



OBJECT ID F2014.168

OBJECT NAME Handkerchief

MATERIAL Silk

ACCESS POINTS Personal Gear
Silk
Square
White

OBJECT DESCRIPTION

Large, white, square, silk handkerchief. About one inch border that is plain like the rest of the handkerchief, but is defined by a very thin cutwork line. The whole of the hanky is plain white, minus one of the corners that has an embroidered jacquard design on it; done in the same color as the rest of the hanky, just raised.

ORIGIN

Was held within F2014.159, along with a number of other handkerchiefs.

A square of cloth, smartly decorated, becomes a fashion accessory, a bandage, a tissue, a flag, a small basket, or a love token. Handkerchiefs are useful, if somewhat old-fashioned, but utility isn't even the half of it. The first written reference to hankies comes from the Roman poet Catullus in the 1st century AD. Called sudarium from the root sudor (to sweat), Romans used hankies to wipe the sweat from their brows, and to shield their heads from the sun. The start of the Roman games was signalled by dropping a handkerchief. High linen costs made sudarium an accessory for the rich, who waved them like flags to show excitement during gladiator matches.

The English called it a 'coverchief' (for covering the head) and then 'hand coverchief' for the smaller version meant to be carried. They were imported from France in great numbers in the 14th and 15th centuries. In the 16th century, Italy, well known for its exquisite 'Venice lace,' began producing richly embellished handkerchiefs for the well-to-do all over Europe. Ladies and gentlemen posed for paintings clutching lace handkerchiefs as a sign of wealth and prestige. Italian noblewomen, outraged that prostitutes were flaunting the accessories they felt should be exclusive to nobility, pushed to regulate the availability of hankies through price-setting in major cities like Florence and Milan. Queen Elizabeth I in England was particularly fond of handkerchiefs embroidered with real silver and gold, and was gifted many by admirers hoping to curry her favor. With its increasing popularity, the value of the hanky rose to astronomical heights. Henry IV gave two handkerchiefs, worth 1000 francs and 900 francs, to his mistress in 1594. They were so valuable that he asked for their return after her death! In 1785, Louis XVI issued a decree forbidding anyone from making handkerchiefs that were not square.

Through World War II, handkerchiefs were an important part of European and American societies. They were perfumed, and used to veil the face and mask the odors of pre-plumbing Europe, kept in special 'sweet bags,' given away as love tokens, and used as props for elaborate flirting rituals. During both World Wars, pilots would wear silk kerchiefs printed with maps of the areas they flew over: if they were shot down, they were wearing an escape map. Hundreds of hankies were printed specifically for soldiers.

Ultimately, it was Kleenex's "Don't carry a cold in your pocket" ad campaign that signaled the slow demise of the hanky. No longer a symbol of wealth and prestige, modern advertising turned the handkerchief into a terrible breeding ground for filth and disease.

CITATION

Handkerchief, *National Hellenic Museum*, <https://collections.nationalhellenicmuseum.org/Detail/objects/>. Accessed 11/13/25.
