


[Print this Page](#)
[Close Window](#)

The Atlantic Monthly | April 2007

BOOKS & CRITICS

BOOKS

CARRIED AWAY

When it comes to high-end handbags, you are what you tote.

BY LYNN YAEGER

.....

According to *The New York Times*, the 2006–2007 season had not one but three must-have handbags: a Fendi distinguished by two nonfunctional outsized buckles shaped like B’s and thus known as the B Bag; a tote from the house of Goyard made of resin-coated, chevron-patterned linen and cotton frequently decorated with racing stripes and the owner’s monogram; and a black vinyl Chanel sack called the Coco Cabas, an item that more than one observer has likened to a trash bag.

There’s no telling how long the trio will be on top—an It bag, like an It girl, can’t, by its very nature, remain an It indefinitely. But if the actual satchel changes every couple of seasons, the motivation for owning one remains constant, a state of affairs that Winifred Gallagher tries mightily to explain in her jaunty, slender new book, *It’s In the Bag*. If anyone can appreciate what Gallagher, whose previous subjects have included heredity and spirituality, is up against, it’s me. As a fashion writer (and, let’s face it, compulsive shopper), I’ve spent the last couple of decades looking at extravagantly priced handbags, trying to uncover their secrets: Why are women dragging veritable suitcases to work when their male counterparts make do with a billfold and a BlackBerry? Why does a frivolous bag like the coquettish Fendi Baguette, shaped as the name would indicate, cause a sensation while the Chanel 2005 (introduced in 1998), which looked like a high-tech pillow and prided itself on its ergonomic correctness, lay a tremendous egg? The answers, it turns out, lie far beyond considerations of practicality or even objective aesthetic appeal. (Sometimes a *jolie laide* bag will take off while a lovely purse languishes.) This much can be said with certainty: Handbags have nosed their way into a place once occupied almost exclusively by diamonds and fancy furs, functioning as badges of honor, announcements that you’ve arrived at a particular economic or social level, or at the very least, emblems of hopefulness, yearning, and optimism—I have the same bag as a movie star! I am someone to be reckoned with!—that can be brandished for all the world to see.

Forty years ago—even 30—there was no such thing as a “hot” bag. You had something square and

It’s in the Bag: What Purses Reveal—and Conceal

by Winifred Gallagher
HarperCollins

How to Be a Budget Fashionista

by Kathryn Finney
Ballantine Books

Bags: A Lexicon of Style

by Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli
Scriptum Editions

black, or brown and squashy, that you carried in the daytime; something smaller and shinier for evening; and maybe something made of velvet or straw if you were a hippie. Now an impressively large number of women, in addition to worrying about how thin they are and whether they can walk a block in the shoes they're wearing, also feel compelled to spend in the neighborhood of \$2,000 on a purse. And it isn't only wealthy women who are shelling out; middle-class women, working women, even schoolgirls are also deeply conscious of what they are carrying. If a serious bag once signified that you were a grown-up, now the brand name on your bag signifies what kind of grown-up you are.

Gallagher attempts to explain the annual prominence of a few particular purses with a survey that ranges from Freud's unsurprising opinions on the subject ("He proposed that the purse—in his day, a capacious, satchel-like affair—was a symbol of woman and that placing an object inside it represented sexual intercourse") to the observations of a Condé Nast fashion director with the markings of an amateur historian, who contends that the roots of the current situation lie in the booming '80s, the decade when purses first took center stage: "It was Wall Street! It was excess, it was more and more! It was big gold chains! It was very much 'Let's get a big watch. A pink alligator bag!'"

Gallagher barely touches on another reason for the ascendance of the handbag in these label-obsessed times: A bag always fits. If that Marc Jacobs frock seems meant for an Olsen twin, that Marc Jacobs quilted tote is one-size-fits-all. And another thing: No matter how wretched your outfit, the "right" handbag lends an imprimatur of glamour. As Kathryn Finney points out in her unintentionally poignant *How to Be a Budget Fashionista*: "If you're carrying a \$1,000 Christian Dior bag, it doesn't matter if you're wearing a jogging suit from Kmart— people will assume you're wealthy because of the bag."

So let's pull on our sweatpants and take a trip to Madison Avenue, where the bags on shoppers' slender arms mirror the ones in the showcases. At this very moment, the satchels that seem to capture the imagination are for the most part: advertising their provenance discreetly (bearing tiny initialized plaques rather than monogram upholstery); droopy rather than rigid; and overladen with hardware.

So here are Bottega Venetas, whose distinctive woven leather is itself the calling card; limp Balenciagas, announcing themselves by their louche strings and faintly sinister studs; and massive Paddington Chloes—as if they weren't weighty enough, they have been further encumbered with brass locks and keys, making them virtually unliftable by anyone over 25. (I have often wondered if the enthusiasm with which some women embrace a backbreaker like the Paddington is a way of flaunting their vigor and strength, an advertisement of their youthful vitality.)

Could Miuccia Prada, who bears a fair degree of responsibility for the current handbag craze, have known that grown-up women wouldn't want to drag around 50 extra pounds all day long? In the late 1980s, Prada, a former communist and scion of the Milan-based fashion company, revolutionized the handbag world when she introduced an ultralight black backpack made from the kind of nylon employed in the manufacture of Italian army parachutes. ("I wanted to be something more. But I am what I am," she told *The New Yorker* a bit wistfully in 1994, reflecting on her transformation from socialist to society figure. "Not everyone can be Albert Schweitzer or Karl Marx.")

Flinging one of Prada's backpacks over your shoulder sent much the same message that the stringy, saggy, cracked-leather Balenciaga offered in more recent years—I'm hip; I'm cool; I have broken permanently with the vast undistinguished pocketbooks of my mother's generation, lumpy carryalls with contents so forbidding that Gallagher describes them as "radioactive":

Like a medieval chatelaine's "pocket," which held money and keys to the household's larder and treasure, my mother's purse was an important article filled with important things that children were not to touch.

(In fact, not everyone has abandoned these cavernous carryalls. Nora Ephron, in an essay titled "I Hate My Purse," lifts the veil on what her mommy-bag frequently contained, offering a frankly disgusting roster that includes used tissues, old tea bags, aging ChapSticks, and unfurled tampons. She also confesses that these days she relies on a plastic shopping tote embellished with an image of a New York City MetroCard—and she insists that she gets compliments on this item.)

Of course, years ago, if your mom was really chic (and sufficiently well-heeled) she didn't carry a purse at all. In the recent retrospective of Nan Kempner's wardrobe at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, the late socialite's closet was re-created in breathtaking detail—all 354 jackets and 362 sweaters—but her surprisingly undistinguished collection of handbags was relegated to a high shelf and mostly hidden. Actually, Kempner, like many women of her age and class, frequently didn't bother with a bag at all. ("I don't think she needed the status conferred by the handbag," Harold Koda, the show's curator, told me by way of explanation.) After all, when you're traveling from limo to restaurant table, when every bill goes directly to your husband, or your father, what do you really need to carry with you?

As it turns out, women like Kempner are the last gasp of a bagless tradition that dates back hundreds of years. In their excellent, recently reissued *Bags: A Lexicon of Style*, Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli describe a trajectory that begins with Victorian women depending on tiny bags worn at the waist to carry money, keys, scissors, etc. By the turn of the 20th century, with more women venturing outside the home, the roominess of one's bag was a reverse indicator of social status—i.e., the bigger the satchel, the more likely it was that you were fending for yourself. A miniature purse, on the other hand, was an indication of a cosseted lifestyle. Steele and Borrelli quote Vanda Foster, who noted in her 1982 book, *Bags and Purses*, that 55 years ago,

a woman who complained that tiny evening bags would not hold both cosmetics and a cigarette case was told that "any woman smart enough to carry this tiny handbag is sure of an escort who will provide the cigarettes."

Cigarette-pushing escorts notwithstanding, Germaine Greer has argued that "shouldering luggage is an ancient female habit, born of servitude." Well, maybe, but at least that servitude has now evolved into paid labor. Like Mother Courage, this indomitable working woman, carrying her miniaturized home office on her arm, makes her way through the modern world. But how exactly has this otherwise rational person been convinced that it's OK, that it is in fact a fine idea, to spend four figures on a particular bag—especially one, in the case of Goyard or Louis Vuitton, that is not even made of leather but has instead been created from frankly cheap-looking coated canvas?

There's something mysterious as religion—and almost as magical—that makes women so fiercely desire a particular bag in the first place, even when circumstances dictate that they may have to settle for a replica. Though Louis Vuitton, say, has been vocal about the painstaking ways in which it combats forgeries, a trip to Canal Street—or the avenues leading to the Porte de Clignancourt market in Paris, or a certain subway tunnel in Moscow—proves that the company's efforts, while valiant, are mostly futile. In contrast to most fashion books, Finney's *Budget Fashionista* is at least sensitive to the patently obvious reason people buy counterfeit bags in the first place: In a chart of "expensive" versus "budget" accessories, Finney's line of demarcation is \$50, accurately reflecting what most

Americans are willing to spend on purses, real or fake. Anyone who wants a phony Louis Vuitton bag can find one, and it'll probably be a pretty convincing copy—so good that Finney has a section titled “Is My Louis Vuitton Bag Fake?” Here she unintentionally reveals how difficult it can be to tell the real from the mock. She cautions that you should make sure that the color of the handle exactly matches the piping (a ridiculous concern, in reality, since the leather trim on a Louis Vuitton bag will fade unevenly), and that the dustcover not have rounded corners.

But does buying the fake bag afford the frisson of pleasure that purchasing the \$2,000 version brings? Or, put another way, can an inauthentic bag provide an authentic thrill? It depends. For the sort of person who is troubled by the fact that her dustcover has the wrong corners, the phony bag, which she knows full well is merely similar but not identical to the one Gwyneth Paltrow carries, is a haunting reminder of failure. But for another kind of customer, the same purse can function as the sartorial equivalent of a Palladian villa that is meant to look 300 years old but is in fact newly built.

Two blocks from my Manhattan apartment, street vendors have set up a table on the corner of 14th Street and Fifth Avenue, where they do a brisk business in bogus Fendi spy bags, Marc Jacobs–esque quilties, and other artful reproductions. There's no fake Chanel trash bag (though the classic double-C bucket is represented), nor to my knowledge has faux Goyard popped up yet—but a friend reports that he has seen it on the streets of Hong Kong, so it can't be far behind. One day recently I watched as a very stylish young woman came to a screeching halt in front of this table and reached with both hands for a humongous floppy pink ersatz Balenciaga bag, its voluminous tassels gaily flapping in the breeze. She couldn't have looked happier if she were leaning on a showcase at Barney's.

And for a long time I thought I was just like her—insouciant, daring, willing to mix the real and the fake with chic abandon. That is, until a few years ago, when Louis Vuitton introduced a line of bags created by the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, and I was immediately entranced. It's true that I am easily entranced, but these bags—some of which were rendered in white with multicolored “LV” initials, others decorated with cherry blossoms sporting smiley-face centers (better looking than it sounds)—played with the then-stodgy monogram pattern in a way that I found irresistible. Unfortunately, I was not alone. The clerk at the company's Fifth Avenue flagship store informed me, in that chilly way unique to high-end store clerks, that the bag I wanted, the one with the inane flowers, was wait-listed. But then she took not just my name and phone number but also an imprint of my American Express card—a clear indication that this sale was a done deal as soon as the next shipment arrived.

Or so I thought. Finally, after months without a call from Louis Vuitton, and feeling like Olivia de Havilland waiting for Monty Clift to show up in *The Heiress*, I went downtown and handed over \$38 for a rather imaginative facsimile that some anonymous creative genius deep in the Chinese mainland had enhanced with silvery trim and a row of nail heads—not Murakami's original design, it's true, but not so far off that anyone but a real aficionado would notice.

The bag was charming, and I got lots of compliments on it, but in the end, to my shame, I was not able to make my peace with its second-class status. After a few outings, it was relegated to a high shelf, where it rested with authentic bags of seasons past, while I, for my part, turned my attention to a crimson Goyard painted with stripes and a monogram in blue and yellow, colors that signified absolutely nothing except, perhaps, my willingness to spend thousands of dollars on a handbag.

The URL for this page is <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200704/yaeger-handbags>.