

Rite of baggage

Whether it's concealing portals to one's innermost world or one's face (you'll see), GRACE CAIN makes a case for the unparalleled value of fashion's most sacred object: the bag



Saint Laurent
Icare bag £3,620;
right Hermès Kelly
bag £4,818



“THANKS, I’LL JUST GRAB IT out of your bag.” Is this the most mortifying sentence in the English language? I have permitted you to borrow my phone charger, and you’ve essentially reached into my soul and rummaged around in my wildest dreams and most deep-rooted traumas via the sacred realm of my bag.

This horrifying situation highlights a paradox that will be familiar to regular bag carriers, namely the inherent contradictions of an item that is both secretive and showy; intimate and public. The relationship between the carried and the carrier is complex, especially at a time when bags have never been more superfluous. In today’s ‘iAge’, instead of having to carry address books, diaries, maps and photographs of loved ones, we require only a phone – unless you happen to be one of those people with personalised stationery, exquisite penmanship and a life that is generally together, in which case, I bow to your superiority.

While phones have undoubtedly helped make the once-distant dream of micro bags

a more realistic prospect, they obviously can’t replace everything you might choose to carry on your person. Even if they could, I doubt it would spell the end for the humble handbag. Being functional is not a bag’s only function; they are also an expression of self, personal style and – sometimes – much more.

Take the late Queen Elizabeth II, a woman who could not have *needed* a bag but was rarely seen without one. She’s even holding one in her final portrait at Balmoral. Even in a home with so many rooms, I can hardly imagine why anyone would need to keep a bag on their arm. Rumour has it that she used the accessory to subtly send signals to her entourage, but we’ll probably never know if that was true. One thing we do know is the Queen’s brand of choice: Launer London. In a reflection of the timeless stability and steadfast restraint that she determinedly portrayed, she always opted for neat, structured designs, often in a neutral colour. More than a vessel for mints or make-up, the Queen’s bag was one symbolic cog in a precisely oiled machine. >

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Perhaps it was also a source of emotional support. Launer’s CEO Gerald Bodmer is quoted as saying that Her Majesty once told him that she didn’t feel dressed without a bag. I can identify with that sentiment, although that is the extent of the similarities between my personal bag philosophy and the Queen’s. Unfortunately, I have no staff and must shoulder the responsibility of carrying my own belongings. Anything that would be the envy of Mary Poppins (hello, Saint Laurent’s maxi shopper) is my kind of accessory. As a chronic overthinker who is constantly anticipating the next undesirable situation (torrential downpours, train delays), I need a bag large enough to fit all the items that prevent my life from tumbling into chaos (namely an umbrella, phone charger and snacks).

I’ve not yet employed my oversized bag as a shield, but it is nice to have the option. Never has photographer Bill Cunningham’s aphorism “fashion is the armour to survive the reality of everyday life” felt more apt than when Noughties-era Lindsay Lohan thrust a Chanel tote in between her face and the paparazzi. And if gargantuan bags aren’t your thing, midi styles can be employed to similar effect. Grace Kelly proved as much when she concealed her pregnancy from photographers with a strategically held Hermès bag; the style was later named in her honour.

Hermès went on to bestow the same distinction upon Jane Birkin after – if you believe the legend – she found herself sitting on a plane next to the brand’s then-executive chairman, Jean-Louis Dumas. Birkin was allegedly frustrated that her signature basket was not up to the trials of carry-on luggage and motherhood, and Dumas accepted her challenge to sketch a bag that was as practical as it was stylish. Thus, an everyday problem gave rise to the ultimate sartorial status symbol, while highlighting the biggest paradox of all: sometimes, we need our bags to carry us.



Here, then, are three of the best to do just that – from super-sized to super-small...

Prada Supernova bag £2,900

Luxury Accessories, Ground Floor; and harrods.com

THE MARY POPPINS MAXI

If everyone’s favourite nanny was a high-fashion icon, she’d surely keep her hat stand in Saint Laurent’s Icare tote (*opening page*); perfect for those days when you need all the essentials.

THE ‘JUST RIGHT’ MIDI

When you don’t want to worry about the extra baggage, but still need the reassurance of a reliable – and roomy – companion, take Prada’s Supernova (*above*) to have and to hold.

THE ROYAL MINI

Because even people with nothing to carry occasionally need a little – sometimes *very* little – hand-held confidence booster. The diminutive Hermès Kelly (*previous page*) is fit for Hollywood stars, princesses and everyone in between. □