

Make a Metal-Frame Purse

Costume College 2008, instructor Trystan L. Bass

Historical Background:

The earliest surviving metal-frame bags date from the 1400s and functioned as coin purses and alms bags for wealthy men and women. Some were very elaborate in decoration and clasps, but the overall shape is still similar to metal-frame “kiss clasp” bags used today. In the 1500s and 1600s, pouches often hung from a person’s belt.



From left to right:

1. 1500s, European, belt pouch made of leather with iron frame & 18 pockets, some hidden
2. 1580, Spain, man’s purse made of leather with silver frame
3. Late 1600s, Netherlands, belt bag made of velvet with copper frame
4. 1620, Spain, man’s purse made of brocaded wool & linen with steel frame
5. 1700-1730, France, shield-shaped purse made of silk with gilt embroidery

The purse truly came into prominence in women’s fashion in the 19th century. Carrying a separate bag first became popular in the Empire or Regency era, and a huge variety of styles and sizes were used in Europe and America. Starting in the 1820s, lightweight frames made of silver or steel were readily available for purchase, and fabric bags could be made and attached to them at home. Metal-frame purses could have bags made of fabric, crochet, beading, leather, even metal mesh. Small purses were sometimes worn at the waist towards the end of the century.



From left to right:

1. 1800s, United States, purse made of brocaded silk with silver frame
2. 1832, Netherlands, brocade purse with gold frame
3. 1870s, Germany, velvet chatelaine bag with silver frame & belt
4. 1870s, France, beaded purse with gilt metal jeweled frame
5. 1870, United States, handbag made of silk & suede with stainless steel frame
6. 1890, France, purse made of leather with silver frame

To make this type of purse, you will need...

Tools:

- sewing machine with straight stitch
- basic hand-sewing needle
- scissors for cutting fabric
- straight pins
- E-600 glue or other strong glue intended for metal & fabric (but not Crazy Glue)
- a metal butter knife or a screwdriver (this item will get messy but can be cleaned up)

Materials:

- a metal “kiss clasp” purse frame
- paper to make a pattern
- ruler
- pencil and eraser
- 1/2 yard of fashion fabric (non-stretch, medium weight)
- 1/2 yard of lining fabric (non-stretch, light to medium weight, avoid the really thin acetate lining stuff; go for a broadcloth or a taffeta)
- 1/2 yard heavyweight sew-in interfacing / stabilizer
- 1/2 yard heavyweight fusible interfacing / stabilizer
- 1/2 yard or so of narrow chain, cord, or ribbon for handle
- thread to match your fabrics

Notes about the glue: The glue should dry overnight for strength, so don't plan to use this purse the same day you make it. You may not want to wear nail polish when making this purse because these types of glue can sometimes eat through a nice manicure. It's strong stuff. Make sure to read the glue label if you have chemical sensitivities. Use in a well-ventilated room.

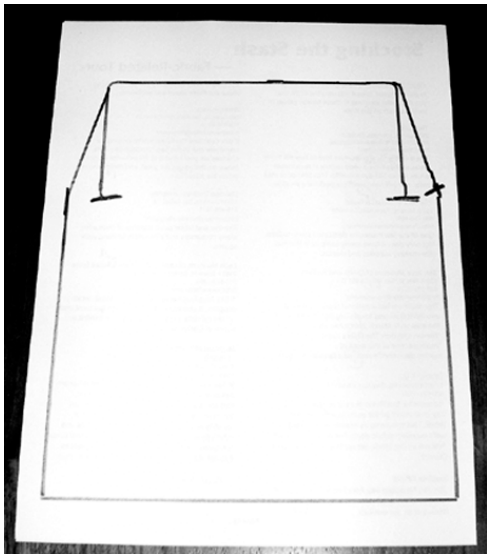
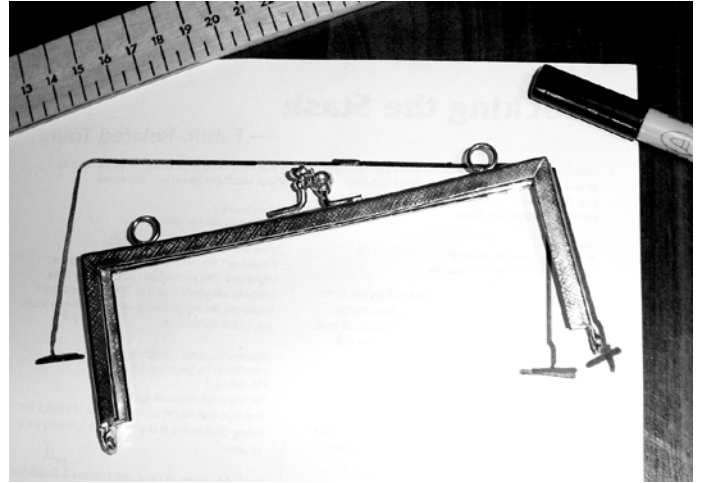
Instructions:

1. Making the pattern: With a little practice, you can make a pattern to fit any purse frame you find. You can also modify an existing pattern to create a new or unusual shape. Experiment! Purses don't use that much fabric, so even if you screw up, the loss isn't that huge :-).
 - a. Lay the frame on pattern paper, and draw around the outside top of the frame. Mark where the hinges stop.

- b. With the frame still on the pattern, hold the top corner or edge of the frame and tilt it out about a quarter-inch from where you marked the hinge stop. Mark this spot.
- c. From this second mark, you can draw down to create the bottom part of the purse. Go crazy making any shape you like!

The only rule is that the sides should “puff” out about a quarter- to a half-inch in each direction from the frame markings – this gives the purse fullness so you can put stuff inside.

So extend the sides a little bit, then make the bottom as long, round, square, trapezoidal, diamond-shaped, etc., as you want. Look at period and modern examples for inspiration.



- d. Add your desired seam allowance around all the edges.
 - e. To make the pattern symmetrical, fold it in half and then cut it out.
2. Cut out the fabric – cut two of the fashion fabric, two of the lining fabric, two of the fusible interfacing, and two of the sew-in interfacing.

Note: If you wish to decorate the purse, do it now! Embroidery, beading, appliqué, ribbon trims, etc., should all be added to the fashion fabric before you sew anything together. Just be aware of the seam allowances.

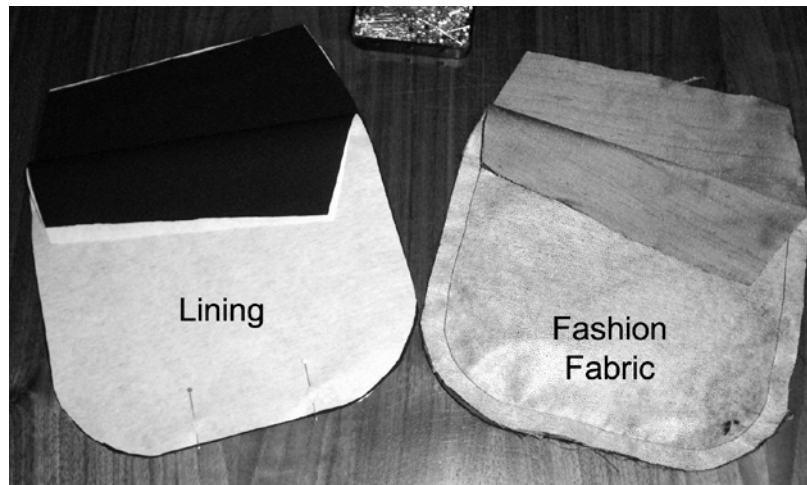
If your decoration is very 3D (such as beading), consider doing step #3 first, then decorating. Depends on the type of fabric too.

3. Iron the fusible interfacing to the wrong side of your fashion fabric. Do this on both pieces of fashion fabric.
4. On each fashion-fabric piece, mark with a pin the spot where the hinges stop at the top on each side. Sew the fashion-fabric pieces together, right sides facing – start from one pin mark and sew all around the bottom.

- a. If your bag has a squared bottom, you can make it flat too. This is more common in later eras, such as mid-19th century. With the bag inside out, flatten a corner so that the side seam lines up with the bottom seam (on the inside).

Measure a half-inch from the point, hold a ruler across, and draw a line to create a triangle. Stitch across this line, then trim the excess. Repeat on the other corner.

- b. If your bag has a curved bottom, clip and notch the curved edges.



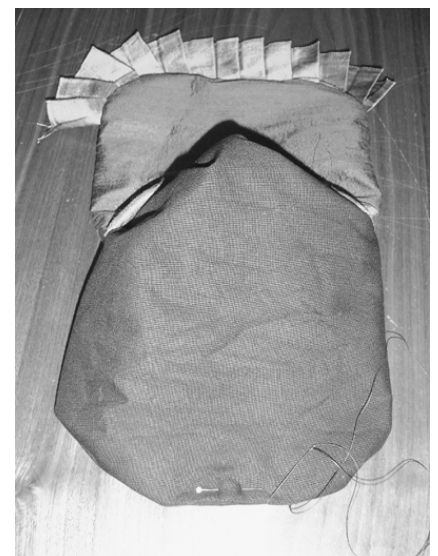
5. Treat the sew-in interfacing and the lining pieces as one. On each piece, mark with a pin the spot where the hinges stop at the top on each side.

Make a sandwich with the interfacing on the outside and the lining on the inside, right sides facing.

Start from one pin mark and sew all around the bottom, EXCEPT for a 2" gap at the bottom. Leave that open (you'll turn the whole bag right side out through it).

If the bag has a squared bottom, repeat step 4a on the lining (with the lining inside out). If the bag has a curved bottom, clip and notch the curved edges. Press the lining bag.

6. Press the fashion-fabric bag, then turn it right side out. Place it inside the lining so that the right sides of both bags are facing each other.
7. Sew the fashion fabric to the lining at the top on each side. Clip the corners, or notch the curved edges. Clip excess at the bottom joins.
8. Carefully and slowly pull the fashion-fabric bag right side out through the little gap you left in the bottom of the lining.



9. Once the fashion fabric is mostly out, sew the hole in the lining closed by hand. A slip-stitch makes it neat and won't show.
10. Push the lining inside the fashion fabric, and iron the bag, paying careful attention to get the top edges nice and smooth.
11. Squeeze some glue all along the inside of one side of the purse frame. Use enough glue, but don't use too much – it will squish out and can get messy! If necessary, use a wooden toothpick to get glue all the way into the purse frame. You'll only work on one side of the frame at a time, so don't put glue on the other side yet.

12. Starting from one end of the frame, insert one top edge of the purse into the glue-covered frame edge. Use a metal butter knife or screwdriver to push the fabric all the way into the frame.

Work a little from each end, then towards the middle of the frame. Work mostly from the inside of the purse, but check the front to make sure both sides of the fabric are seated into the frame.

You may need to go over the whole frame again on both front and back to make sure the fabric is fully set into it.

Repeat steps #11 and #12 on the other side of the frame.

13. Clean up any stray bits of glue on the frame and fashion fabric. As soon as the glue has set (a few minutes), you can usually scrape it off the metal with a fingernail. You can clean up the butter knife or screwdriver this way too.

It can be more difficult to remove from fabric. E-600 can be dissolved with nail polish remover; don't use too much or you can weaken the bond holding your purse together!

For best results, the glue should dry overnight before you use the purse. After that, it's pretty darn durable.

14. Attach a chain, cord, or ribbon handle if the purse frame has integrated loops. To connect a chain, use needle-nose pliers to open a jump ring and connect the chain to the loop. Cord or ribbon can simply be knotted around the loop.

You can make a beaded handle out of wire (memory wire used for necklaces is good). Just twist one end of the wire around the purse frame's loops, string beads on the wire, then twist off the other end of the wire on the other loop.

If the frame doesn't have integrated loops, you can still add a handle. Use flat ribbon or bias tape. Sew it to the lining just below the frame on either side of the clasp. The purse should still close securely if the ribbon or tape is not bulky.

Resources

Metal Purse Frames

The best place to find frames is thrift stores! With a little bit of hunting, you can find old purses for \$5 or less. Simply rip out the fabric bag and reuse the frame for a new purse. You'll get more interesting shapes and sizes this way, plus you're recycling perfectly functional stuff.

You can also search eBay for metal purse frames. This is useful if you want to buy in bulk.

These sites sell frames, mostly in Victorian styles, plus a few neutral styles that can work for earlier periods. Some sites sell patterns, kits, and glue as well.

Bag Lady — <http://www.baglady.com/>

Kari Me Away — <http://www.karimeaway.com/>

Pursenickety Patterns — <http://www.pursenicketypatterns.com/>

Tall Poppy Craft — <http://www.tallpoppycraft.com/>

More Tips

U-Handbag Blog — http://u-handbag.typepad.com/uhandblog/2006/12/purse_frames_de.html

This is where I really learned what to do (and what I was doing wrong!). Between this site and patterns from Tall Poppy Craft, I was finally able to figure the frame out. Highly recommended! The blog is attached to an online store, but it's in the U.K. so prices aren't great.

Historical Reference

These books are full of photos of purses from about 1500 to the 1980s. Look for them at the library or amazon.com.

Bags by the Tassenmuseum Hendrikje, the Pepin Press, 2004, <http://www.pepinpress.com/>

Bags by Claire Wilcox, V&A Publications, 1999

Bags and Purses by Vanda Foster, Drama Book Publishers, 1982

Handbags by Judith Miller, Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2006