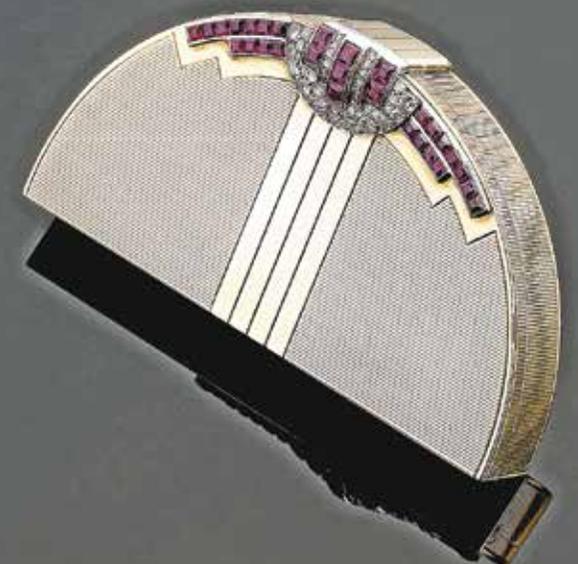
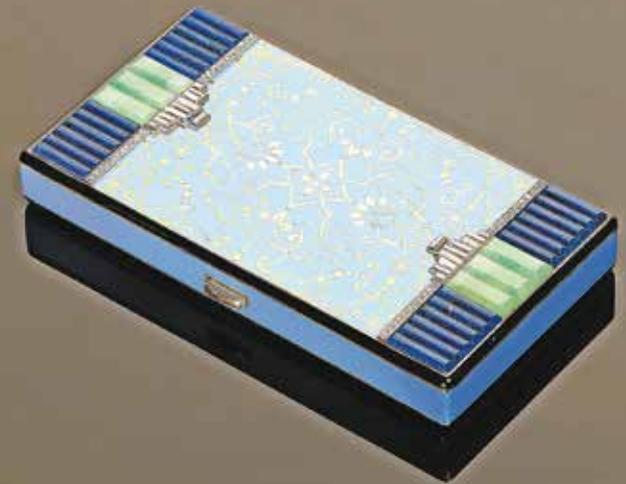




The vanity cases pictured in this article are all from the collection of Kashmira Bulsara, Freddie Mercury's sister. Clockwise from top left: card case by Lacroche, France, circa 1920-25; vanity case by Cartier, France, c.1923; vanity case by Ostertag, France, c.1925; vanity case by Van Cleef & Arpels, France, c.1925; vanity case by unknown American maker, c.1930-35; vanity case by Cartier, France, c.1925; cigarette case by Black, Starr & Frost, USA, c.1925; vanity case by Gerard Sandoz, France, c.1925.



VANITY FLAIR



AS SMALL but sparkling commentaries on the world around them, precious objects express their era in succinct and dazzling style. So often they provide the best backstage passes into history, snapshots of time and place in miniature that reveal the zeitgeist, giving us a glittering lens through which to glimpse something of the lives and times of our ancestors, whose characters live on in their personal possessions.

Jewels have the power to do this: to transport us to another world, another emotion, and the finest jewelled vanity cases – the most astonishing accessories produced in the interwar years – take us back to a very specific time and place: Paris, London and New York in the 1920s. No creation was more quintessentially of its time and as the ultimate indulgence of the Great Age of Glamour, the story of the vanity case is, in effect, the story of the 1920s, the art deco era. And what an era it was.

PERIODS OF great privation and hardship have historically been followed by years of their antithesis, and so it was when the end of the Great War ushered in a new era of euphoria and indulgence across the Western world, a sweeping aside of the old and an urgent quest for the new. Everything was focused on a fresh start, the past ignored in a conscious effort to erase every reminder of recent warfare and all its horrors. Postwar Europe and America experienced a collective and compelling sense of liberation and a widespread desire to live for the moment. Carried along on this wave of exuberance, a magical age bowled in, a radical new age nicknamed “*les années folles*”, the “jazz age” and the “roaring ’20s” on account its sheer vivacity and *joie de vivre*.

War had undoubtedly changed the men who went to the front and saw things they could never forget. One in 20 soldiers from France, Britain and Germany never came home. But the women they left behind also had their lives turned upside down. They had been asked to embrace new roles and new skills that until the hostilities had been regarded as “men’s work”. Yet once warfare ceased and everyday living resumed, society found itself fundamentally transformed, the natural order of things utterly disrupted. It was simply not possible to reinstate the status quo and the way people had previously lived and behaved: four years of war had irreversibly transformed the world, and everyone in it. More innovations, inventions and advances had appeared during that relatively short space of time than in the previous half century, and people’s priorities and values changed as quickly as the technology that had accelerated the pace of life on both sides of the Atlantic.

As the echoes of World War I faded and the roaring ’20s kicked in, exquisite vanity cases came to epitomise not just the excesses of the age but the emancipation of young women.

CHANGING LIFESTYLES had a huge effect on women. During the conflict they had worked in munitions factories and fields, operated machinery, worn uniforms and nursed on the front line, gaining their long-awaited freedom in the process. Emancipated, they bravely resolved to remain so when peace returned, hurling themselves wholeheartedly into the unknown world emerging from the embers of combat.

Their new postwar status, self-image, roles and enfranchisement all triggered a liberation of behaviour, and the changes were manifold and clear to see. These newly independent women were active and sporty. They embraced the joys of the open air, played tennis and golf and wore bathing suits on holiday in San Tropez. They were seen at the steering wheels of cars and in the pilot seats of aeroplanes; they swept decoratively down the gangways of yachts, posed at stylish motorcar rallies and danced and drank cocktails by night.

Many aspired to be La Garçonne (The Bachelor Girl), introduced by Victor Margueritte in his novel of 1922, which sold more than 100,000 copies and made the author a fortune (though it was still considered scandalous enough to have him struck off the rolls of the Legion of Honour). This liberated female heroine became a role model for young, emboldened women everywhere.

New habits and hobbies in turn affected fashion, social mores and etiquette. In Europe, women like Coco Chanel were beginning to define the new style rules, descending from her lover the Duke of Westminster’s yacht “as brown as could be”, at once introducing the appeal of the suntan. Women began to wear make-up more openly and with relish, applying and touching it up in public. Until now, make-up had been worn with reserve and was not considered respectable for any lady of good standing, but all this changed as women looked to Hollywood and the idols of the silver screen for inspiration, and movies brought visions of glamour and sophistication to a larger, wider public than ever before.

Increasing numbers of women, wooed by the tobacco industry’s cunning marketing campaigns, were also smoking, both privately and now in public, posing seductively with their stylish cigarette holders. Smoking had already become popular by the middle of the 19th century but was a strictly male custom. Once it became permissible in public establishments during the war, including in the smartest New York hotels, it was clear that the new habit was here to stay.

JEWELLERY SHONE out as one of the most exciting arts of the art deco era, and postwar female emancipation was reflected in the jewellery that was worn

BY

Sarah Hue-Williams



and admired by the very women who personified the new circumstances: Elsa Schiaparelli, Diana Vreeland and Louise de Vilmorin, all of whom were the embodiment of “modern” and the latest word in fashion. The soul of the era was speed, its essential geometry long-lined and vertical, and jewels had to match this sartorial revolution.

The vanity case encapsulated everything jewellery designers were seeking to achieve during this period. Also known as the *nécessaire de dame*, *nécessaire de soir* or *nécessaire de beauté*, it was considered the epitome of elegance while remaining practical enough to accommodate everything a stylish woman might need, day or night, when out and about.

In an age when cocktails vied with cabarets and fine dining as the last word in elegant entertainment, these small but stylish additions to the overall parure were required to match the spirit and flair of the modern world around them. The fashionable woman could now smoke, apply lipstick and powder her nose in public, but the vanity case eclipsed even the most exquisite of contemporary powder compacts and cigarette cases in its sheer beauty and unrivalled sumptuousness.

More than any other accessory it brought together the practical with the aesthetic. The adage “form follows function” was evident in Louis Cartier’s guidance to his designers: “We must make it our business to build up an inventory that responds to the moral mood of the public by producing articles which have a useful function but which are also decorated in the Cartier style.”

Yet while they provided a practical means of transporting personal items, the new vanity cases were more jewellery than mere accessory, such was the level of craftsmanship and materials used to create them. Set in precious metal and often

elaborately lacquered or enamelled, with decorative elements carved in precious and semiprecious stones, they were made with the maximum of detail in the minimum of space and in myriad different styles borrowed from a vast range of cultures and influences. The Great Age of Glamour was the golden age for these jewelled creations and each provided a glorious chance for jewellers’ imaginations and ingenuity to run riot, creating truly unique works of art.

AS THE ranges of powders, lipsticks and blended sticks of perfume grew, so it became obvious that the existing, and rather makeshift, containers were no longer fit for purpose. Interior divisions and compartments were needed to accommodate and organise the many forms that the new cosmetics now took, and by 1920 a plethora of different types of vanity cases, along with cigarette and powder boxes and lighters, had become essential accompaniments to the new habits of life the fast lane.

These precious yet practical items, often made to order for specific clients, were miniature miracles of design and manufacture, and were as slim and flat as possible in keeping with the streamlined look of the day. Most importantly, they had to match the appearance of the society ladies who owned them. The use – and now the application – of make-up had become a sophisticated art to be enacted in public.

The dressing table at home was certainly perceived as a glamorous setting, but what really mattered was the performance of putting on make-up in front of people. The process of application was as important as the finished effect, and all part of the seduction of beautification. It was clear that women needed a means of carrying their cosmetics that was every bit as handsome as the rest of their attire.

Above, top: vanity case by Cartier, France, c.1915-20; below: vanity case by Jean Fouquet, France, c.1928-30.

Quickly considered indispensable in high society, *Harper’s Bazaar* referred to “the kind of compact you can pull out and make a great show of at the table” – and this was the point. These creations were designed to be highly visible when out at lunch, dinner, the theatre or a nightclub, placed prominently on the grandest of dining tables or atop the most fashionable cocktail bar, to rest, dazzling, in full view of admiring onlookers. It was not considered vulgar to show off a case in this way, to make it a talking point and to pass it round to other guests, while it would have been unthinkable to do the same with a piece of jewellery.

Vanity cases were miniature status symbols, made to be admired and shown off. They took many hundreds of hours to produce, showcasing superb and often unique bespoke craftsmanship. Most of them were created in Paris, often by the great jewellery houses of the day, and were owned by ladies of the highest social standing. They were truly one-off creations, sometimes commissioned and always treasured, true triumphs of the jewellers’ art.

Many were made to order to match couture outfits from the leading fashion designers: Chanel, Patou, Lanvin or Vionnet. Little wonder they became the most desirable accompaniment to smart lives led in the public eye. Stars of stage, screen and style all added to the hype, captured on film and in magazines with these symbols of modern elegance always to hand. A lady like Florence Gould, an American heiress married to the railroad magnate Frank Jay Gould and living in Paris, might have several cases: colourful examples with floral motifs for day wear, and carried instead of a handbag, and more streamlined, diamond-set examples used at night in place of an evening bag. Mrs Gould was habitually photographed with wavy hair, pearl necklace, black fur stole, jewelled bracelet and glittering vanity case, a combination considered by her contemporaries to be the personification of chic.

Vanity cases were made in a vast variety of forms and there was no such thing as a standard model. The first simple cases were in made yellow gold, perhaps embellished with a monogram, and these were quickly followed by models with Russian-style enamelling as decoration. Flat or possibly cylindrical, they might be up to 12½ centimetres in length, and soon developed into the most sophisticated and embellished vanity cases of the art deco period, set with precious stones, carved jade plaques, elaborate Chinese lacquer panels or mosaics of mother-of-pearl inlay.

Even more ingenious in their manufacture were the double-sided, multi-compartment or “combined” cigarette-and-vanity cases, which at their simplest had one side for the storage of cigarettes (the lid) with the base containing the powder and rouge compartments. These examples were often oval or cylindrical in shape to provide the necessary depth inside, also enabling them to be carried and cradled comfortably in the hand. They were more difficult to produce, however, since decorating of the second side often damaged the first. This was decorative dexterity of unrivalled virtuosity.

Whatever their shape and form, these portable little beauty kits had one overriding requirement: the need to fit the largest possible number of elements into the minimum amount of space. They were as intricate on the inside as the decoration on their exteriors, their internal engineering requiring absolute precision on a miniature scale: lift the lid and a veritable dressing table was revealed with everything condensed into a miraculously small area. The extensive range of women’s “vanity necessities” now included – in addition to powder, rouge, perfume, lipstick and a comb – a pencil with an ivory slate and even a concealed watch as the ultimate symbol of daring modernity. (Mrs Evalyn Walsh McLean even commissioned a miniature vanity case with a leather strap in 1930 to be worn on the wrist like a watch.)

In fact, the only item missing from the list was money, which was naturally regarded as entirely superfluous to a society lady’s requirements. As well as containing

these various vanity items, as much of a nécessaire's interior as possible needed to be mirrored, allowing the owner to perfect her make-up without having to retire to a rest room, an essential feature given that the display of application was as important a part of the allure as the finished effect of bright-red lips and flawless skin.

IN THE 1920s it seemed that artistic movements came and went as fast as the notion of innovation they glorified, but out of this maelstrom of ideas and energy art deco spread quickly and contagiously to become an all-consuming style, influencing every form of creativity.

Yet just as this free-wheeling decade approached its finishing line, the stock market crashed on a catastrophic scale in the US, and what had started as a boom ended with an almighty bust. The same soaring share prices that had made millionaires almost overnight now dealt a mortal blow, with Wall Street losing a third of its value in a matter of days. The great financial crisis would take a decade to recover from, and although the immediate effects rocked America, the repercussions reverberated around the world. People who had embraced modern urban life and the exuberant spirit of its popular culture were suddenly stopped dead in their tracks.

The crash of 1929 affected all levels of society, and proved catastrophic to the luxury industries in particular. From 1930 onwards, as the economic devastation deepened, clients stopped buying as many extravagant items, and firms stopped producing anything they thought might prove difficult to sell. Indicative of the change in consumer preferences, Cartier's flagship stores in both London and New York recorded a 50 per cent fall in sales of the more expensive and exclusive items such as cigarette and vanity cases created using precious materials, but an equivalent rise in sales of the more affordable and practical items such as



Cigarette case by Cartier, France, c.1925.

These creations were designed to be placed prominently on the grandest of dining tables or atop the most fashionable cocktail bar.

cigarette lighters and simple powder compacts. This trend was indicative across the entire sector, and all the major jewellery houses suffered, cutting back their staff or completely closing their doors. Some estimated that up to 90 per cent of the entire jewellery workforce lost their jobs during the Great Depression.

Gradually but inevitably, aside from some stylised cigarette boxes and powder compacts, the production

of nécessaires tailed off. By the outbreak of World War II it was becoming more difficult for owners of vanity cases to find a supplier who still stocked loose and unbranded cosmetics. It was altogether quicker and easier to buy make-up from the larger cosmetics companies who were now designing attractive semi-permanent containers and packaging of their own.

As a result, the vanity case gave way to the purse, the handbag, the evening clutch, and a new invention, the *minaudière*. Slightly larger than the vanity (about the size of a small book), it usually had straight edges and different compartments for storing the usual cosmetics, but now with some additions: a pill or candy holder, a lighter, theatre glasses, keys, tissues (Kleenex was invented in 1928), business cards and possibly a small clock.

IN THE vanity case, art deco found arguably its most glorious form of artistic expression. The exquisite workmanship and imagination that went into these tiny creations, to say nothing of the miracles of miniature engineering that were involved in their interior fittings, will never be recreated. As exquisite jewelled accessories, each represents the embodiment of the style, glamour and sophistication that was the Jazz Age. These glittering relics still have the power to evoke a golden era of supreme adornment, and stand as astonishing reminders of high times and great opulence. Masterclasses of miniaturisation and icons of elegance, they had materialised as if by magic, only to vanish again almost as quickly as they had appeared, evanescent in their luxury and sheer beauty. ■

Edited extract from A Kind of Magic, by Sarah Hue-Williams and Peter Edwards, which was launched last week in London (Unicorn Press, \$80). It will be available in Australia in December and can be pre-ordered via info@woodslane.com.au.