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SHERRILL

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frames etched and embossed with flowers; fringed, tasseled, or scalloped bottoms and drawstring tops; jewel-studded clasps; and the imaginative patterns that were a denouement of women's creativity.

In the early nineteenth century, making purses for keepsakes and gifts was a "ladies' thing to do," notes Callahan. After 1850, the bags were more commonly manufactured, but women continued to add the finishing touches by hand. Bead-lite, for example, a flat-link enamel-painted mesh popular in the 1920s, was manufactured in sheets, cut into shapes, and hand decorated.

The domestic artistry of the bags blends well with McRae's distinctive wardrobe. "I like to dress up and wear clothing made by artists," she explains. "If I wear a wonderful tunic or hand-painted kimono, I can slip an evening bag into a pocket or carry the chain on one arm. Sometimes I get dressed and then peruse the house and pick out a purse with the same colors."

McRae plans to broaden her collection with an American Indian ceremonial bag, a few Lucite purses popular at cocktail parties in the 1950s, and some signed bags by contemporary artists, such as Judith Leiber, well known for her minaudières in delightful shapes, including Fabergé egg look-alikes.

"I am attracted to the bags as beautiful objects that were a part of women's happy lives in getting dressed up to be their best," muses McRae. "I like to think about women using them for weddings and special events, women going visiting with them and handing out calling cards. It's a link to a life I won't exactly experience, but women of two or three generations back did."

McRae hopes that her new daughter-in-law might someday, twenty years or so from now, get dressed up and carry the little antique French bag to another family wedding. ♦