

An Intimate History of the Handkerchief by THL Genevieve de Valois

Ah, the Handkerchief. An accessory of dress that is both useful and beautiful. For as long as mankind has perspired there have been versions of this cloth. Over time this insignificant accessory changed into a much more vital part of dress and society. From Ancient Roman plays to 14th century children's snotty noses, reaching a peak as treasured gifts to a Queen, the handkerchief has had a colorful and intriguing past.

The earliest known reference to the Handkerchief is in the poems of the Roman Republican Poet, Gaius Valerius Catallus, born in 84BC (whose poems are not recommended for those easily offended by vulgarity). Judging by his writings one would think that the handkerchief had already become an important part of society by his time. There are also some occasional references to their use in Ancient Greece as perfumed cotton cloths. It is certain however, that by the 2nd Century AD they were widely used throughout Rome. Initially they were used by Roman men to wipe the perspiration from their hands and face. Later it became quite popular for Patrician women to carry them and wave them at games and festivals as a sign of their approval. The elegant Roman woman would not be seen without her delicate dress accessories, including this dainty cloth. It was most likely at this time a white linen square and a luxury of great expense. Additionally, there are records indicating that during this time period the handkerchief played a frequent role on stage for many Roman comedies and satires. Eventually, because of their great expense and frequent use by the wealthy, they became known as a symbol of the refinement and power of Rome.

As time passed handkerchiefs became a more plentiful item. During what is sometimes known as the "Christian Era," just prior to the Middle Ages, it became popular to wave them in church as a means

of applause. It was at this time the trend for using them primarily for the face developed. This trend was started by priests, who perspiring during a particularly heated sermon would then wipe their face with a handkerchief. These cloths eventually became so valued that they began to be considered part of the priestly vestments. It is also during this time period that the expense and value of handkerchiefs were increased by adding embroidery and fringed edgings.

By the Middle Ages the handkerchief was considered a showy accessory. Courtly ladies considered fashion leaders of their day, frequently owned at least one extremely fine handkerchief that found its way into the records of their most valuable possessions. One such example is the Lady Clemence of Austria who in 1328 had recorded in her wardrobe accounts of her most valuable items, an embroidered handkerchief of fine silk. Of course, the less extravagant versions still existed. In the 14th and 15th centuries children were frequently given handkerchiefs called "muckinders" and taught the proper use of them for wiping noses. Later during the fifteenth century, it became fashionable for Ladies to present their Lords with a delicate, often embroidered, handkerchief that the Lord would then wear in his hatband.

It was, however, during the Renaissance that this delicate accessory reached it's height of fame. It is traditionally thought that the courtly displays began with the fashionable ladies in Italy and then spread later to France and Germany. It was not long before they were the height of fashion in courts across all of Europe. The 16th Century versions were generally of a fine linen, cambric or lawn cloth and were embroidered with colored silks and edged with a beautiful lace and



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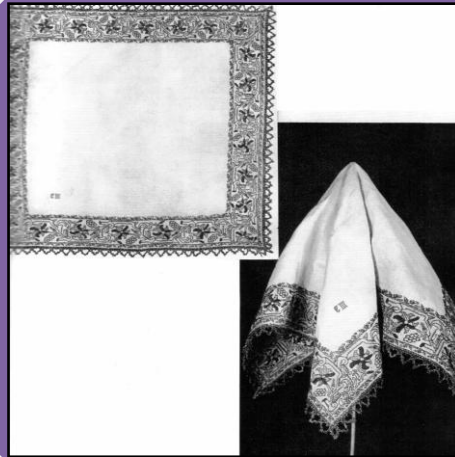
sometimes weighted at the ends with buttons or tassels. The delightful thing about the handkerchiefs of this time period is that they were of all shapes and sizes, depending upon the imagination of their creators. In Italy it was popular to embroider them with fine, drawn threadwork or with delicate patterns in red silks. Later in the century as lace began to grow in popularity, it became fashionable to edge them with bobbin and needle laces. As the lace edged versions became more popular it also became fashionable for gentlemen to carry them. People of great wealth carried extremely elaborate versions, such as the one put on display by Gabrielle D' Este in 1594 that cost 1,000 Francs. The handkerchief also became a more frequent subject in writings of the time. One such example is Erasmus who frequently wrote to encourage children to the proper use of the handkerchief and would chastise them for boorishly wiping their noses on their sleeves.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth the handkerchief made rapid progress. She was a lover of such dainty accessories and set the fashion trend of handkerchiefs amongst the ladies of the court. It is supposedly during this time that the lace trimmed handkerchief first made its appearance in the courts of England. The preferred versions were made of fine silk or cambric and embroidered with silks, sometimes with names or dainty love knots. It became popular to give them as favors to admirers and this engendered their use as a dainty flirtation. These favors were typically 3-4 inches square, embroidered all around with silk thread and had buttons attached to the corners and sometimes at the center. The best of these were also edged with a gold lace. An interesting look into the records of New Year's gifts received by Queen Elizabeth shows just how popular these

items were as gifts. In 1562 she received 72 handkerchiefs, most of which were embroidered with silks of various colors including several done completely in red or black. In 1577 she received 48, most of which were made of fine cambric, black-worked and edged with gold lace. In 1578, she received 42 that were primarily the same as the year before with one notable exception that they were more frequently edged with a bone lace. In 1588 she only received 27 handkerchiefs, most of which were black-worked, but only a few had edging of any kind. And last of all, the

handkerchiefs she received in 1599 numbered a mere 19. Most of them were black-worked and edged with gold lace. The main difference being they were made primarily of fine Holland Cloth as opposed to the previously more popular Cambric. It is interesting to note that these gifts of handkerchiefs were almost always given in sets of six, with the occasional exception of the gift of one extremely fine and outrageously expensive version that was exceptionally decorated. But no matter the differences, Queen Elizabeth treasured them all as tokens of love and appreciation from her court.

People have loved and appreciated the handkerchief for centuries. And whether it was a Patrician woman cheering for a game, a Fifteenth Century Lady expressing her love to her Lord, or a loyal subject making a gift to a Queen - the humble handkerchief has had a significant place in history and in the hearts of its owners. Knowing this, it is easy to see why it has been a highly treasured accessory throughout the ages.



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"New Year's Gifts for Queen Elizabeth" from The Progresses & Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth. http://geocities.com/karen_larsdatter/gifts/



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Picture 2 - *Handkerchief of the Elizabethan Period*
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Picture 3 – Cropped from portrait of [Karin Månsdotter](http://www.larsdatter.com/handkerchiefs.htm),
c. 1580 found at
<http://www.larsdatter.com/handkerchiefs.htm>