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Largest Western collection of handbags in the world moves out of the suburbs and goes uptown.

BAG IT UP. BAG IT UP GOOD.

Fashion

Aan de Amsterdamse Grachten

Tassenmuseum Hendrikje, 10 June-16 September

By Karina Hof

Once upon a time, in the days when Tom Ford was a newbie at Gucci and Marc Jacobs honeymooned *chez* Louis Vuitton, when LeSportsac was just a fanny pack

and it was cute to flaunt Kipling key-ring monkeys, there was a house. Like other houses in the sleepy suburb of Amstelveen, it appeared plain and unassuming. Though beyond its rose-dotted lawn and cat loafing in the driveway, it was unlike any other.

This was Tassenmuseum Hendrikje, the largest collection of Western handbags in the world, which happened to

Joke, handbag interpreter

A featured artist in the Tassenmuseum's first temporary exhibition is Joke Schole, native Amsterdammer and internationally acclaimed Rietveld graduate. When it comes to interpreting the handbag, her SNS REAAL-subsidised contribution surely rocks the boat. Entitled 'De Bagage van Amsterdam', Schole's design is a ship-shaped canvas inspired by the Amsterdamse Stedemaagd, whose image gazes down from one of the Tassenmuseum's original 17th-century ceilings. The artist recalls: 'I saw this and thought: "This *has* to be a figurehead." So [then] I thought: "I will make a boat," and then I thought about a VOC ship, and then I thought about why were there bags...' Her conclusion was that purses enabled traders to trade, and trade is what put Amsterdam on the map, evolving into a place where, besides material goods, free

thinking and creativity were also exchanged—in such a society, 'everybody is important,' the artist believes. Schole used old-fashioned buckles to stud the piece with mini-portraits from Dutch history, with faces ranging from Spinoza to Shaffy. Cargo is represented by mother-of-pearl porcelain figurines of 'all the most important trade products, the bicycles and the Amsterdammertjes, et cetera.' Viewers will also get a glimpse of the bag's fully lined Amsterdam flag-patterned interior. Although Schole assures that her creation is as pret-a-porter as any other, 'De Bagage van Amsterdam' comes with its own display stand: a porcelain base with wooden pillars constructed by the same shipbuilder who worked on the Queen Beatrix-christened *Batavia*. **W**

www.jokeschole.com

occupy the private residence of the couple who spent half their lives amassing 500 years' worth of civilisation's various forms of baggage. But a decade after receiving some 4,000 visitors admiring its 50 display cases each year, the museum began to bulge.

'Bags were under her bed,' museum director and curator Sigrid Ivo says, describing the mushrooming effect that her mother, Hendrikje, had unsuspectingly set off the day she fell in love with a 19th-century German reticule with tortoise and mother-of-pearl inlay. And so, acknowledging the 'problem', the Ivo family began seeking new real estate that could cope with their excess baggage. In 2006, the museum closed its doors. The end, however, this was not.

On 10 June, the Tassenmuseum reopens and mama's got a brand new pad on the Herengracht, with original ceiling paintings and marble floors:

'Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy.'

space enough to show at least half the collection of 3,500 pieces. It's an impressive cache: leather coin purses from the Age of Exploration; 17th-century *chate-laine* 'body necklaces', for suspending everything from eating utensils to bibles; the Versace Couture carried by Madonna at the *Evita* premiere; a Hermès Kelly bag.

As Ivo points out: 'We are not only showing the history of the bag, but the history of civilisation, technology, industry, materials, techniques, social and historical events.'

Leaving the suburbs has given the museum not just more square metres, but more spending money. 'I always say it's like an angel flew over the building,' says Ivo as she recounts how the Tassenmuseum went from being a mom-and-pop-run mecca for purse fetishists to a state-of-the-art *rijksmonument*. The 'angel' refers to the anonymous donor who not only bought the building, but also financed its remodelling. 'My parents are now going on retirement, they are seventy and seventy-four,' Ivo shares. 'I mean, our dream [came true]. A well-to-do businessman comes along and buys the building and renovates it, and you get this marvellous place in Amsterdam.'

Its past incarnation as a Commerce Bank long over, the building now flaunts two refurbished period rooms for private parties, a *kinder* atelier, café, a shop offering the latest tote trends and a historical garden designed by Robert Broekma.

The museum will also host rotating exhibitions, either highlighting a period in handbag history or showcasing up-and-coming designers, from the Netherlands and abroad. For the grand reopening, *Aan de Amsterdamse Grachten* features works by a score of artists who were asked, in Ivo's words, 'to make a special bag demonstrating how we, as a museum, are an inspiration for designers, and how our new place may also be an inspiration.' Like the double-Cs of Chanel, the exhibition is meant to evoke nostalgia while also glimpsing the future. **W**

www.tassenmuseum.nl

Jeltje, original occupant

'She lived here around 1850 and she wrote in her diary: "This life is boring, totally boring."' Sigrid Ivo, director and curator of Tassenmuseum Hendrikje is referring to Jeltje de Bosch Kemper, daughter of a prominent Amsterdam solicitor-general and professor of jurisprudence, who heaved her sighs of ennui in the mansion she called home and where, this week, the Tassenmuseum reopens. (Look for De Bosch Kemper's portrait on Schole's design.)

Jonkvrouw Jeltje came to relieve her boredom by shunning leisure and shouldering labour. By age 36, she had established the Amsterdamsche Huishoudschool, a vocational school to train women for domestic work. Sick of their daily sketching-letter-writing-piano-playing humdrum, honourable misses thus had a new reason to leave their

homes—even if it would ultimately mean entering into other people's dirty ones. As Ivo explains, in 1891, housekeeping was not seen as menial: it was a marketable skill that created prospects for women to become independent money-makers.

While the Amsterdamse Huishoudschool is now the site of hostel Stayokay Vondelpark, back at the Tassenmuseum, a spark of its founder's some-Marxist feminism is today relit. Besides honouring De Bosch Kemper as one of the premise's famous prior inhabitants, the collection celebrates an iconic piece of female material culture. Moreover, the object is one with which many women have come not just to carry cash, but to keep control of it—in their own hands. Surely, such developments gave new meaning to the dictum found in French magazines during De Bosch Kemper's era: 'The lady can leave her husband but not her bag.' **W**