



Is it a Miser's Purse or a String Purse? Artifact Analysis of a Vintage Handbag

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University historic dress and textile collections frequently hold objects with little or no provenance, and curators and collection managers have limited time to do the extensive research required to firmly date an object, let alone place it into context. This was the case with a purse in the historic costume collection at a large Mid-Western University. The purse is an oblong bag measuring 14" in length when lying flat. It appears to have been made as one continuous unit with multiple crochet chains (strings) connecting two pouches. Objects could be placed through the strings and pushed towards either end and secured with rings. It is decorated with silver beads in a combination of floral and geometric motifs. On first inspection, it appeared to be a traditional miser's purse but upon closer examination other characteristics resembled that of the less popular string purse. With characteristics of both purse styles, it clearly didn't fall into either category. The purpose of this study was to compare the purse in the collection to images of other purses with the same traits, first to accurately date it and then to place it into context. The main questions that guided the research were how prevalent was this style of purse that combined features of both miser's purses and string purses, and was there additional documentation that provided clues to its use or production?

Fleming's model for object analysis provided a framework for the initial investigation. Prown's model was also considered, especially his approach to comparison and cultural analysis in using objects as primary data (Fleming, 1982; Prown, 1982). The following names were used to search for purses with similar visual characteristics: miser's purse, stocking purse, long purse, string purse and crochet purse. Images for the research came from digital museum collections found on the internet from the US, UK, and Canada. One hundred seventy-five purse images were evaluated based on materials, techniques and design features indicative of this unique style bag. In addition, over two dozen antique pattern manuals dating from 1840 to 1924 that included purse patterns for needlework, crochet, knitting, netting and beadwork were reviewed.

The names miser, stocking and long purse refer to the same style of bags. The distinctively tubular style purse was used to hold coins close to the body and was worn by both men and women between the eighteenth and early twentieth century (Wilcox, 1999). Coins were slid through a vertical slit in the center towards both ends and then secured with rings. Over time, as designs became more elaborate, the purses were worn at the waistline outside the garment and doubled as a form of fashion accessory. Crafting small purses served as a common pastime for women and they were often personalized and given as gifts.

A similar purse called a string or crochet purse was less common. String purses were comparable in shape to miser's purses but the ends often resembled pockets with flaps existing as separate units attached to the center by strings or crocheted chains. In 1856, Godey's Lady's Book

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included the only example of a crocheted string purse pattern. The string purse presumably serving the same functional and decorative purposes as the miser's purse, but never gained its popularity and indeed was also often mistakenly called a miser's purse (Camerlingo, 2010).

Comparisons to similar purses suggested that the bag from the collection may have been created sometime after 1850 when steel embellishments were beginning to be mass manufactured. These embellishments also suggest that the purse was intended to be worn outside the garment. Differing pouch shapes on either end also help date this purse to the mid to late 1800's because this style trend emerged at this time to identify separate storage areas for gold and silver coins (Camerlingo, 2010, p. 14). At this time it is not possible to specifically identify this bag by name because it does not clearly fall into a single category and no available documented purses of this exact type have yet to be found among the numerous representations of the other two purse styles. As a result of the research, additional questions arose. Did the design originate from a commercial pattern or was it modified by the maker? Was the design an attempt to personalize the purse and/or a way to allow for additional uses not originally intended of a miser's purse? The social and symbolic implications implied by subtle design changes will propel further investigation. Identifying visual and written documentation of like purses could provide valuable information and add to existing research about meaning behind hand-made purses and specifically about women and crafts as situated within a particular time period. Future research may include a more extensive look at historic collections not limited to digital availability and review of additional women's needlecraft books and magazines that include patterns for hand-made purses.



String Purse, lying flat with strings and rings in the center.

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