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BEN TOMS. THANKS TO SPRING STUDIOS. TOP, MODEL'S OWN. FIND SIMILAR  
AT COS AND T BY ALEXANDER WANG. TROUSERS, STELLA MCCARTNEY

It evokes memories, elicits passion, inspires jealousy and can cost the same as a small flat. Lifelong devotee *Christa D'Souza* explores why we are still losing our hearts to the handbag. Photographs by *Ben Toms* and *Neil Gavin*

**Y**our first grown-up handbag. Do you remember it? The one that marked the momentous passage from mere graduate to Person with a Proper Job? Mine was a burgundy quilt'n'gilt affair, shaped like a giant section of Toblerone, from – well, where else? – Chanel. It cost more than anything I had ever owned, had to be scrupulously hidden from my family, and meant eating pasta for weeks before and afterwards. But I didn't care. I'd just started my first properly important, properly intimidating job, and I needed the properly important, properly protective bag to go with it.

My precious "starter" bag. What a loyal, reassuring friend it was, and how it was worth all that expense and cheap pasta. I can still feel it swinging slightly awkwardly from my shoulder (it was New York in the Eighties, so my sneakers often went in there as well), can still smell its fusty, oxblood-coloured insides to which a stray cherry throat-drop would always be stuck. How safe I felt in that battlefield of an office with it there, like a talisman, beside me. How violated and limbless when it was nicked from under my desk by a messenger, with my passport, my green card, my money, my keys, my everything inside...

The Handbag. That thing we must no longer, under any circumstance, describe as "trophy", "It" or, worst of all, "iconic". That thing of your mother's you carried around the house in the crook of your arm when you could barely walk; that thing you must never ask your other half to carry for you, not even for a second, unless you want to very publicly, very ritualistically humiliate him.

Lately, with shoes taking centre stage, it has not really been the handbag's moment, has it? Poor thing. How many super-stylish women have I come across recently who recoil slightly when you mention the subject and proudly swear that the bag that does fine for the moment is a battered canvas tote from Daunt Books? As one of them drily asked, "Shouldn't you be writing a piece about the pocket instead?"

In a way, I am with her. I don't much think of myself as a bag person, and even if I were, I love the look that shouts, "I've a car permanently purring outside." All that handbag hardware, all those charms and padlocks, all those bags bigger than their owners (remember how dwarfed the Olsen twins were by their Kelly

bags?). How could we not go off them for a bit? As long as it does the job, surely the better significant buy would be, well, yes, a pair of killer shoes?

And yet. The raging covetousness I cannot help feeling in the presence of an Hermès Micro Constance... The new friends I made, the chat that was engendered, when I took Chanel's hula-hoop bag as my date to a drinks party the other evening... The respect that the embossed Boy, kindly lent by Chanel, so stealthily commands... And the sadness I feel, even though you can barely fit an Oyster card into it, let alone a wallet and keys, at the thought of having to give it back... As for the vintagey white bugle-beaded baguette Fendi let me fondle for a few days – with a tan and a pair of flip-flops? Drinking Greek rosé in a Mykonos bar? Oh, my. Who knew the hole in my heart was baguette-shaped, and how miserable I will be to say goodbye to it? To be seduced by a bag. To know your life will be complete if it can just be yours. Don't underestimate that feeling. The shops certainly don't.


"The accessory may change, but the desire is always there," says Ed Burstell, managing director of Liberty. "As a retailer you have to put yourself in front of that desire and figure where it pops up. Along with niche fragrance and jewellery, handbags are what we are standing behind right now." He adds how Liberty's figures for handbag business last year rose by 12 per cent. According to Stephane Jaspard of Stella McCartney, the riotously popular Falabella bag, which came out quite a few years ago, still accounts for a good part of the accessories business, which itself accounts for a quarter of the entire business. He expects the new Boo bag, named after Stella's daughter, will do the same.

"Everyone likes to say the demise of this, the demise of that. Well, I'm sorry, the actual customer disagrees." So speaks Stuart Vevers, creative director of Loewe (formerly at Mulberry). "Nothing seems to connect as powerfully with the customer as a bag," he says. "If you see a bag that truly, truly speaks to you, that you just know you have to have right now or else, all that gloom and doom stuff can go straight out the window. *Nothing* works like a great bag."

"You can be fat, short, tall, ugly or beautiful, a bag is something that a woman can always wear," agrees Camille Miceli, former muse to Marc Jacobs and now Dior's creative director of accessories. "A bag is a positive way for any woman to access a brand without having to either try it on or fit into it. It's got the excuse of being practical, too, unlike scent >

"You can be short, fat, tall, ugly or beautiful, a bag is something that a woman can always wear."  
Leather Cecily bag, £1,100.  
Mulberry.  
Hair: Naoki Komiya. Make-up: Lauren Parsons.  
Model: Lara Mullen. Fashion editor: Emma Elwick-Bates





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Blouse designer Sophie Hamilton, photographed here with her vintage Lanvin clutch. Hair and make-up throughout: Rozelle Parry. Stylist: Saranne Woodcroft. Sittings editor: Michael Trow

or jewellery, even though, of course, so often it is not.”

So, yes, *of course* it's still possible to fall in lust with a bag, but maybe this time around it will be in a slightly different way. If the must-have pre-recession bag was all about making a big showy statement, the post-recession one is very definitely not. Understatement to the point of anonymity, that's what appears to count now, such as the minimalist leather “paper bags” Céline is doing for spring in blue or red nappa lambskin, or the black schooly pencil case from Comme des Garçons my stylish friend Sahar Hashemi counts as one of her favourite-ever evening bags.

Like nice underwear, therefore, or real diamonds, it's not so much about the world knowing you've got it, as about *you* knowing you've got it, with its state-of-the-art craftsmanship and insides that look as good as the outsides.

“Nobody actually *needs* a luxury bag,” says Anya Hindmarch, whose own obsession began in earnest when she was 16, “but there is something mood-altering about them. They're not just receptacles for our things. They're tribal. They're more than the sum of our parts.” Oh, come on, bag as semaphore? Of course it is. Why did Freud make such a big deal about poor hysterical Dora fiddling with hers? Why were we taught in film studies at college in the early Eighties that just as a gun symbolises a penis, so a bag symbolises a woman's you-know-what? Which reminds me of the time I accidentally upended mine in the lobby of the Carlton Tower: coins, balled-up receipts containing wads of old chewing-gum, half-unwrapped Tampax, keys, an empty edamame pod, even – all cascaded on to the marble floor, while a doorman looked on, too embarrassed to help. It all chimes with a 1945 article entitled “Bagology” in *The New York Times*, which advised, “A decent man should always tactfully stare at the ceiling whenever his companion opens her bag.”

**H**illary Clinton famously once said that it was not nice to judge a woman by her bag (her favourite at the time was a big pink one from Ferragamo), and she is right, it is not. But how many of us cannot help doing so? Is it just me, or is there a subtle one-upmanship played out by fellow Birkin owners at the hairdresser's, in the way that their bags are so prominently placed right there in front of the mirror; a complicit understanding, a freemasonry, almost, between those who own a Trapeze by

Céline? And why is it that the first thing you do if you are a dancer and you've got your first big job, or so I am reliably told, is to blow your whole pay packet on a Mulberry? Not an L.K. Bennett, not a Coach, but a Mulberry? If there is anything that identifies a dancer who has done well, apparently, it is her "Mulbs".

However much we claim that bags are not really our thing, we are all – whether we choose something that costs as much as a small flat in Kensal Rise or a tatty charity tote – making some sort of statement with the object to which we entrust the contents of our lives, day in day out. The dual desire that most human beings have, of wanting to stand out and simultaneously fit in, is all played out in public via our bags. A badge that says one belongs, but very much not a badge, if you like.

"The thing about an 'It' bag was that it was always about it rather than you," says blouse designer Sophie Hamilton. "I love the idea that there is some kind of backstory to it, rather than it looking as if it's been one-clicked and delivered to your house the same day... At the same time," she adds, patting the Trapeze her boyfriend recently surprised her with, "you don't want to *not* run with the pack."

How telling, too, is the way we use them as psychological anchors or shields. Remember that famous picture of Princess Grace using her Kelly to hide her pregnancy from the press? Many a time has my own bag politely but firmly warded off an overly chatty, smelly or just plain undesirable person I don't want sitting next to me on the Tube, the train or even at the dinner table. In that respect, it is a little like a squalling, snotty child. But then I ask a lot of my bag, aside from its conveyancing services. It is my security blanket, my bodyguard, even, in the way it stands between me and the big, bad world. This means I'll always pay way more for one than I can ever afford.

Sophie Delaney, 28, a producer in advertising, has always been known among her friends and family to spend more on a bag than on clothes. The first one she saved up for was a Mulberry Roxy, which she proudly wore as a student on the Nottingham University campus. The second, the one that is now her "everyday"

bag, is a black Rocco by Alexander Wang, with antique studs on the bottom. "I thought about that bag every day for a year before I had enough to buy it, and was insanely jealous whenever I saw anybody else wearing one," she says. "For me, my bags are a much more accessible way to be a part of the fashion world. It's my personal style without being too in-your-face. See, it's not something precious that only comes out on special occasions. I couldn't wear Miu Miu shoes or a Roland Mouret dress to work every day, for example, but a bag is different. Especially if it is one you have coveted for a really long time."

picks every morning – and she has more than 2,500 stacked in Muji boxes in her bag "morgue" in east London – as a way of "sharpening" her look. "I'm a jeans and Converse person during the day," says Hillier, who has collaborated with everyone from Marc Jacobs to Victoria Beckham to Asprey. "My clothes aren't how I play out my 'Mrs Rigidness', as I call it, or my professionalism. I'll tend to do that through my bag." Her two current favourite "sharpeners" are an extremely grown-up navy-blue Victoria bag from Victoria Beckham, and a two-tone crocodile shoulder bag from Asprey. "My dad always said you could tell a person by their shoes," she says, "I actually think you can tell better by their bag."

As for my own modest collection, I wonder what it says about me. Let's see... there's a black Gracie from Anya Hindmarch; a white peephole Nevis zip-up pouch, also from Anya, which I carry Russian-doll style inside my cobalt peephole tote; then there's the medium black shopper from Chanel, which I recently decided to sell on Style Sequel, an online designer-resale service founded by my friend Emma Allen, and then two hours later, heart thudding, demanded back. I may think I'm not a label person, but those interlocking raised leather Cs still give me a huge amount of security, the confidence, the emotional armour, to do certain things – such as walk into a swanky restaurant or a jewellery shop with bodyguards at the door, wearing the flannel shirt, jeans and cowboy boots that have

been my daytime default button since I turned 50. So as well as being my blankie and my bodyguard, it is also my perfect foil.

"A handbag is something it is definitely reasonable to spend a fair amount on," says Inga Fraser, assistant curator at the National Portrait Gallery. "It will always be with you so it must be a perennial, for a start. Practically speaking, you don't want any straps giving way at a crucial moment. Economically speaking, it has to withstand sticky pub tables and dusty pavements while holding its own in more salubrious surroundings. It's basically your avatar. Of course, despite realising this, I am >



Cosima Vesey with a bag by Givenchy. She is passionate about handbags. "I tell myself they're an investment. You could say I'm saving money by buying them now rather than later, right?"

Make-up artist Lauren Parsons sees her beloved Nano, bought from the Céline concession at Selfridges, as "a kind of carte blanche to be a bit of a Vicky Pollard on the clothes front". Ditto her Eighties Chanel, which she inherited from an aunt, its insides lovingly relined by her grandmother with an old black nylon petticoat. "During the day I pretty much run around in Adidas and trackie bottoms from Lululemon," she confesses. "At night I'm not that adventurous and am almost always in black. A fabulous bag somehow makes that OK."

Accessories designer Katie Hillier, meanwhile, likes to think of the bag she



incapable of making my handbag avatar any less flawed than myself.” Fraser’s current avatar comes in the shape of a beautifully weathered, vintage brown leather backpack, “which my practical brother dismissed as wildly impractical due to its dodgy catch,” and a strapless, vintage black satchel “that looks like something my grandpa carried his camera in, in the Seventies,” she says. “While the strapless look is unintended – I really keep meaning to have one put on – it seems I am bang on the money with the current modish yet impractical method of hauling one’s things around.”

Isn’t that the truth. Me, I’d adore to be the sort of woman who could do the large-clutch-for-day thing. What volumes it speaks, being able to carry this look off, and what beautiful ones there are around, too. Look at the oversize purple one Roksanda Ilincic showed for spring. And what about the daffodil-yellow envelope from Sophie Hulme, which Kate Moss so cleverly paired with a leopard-print coat at the end of last year?

But are they practical for the humble civilian? It’s hard, with all the shit one lugs around, to keep it neatly tucked under an arm. As for between one’s finger and thumb, what a waste of a spare hand. To be honest, the only place that feels really right to carry anything is a shoulder. Whether it’s a light day, a heavy day, or a super-plus day, the shoulder is where, for me, it most comfortably goes.

“On your shoulder? But I haven’t worn a bag on my shoulder for three years!” So says stylist Martha Ward, whom I meet for tea at Little House. She is wearing a Tod’s Signature mini shoulder bag – the approximate size, we agree, of a panty-liner – and, amazingly, not much else. How on earth does she do this? “I know,” she sighs. “It means making a few sacrifices, like leaving my diary at home. But it’s a good way to declutter. No, seriously,” she adds, somewhat unconvincingly, “you should try it. It’s like water finding its own level. It’s amazing the junk we don’t carry round if we can’t.”

“Bags, for me, always mark an emotion,” says Laura Bailey, who is designing a collection of handbags for Radley. “Each

of them has a backstory, like the oversize white Chanel that I was given when I had my son, the most glamorous baby bag ever, or the cheap wicker basket I got from a market in St Tropez. The Louis Vuitton monogram clutch given to me by Bay Garnett, or the Gucci one I scored as a student in a charity shop, or the pretty damn perfect vintage Hermès satchel that I hinted about like crazy pre-birthday and will treasure forever.”

It’s true. Past bags have such a habit of evoking strong memories, of bringing you back to where you were right then. No wonder it sometimes feels a little



Chef Florence Knight says she has never been a bag person. But then her fiancé gave her this simple, exquisite Lanvin briefcase, and it suits her personality just brilliantly

cuckooish inheriting one, why it feels disloyal – even though you know it is well past its sell-by date – throwing it out.

But then how long is a bag supposed to last? How many, in this day and age, is it appropriate to own? This is a tricky one because, unlike clothes, which you can mix and match, a bag is always going to say the same thing. It has an awful lot of ground to cover, in other words.

When I visit stylist Cosima Vesey, 26, she has a selection of at least 20 on the table in the Picasso-lined hallway of her penthouse to show me. Among them are a couple of Lady Diors, the Chanel 2.5

bought for her on her sixteenth birthday and a few python envelopes made for her “by Savine, my lady in Spain”. No Trapeze, then? “Oh no, because everyone has one of those, don’t you think?” She does have, however, a vintage Balenciaga Motorcycle, which she hopes one day to pass on to a daughter. She herself constantly pilfers from her own mother, the Anglo-Indian designer Lady Sita de Vesce. “Yes, of course she minds,” says Vesey, “but she travels!”

In stark contrast is actress Annabel Baring, who can boast, amazingly, just the one: a brown woven Bottega Veneta that her husband bought for her as a Valentine’s

present eight years ago. “It has been to the Bottega bag ‘spa’ in Naples twice, but is now covered in leaked Biro stains and, although I am loath to admit it, probably is on its last legs,” says Baring from the family home in Notting Hill. “I’ve got a scrumpled-up piece of paper in it with a picture of a Marcello from Cartier in it. It is probably going to be its successor, but it feels traitorish saying that out loud.” Might this be called bag integrity? It certainly takes confidence to pull it off, and I agree with Sue Jones, formerly of Jasper Conran, when she says she feels bullied by the media into thinking that she needs a light-coloured bag for summer.

Another day, another bag to borrow. This time my kind friend Anya lends me a coral ostrich Carker from her spring/summer ’13 collection. I like the “schooliness” of the thick cross-body canvas strap; I like its corrective effect, the way it flatteringly separates what might otherwise be construed as a mono-bosom. Being one of those mothers who always preferred slings to pushchairs, I also like having everything I need, right there, kangaroo-like in front of me (as opposed to having to delve blindly under an armpit). But even if it isn’t exactly panty-liner size, am I not always going to need two? Or maybe even three? I’d like to be butch about it, I would, but that big plastic key ring I got from Thorpe Park of me and one of the kids going on Stealth, the 75cl bottle of sports water, the yoga kit – where is all that going to go? Isn’t a bag like a modern-day husband, in that, with all that it provides, you can’t really expect it to fulfil single-handedly every one of your needs?



Perhaps the answer would be a mannish briefcase, such as the black Lanvin one chef Florence Knight was given by her fiancé last year. (Amazing, all these boyfriends and husbands who buy their other halves bags! Aren't bags, like underwear, the one thing they should never attempt to buy? Shouldn't they always stick to jewellery... and even then?)

"I'm *not* a bag person," says Knight, 28, when we meet for tea at Maison Bertaux. "I hate the idea of making a statement via a bag. I'm my own person; I don't need a label to attach myself to." That said, the affection she bestows on her briefcase, nestled as it is on its own chair, the slight softening of her eyes when she opens it up to show me its contents: a sachet of almonds, a big bar of 70 per cent chocolate, her toothbrush and a stash of doggie-poo bags rather proves the point, that even the no-bag bag person cannot be completely immune to its charms.

Here I am, then, very regrettably at the end of my handbag odyssey. I have asked Kerry Taylor of Kerry Taylor Auctions (the largest fashion-resale auction house in Britain) who is *the* go-to person for vintage Hermès bags, to bid for me on a heartbreakingly well-weathered Kelly in midnight-blue box. I'm 52. It may be time.

Meanwhile, I have on-and-off reveries about various permutations of bags, all the flattering things about myself I could effortlessly convey with the right combination. A black-and-white patent flower tote from Prada, with one of those dear little cross-body Brewsters from Radley – what freshness, what ingénue-ness that immediately confers. One of those Herschel backpacks with the bandana inside, with a mini Constance from Hermès poking out of the top – what a free spirit I am, that surely says, and yet with what terrific style. A Chanel cross-body Boy and a Fendi tote discreetly initialled on the inside flap, as worn by Amanda Harlech. Or, indeed, a calf-leather and crocodile Wharton from bag legend Myriam Schaefer, with one of those dear mini Lulus in red from Saint Laurent. Are these bags that are going to get you the upgrade, or what? Oh, my days – and what about one of those genius Lego-like clutches from Chanel in Perspex... or the Twenties-style black glass minaudière Vuitton has done for spring, a snip at £16,000 and which, because of fingerprint issues, probably requires gloves. Imagine being able to casually plonk either of those on the dinner table, the way they'd reflect in candlelight, the way they'd reflect, so perfectly, on *you*? How 5 Hertford Street is *that*? ■

FLORENCE WEARS DRESS, COMME DES GARÇONS; SHIRT, CARVEN; JACKET, JW ANDERSON; SHOES, CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN; INGA WEARS SUIT, MARGARET HOWELL; T-SHIRT AND SHOES, VIVIENNE WESTWOOD



*“A handbag is something it is definitely reasonable to spend a fair amount on”*

Inga Fraser, assistant curator at the National Portrait Gallery, with her vintage leather backpack. “My bag is my avatar,” she says