

IT'S OUT WITH THE 'IT' BAGS

AND IN WITH THE POCKET

Viva the quiet — and practical — revolution in our wardrobes

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THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



Just stop for a moment and check your pockets. If you are wearing jeans you probably have at least five. A shirt carries a breast pocket. Fitted trousers have side pockets. A cardigan may well have two patches, three, or four if it's alluding to Chanel. Even a dress is likely to sport sneaky pockets tucked into the seams, great slabs slapped on the front or dainty decorative ones just about big enough for a doll's hand. If you managed to leave the house today unaccompanied by pockets, you are a rarity. Perhaps you broke out in a catsuit. Once, no outfit was complete without a handbag. Now none is complete without a pocket.

This has been a quiet revolution. Ever since Mulberry launched the infamous Roxanne in October 2003, handbags have been growing in price and size, their increasingly ferocious hardware glinting in our hands like giant knuckle dusters. It is a trend that seemed to reach a self-regarding peak in spring 2007 when Louis Vuitton issued a US\$35,600 bag comprised of segments of all its recent successful bags. Then in March last year, just 12 months on, the tide turned. The consumer research specialist Mintel forecast an 18 percent fall in sales growth in the luxury sector. Brief, sheepish asides about the end of the "It" bag have peppered *Vogue*, although the sensitivities of its advertisers have deterred it from nailing the demise. At the fall/winter catwalks few or no handbags appeared on such diverse runways as Givenchy, Versace and Balenciaga. Instead, models sauntered along with hands dug deep into the folds of their clothes. The London designer Louise Gray showed a black shift on which the multicolored utility pockets were so large they looked as if they were holding the dress hostage. The pockets had become the protagonist.

"I'm obsessed with pockets," says Anita Borzyszkowska, of Gap, a store that has been at the forefront of the pocket revival on the high street, from hoodie-style pouches on sweater dresses to Chanel-style patches on cardigans and invisible slips sewn into the side seams of dresses. Borzyszkowska — whose personal pocket tally for the day is seven (jeans plus a boyfriend-style cardigan) — cites Gap's collaboration two years ago with the designer Roland Mouret as the turning point. His collection of 10 dresses, much lauded at launch for its jolliness of color and blousy styling, was in fact conceived with

something else in mind. "One of the goals," says Borzyszkowska, "was for everything to have a pocket."

This is not as offbeat as it sounds. Look back at the headline trends of the past few years and pockets emerge as the common factor. The peg-leg was widely heralded as this season's trouser shape but it fulfills its true jodhpur-like silhouette only when its pockets are puffed out with hands. The trapeze dress, the frock of summer 2007, swung with ease when propelled by hands in pockets.

Secreted in the folds of fashion history, pockets seem to offer an inside take on the way we dress. In their tiny dimensions huge changes have been conveyed. Coco Chanel's trademark jackets in the 1930s caused such a storm because they incorporated conspicuous pockets — for centuries associated only with men's dress — and thereby promised to liberate women with sporty practicality. Such was their power that when Diana Vreeland, the legendary editor of *US Vogue*, started work on the magazine in 1937, she turned up in "a little Chanel shirt with pockets inside," and told a colleague she had had "the best idea. We're going to eliminate all handbags ... and do the whole magazine just showing what you can do with pockets." She didn't — because her then editor explained how handbag advertising worked — but by the time of World War II, women's pockets were everywhere, heavily buttoned, bucket-like numbers with utility flaps or slouchy pouches that bagged out the fronts of dungarees.

In the 1950s, the presence of pockets gave refuge to hands that sought elegance by perching on the hip: without the pocket the decade might not have acquired its defining posture, the arm bent like an arrowhead, elbow sharpened. In the 1960s, giant pockets helped to make Mary Quant's minis even more miniature, while models on 1980s runways would often be seen with their thumbs hanging out of their, a style feature — surely the only one — that today unites Britain's Prince Charles and Alexa Chung.

"Pockets are a tiny, slight thing in terms of world importance but they are a very sensitive barometer about how we feel about the world and our possessions and how we feel about our bodies," says Barbara Burman, a pocket expert who has curated an exhibition on the subject at the Fashion Museum in Bath.

"Having your hands in your pockets has social and moral connotations." The front pockets of any brand of blue jeans have changed little since the 1950s, but the way we wear them, the turn of the thumb, the sag of the arm, makes revelations. That is why, when Bob Dylan buries his hands deep in his jeans, shoulders hunched, on the cover of the *Freewheelin'* album, he looks as if he's scuffing along his own path, solitary even with Suze Rotolo at his side; yet 40 years later when former US president George W. Bush, in an almost identical outfit of tawny jacket, blue shirt and belted jeans, tucks his thumbs into his pockets, he looked as if he is feeling for his holster. Few items of dress can convey such hardship and such wealth, such alienation and power.

So why are pockets de rigueur? Burman, whose experience in the field dates back to the 1950s when she had a pocket on the front of her gym knickers, thinks our pockets are multiplying because we need to find an increasing number of places for all the technology we have to carry. Harriet Quick, the fashion feature director of *Vogue*, believes pockets make the wearer feel more relaxed — "not casual, but easier." A pocket, she says, gives you insouciance. It fits with the current dress-down mood, and when you're standing at a party with one hand holding a drink and the other feeling awkward, it can find its place in a pocket, fiddle with a lipstick, flip a coin.

And, of course, as the credit crisis worsens and shoppers retreat from the idea of spending a small fortune on a handbag, it fits that the most appropriate refuge for overspending hands might be the stillness and sanctuary of a pocket. If our economic self-consciousness continues, the chances are those pockets will have little inside them but at least we will all look insouciant.

