

The History of Pockets

When people put their hands in their pockets, they rarely realize they are using an invention that is only a few hundred years old. For several thousand years, human clothing did not have pockets of any kind. People cut a circle out of cloth or leather and put their money, keys, or other objects in the middle of the circle. Then they gathered up the edges and bunched the circle into a loose bag or purse. They tied a string, usually of leather, around the neck of this purse to keep objects from falling out.

These purses were usually tied onto belts. They dangled by their strings. Thieves would try to cut these strings to steal the purses. Near the end of the 1500s, men began to ask for slits in their trousers exactly where we have side pockets in pants today. A man still tied the strings of his purse to his belt, but then he pushed the purse through the side slit in his trousers. This made it more difficult for a thief to steal the purse.

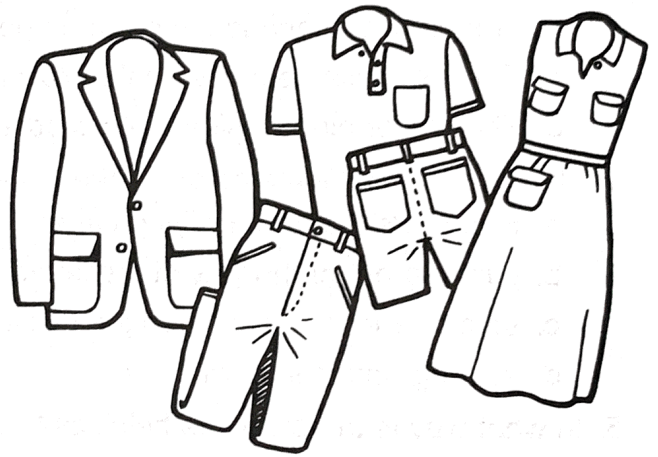
These purses were also known as pockets even though they were not yet attached to trousers. We don't know who figured out how to sew this pocket into the side seam and make it a permanent part of the trousers. The invention made it easier and quicker to get something from the pocket. No longer did a man have to untie a purse from his belt and then undo the string around it.

Shortly after the pocket became a permanent part of trousers, people began to want pockets in other garments as well. Both women and men asked for them in cloaks and coats. At first, these pockets were attached near the lower hems of long capes and cloaks. A person had to pull up the garment and keep holding it up while reaching into the pocket. This took two hands. Eventually, people asked for pockets at the hip so that it would only take one hand to use the pocket.

Travelers in the days of the first sewn-in pockets had to journey from town to town in horse-drawn carriages. They began to ask for secret pockets so they could hide small valuables from the robbers who often held up coaches. The robbers could not always find a secret pocket sewn inside a piece of clothing. Today, business jackets for both men and women still have these inner pockets to protect valuables.

Modern travelers sometimes still use purses like those of long ago. Today tourists can buy small, flat bags for their passports and money. These are worn around the neck or waist and are kept out of sight, beneath the clothes. Then, even if thieves steal briefcases or women's handbags, tourists will still have the most important papers and emergency money that they kept tucked out of sight.

Three purposes have shaped the history of pockets. The first is safety. To prevent theft, pockets have evolved inside business jackets as secret places for valuables. Pockets also developed because people wanted to reach money, keys, pens, tissues, and other items quickly and easily. The third purpose of pockets was the last one to develop. Only in the last 150 years have people figured out that pockets offer a good way to keep hands warm in cold weather!



The History of Pockets (cont.)

After reading the story, answer the questions. Circle the letter before each correct answer.

1. What is this passage mostly about?
 - a. how travelers protected valuable papers
 - b. how pockets developed over time
 - c. how tailors hide pockets in clothing
 - d. how people used to carry purses
2. Which of these statements shows that people use purses today in a way similar to how they were used in the past?
 - a. They are worn around the neck and are sometimes kept out of sight, beneath the clothes.
 - b. The robbers could not always find a secret pocket sewn inside a piece of clothing.
 - c. Both women and men asked for them in cloaks and coats.
 - d. The third purpose of pockets was the last one to develop.
3. The original pockets were probably sewn near the lower hem of capes and cloaks because
 - a. robbers wouldn't think to look there.
 - b. this was where valuables would fit.
 - c. hems provide extra fabric needed to make a pocket.
 - d. this was a convenient place for people to access.
4. Why did people start sewing pockets permanently into trousers?
 - a. Permanent pockets allowed people to warm their hands.
 - b. The leather used to make purses was hard to find.
 - c. This made it easier to get to the pocket without having to unfasten the purse.
 - d. It was less expensive to sew the pocket into trousers than to make purses.
5. Why did people begin putting their small purses in side slits in their trousers?
 - a. It was harder for the purses to be stolen.
 - b. The purses were less likely to be lost.
 - c. They didn't like the weight of the purses hanging from their belts.
 - d. The purses didn't get in their way.
6. Pockets kept people's belongings safe. What is another reason people liked pockets?
 - a. They were fashionable.
 - b. They could hold more than purses.
 - c. They were easy to make.
 - d. They were easier to use.