripts, such as the following case study from a session on February 19th, 1794.

223. JOHN MITCHELL was indicted for stealing, on the 13th of January, privately from the person of Margaret Jones, widow, a leather pocket book, value 1s. a bank note, value 200l. another bank note, value 50l. another bank note, value 40l. another bank note, value 20l. two bank notes, value 10l. each, and a bank note, value 5l. her property .⁵³

Margaret Jones was a wealthy widow who was robbed of her utilitarian leather pocketbook and some highly valuable banknotes on her way out from the bank. The money stolen from Jones would have been an enormous amount, converted to the value of pounds from 2017, she would have been carrying nearly £40,000.⁵⁴ Though she claimed to have stored other items in her

⁵² Fennetaux, “Women’s Pockets,” 314.

⁵³ The Old Bailey Online, “JOHN MITCHELL. Theft; pocketpicking.” t17940219-74.

⁵⁴ *Currency Converter: 1270–2017*, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/>.

pockets such as keys, her gloves, and notes, it was only the money which was stolen. She seemed to recall four people who came towards her all of a sudden, lifted her gown and stole from her pockets. She was so distraught that she was not able to catch many other details. A question was asked to her during the trial. “Q. Pray what else had you there besides; ladies pockets are generally pretty full, they say there is no bottom to them?”⁵⁵ This is interesting, as the judge characterized women’s pockets as ultimately bottomless. Many things could be stored in them making women an easy target; this risk would worsen if they would walk alone, especially after dark. Women with active, social, and hardworking lives often fell victim to these crimes due to being out in public without any company. The pockets would support their roles as homemakers and their jobs and employment. Their pockets would be reflective of the work that they did, or the resources they had, and all these items would be stored in their pockets, allowing for easy shifts from role to role.

Pocket theft and pickpocketing were not the only crimes women had to face when it came to their pockets; there were much worse. Most have heard the notorious name Jack the Ripper. The way poor women’s lives were kept in these pockets was brought to life after a series of murders in Victorian London in 1888 which were traced back to Jack the Ripper. These women were all referred to as ‘prostitutes,’ when in reality few of them were. The majority of these women worked different occupations that all were centered on the street, including pawning, begging, hawking or scavenging, among others, all last resorts. In many of these cases, records of the clothing the victim was wearing were itemized, including tie-on pockets, a fashion still followed by the poorest working women. The contents of these pockets depicted the harsh realities of the lives these women lived. When the pockets were found, at least in the case of Annie Chapman, the pockets were ‘torn down the front and also at the side’ in a macabre style

⁵⁵ The Old Bailey Online, “JOHN MITCHELL. Theft; pocketpicking.” t17940219-74.

that seemed to symbolize disembowelment. The contents of the pockets were laid by the body, and consisted of “an envelope, pills, a small pocket hair comb, and a piece of coarse muslin.”⁵⁶ Interestingly, the shape of women’s pockets have been compared by one scholar to the shape of a woman's uterus or female genitalia with its pear shape, drawing connections of femininity, but also an oversexualization of women and their garments. The gesture of a woman reaching down into the slits of her dress, into her pockets, and feeling around for objects was said to be very evocative of reaching for her private parts, according to cultural historian Ariane Fennetaux.⁵⁷ It is impossible to know how wide this idea spread, another of many routine hypersexualized misogynist tropes, made women’s routine domestic habits a justification for sexualized attacks. This idea is not necessarily entirely agreeable, as we do not really know if this were the case or not. But, it was apparently a commonplace of that time.

When Catherine Eddowes was found, in 1888, another Ripper victim, she had three pairs of tie-on pockets with her. This was evidence of what Eddowes did in life. She would go out hawking, trying to make a living by selling things on the street. She was found with multiple pairs of pockets which were described as large and made of calico, or bed ticking (cheap fabric). But when found, the pockets were bloodied and the pocket strings had been sliced. She did not have any money on her yet was found with many different trinkets that were stored in the three different pocket pairs, some of which included a small comb, an empty match box, some sugar and a small tin of tea, a ball of hemp, 6 pieces of soap, multiple small buttons, and the list goes on. Her pockets were proof of her nomadic lifestyle, and the little things she would have carried with her to keep up with her day on the city streets – the toiletry items along with the tea and sugar.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 183.

⁵⁷ Fennetaux, “Women’s Pockets,” 318.

⁵⁸ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 184.

Due to the fact that these pockets were tied around the waist, it meant they were a temporary fixture and could come undone, break or tear off, or be removed even violently. This made the pockets very vulnerable and at times unreliable. When removed, these pockets had to be carefully stashed and hidden, especially because stolen pockets could be hard to find again, as they could be transferred from individual to individual, hidden, refashioned, or thrown away completely.⁵⁹ Pockets were stored in many different ways when they were not in use, always particularly close to the owner: under pillows, slung over a chair, or stowed away somewhere close to the owners' beds.⁶⁰ But these methods were not particularly safe here either. When Elizabeth Taylor was a patient at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, in 1803, she had the contents of her pockets stolen by a nurse from under her pillow. A patient had seen the nurse:

Put her hand under the pillow, and take out the pockets; she put them on a shelf behind the curtain, and put a bit of flannel over them; in a short time afterwards, I saw her go and take the pockets again, fling her apron over them, and take them to the privy; she staid there a short time; when she came back, she brought the pockets with her, and put them under the pillow again [empty of their contents].⁶¹

Because of the nature of these pockets, it was easy to gain access to the contents and steal. When accused of stealing, women did many things to hide the evidence, hiding the pockets in various places, throwing them down a well, or passing them along to others.⁶² Pockets were ever-present, valued and invaluable and, unlike chatelaines, they were rarely in view when not in use.

⁵⁹ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 27

⁶⁰ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 28.

⁶¹ The Old Bailey Online, "ELIZABETH TAYLOR. Theft; theft from a specified place". t18030420-54

⁶² Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 27.

Conclusion

The study of material culture allows us to learn more about the tidbits of history, the parts that may sound less relevant, and that end up having rich narratives and share the stories of people and the different ways they lived and the items they lived with. The history of women's pockets provides a fascinating lens to study the societal aspects of women's gender roles from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, and what this meant for the lives these women lived. Pockets allowed women to carry objects with them at all times, in or outside of the house, or place of work, enabling them to play roles, more than just being homemakers, it enabled them to get jobs. Tie-on pockets also ended up being an intimate part of women's lives in the sense that they learned to embroider and sew at a young age, creating all kinds of beautiful things, including decorated pockets. They shared these designs, creating them for one another and passing them on to their loved ones, pockets were thereby a form of love and freedom.

Women's pockets today will continue to be as unique as they once were, even if they take different forms and shapes, appear in different ways, and are a part of the actual garments we wear, providing a sense of belonging and equality. We see them on our tops, jackets, and our pants. In our jeans, which are made nearly the same as men's jeans, except for the pockets, which still happen to be smaller. Yet in the same way, jeans are so personal to the wearer in the way that they become personalized with the gradual wear and tear or creasing and fading with repeated use.⁶³ Jeans become just as unique as the fingerprints of the wearer.⁶⁴ We still decorate our backpacks, purses and jackets with things like pins, patches, and embroidery, customizing our utilitarian garments as much as we can, making it our own, just like the women did then with pockets. Studying material culture and learning about the history of the people that occupied this

⁶³ Kelley, "Time, Wear and Maintenance," 191.

⁶⁴ Hauser, "The Fingerprint of the Second Skin", quoted in Gerritsen and Riello, *Writing Material Culture*, 191.

planet before us can be used to show the contrasts between our lives and theirs, all the way that we live similarly, yet so differently at the same time, with the modernization of the given tools and items we use in our daily lives.

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