

Pockets, Consumption and Female Sociability in Eighteenth-century London



When a lady was attacked on Barnes Common in London in 1754 her pockets contained ‘among other things’ a small round Tortoiseshell Snuff box, [...] a London Almanack, in a black Shagreen Case, [...] an Ivory Carv’d Toothpick Case, [...] a Silver sliding Pencil; a white Cornelian Seal [...]; a Tortoiseshell Comb in a Case; a Silver Thimble and Bodkin; a Bunch of Keys, a red Leather Pocket-book; a green knit Purse, containing Half a Guinea, a Crown Piece of William and Mary, and about Five Shillings, with two Glass Smelling Bottles.¹

The roll call of near-on 15 objects all carried in the pocket by the well-to-do woman illustrates the host of pocket-sized objects which the eighteenth-century consumer society produced specifically for the pocket. In an age of expanding consumption, the small space of the pocket was indeed the focus of an ever-encroaching marketplace that produced and marketed innumerable pocket accessories such as these, cunning little devices that enabled to carry, and keep at hand, the wherewithal of polite sociability in miniature form.

Based upon a forthcoming book on women’s tie-on pockets in the 18th and the 19th century, co-written with Barbara Burman and entitled *The Artful Pocket: Social and Cultural History of an Everyday Object*, the paper proposes to explore how pockets accessorised women’s sociability in the long eighteenth-century. Underpinned by extensive research into over 350 extant pockets kept in British public and private collections, the book interrogates this unprecedented material archive in conjunction with more traditional historical sources such as private and trade archives, trial records and visual culture, to understand what pockets tell us about women’s lives, work, relationship to possessions, mobility or privacy in the two hundred years of their use. In the context of the conference, the paper will focus on parts of this research to interrogate forms of female sociability in relation to consumer goods found in their pockets as well as to the pockets themselves as objects of consumption and desire in their own right.

Providing them with props and tools to navigate the city and its many sociable events, pockets were essential to women’s appropriation of social spaces and practices. But because as objects they were often hand made by women for themselves or as gifts to friends and relatives and were used to shelter pocket-sized gifts from friends and kin, pockets were also instrumental in fostering specific networks of female sociability. Far from being reclusive, the needlework that went into making the pockets was often a highly sociable practice that brought women together, often across generations, either physically in small groups of practitioners or by the exchange of patterns, advice or materials. Kept in the pocket, such keepsakes and friendship tokens as marked handkerchiefs, pincushions or hair locket turned the pocket into a shared feminine space where friendship, bonding, and female networking processes were materialized.

¹ *Public Advertiser* (London). Tuesday March 12th 1754.

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Short Biographical Notice

An Ecole Normale Supérieure and Courtauld Institute Alumna, Ariane Fennetaux is assistant Professor at the University of Paris Diderot, France. She lectures in eighteenth-century social and cultural history. Her research focuses on material culture with a particular emphasis on textile and dress. She has published on various aspects of eighteenth-century material culture with contributions to the *Women & Things* and the *Women and the Material Culture of Death* collections edited by Maureen Goggin & Beth Fowkes Tobin and published by Ashgate. She has recently edited *The Afterlife of Used Things, Recycling in the Long 18th century*, published by Routledge and is co-writing a book with Barbara Burman to be published next year on women's tie-on pockets in the 18th and the 19th century, *The Artful Pocket, Social & Cultural History of an Everyday Object*.