



Handkerchiefs: The forgotten statement?

By: Lucy Qi

When I was little, it seemed to me like my dad had an endless supply of handkerchiefs. White ones, blue ones, checkered ones, stripy ones – you name it. And he always carried two with him, one in each pocket. I remember asking him why and he mused that one was for his nose, and the other was for my face. My mom had one too, but it wasn't for catching her sneeze in. Hers was a soft silky square, all white except for the blue and purple blooming violets in one corner she had sewn herself.

But now, you just don't see people carrying one around with them anymore. Studies and research have shown that used handkerchiefs can hold and grow more bacteria because they're kept in a warm pocket environment. Especially when you have a cold. According to health professionals online, there are around 200 viruses in a common cold, all contained in that hanky. Kleenex saw its chance of succeeding and advertized its disposable tissues in 1930 with the slogan "Don't carry a cold in your pocket", and thus branding the good old hanky as a dirty booger nest. Then, somehow along the way, women's hankies were also left behind, and travel sized tissue packs replaced them in purses and wallets around the world.

I don't really miss seeing my dad's old handkerchief, or how he would fold it after a good nose blowing and put it back in his pocket, but I do miss those silk and lace ones. I feel that each design is different and tells its own little story. Though my mom no longer knows where her old hanky is, she tells me she wishes she still had it.

"It was my favourite one. Your dad gave it to me when we first started dating. I sewed just two violets then, and just before you were born, I sewed another one. I knew you were going to be a girl before I had you," she said, eyes glittering with fond memories.

This past summer, I went to China to visit my relatives. I asked my dad to take me sightseeing and he took me to SuZhou, a city known for its exquisite embroideries. It is said that SuZhou provided the majority of embroidered silks for the ancient emperors of China because the people in the city were gifted with unbelievably talented hands. I was not disappointed. As soon as I laid my eyes upon the rows and rows of silk handkerchiefs in the market stand, I was

captured by their humble beauty, and in awe of the hands that created them.

Sure, hankies are still used today on special occasions, such as weddings and funerals, but how many people do you know still carries one around everyday, especially the intricate lace and silks ones?

The truth is, they are something that most people have just forgotten about or simply overlooked. My kid sister referred to them as "a square piece of fabric used in the ancient times by women." I think she means "vintage", not "ancient".

I asked Carole Tanenbaum, a well-known vintage collector, why handkerchiefs have lost its popularity. She says it's because no one has really cultivated a market for them.

"Everything has its cycle but I think it's that nobody has gotten behind handkerchiefs to boost them up. Handkerchiefs are probably the best-kept secret of collecting because they are textiles and there are some extraordinary designs in the fabrics that they use," she explained.

Carole is known for her vintage costume jewelry collection and has been collecting for over 20 years. Her pieces have been exhibited in museums such as the Royal Ontario Museum and featured in photo shoots for magazines such as Vogue, Flare, Fashion, and Elle. She says although she mainly collects vintage jewelry, handkerchiefs are something that she loves and would definitely collect more of if she had the time.

In fact, Carole actually keeps a white lace hanky in her some of her clear purses and loves it when people comment on it. More people are looking to be different from the rest, to stand out, and that's where vintage items come into play. People look for the unusual because it's a great conversation starter and it also makes a memorable impression.

"All the coutures are copying vintage designs, and I think they're doing it because those designs were so terrific and so unusual. It creates a real fashion statement because people stop and take notice," she said.

I'm not sure if later on handkerchiefs will regain its popularity, but I'm going to start tying one around my wrist because I love them. And I'm going to cherish every weird look and intrigued smile because I know I'm making my own little statement.