

# Hands Deep in History: Pockets in Men and Women's Dress in Western Europe, c. 1480–1630

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*Pockets are now standard and accepted aspects of clothing, but their presence in dress has not always been so assured. This article examines the use of pockets in western Europe from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, demonstrating that pockets were adopted into clothing much earlier than has often been believed. It discusses the physical form of pockets in the dress of both genders and the types of garments into which they were inserted. It also explores the possible reasons for the uptake of pockets, the uses to which they were put and the sorts of objects which were kept in pockets, showing that pockets provided the wearer with an individual and personal space which they could use to transport a wide range of goods hands-free.*

**Keywords:** pockets, clothing, sixteenth century, Europe, fashion, accessories

## INTRODUCTION

Pockets are now relatively ubiquitous aspects of dress. Sitting here reading this article, the chances are that you have on at least one garment which contains a pocket or two, be it jeans, a skirt, a suit, a T-shirt or a cardigan. Pockets have permeated the wardrobes of both genders, even increasingly to be found in the gowns worn by celebrities on the red carpet. They are applied to clothes for both functional and decorative purposes, and such is the advantage which they provide that they can be used as a means of selling garments: in 2011, H&M launched a trouser collection for men with one style explicitly called the '5-pocket' trouser. We rely on our pockets as spaces in which to store and carry varied objects such as our keys, phones, loose change, tissues, or just put our

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hands. The expectation of their presence in clothing is now such that there can be a sense of loss and confusion when we unexpectedly find ourselves wearing a garment without pockets, uncertain of where to put our possessions.

But pockets have not always been such an assured feature of clothing, an accepted and expected part of our sartorial world. This article aims to historicize the pocket, exploring when and why pockets began to become such indispensable additions to both male and female dress. It focuses on an expanded sixteenth century, from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, and uses a range of sources, including objects, images and texts, to examine the form and function of pockets in Europe in this period: what garments they were placed in, what they looked like and were made from, what was held in them, and the reasons for and significance of their inclusion in clothing.

## THE STUDY OF POCKETS

Pockets have tended to stay out of the gaze of the early modern historian, their historiographical absence mirroring their frequent physical invisibility. Hidden away amongst folds of fabric, unlike the outfit as a whole, pockets do not appear to fit the usual narrative of early modern dress, that of display and the proclamation of an individual's actual or desired identity through their clothing. Nor have pockets been included in the relatively recent spate of studies on the cultural significance and applications of individual accessories or separable aspects of early modern clothing.<sup>1</sup> A considerable amount of research has been done into the material, social and symbolic lives of pockets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and particularly women's tie-on pockets, mainly due to Barbara Burman and her 'Pockets of History' project.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, sixteenth-century pockets have generally been overlooked by historians; either their very existence has been refuted in favour of a later start date for the adoption of pockets, or they have been brushed over in a paragraph or two in a wider work of dress history without any sustained analysis of their material forms or cultural associations.<sup>3</sup> There has, however, been a little more interest in the physicality and use of pre-eighteenth-century pockets outside of the academy, amongst those involved in the historical reconstruction of dress and the online costuming community.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst large numbers of later tie-on pockets survive, offering up a visibly interesting cache of objects and a sizeable body of material to analyse, references to sixteenth-century pockets, whether textually, visually or in the material remains of garments, are rather harder to come by.<sup>5</sup> It is not easy to determine how pervasive pockets were in the early modern period, as inventories and wardrobe accounts rarely record the presence of pockets, whether separable or included in garments, and for all the paintings which show a gaping pocket hole, in how many more was a pocket hole concealed amongst folds of fabric or elided altogether by the painter's brushstrokes and a lack of concern for the construction of clothing?<sup>6</sup> The fragmentary nature of surviving evidence for early modern

pockets means that this article has taken a broad geographical approach, looking beyond Britain alone to evidence from the wider European continent. This article is an introduction to the topic of sixteenth-century pockets, built up from years of small discoveries and serendipitous encounters in the archives whilst in the process of conducting other research, finding hints of pockets embedded in a myriad of different sources. A combination of portraits, prints, objects, letters, books and wardrobe accounts which depict or refer to pockets have been used to gain a sense of the physicality of pockets in this period and the uses to which they were put. In particular, this article has been aided by the recent rise of online digital resources, which offer searchable access to large databases of manuscripts and printed works, enabling references to pockets to be pinpointed more easily. Rather than endlessly trawling manually through the State Papers, for example, keyword searches on *State Papers Online* have been used to identify all the references to pockets that they contain. The utility of such tools depends on how well documents have been catalogued, whether a description or transcription of their contents is in-depth enough to contain the word ‘pocket’, and on how effective a programme’s search function is. However, through the use of these online repositories of documents and literature, this article shows how changes in technology are opening up new avenues of research for dress historians, allowing small facets of clothing to be reclaimed from the archives and enabling large bodies of sources to be scoured in a way that previously would have been incredibly time-consuming.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE FORM AND DEVELOPMENT OF POCKETS

The limited evidence available for pockets makes it hard to ascribe a definitive start date to their introduction into dress; this article is not trying to claim that pockets were an ‘invention’ of the long sixteenth century per se. Though pockets may have been in use before the late fifteenth century, it is from this point onwards that their presence becomes more noticeable, increasing in popularity and prevalence throughout the sixteenth century. It has been argued that tie-on pockets fell out of fashion with the adoption of the slender profile and gauzy fabrics of neo-classical dress at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> By the same reasoning, whereas the fullness of sixteenth-century dress for both men and women gave ample opportunities for the inclusion and concealment of pocket bags without unsightly bulges, the narrower medieval silhouette would have similarly restricted the placement of pockets in clothing. Some garments could have accommodated pockets even less than others, as in men’s hose, worn skin-tight in the fifteenth century and described by the Venetian Cesare Vecellio (1521–1601) as being ‘so closely fitted that they showed almost all their muscles, as if they were completely naked’.<sup>9</sup> In a chapter on ‘The Grossnesse of former Times’, the 1613 text *The Treasvrie of Avncient and Moderne Times*, a compendium of observations collated from a variety of European authors, said of the hose men used to wear that they were ‘made close to their limbes, wherein

they had no menes for Pockets'.<sup>10</sup> However, in his work illustrating historical and contemporary dress from around the world, Vecellio indicated that pockets were a relative novelty of the end of the fifteenth century, writing of the 'reformed and more modest dress' of some Venetian women that:

I have found that in those times trains were not worn long but held up and attached to the belt or to the edges of pockets — which were being used for the first time, though their use continued for a very long time afterward.<sup>11</sup>

So what forms did pockets adopt in the long sixteenth century, and what types of garments were they placed in? Men's upper hose in this period grew in volume, becoming rotund and then baggy, so large that attempts were made to try and limit the amount of material and padding which could be used in their construction and concerns were raised that men were concealing weapons in their hose.<sup>12</sup> These increased dimensions of hose enabled the inclusion of pockets, which, according to Janet Arnold's (1932–1998) study of extant objects, were generally a pocket bag made of fustian or leather stitched into a vertical placket which was not always located along the side seam of the hose.<sup>13</sup> The wardrobe accounts for Elizabeth I (1533–1603) record that in 1575 Thomas Ludwell (*fl.* 1564–1582), one of her tailors, was charged with making a pair of paned hose for a Moorish boy of carnation stammel with 'pockettes of fustian'.<sup>14</sup> The hosier Henry Herne (*fl.* 1559–1592) also made a pair of hose for the boy 'with thre yerds of chaungeable mockeado with lase & silke lyned with lynen, wollen, cotten, canvas, heare, pockettes & Poyntes'.<sup>15</sup> A pair of *calze* were made for Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–1574) in 1570 of crimson twill with cotton pockets.<sup>16</sup> Svante Sture's (1517–1567) *pluderhose*, which he was wearing when he was murdered in Uppsala Cathedral in 1567, have a rather different style of pocket: a pouch with a drawstring top built into one of the flounces of the hose in between the panes.<sup>17</sup>

Some pocket holes are clearly visible in men's hose in paintings and prints, although, as with women's skirts, it can be difficult to determine what is simply a fold in the fabric and what is a pocket hole. Giovanni Battista Moroni's (1520–1578) portrait of Count Alborghetti and his son from *c.* 1545–1550 shows the boy wearing a pair of horizontally striped hose with a vertical pocket hole lined with the same fabric as the hose and trimmed with a pink binding.<sup>18</sup> Bindings and embroidery down the sides of men's hose were used to frame and advertise the presence of pockets to even greater effect in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as in Robert Peake's (*c.* 1551–1619) painting of Henry, Prince of Wales (1594–1612) from *c.* 1605 (Figure 1). Alongside actual pockets in the sides of hose, seemingly false pockets which were an elongated hexagonal shape decorated with buttons were playfully placed in the front of hose in the early seventeenth century. The parade costume of Christian II, Elector of Saxony (1583–1611), sports a pair of such pockets, as do figures in a number of paintings.<sup>19</sup> These buttoned, possibly imitation, pockets could be placed vertically as well as horizontally, with several sets in one pair of hose, as can be seen in a portrait of Lars Kagg (1597–1661) (Figure 2).<sup>20</sup> One painting





**Figure 1.** Robert Peake the Elder, *Henry Frederick Prince of Wales (1594–1612), with Sir John Harington (1592–1614), in the hunting field*, 1603. Oil on canvas, 201.9 × 147.3 cm. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest 1944, 44.27 Metropolitan Museum of Art.

of an unknown French nobleman from 1607 shows the sitter with both a set of vertical buttoned pockets in the front of his hose and a set of actual pockets in the side of his hose (Figure 3).

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