



# Vanity flair

A superlative collection of Art Deco vanity cases has just been promised as a gift to the V&A and the accompanying book describes how these miniature masterpieces capture the glamour of that age, says Caroline Bugler

**T**HE Roaring Twenties were a decade of glamour, brilliance, change and exhilaration—at least for the wealthy and sophisticated. As the world began to recover from the devastations of war, the rich and fashionable left behind years of misery to embrace modernism and hedonism, indulging in the new pleasures of cocktail parties, jazz clubs, avant-garde art, Hollywood films, trips on ocean liners and motoring.

On both sides of the Atlantic, fortunes were made and spent with the kind of lavish abandon portrayed in *The Great Gatsby*. The excitement of a new way of life was felt in every Western culture and society, but Paris became the city to which everyone gravitated, with London and New York follow-

**Vanity case with multi-coloured enamels on an ivory enamel ground. Strauss Allard & Meyer workshop, about 1925**



Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans; The Kashmira Bulsara Collection

**The height of fashion: guests gossiping at a smart cocktail party captured by Fouet to accompany a poem in *The Bystander* of May 1929**

ing close behind. It was a thrilling time to be a woman, as new freedoms gained during the war filtered into peacetime.

Liberated from constricting corsets, young women were active and sporty and some were even seen at the steering wheels of cars and in the pilot seats of aeroplanes. Embracing the spirit of independence conveyed in Victor Marguerite's novel *La Garçonne (The Tomboy)*, they shortened their hemlines, cut their hair, danced the Charleston and smoked in public. Makeup became an increasingly essential part of

the female look, partly inspired by Hollywood screen icons. No longer considered vulgar and best kept to the privacy of the boudoir, it could now be touched up at the dinner table in full view of everyone. Indeed, the act of applying powder and putting on lipstick became part of an intricate public ritual of seduction.

To accompany the new fashions and behaviour, women needed a new accessory, a container to hold their powder, lipstick, comb and cigarettes that was as stylish as their outfits. Jewellers were quick to spot



Open and closed views of a vanity case in enamel, with a central mother-of-pearl panel inlaid with lapis lazuli and gold flowers. Van Cleef & Arpels, about 1930

## “The one thing the vanity cases never needed to contain was money”

an opportunity. They began to make exquisite vanity cases, or *nécessaires*, small boxes that were cleverly designed with separate compartments to hold everything a wealthy, fashionable woman might require while out on the town. The one thing they never needed to contain was money.

Before the advent of the vanity case, women might have carried their personal items in a small drawstring bag or reticule, but these new cases had more in common with the traditional Japanese *inro*—a neat stack of little boxes for small objects held together with a cord and suspended from the waist. Like the *inro*, they transcended their purely utilitarian function and developed into miniature works of art. The women who owned these exquisite objects would have enjoyed flaunting them in restaurants, nightclubs, at parties or at the theatre or opera.

Although designed by master jewellers, their manufacture was often outsourced to specialist craftsmen and they frequently took hundreds of hours to perfect, making



Vanity case and lipstick holder in striped white enamel within a black enamel border, with a central plaque of a coral and diamond urn. Cartier, Paris, about 1923

them extremely expensive to buy or commission. Most were created in Paris in the 1920s, when some 1,000 workshops were busily turning out luxury goods for the home and foreign markets.

Vanity cases came in a variety of forms. The first ones were fairly simple, crafted in yellow gold, perhaps embellished with a monogram or decorated with Russian-style enamelling. Flat or possibly cylindrical, they might be up to 5in in length. They soon developed into highly sophisticated and embellished creations, set with precious stones, carved plaques, elaborate

Chinese lacquer panels or mosaics of mother-of-pearl inlay. Some cases had a simple lid that was opened with a push piece and others were attached to a finger ring or lipstick case by a silk cord and tassel, giving them a more obviously Oriental look.

The elaborate double-sided, multi-compartment cases had a space in the lid for cigarettes and powder and rouge were housed in the base compartments. All were designed to fit the maximum number of items into the minimum amount of space and were intricately engineered, with everything condensed into a tiny area.

These new accessories were invented at the precise moment Art Deco burst upon the scene, a new style that reached its apogee at the 1925 Exposition internationale des Arts Décoratifs held in Paris. This extravaganza presented a panoramic overview of the decorative arts the like of which had never been seen before. More than 130 pavilions spread along a vast site centred on the Grand Palais displayed the creations of international artisans and designers to 16 million visitors.

Art Deco was not a unified style, but a distinctly modern sensibility characterised by luxury, glamour, exuberance, supreme craftsmanship and a belief in technological prog- ➤

# Focus on the Visual Arts

ress. It drew upon a multitude of influences: the art of Japan, China and Africa; the Ballets Russes; and the abstract shapes of modern art and the industrial forms of the machine age. The famous high-end jewellery houses based in Paris, such as Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels and Lacluche Frères, borrowed the decorative themes and bold colour combinations of Art Deco for their jewellery and vanity cases, still using the precious gems they had always employed, but now incorporating some semi-precious ones and hardstones into their designs, such as onyx, coral, jade, lapis lazuli, malachite and turquoise.

Floral and figurative motifs remained perennial favourites for jewellery and vanity cases, as they had been for decades, but now they were simplified and stylised in keeping with the Art Deco taste for streamlined forms. Birds, insects and animals all appeared, although the animals were selected for their speed and grace, such as the gazelle and deer, or the panther that became a Cartier trademark.

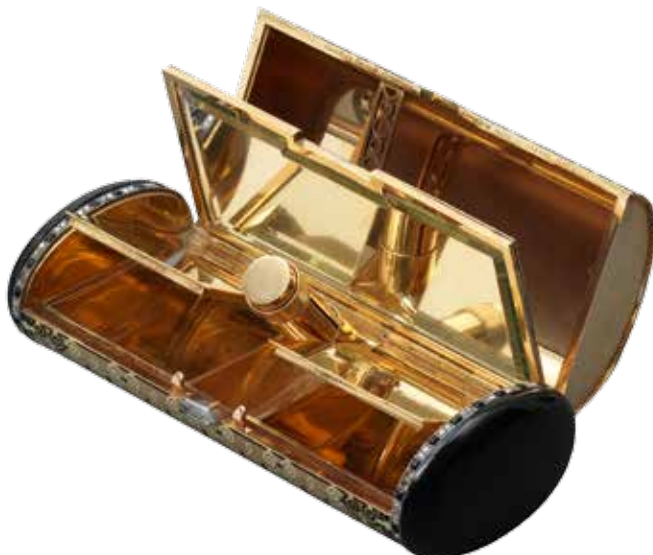
Jewellers who created vanity cases were conjuring up objects of desire for well-travelled clients who were intrigued by the exotic cultures they had either experienced at first hand or seen represented in magazines, films and exhibitions.

Designers scoured the globe for motifs. Egyptian ones were popular, fed by the Egyptomania that followed the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. Pharaohs, gods, lotus flowers, scarabs, sphinxes and hieroglyphs began to feature on these accessories, chosen for their decorative effect rather than for any symbolic significance. Lapis lazuli, turquoise, carnelian and coral were combined in an attempt to conjure up an Egyptian palette that was attractive but completely inauthentic.

China and Japan were gradually becoming more accessible to Western tourists, who brought back souvenirs of their visits.



Advertisement designed by Georges Lepape for Coty powder, which appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1924



Open and closed view of a cylindrical vanity case with onyx panels on the ends. Cartier, Paris, 1925



Far Eastern wares could also be seen at trade fairs, so it was only a matter of time before jewellers began to plunder the decorative lexicon of these two countries for their own work. Pagodas, dragons and vaguely Oriental landscapes depicted in mother-of-pearl, Chinese characters and carved jade plaques were particular favourites.

A taste for Indo-Persian or Mughal motifs had been ignited a decade earlier by Léon Bakst's designs for Diaghilev's ballet *Scheherazade* and an exhibition of Islamic art in Paris in 1911. Louis Cartier was a particular fan of Islamic art and amassed a superb collection of Persian miniatures and manuscripts and his firm bought many of its gemstones in India.

## ‘These dazzling creations survive as reminders of an era of opulence’

The arabesque designs of Islamic book-bindings translated particularly well onto the flat surface of vanity cases and the delicate colour combinations of yellows, pinks, blues and greens that echoed those seen in Islamic miniatures or carpets produced a subtle, feminine effect.

A younger generation of forward-thinking artist-jewellers, including Raymond Templier, Gérard Sandoz, Jean Fouquet and Jean Dunand, produced a very different kind of work from the high-end jewellery houses. They chose materials for their decorative character rather than their intrinsic value and shunned superfluous decoration.

They also experimented with modern plastic and metals, such as Bakelite and chrome, to produce cases with sleek, streamlined forms, mechanical patterns and daring colour combinations. Their creations reflect the fascination with technical progress that was accelerating during inter-World War period, as well as the thrill of Modernism and the machine aesthetic and the freedom of abstract art.

Simple, colourful geometric forms were particular favourites: squares, circles, rectangles and triangles were often juxtaposed, overlapped or repeated to create more complex configurations. Figurative decoration was minimal—perhaps featuring a stylised figure of a jazz musician—but, more often, there was no additional embellishment.

The vanity case was an object that captured the essence of a pleasure-seeking decade and its heyday was short-lived.

An extremely rare Modernist vanity case in silver with black lacquer decoration, and a slide-action lipstick holder. Jean Fouquet, about 1928–30



When the American stock market crashed in 1929, the repercussions reverberated throughout the world, affecting all levels of society and sounding a death knell for the luxury market. Clients stopped buying as many expensive items and the production of vanity cases tailed off.

Anyhow, by the mid 1930s, it was becoming increasingly hard to find suppliers of unbranded loose cosmetics to fit into the compartments of the cases and many women found it easier to buy cosmetics

from the large companies that were now designing their own attractive semi-permanent packaging.

The vanity case had been a brilliant expression of the glamour, style and hedonism of Art Deco, but, by the outbreak of the Second World War, it was no longer the smart accessory of choice. These dazzling creations survive in our own more sombre age as sought-after collector's items—glittering reminders of an era of opulence and adornment.

### The Kashmira Bulsara Collection

These miniature masterpieces are prime examples of the jeweller's art and when the exceptional private collection of 48 of them goes on display at the V&A next year, they will be a highlight of the refurbished jewellery galleries. The collection was formed by Kashmira Bulsara, the sister of the late Freddie Mercury, lead singer of Queen, as a special tribute to his love of beautiful things. Freddie was an accomplished artist as well as an outstanding musician and would no doubt have taken great joy in these lovely objects and the fact that the public will soon be able to enjoy them.

The vanity cases are on display at Symbolic & Chase, 30, Old Bond Street, London W1, during October.

*A Kind of Magic: Art Deco Vanity Cases, the Kashmira Bulsara Collection* by Sarah Hue-Williams and Peter Edwards, is published by Unicorn Press.