

Whiting & Davis mesh
handbag, ca. 1920s. Ryerson
FRC2014.07.600. Photograph
by Victoria Hopgood, 2019.



A HANDBAG'S TALE

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Editor's Introduction: *This post was a creative project by MA Fashion student Anna Pollice for a special topics class called "Fashion Beyond the Clothed Body" with Dr. Esther Berry. In this post, Anna writes the narrative of an object biography from the point of view of a handbag (and her imaginary owner Eleanor). This handbag is in the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection (FRC2014.07.600) and was a gift of the Suddon-Cleaver collection.*

I remember so clearly being put on display and supported by an upright Wadco easel. I was beautiful and I sparkled. I was the newest Whiting & Davis mesh bag on display at the jewellery shop and I think I cost about \$2.25 at that time (Schwartz 88). It was 1925, just after the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris, that [Whiting & Davis](#), a mesh handbag manufacturer, embraced the Art Deco style. Although this look did not last long (as styles dramatically changed during the Great Depression), I loved my enamelled flat surface links, called *Armour Mesh*, patterned with pink geometric flowers, centred around a red point and encircled with two shades of green. The pattern regularly repeated all over me and only changed at my bottom edge. The edge was pinked and the floral design deviated ever so slightly with a smaller pink flower.



Whiting & Davis mesh
handbag, ca. 1920s.
Ryerson FRC2014.07.600.
Clasp detail. Photograph
by Victoria Hopgood,
2019.

Some time has passed, but I still maintain many of those original qualities. I must admit that my ageing well is in part due to the excellent artistry and craftsmanship of [Whiting & Davis](#). Founded in 1876, William H. Wade and Edward P. Davis manufactured jewellery. It was not until 1896 that Charles A. Whiting and Edward P. Davis purchased the company, changed the name and began to make mesh bags. Although my predecessors were handmade, in 1912 the world's first automatic mesh machine was invented, and Whiting & Davis became the first company to use it, later patenting it (Schwartz 74). I was, of course, made by one of those machines. The company guaranteed my durability and strength allowing me to carry a minimum of 2.26 kg. or 5 lbs. (Schwartz 74)! Imagine that! What could a girl possibly need to carry?

Well, as petite as I was, I had the strength to carry a fair bit. My brass frame is 10 cm wide, and is embossed with a delicate pattern of small leaves and flowers. It is straight across the top and elegantly dips down on each end. My angles are clean and strong, and very modern. I am 21 cm long from the top of my rounded gold metal clasp to the bottom tip of my last flat link. My chain is a series of linked infinity symbols that measures 32 cm in length; just long enough to have me sway from a woman's wrist while still making a stylish impact. My flat mesh looks like liquid gold and drapes beautifully. My flat mesh body is joined to my metal frame using an innovative process called hanging up (Schwartz 74), implementing a fine spiral wire without opening a single link (Schwartz 74) (Fig. 4). The Whiting & Davis Mesh Bags logo is impressed into the inside of my metal frame on the top left-hand side (Fig. 4), and I have no other label, although, indeed I say, my design and artistry speak for themselves. During the 1920s, inspired by Parisian designer Paul Poiret, Whiting & Davis

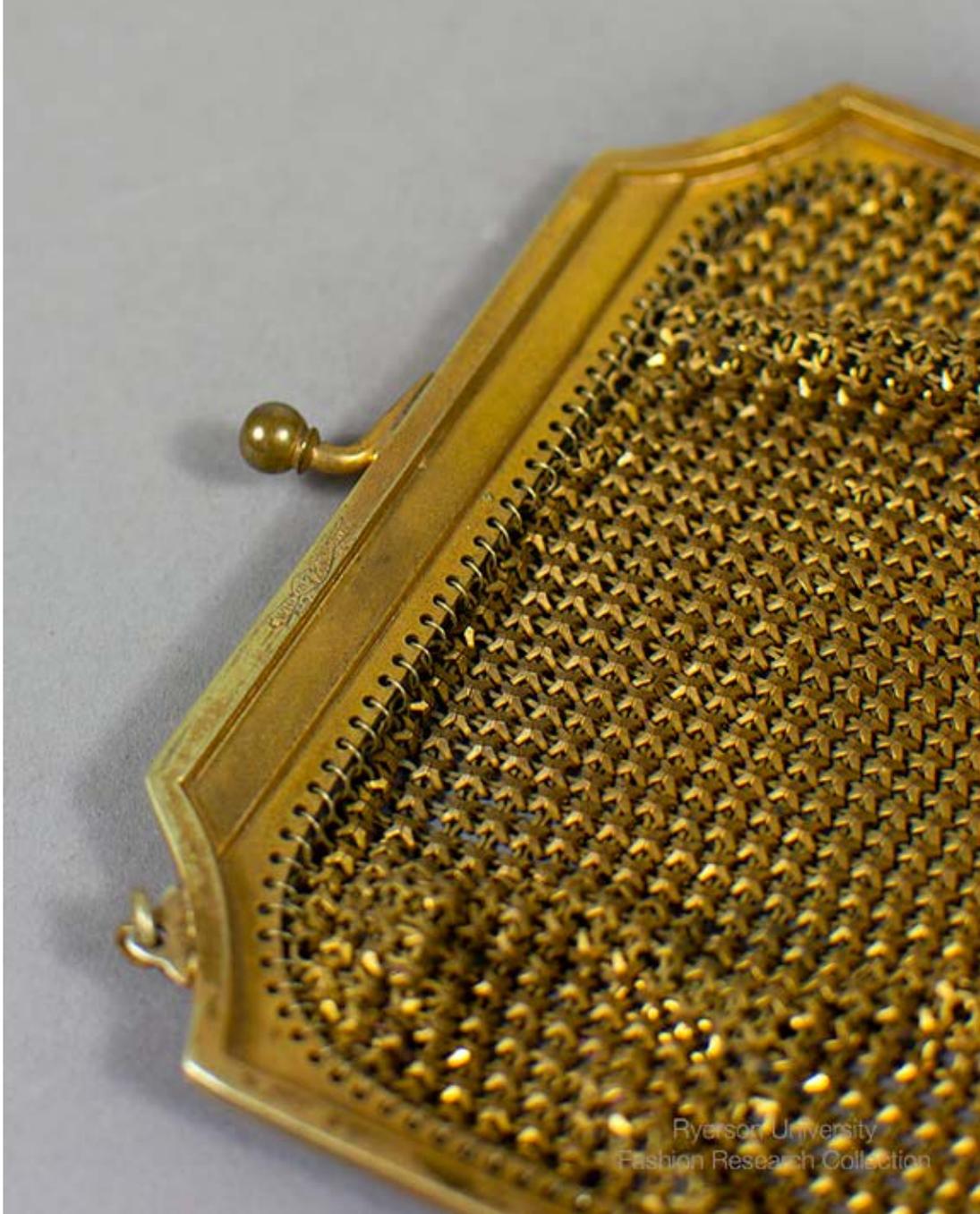


Whiting & Davis mesh
handbag, ca. 1920s.
Ryerson FRC2014.07.600.
Metal detail. Photograph
by Victoria Hopgood,
2019.

Whiting & Davis mesh
handbag, ca. 1920s.
Ryerson FRC2014.07.600.
Chain detail. Photograph
by Victoria Hopgood,
2019.

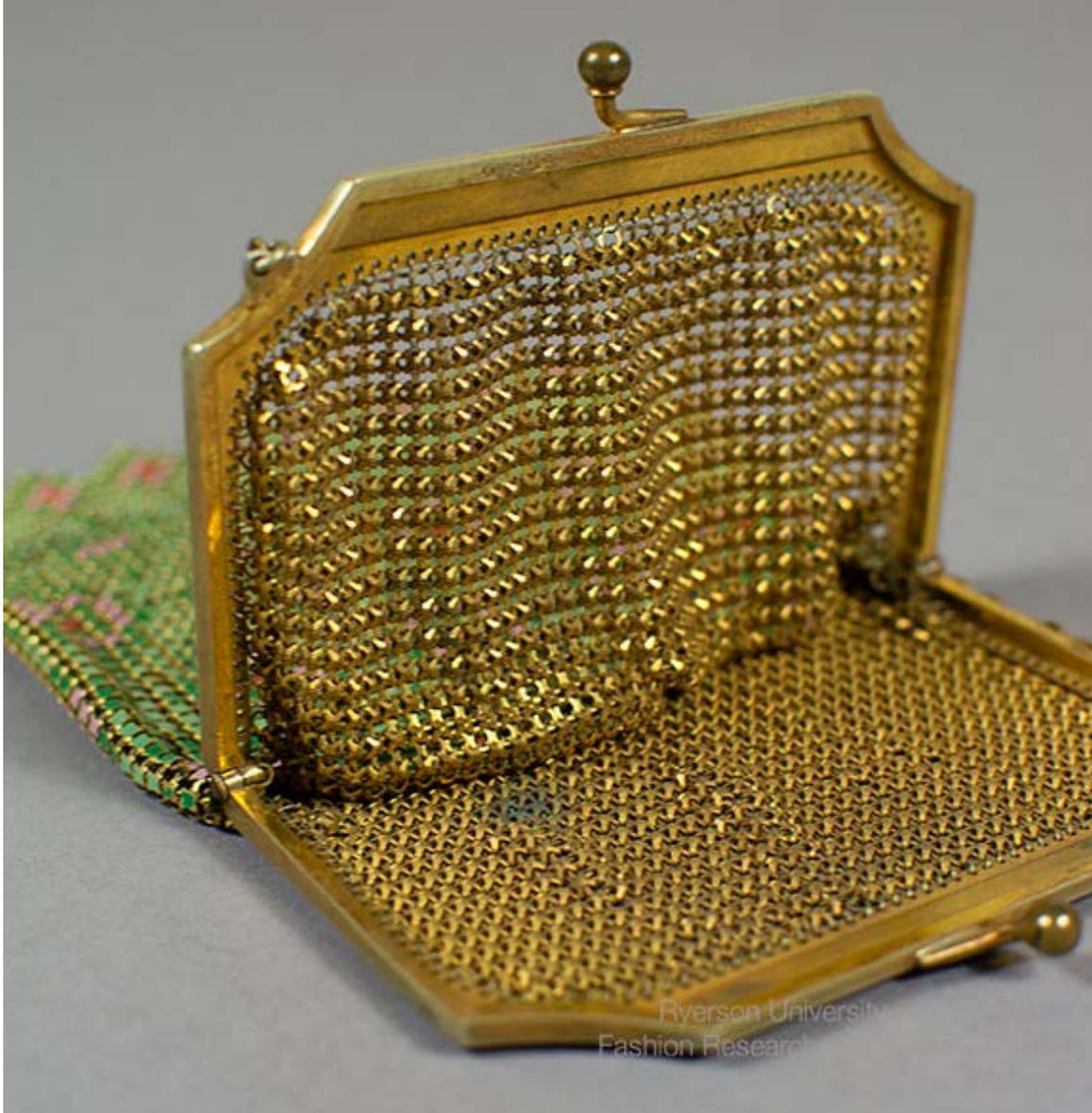
created a new line of pouch-style mesh bags. Those bags included a colourful picture of Mr Poiret and housed a silk lining (Schwartz 75). The result was quite luxurious. I, however, am unlined. I am also very flat and deceptively appear unable to carry a thing, but I do remember subtly moulding my shape to carefully hold my owner's Coty swivel lipstick in crimson red (glamourdaze.com), her mild cigarettes (Vogue 36) and her own money. Carrying money was indeed an option for her as she did work, earning about \$11 per week (US Women Bureau 8). When she went out dancing, she did not need to have much in the way of funds as any cocktail was taken care of by her soon to be husband. Regardless of the fact, as a "New Woman" of the 1920s, Eleanor Brand wanted the same freedom of movement that men had" (Freedman 373). A purse containing her own money offered her just that.

My attachment to Eleanor B. began when she walked past the jewellery shop one afternoon and decided she just had to come in to see the new purses on display. I, of course, having just arrived, caught her eye straight away, and as she dangled me from her delicate wrist, she admired the two of us in the mirror. She made it clear that I had to leave with her that day. So I did. I sensed her excitement all the way to her home. That evening she and her friends were going dancing at a very popular Jazz dance hall, and she just knew I would be ideally suited to go along with her and her fabulous new outfit.



Whiting & Davis mesh
handbag, ca. 1920s.
Ryerson FRC2014.07.600.
Inside detail. Photograph
by Victoria Hopgood,
2019.

Eleanor was what was coined “The New Woman”, described as “a wholesome and loveable creature with surprisingly bad manners (Brown 31). Well, loveable she was, but her bad manners were all but a perception defined by “alarmed elders” (Brown 31), describing her generation as “restless, excited and noisy” (Brown 31). Eleanor did enjoy having fun and being extravagant and doing all of the things that were at one time not permissible for women, such as smoking and drinking and having sexual relations and wearing lipstick (Banner 138)! You could say she was a new-style feminist, as described by Dorothy M. Brown in her book, *Setting a Course American Women in the 1920s*. The new-style feminist was a “good dresser” and a “pal” to men and fully expected to have marriage, children and a career too (Brown 33). Eleanor was well aware of how important it was to capture the attention of a man and marry one (Sutton-Ramspeck 225). Fashion and beauty was a sure-fire way to do just that in the 1920s, as men too were quite aware of the fashions those days. Any girl, stylishly dressed, would make a man proud to have her by his side.



Whiting & Davis mesh
handbag, ca. 1920s.
Ryerson FRC2014.07.600.
Gold mesh detail.
Photograph by Victoria
Hopgood, 2019.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a feminist and theorist of androcentric culture, tells of man's human common sense, expressed in his opinions about women's clothes. She says, "His critical human judgement loudly complains of the vanity of women, the extravagance of women, the women's silly submission to fashion but his male instinct leads him straight to the most vain, extravagant and fashionable of them all" (Sutton-Ramspeck 225). Well, Eleanor was indeed fashionable and smart. As a recent college graduate, Eleanor's job afforded her some luxuries such as the latest mesh bag and a new dress, and she instinctually knew how to utilize them. She was sure to capture the attention of many eyes that evening.

Perhaps Gilman may have been accurate in saying, "the shortest route to a man's heart is through his eyes" (Sutton-Ramspeck 225) because that evening Allen F. could not take them off of her. She radiated, as did I. I clung to her wrist all night adding a dazzling spark of colour to her ensemble all while enabling her the freedom her generation had come to expect. Our trio, Eleanor, Allen and I, spent many evenings out dancing and mingling, at the cinema and speakeasies. I would have enjoyed spending a bit more time with the two of them but things in those days moved so quickly, and novelty was quite significant (Veblen 106).



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Mesh detail. Photograph
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Soon enough a lovely new purse made her way onto Eleanor's wrist. I was then relegated to Eleanor's top drawer, and I lay there for years. During that time she and Allen married and had two children, and her career flourished. She embodied the new-style feminist.

Eleanor died in the 1980s in Boston Massachusetts. I was still in her possession at the time. Shortly after, I became part of a private collection and remained there until I found my home as part of an university study collection. With time and use the enamel has chipped off in some areas exposing my brass, my clasp no longer works as it should, and the soldered links at my bottom edge have come undone, effectively creating an opening and rendering me incapable of carrying anything. I'm a far cry from my original splendour however I know I was adored by Eleanor, especially during her courtship with Allen and years later her daughter delighted in playing dress up with me. One year I was fortunate enough to go out to a Halloween party. Oh, what fun. Although I suppose at that point, I was viewed merely as an old bag from the 1920s.

After having spent a few years as the coveted fashionable accessory of flappers, actresses and well-dressed women everywhere (Whiting & Davis), imbued with the excitement of a newfound sense of freedom, I left the Brand-French household with fond memories. Today I spend my time peacefully as part of a curated collection of historical fashion artefacts where I am well cared for and still admired, hopeful that other Whiting & Davis Mesh Bags will one day join me.

This blog post was edited by Dr. Ingrid Mida.

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