





E S S E P U R S E M U S E U M P R E S E N T S

What's Inside?

A Century of Women and Handbags

1900 – 1999

Anita Davis

Nonfiction text by Laura Cartwright Hardy

Fiction text by Rita Henry

Photography by George Chambers, Brandon Markin, and Nancy Nolan

Illustrations by Betsy Davis

Design & Styling by Steven Otis



Little Rock, Arkansas

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To my mother and my daughters.

And to the women who found me in dreams:
Through your purses, we hear and see you all.



Museum & Store

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P R E F A C E

Strange, but nonetheless there I was, in Little Rock, Arkansas, sitting atop a crate full of purses I'd collected over more than thirty years. The collection's return in 2011 from a professionally curated five-year nationwide traveling exhibition to small history museums from Concord, Massachusetts, to Seattle, Washington, loomed as large as the container. The excitement of a successful tour extended for a second run to more museums was through. Documenting the purses' travels and hearing stories of how they'd mattered to people along their way had filled me with pride and energy.

Opening the crate, I encountered the purses once more like old friends. I reunited with the wicker bust of a woman from a New York antique market, the Ingber black wool safety pin purse that I'd found in central Arkansas, and a leather box bag from my own mother's closet in Murfreesboro, Arkansas (which took me back to childhood days when I swooned over it as I imagined the lives of the cast bronze Dutch girl and boy mounted to its exterior). Since I hadn't seen most of the purses in several years, it was hard not to while away the hours with nostalgia. Not knowing exactly what to do with the purses, I left them in their storage area and locked the door. Perhaps they had served their purpose. Imagining it all coming to an end, I couldn't help but feel deflated.

As I slept over the next few weeks, dreams came strong and vividly painted. Women came to me in flashes, their faces appearing one after another after another like rolling pictures. She, her, she, her, she, her . . . more and more and more women, faces I'd never seen in my life. In the gazes of all these women, I became locked. Not exactly a haunting, but they wouldn't leave me alone. Women, always more women, stirring me, urging me. *To do what?*

When they finally answered, they whispered into my ear as one: *We have more stories to tell.* And then it clicked. The purses had belonged to these women. No longer an end, the women who streamed through my dreams spoke of a new beginning.

While exploring what to do next, I found and bought a building on Main Street in Little Rock, one built in 1948 with a history of its own. It seemed a good fit for the collection, but what might that mean? As I considered, I assembled a new creative team to help me reconfigure the traveling exhibit for a permanent space.

As we worked, we realized we were actually curating a women's history museum, one that tells the story of the American woman from 1900 to 1999 through her constantly changing purses and the items she carried in them. We would call it ESSE, Latin for "to be." As a purse holds the identity of each woman and is a symbolic container for the feminine, the museum would house the purses and share with the world how countless women's identities

Leather Box Purse

Brass fittings with brass
Dutch boy and girl figures



and the contents of their purses were shaped by the forces at work during the eras in which they lived. Along with photographs of women holding their purses and decade copy to provide historical context, each display case was developing as a mini history lesson, with a dose of fashion.

As the museum's vision became clear, I also began to value the importance not only of sharing the stories of women past, but of supporting contemporary women whose lives intersect with the purse. The ESSE Store was born, and is stocked with a rotating mix of mindfully curated vintage and new, elegant and cheeky, practical and whimsical, so ideally there is something for every woman on every occasion at a price that is comfortable for her pocketbook. The inventory is selected with an eye toward fair trade, one-of-a-kind, cultivation of artistry, and fostering the power of the sacred feminine. It is a distinct honor to see customers leave the store with purses that will be at their sides or the sides of their chosen recipient as they conduct their daily business, nurture their dreams, and unlock their own feminine power.

As I walk through ESSE Museum & Store on the eve of its 5th birthday in its permanent location, I continue to believe in the radical importance of thinking about the women who owned each and every purse inside. Through their purses, I see and hear them all. It is emboldening to witness others seeing and hearing them too. Through our foremothers, we open a new relationship with our own feminine. By witnessing their acts of courage, we gain courage of our own to discover what it is we came into this world to do and to serve our own highest purposes.

While we more commonly think of changes for women being brought about by famous names whose stories are more accessible, I think of the women who owned these purses as our unnamed heroines. It is delightful to know that these women can now live together at ESSE, alive in their purse striking a visitor's fancy, respected in being wondered about, new life breathed into them through the curiosity of another—that other perhaps me or you. What a fun way to spend hours, thinking of the ordinary activities of their daily lives, within reach to us all through their purses: women tucking in business cards that will lead to their first jobs, hiding birth control pills from their mothers, bribing their children with chocolates, medicating themselves and loved ones through illnesses, powdering their noses, putting on bright new lipsticks, storing curlers they forgot to remove from their hair while rushing off to work, stashing portable breast pumps, stowing temporarily hats they'll wear to march for the rights of all women. Women evolving through the decades, carrying so much on our shoulders.

On behalf of the women who first appeared in my dreams and now accompany me in my daily waking life at ESSE, I hope this book connects you to a purse or a woman who strikes your fancy as you consider *What's Inside*. This is just a beginning. We all have many more stories to share.

—Anita Davis
Founder, ESSE Museum & Store

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The purse holds power.

Some husbands and sons so fear purses that they'd rather bring them to their wives or mothers than reach inside to find the car keys; to do otherwise would be an intrusion into a sacred, feminine space, which might be eerie, and maybe a little threatening.

When we seek *What's Inside* the purse of another, perhaps there is a breach. Nonetheless, there are mother lodes to discover, extraordinary riches within. The complexities of a woman cannot be fully explained or defined through the contents of her purse, but hints about her identity abound in the depths of her bag and what she chooses to carry. If a woman goes missing and her purse remains behind, everyone knows something bad has happened, or she wants to disappear, because no woman in a good place would willingly lose her handbag. (Sharp detectives turn to purses for clues and to get a feel for the woman herself in missing persons and murder cases. That's how revealing handbags can be.) If a thief grabs her bag, she won't let go easily. Steal a woman's purse and you've stolen a piece of her.

Just as a purse is more than a purse, ESSE Museum & Store is more than a museum. Within its walls, purses and contents reveal much about the women of each decade and their evolving positions in the public sphere. Through it, we honor the women who came before us, offering a much-needed reminder of the strength and courage of usually unsung heroines. We at ESSE love to see the joyful smiles and wistful tears of our visitors as they wander through purse-sized monuments and are reminded of their own mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and other women who have played important roles in their lives. Some visitors return to generously gift a special purse or even a collection—often in honor or memory of a woman close to their hearts. We are extraordinarily grateful for their donations. As each of us are reminded of these women, we celebrate our collective female relatives who, through acts small and large throughout the 20th century, forged the way for contemporary American women. These women, these backbones of America, are the essence of ESSE.

Out of unbounded reverence for women past, present, and future, we have assembled this volume as another tender offering of thanks. Through it, we intend to extend the museum experience, further exploring concepts of art, history, and the feminine. The book's decade by decade peek inside the purse, like the museum, is the vision of Anita Davis, conductor of collaborative efforts.



Each decade opens with a photographed exterior view of a quintessential handbag of the era before its contents are spilled for consideration. These pages were curated and styled by ESSE Art Director, Steven Otis, and are illuminated by the micro-histories of lifelong journalist Laura Cartwright Hardy. Hardy's words also grace the display case plaques at ESSE, providing historical grounding for the purses and ephemera contained within as they do in this book. Readers will next encounter the vibrant illustrations of Betsy Davis, daughter of ESSE founder Anita Davis. These works provide an opportunity to visually muse on women's personalities and identities within the context of their era. Betsy Davis' illustrations are paired with stories by Rita Henry, whose historically-informed fictions contemplate what might have happened beyond the slices of life captured in colored pencil. Altogether, these four mediums infuse the decades not only with what was, but with what very well *might have been*, venerating the stories of all women as they beg us to restore them to life through our imaginings, whether or not we are able to know the precise circumstances of their lives.

As you read, we hope you will find yourself dreaming. Perhaps, as you wander through an estate sale, an auntie's closet, or a vintage store, you will be beckoned to fathom the story of the woman or women who carried a purse you encounter there—to ponder what may have been her style, habits, secrets, fears, and joys. And most of all, as you read and contemplate, we hope you have fun asking *What's Inside?*

1900s

In the early years of the 20th century, not much changed outwardly for women. The fashions of the late 1800s died hard, which was fitting for such stiff and modest attire. In most homes, the attitudes that gave rise to corset and bustle still bound the woman of the house to her husband, making her more property than partner. But some women felt stirrings of the winds of change the new century would bring and began claiming the right to leave the house unaccompanied to socialize with friends, or attend lectures or political gatherings. In some cases, blustering men didn't know what had hit them, but the more acquiescent just went with the flow.

A wealthy woman—who charged purchases to her husband's account and had no need for cash, was too high-class for cosmetics, and didn't need keys since a maid or butler waited at home to open her door—could still get by sans purse, or with a delicate little thing carried more for effect than effectiveness. But the average woman found she needed something substantial enough to carry her essential items of daily life as she began spending more time away from home pursuing her favorite activities.



Since a working woman didn't have the luxury of staying home on "those days," not only did she need to carry her lunch, keys, and coin purse, but at that time of the month, she also had to tote her cumbersome, well, *you know*. And probably a tin of a new over-the-counter medicine called "aspirin" for her unmentionable pain, as well as her sore feet and hands.

As the decade progressed, practicality reigned, and what we know as the modern handbag was born. Sturdy, reinforced, almost suitcase-like carryalls—think *Mary Poppins* minus the magic—became the norm for day, and shimmering mesh bags became the must-have for evenings out, at least for those who could afford them.

Savvy purse makers paid attention, and satchel-like purses became more sophisticated to fit women's changing needs. Soon, bags were designed for particular occasions with clever interior compartments for specific items. Along with traditionally feminine accessories—handkerchief, fan, calling cards, and smelling salts (because one never knew when a lady might have a fainting spell, or feint one for effect)—a woman's bag might contain her bankbook, change purse, notepad, tiny pencil, and house key.

Progress!





Original Design
Hand-tooled leather bag



Canteen-Shaped Purse
Suede with celluloid



Mary Grace Hollins

Baltimore, Maryland

1900 – 1909

“Hello, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am Mrs. John Cumberland Hollins. Mary Grace Hollins. You may have heard of the Hollinses? The family has been in Baltimore for over a century.

“And this child to my right is Rebecca, our daughter, who is looking for her lost Teddy Bear. These popular Teddy Bears, as the advertisement says, are “the best plaything ever invented . . . the most sensible and serviceable.” Oh, yes, and here is dear Cora, our cat.

“Our governess, Isabella, takes care of Rebecca’s outdoor activities when I am away from the house. Wholesome games are lined up in the playground to exercise her mind and body.

“There are several places to visit today, from Federal Hill almost to the Harbor. I understand you’ll accompany me on my outing? Shopping is work, you know. I would like to purchase a book to read to Rebecca. Maybe L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*. She certainly has enjoyed *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Children must be read to daily.

“Since it will soon be the sociable season, I will need a book to discuss. I recently read *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*: “The soul grows into lovely habits as easily as into ugly ones.” A nice thought. For something challenging, I have heard much of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* . . . very political. Perhaps I will choose it, or maybe another.

“Last week, I shopped for purses. Asked questions and negotiated a bit. I think it’s time to purchase. I need an evening bag for the opera. I found a beautiful Irish crochet handbag with such delicate lace, and several silver chatelaine bags with mesh and bead. Some have such captivating raised flowers and birds and cherubs. We should also look at the leather handbags, the ones that strap to the belt and help free the hands.





"This purse with a security clasp is perfect for our outing. Let me check inside. Did the maid put in our family calling cards with the apron edges? We might have time to drop a card by the new banker's residence for the lady of the house. I see the lavender smelling salts, the silk and linen handkerchief. There is the calling card case! Good.

"I'd love to browse the music counter at the department store. What do you think of the ragtime tunes? There is some debate over the quality of the pieces, yet I heard "The Entertainer" and it was impressive. I am debating what music to perform for the ladies when they visit. Maybe "Toyland," or a romantic piece by Chopin. My parents sent me to St. Timothy's girls' school, which was first class, but what I would have given to be a student at the Peabody Conservatory of Music! Some women are receiving college degrees. The Maryland Women's Suffrage Association even helped women become a part of the Johns Hopkins Medical School. Women studying beyond a dash of literature, history, and art. Someday women may even vote! With my household, my social calendar, and the church Women's Auxiliary, I strain to find time for more than the classics and parlor entertainment.

"Let's be on our way. Life is moving fast. My husband informed me this morning he will purchase a Ford Model T, so perhaps we can go for a ride on our next excursion!"