

# Muff and nonsense

Is that furry handwarmer merely a decorative symbol of feminine passivity or does it conceal a meat cleaver, a pistol or a pugnacious pet, wonders Deborah Nicholls-Lee

**I**F the Victorian Christmas card had a tick list of favourite features, cherubic girls warming their hands in soft fur muffs would rank highly. Yet the muff can be traced further back—perhaps to the sheepskin hand coverings used by monks more than 1,000 years ago—and certainly to the 16th century, when sleeves began to recede and sumptuous muffs, suspended on a chain from the girdle, became the fancy ornaments of the nobility.

The Victorian journalist and author Frank Hird, writing in *The Girl's Own Annual* of 1896 was an ardent enthusiast. 'Of all the accessory details of feminine *toilette*, the muff is the most fascinating. Be it of costly fur, a triumph of millinery, a piece of twisted velvet with coquettish bows of ribbon inconsequently placed here and there, or of plain cloth demurely braided and corded, with

wise-looking tassels, it is always an incident in [a] woman's appearance that cannot be overlooked,' he gushes. He attributes the invention to an unknown Venetian woman of the late 1400s, who 'appeared in public one winter day carrying a rolled piece of velvet lined with fur, its two ends fastened with crystal buttons'.

From here, the trend made its way to France, suggesting that its English name may originate from *moufle*, meaning mitten. The trend later ventured north and words such as *mof*, meaning sleeve in Dutch, hint at the muff's tubular shape as well as its precursor: a thick fur cuff into which a hand could retreat.

The muff's saucy double meaning was already at play in the 1700s and may be hinted at in Henry Fielding's episodic novel *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. Here, one belonging to Sophia Western is a symbol of the romantic love between her and Tom, who kisses it passionately in her absence and declares it 'the prettiest muff in the world'. By contrast, in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, the muff denotes wealth rather than feeling when the materialistic Mrs Allen invites an obliging James Morland to guess the price of her latest purchase.

**'Of all the accessory details of feminine *toilette*, the muff is the most fascinating'**

Whereas Morland may have had to feign interest in Mrs Allen's new muff, many important male figures have gone so far as to add it to their own wardrobes. According to Hird, Henry III of France (1551–89), a renowned fashionista, was an early adopter of the muff and 'sheltered his hands in masses of ribbon laced together with gold thread with heavy fringes thereto of twisted gold and jewels'. The 17th-century diarist Samuel Pepys was more than satisfied with his thrifty foray into the fashion, writing: 'This day I first did wear a muffle, being my wife's last year's muffle, and now I have bought her a new one, this serves me very well.'



**In France, muffs kept everyone warm, from a Knight of the Order of St Louis in 1787 to executioners only a few years later**



**French actress Gabrielle Dorziat in a chic 19th-century ensemble**

Across the Channel, Louis XIV reportedly made a more decadent choice, opting for a muff made of tiger's fur. Lower down the social scale, some accounts suggest that even executioners made use of fabric muffs, ensuring their hands were warm enough to undertake their grisly task. Yet, not everyone liked to see men with muffs. A 1735 print complains that the fey dandy depicted seems a little too delighted with his highly decorative version and a caption in French invites him to cast off the effeminate accoutrement and instead warm himself in a woman's embrace.

With the muff firmly back in female hands—or female hands back in the muff—there was no less exhibitionism. By the turn →

**Ooh, I say: for Debbie Reynolds in 1955, an ermine muff was the perfect festive touch**









Showing the Americans how it's done: Edith Bolling Wilson, Queen Mary, President Woodrow Wilson, George V and Princess Mary in 1918



**There was room for everything in much-lampooned oversized muffs, such as this one in 1913**

of the 19th century, this fluffy status symbol had inflated to ludicrous proportions, dwarfing its owners, who waltzed around with hand warmers the size of sheep, inviting the admiration of fashion illustrators and the mockery of cartoonists.

Whether large or small, fur was once the obvious choice for the muff and offered numerous possibilities. 'To-day the monkey, blue fox, beaver... and ermine are metamorphosed into Muffs; to-morrow will come the furs of sable, of otter, of chinchilla, of squirrel, of marten, of wolf...,' remarked 19th-century writer Octave Uzanne in 1883, lamenting 'the inconstancy of *la Mode*'. In place of fur, many ladies chose delicately embroidered or beaded fabric, sometimes featuring mezzotint portraits. They lined them with velvet, satin or silk and twinned them with a matching tippet, dress or cloak.

In the 1860s, feathers came to the fore, crossing from France into England, much to the dismay of British commentators, who saw it as a deliberate attempt by the French, having lost Canada to the British, to undermine its lucrative fur trade. Ranging from creams and browns to gaudy reds and blues, the outlandish designs both delighted and appalled.

Many muffs were not only a vision to behold, but smelled wonderful, too. 'Some became veritable scent-bags, perfumed with heliotrope, rose, gardenia, verbena, violet, or they were powdered inside with orris root or *poudre à la Maréchale*,' notes Uzanne, in his extensive eulogy on the muff.

## ‘Mary Richardson concealed a meat cleaver in hers to slash *The Toilet of Venus*’

Designed first and foremost to keep a lady warm on a walk or in her carriage, many offered additional functions. 'Some muffs incorporated pockets to hold small items, such as handkerchiefs, and in the 19th century, muff bags or purse muffs made a brief appearance,' explains Beatrice Behlen, senior curator of fashion and the decorative arts at the London Museum, where the collection includes a silk-lined cream skunk fur muff (1870–1900) made for Queen Victoria's daughter Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll.

Some ladies even placed beloved lap dogs in muffs, carrying them around like little dolls. However, Suffragette Mary Richardson →





Above: The perfect Christmas scene, complete with cosy fur trimmings. Below: Looking foxy in 1954, with a fox-fur hat and muff

was less sentimental. She concealed a meat cleaver in hers to slash Diego Velázquez's painting *The Toilet of Venus* (the 'Rokeby Venus') at the National Gallery in protest at Emmeline Pankhurst's arrest; whereas Edith Garrud, a Suffragist-cum-martial arts expert, used hers to smuggle wooden clubs. Some women hid delicate pistols in there for self-defence against highwaymen and others simply popped in a small ceramic bottle of hot water to help keep the cold at bay.

Now that women had secured the vote and were increasingly undertaking paid work, they rolled up their sleeves and cast off the muff as a symbol of feminine passivity at odds with the new era. 'Muffs seem to have been largely abandoned after the Second World War,' notes Ms Behlen, a muff aficionado, who nevertheless acknowledges its shortcomings. 'They are not the most practical of accessories and were probably only ever carried by men and women who did not have to work for a living.'

The streamlined silhouette of the 1960s seemed to have killed off the muff for good. However, by the 1980s, it was making sporadic appearances, with several of Princess Diana's ensembles featuring the forsaken item. The accessory has refused to be stifled ever since, reappearing at regular intervals in surprising new incarnations: in neon orange shearling for Celine in 2014; in tartan for

## Warming up

One of the London Museum's most interesting muffs was designed by ballerina Anna Pavlova and features a frothy mix of pink silk trimmed with marabou. Pavlova wore the muff during a 1916 performance of *Christmas: a divertissement* (short dance intended as an entertaining interlude) set to Tchaikovsky's *December* from *The Seasons*. According to her biographer Keith Money, the matching costume included a 'glamorous rose taffeta cloak with a swansdown trim', worn over a 'hooped dress of filmy white *pointe d'esprit* with little garlands of forget-me-nots and pink roses'. The muff would soon drift out of fashion, but the ballet's storyline about a woman flirting with five young men at a Christmas party feels timeless.

British brand Shrimps in 2020; and in shaggy black faux fur for Anna Sui's Autumn/Winter 2025 ready-to-wear collection, which takes 'madcap heiress' as its theme. Fashion followers and fans of *Sex and the City* may have noted that when Mr Big finally tells Carrie, 'you're the one' in the season six finale in Paris (2004), her iconic *eau de nil* tutu is paired with a cosy brown fur muff.

Which all begs the question: could the muff ever make a major comeback? 'Muffs are difficult to incorporate into modern life,' responds Ms Behlen, with a degree of regret. 'Having said that, I always fancied a muff made of padded nylon, like a puffer jacket. Particularly if it could have a little pocket for my phone.' 🐾

