

Encrusted bags evoke an age of elegance

Vanity cases

Claire Adler previews an exhibition that explores the history of make-up

London's Goldsmiths' Hall is set to exhibit a collection of more than 300 bejewelled make-up cases and evening bags dating back to the 18th century. These elaborate objects, that collectively tell their own story about the history of make-up and women starting to wear it, are likely to give modern-day crystal encrusted designer clutches a run for their money.

"Some of these enchanting little evening bags took over 700 hours to make," says Meredith Etherington-Smith, author of *Ultra-Vanities*, that is being published to coincide with the exhibition that opens at the end of May. "Many incorporate historic plaques of jade and coral. To make them, gold was ribbed in different colours or even woven to look like basket work. Guilloché enamels were encrusted with diamonds and precious stones."

The exhibition will show pieces by Van Cleef & Arpels, Bulgari, Tiffany, Cartier, Chaumet, Schlumberger, Lacloche, Boivin, Mauboussin and Buccelatti, in styles reflecting trends from Art Deco, to Art Nouveau, Cubism, Bauhaus and the Ballets Russes.

Highlights include an onyx and diamond evening bag surmounted with a wolf's head, commissioned in 1921, by Elsie de Wolfe, the American actress, interior decorator and socialite, whose clients included the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

In the 18th century, make-up became increasingly visible. By the time of Queen Victoria's reign in the 19th century, growing

numbers of women used cosmetics and the privileged ones kept their make-up hidden in supple mesh bags made of gold and silver threads, some as fine as human hair. Fabergé was an important influence at the turn of the 20th century, producing enamelled and jewelled cigarette cases and powder compacts depicting traditional Russian motifs.

The gamine fashions of the 1920s from the likes of Coco Chanel and Jean Patou led to a streamlined chic that demanded the slimmest and flattest clutch bags, so couturiers sometimes teamed up with the important jewellers of the time, notably Cartier, to produce adventurous designs, often inspired by



the west's fascination with Shanghai, known at the time as the Paris of the East, according to Ms Etherington-Smith.

"In the 1920s, women suddenly wore far fewer clothes than their upholstered and draped predecessors. Beneath a neat Chanel jersey suit or a semi-transparent georgette slip dress embroidered with sequins, there was no room for the necessities of life such as lipstick and powder," she says.

Some of the new evening bags were so tiny they slipped neatly into larger antelope suede handbags that were often designed with a window to reveal the



Make-up magic: items from the Goldsmiths' exhibition include a vanity case made by Van Cleef & Arpels (above) and a fan styled case by Boucheron (below)

front of the case itself.

In the tradition of the most elevated kind of craftsmanship, what is going on inside these delicate objects is at least as important as what is visible on the outside. A bit like nano versions of Mary Poppins bags, some of the most intricate ones are tiny but simultaneously a whole world. Open one up and a lipstick holder, clock, comb, mirror, cigarette lighter and powder compact could all unfurl, appearing from apparently nowhere.

In 1935, Charles Arpels, a co-founder of Parisian jewellery house Van Cleef & Arpels, invented a new word for his own company's version of these opulent evening bags. "In 1934, Charles Arpels attended a function and noticed that the famous American heiress Florence Gould was carrying her lipstick, cigarette lighter, powder case and a few bank notes in an unattractive Lucky Strike tin box," says François Curiel, president of Christie's Asia. Charles Arpels then invented the name *minaudière* inspired by his sister Estelle, whose manners, he said, amused everyone,

basing the name on the French words "*elle minaudière*".

"The *minaudière* evolved from a simple gold case with compartments to extremely sophisticated models in various colours of lacquer and precious stones," says Mr Curiel.

It would be easy to think such objects might be useful for keeping the true extent of a lady's vanity a closely guarded secret, but evidently this was not the case. "Women would put make-up on in public at dinner, or in nightclubs. It was a liberated and brave new world thing to do," says Ms Etherington-Smith.

Lovers and collectors of *haute couture* as well as jewellery are expected to visit the exhibition. Unsurprisingly, such pieces have a collector's appeal. At a Christie's auction in Geneva in 2012, a blackened gold evening bag by Marina B in the form of an elephant, set with yellow and white diamonds and pearls, soared past its pre-sale estimate to fetch a handsome SFr99,000.

"The *Ultra Vanities* collection is fascinating not only because of the exquisite workmanship and the miracles of miniature engineering that into their interiors, but because it shows the power these glittering relics have to evoke a vanished age of elegance," says Ms Etherington-Smith.

Ultra Vanities - Bejewelled Make Up Boxes from the Age of Glamour
Goldsmiths' Hall, Friday 31 May to Saturday 20 July 2013

