

# A Wealthy Man's Pouch/Purse from the War of the Roses Era

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# The Purse

## My Reconstruction

The reconstruction is made of gold silk damask. It is 100% silk, with a plain dark red silk lining (known as Sarcenet in the fifteenth century). The pouch is designed in a common shape for the mid to late fifteenth century, it has pearls and silk thread tassels, and it has a brass purse bar with lid molded off an extant purse bar from the mid-fifteenth century. This purse is completely hand-sewn with silk thread. The silk tassels on the purse are also hand made with silk thread.

## Historical Basis

There are numerous purses and pouches in historical paintings from the fifteenth century. Many members of the upper class, represented in these works of art, are wearing some form of purse/pouch made of a fine material, they appear to be silk velvet or silk damask. Methods of decorating these pouches include embroidery, beading, adding jewels, and tassels.

For my reconstruction, I chose to recreate a purse with a silk damask outer shell and a silk lining. Several painting show what looks like silk damask pouches including "Portrait of Guillaume Jouvenel des Ursins" by Jean Fouquet, "Bladelin Triptych" by Van der Weyden, and "Annunciation" by Antoniazzo Romano.



Portrait of  
Guillaume Jouvenel des Ursins



Effigy of William Browne

The Paston's were a well off family in the fifteenth century. They started in the defined social class "**Substantial Squire**" estate I have listed below, the father being a lawyer and the mother a wool merchant, and moved into the the "**Knights Estate**" during the War of the roses. John Paston Sr. turned down knighthood not wanting the extra responsablity and taxes but his sons do become knights. In letters written between members of this family, The Paston Letters, there are two references to expensive silk pouches. In a 1462 inventory there is listed a pouch of blue velvet with pearls and in an inventory from 1473 there is a pouch of russet (red brown) colored silk damask listed.

- A powche of blew velwet wyth pearlis therin ensealid. (Inventory and indenture: draft, June 6, 1462)
- A powche of rosset damaske (Inventory, not long after 1473)

The shape I chose was a common shape among the paintings of wealthy men from the era, "Portrait of a Young Man", "Effigy of William Browne", and "Annunciation by Antoniazzo Romano all share a similar shape to my reconstruction. There is a top/lid on my pouch based on the fifteenth century purse bar I purchased and also based on paintings like

"Annunciation", "the Effigy of William Browne", and "The Malachi Prophesizes" from the Bible historiale by Guiard des Moulins.



Annunciation



Portrait of a Young Man

Adding silk tassels is based on Constance de Hauteville Refuses Marriage from the Boccaccio's de Mulierbus Claris. You can also see a clear image of the shape of tassels in the Portrait of Guillaume Jouvenel on the pillow in front of him and Altarpiece of the Patron Saints of Cologne by Stefan Lochner. The

pearls are based on the jewelry and beads on the pouches in the Portrait of a Young Man, the Bladelin Triptych (right wing) by Van der Weyden, the St Columba Altarpiece (central panel) by Van der Weyden, Chroniques de Hainaut, and the Altarpiece of the Patron Saints of Cologne.



**St Columba  
Alterpiece**



**Chroniques  
de Hainaut**



**Malachi Prophesizes  
Bible historique**



**Altarpiece of the Patron  
Saints of Cologne**



**Constance de Hauteville  
refuses marriage  
Boccaccio's De mulieribus claris**



**Bladelin Triptych**

## Why is this a Luxury Item?

First lets talk about fifteenth century English currency; it was 1£ (pound) = 20s (shilling) = 240d (pence). Damask silk was an expensive fabric in the fifteenth century; a yard of it cost a quarter of a year's salary for the lowest laboring class. Below are two sections with the cost of fabric and the salary ranges for people of the 15<sup>th</sup> century earned.

I used about a yard of silk damask (12s), due to the pattern matching, and half a yard of plain silk (2s) for this purse. Also it has pearls and silk tassels. I would estimate that the cost of materials and about a day or labor at 4d for a skilled tradesman would bring the cost of a pouch like this at 1£ to 1£ 10s not knowing the cost of pearls or silk tassels.

To put this in perspective against items of war in a time of civil unrest in England a sword, dagger, or lance costs 1£. A helmet ran 3£ to 4£. A jack (layered linen body armor) cost 3£ to 6£. A brigandine (body armor in leather or velvet) cost 11£ to 14£. A full suit of armor ran 40£ and a good war horse 100£ and a normal riding horse 50£. Swords and daggers were so costly to the common archer that many did not own one when they mustered according to the muster rolls at the time. Archers were often levied from local towns and were common farmers and laborers, yeomen archers were in service to a lord and would be issued a sword, jack or brigandine, and a sallet helmet.

### Cost of Fabrics in the Fifteenth Century

Medieval measurements did not always match up with our modern measurements: 1 yard = 36 in = 91.5 cm. 1 Flemish ell = 27in = 68.5 cm. 1 English ell = 45 in = 114 cm.

There are so many types of wools I am only going to name a few basic styles to give a core sample of costs to compare against the cost of linen and silk.

## **Linen**

Cavas: 27" wide, cost 3d-4d per English ell. Coarse heavy flax or hemp cloth.

Buckram: 27" wide, cost 5d-6d per English ell. Stiff fabric commonly used to line clothing and doublets.

Linen: 27" wide, cost 4+d per English ell. Standard linen cloth.

Linen: 27" wide, cost 7d-12d per English ell. The finest plain linen.

Paris and Diaper: 27" wide, cost 1s-2s per English ell. A fine patterned linen demask

## **Wool**

Freise: 36" wide, cost 6d to 10d per yard. Welsh twill wool with a coarse feel. Often used in the making of cheap clothing or linings.

Broadcloth: 63" to 72" wide, cost 1s 4d to 4s per yard. Standard English tabby wool, heavily felted. Normally dyed after it was woven. Quality varied.

Keresy: 45" wide, cost 6d to 2s per yard. A heavy weight medium quality twill weave wool from England.

Worsted: 36" wide, cost 1s to 2s per yard. Worsted is a term for a twill with with no nap. Quality varied. The Paston letters have a request for fine worsted wool in a light weight for doublets.

## **Silk**

Sarcenet: 18" wide, cost 2s-5s per yard. A plain light weight cloth, commonly used for linings.

Satin: 18" wide, cost 6s-7s per yard. A weave the produceses a shimmering surface. Often listed to as used for a mid level upper class garment.

Damask: 18" wide, cost 7s-12s per yard. A richly patterned silk fabric.

Velvet: 18" wide, cost 10+s per yard.

## **Social Classes and Their Wages in the Fifteenth Century**

Here is a break down of some social classes of the fifteenth century and the yearly average income. It really shows the level of people who could afford luxury items at this time.

### **Laborers**

- Many peasants had only a little to no land.
- Also Monks , etc, from houses worth less than 40 pounds.
- Other clerks without advancement.

Income ranged from £1 10s. to £3 annually.

### **Husbandmen**

- A holding of 30-15 acres of arable land
- A groom in household service would live about as well; perhaps receiving somewhat finer clothes than the husbandman in a livery and maintenance contract with a lord
- The poorest landed lesser merchants or artificers
- Pleaders
- Monks and canons from lesser houses

Income ranged from £3 to £5 annually.

### **Yeoman's Estate**

- A yeoman farmer would hold perhaps 100 acres or more
- A skilled craftsman like an ordinary master carpenter
- The middle rank of household servants were ranked as yeomen or valets
- Middling to poor innkeepers
- Married pardoners or summoners
- Farmers of manor or parsonage
- Wholesalers dealing in stock and other lesser trade
- Landed lesser merchants or artificers
- All other beneficed curates, and parish and annual chaplains
- Monks and canons from middling houses

Income: £5-<£10

### **Landless Squire**

- Landless Squire in Service or Arms Poorer franklins or sergeants of the country
- Richest innkeepers and married pardoners or summoners
- 2nd rank of farmers of manor or parsonage
- Wholesalers dealing in stock and other lesser trade
- Lesser landed merchants or artificers
- Clerics with appropriate income
- Monks and canons from the wealthiest houses

Income: £10-<£20

### **Substantial Squire**

- Squire of lesser estate, or widow of one
- Other sufficient merchant, or widow of one
- Apprentices of law and attorneys of lesser estate
- Middling or poor mayors of small towns
- Richer franklins or sergeants of the country
- Richest farmers of manor or parsonage
- Wholesalers dealing in stock and other lesser trade
- Lesser landed merchants or artificers.
- Cleric with appropriate income

Income £20 to £66 13s. 3d

### **Knight's Estate**

- Knight bachelor, or a widow of
- Squire that ought to be knight, or a widow of
- Commander of Hospitallers
- Middling apprentice of law or attorney
- Rich mayor of small town
- Municipal officer of large town

- Great merchant, or cleric as above with appropriate income.

Income ranged from £66 13s. 4d. to £200 annually

### Baron's Estate

- Baron, banneret, widowed baroness or banneress
- Knight able to spend as baron
- Prior of Hospitallers in England
- Alderman of London
- Mayor of great town
- Sergeant or great apprentice of the law
- Married advocate
- Notary or procurator
- Abbot without mitre
- Dean
- Archdeacon
- Provost
- Precentor
- Chancellor
- Treasurer, or parson with benefice or office worth appropriate income.

Income ranged from £200 to £400 annually.

### Basic Soldiers pay

This is not a social class really but I find the information relevant to the topic. Soldiers made great wages an archer made 6d a day and a man-at-arms made 12d a day during war time. Knights and lords were required by the social contract of their rank to give military service and Lords had to fund their men with the expectation the crown would pay them back.

## Full Paintings and Effigies





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