

Inside story: handbags that made history

While much attention is paid to the exterior of a bag — its design, status and, inevitably, its price tag, less scrutiny is paid to this rich and complex internal life and the tension between the two.

When a woman stepped out in the 1740s, her private belongings would have included a watch, a snuff box, money, jewellery and perhaps some food. These are what she chose to take from her domestic sphere into the world thanks to **detachable** pockets that were tied around the waist, accessible through openings in the seams of petticoats.

detachable 可拆卸的

By 1863, she may have included **scissors**, a purse, a thimble, a miniature notebook and a **magnifying** glass. These she would have worn in the form of a chatelaine: a series of small purses that were suspended from the waist and highly visible.

scissor 剪刀

magnify 放大

What many women carry in their bags some three centuries later is remarkably unchanged. One friend lists the contents of her bag at this moment as: “A book, cosmetics, phone, keys, reading glasses, spare **contact lenses** and **eye drops**, etc.”

contact lenses 隐形眼镜

eye drop 眼药水

“The content is so crucial,” says Dr Lucia Savi, exhibition **curator** of Bags: Inside Out. “As bank notes came in, handbags had to be compatible, at least bigger than a £5 note.” Now we carry cards, it is the phone that dictates design. “No one will create a bag that doesn’t fit the largest phone on the market.”

curator 馆长; 监护人

More surprising, she says, is how the most ordinary of bags can communicate something about us. “It’s a blank canvas that can tell us all sorts of things: your status, your beliefs.”