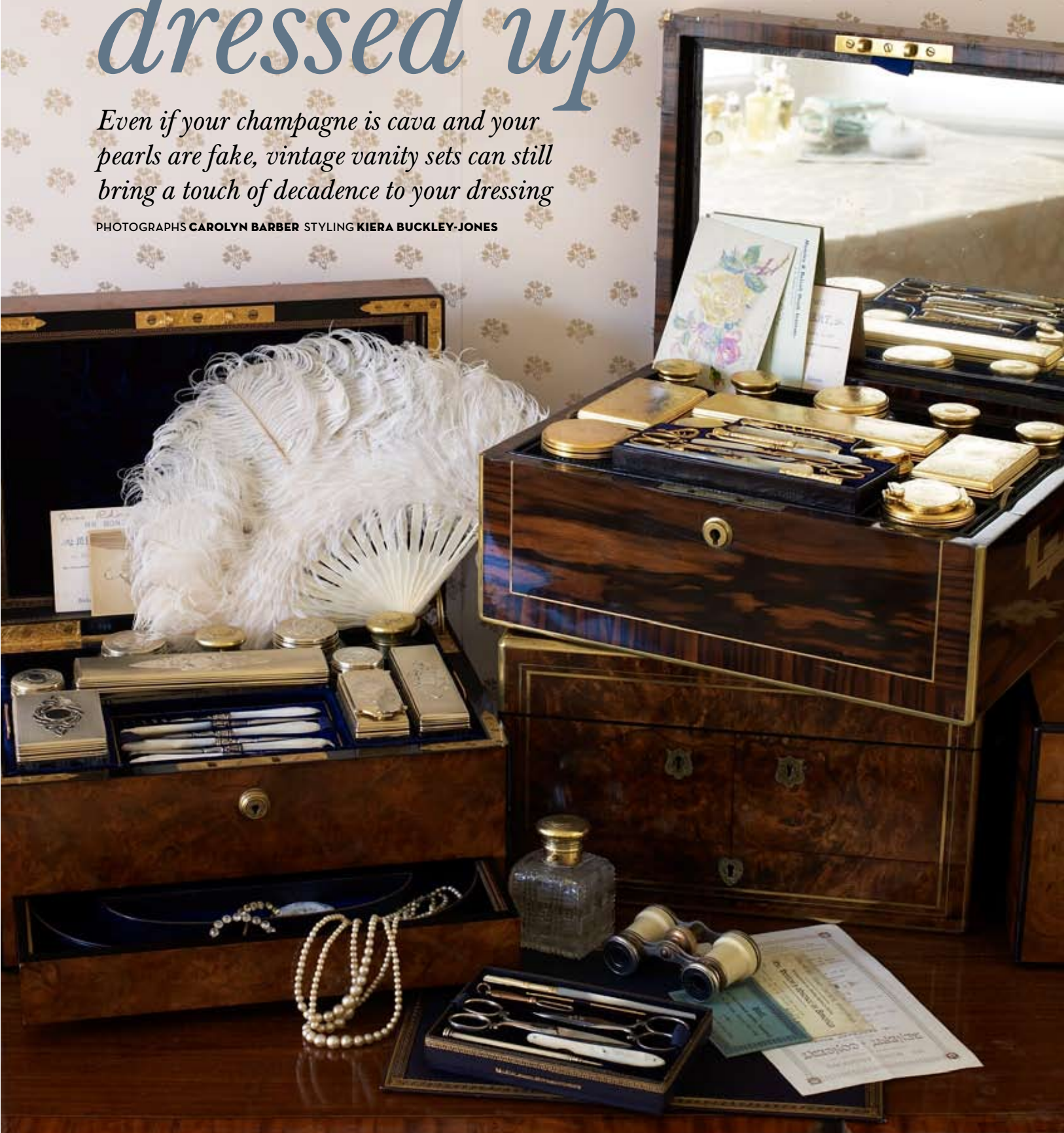


All dressed up

Even if your champagne is cava and your pearls are fake, vintage vanity sets can still bring a touch of decadence to your dressing

PHOTOGRAPHS CAROLYN BARBER STYLING KIERA BUCKLEY-JONES



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DELVING DEEPER

Because they were created by so many different craftsmen, dressing cases can be a mine of marks and information. These can include the retailer's stamp or label; the hall mark of the silversmith (different silversmiths could be involved in the production of a single case); the signature of a lock smith; and the marks of different companies and craftsmen who produced individual items such as pencils, clocks and scissors. In addition to this cases and contents can be decorated with family monograms, mottos and crests. Travel labels can also occasionally be found. Any such information forms part of the history of the case and should be recorded. Richard Gardner suggests that anyone purchasing a vanity box should also leave details of their own purchase and some personal information in one of the drawers. 'In 100 years or so, you too will be part of that case's

In Jersey museum is a travelling dressing case made in 1892 for Lillie Langtry, celebrated actress and mistress of Edward, Prince of Wales. The magnificent wooden box opens up to reveal a plethora of pull-out drawers and swing-out compartments, all lined with scarlet velvet. Each section is fitted with silver gilt accessories – chased, monogrammed and inlaid with turquoises - ranging from powder boxes to manicure tools, from hair brushes to shoehorns, an impressive total of 72 different items guaranteed to keep the Jersey Lily in full bloom, wherever her busy schedule took her.

Travelling dressing cases made their debut around a century earlier, and because men travelled more than women, most were initially designed for male use. 'With their cut-throat razors and a brandy flasks, they were made for officers serving across the empire and for gentlemen going on a grand tour,' explains dealer Richard Gardner. By the regency period, dressing cases were becoming equally

popular with women, as ladies followed the social season, partying in London, taking the waters at Bath, and paying extended visits to grand country houses. For both sexes a travelling dressing case provided a little home from home, where you could fix your hair, write your letters (most cases included writing equipment) and store your valuables. A good box, containing the work of literally dozens of expert craftsmen, working in every medium from wood and glass to silver and textiles, was also a status symbol that would hopefully impress your hosts.

Famous retailers included royal jewellers Asprey's; Edwards of King Street, Holborn, dressing case makers to William IV; and William Leuchars, first established in Piccadilly in 1794 as a Perruquier but who, when wigs fell from fashion became a high society silver and goldsmith. The box itself was made by a cabinet maker - the finest examples produced from rare woods such as coromandel and figured walnut, perhaps decorated with inlays and brass, and secured by the latest patent lock.

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“Discovering who used these objects, seeing their handwriting, reading their letters really brings a box to life”



Edwards for example used Joseph Bramah, the most famous locksmith of the day, who in 1784 designed a lock of such complexity that he promised 200 guineas to anyone who could open it. The reward remained unclaimed until the Great Exhibition of 1851, when an American locksmith finally unpicked it, but only after 53 hours of concentrated work.

WELL TURNED-OUT

Apart from the odd dusting of powder, cosmetics were considered indecent for a respectable Victorian lady, but lack of make-up was made up for by elaborate hair-care. Lillie Langtry’s dressing case includes a pair of solid silver curling tongs while a Victorian dressing case made for Viscountess Exmouth (for sale through Richard Gardner) houses a jar still filled with hairpins. Rounded military hairbrushes were used by men, whilst for women there were long handled brushes complete with a matching hand mirror which could be used to check the back of the hair.

In a world of uncertain hygiene, perfume was particularly important and an armoury of exquisite silver-topped jars and bottles in heavy-cut crystal was intended for a plethora of scents, creams and fragrant pomades. Many vanity cases also included a small corkscrew, not a sign of incipient alcoholism, but used to open then decant throwaway toilet water flasks purchased from the perfumier. Intimate items, such as solid silver tongue scrapers or a cunning little tool with tweezers at one end and an ear wax remover at the other are occasionally discovered too.

Cleanliness was next to Godliness and manufacturers literally thought of everything when it came to avoiding dirt. Clothes brushes, hat brushes (even a moustache brush) are sometimes found, and other fashion essentials include manicure tools, shoe horns, glove stretchers and button hooks for the endless, fiddly buttons on everything from gloves to boots. Leuchars provided a silver holder to secure a napkin to your clothes when eating and a silver and tortoiseshell page turner (looking like a giant paper knife) so a lady could turn the pages of a newspaper without soiling her lily-white hands. Ink pens and needle cases and sewing equipment are often found, while silver tea mugs (with folding ivory handles) and vesta cases for lighting your silver brandy warmer are other interesting novelties.

‘Outside and in, a good dressing case contains the best of everything. What I love



DETAILS From top left: Antique tapestry, with rose pink and blue pattern, c1900, £365, Great English Outdoors. Detail of 19th-century narrow loom blankets, £100-£200, both Jen Jones **BY MILL SIGN** From top: fringe throw, yellow, green and orange, 1960s, £95, Great English Outdoors. 1940s plaid blanket, £60-0-£65; Jen Jones. Blue and cream with some red and multi coloured threads, 1940-50, £95, Jen Jones **THIS PAGE** from left: Ben Thomas c1900 striped narrow width blanket, £349, Welsh Blankets. 19th-century narrow loom blankets, £100-£200, Jen Jones. Folded blankets, as before,



about them is their ingenuity and not an inch of space is wasted,' says antique box dealer Mark Goodger unlocking a mid Victorian case by Austin of Dublin. From inside the lid he removes a dressing mirror to reveal a leather document folder - a perfect hiding place for love letters or unwanted bills. Underneath the top layer of bottles and cosmetic accessories are two secret drawers - one lined with purple leather, the other a silk and velvet jewellery box - both opened by pressing carefully concealed buttons. 'I began my career as a furniture restorer and it's not until you take one of these boxes apart that you can really appreciate how amazing the mechanisms are,' he enthuses. 'People often don't realise there are hidden compartments and I've found letters, small pieces of jewellery, locks of hair and all sorts of little mementoes.'

Richard also loves the air of intrigue carried by an unopened box. 'You never know what - or even who - you are going to find,' says Richard. 'I think it's the little boy in me, but I get really excited when I open up a case and begin to explore who made it and who owned

it.' He has spent months decoding crests and monograms, and tracking down the personal histories of these Victorian travelling owners. 'Discovering who used these objects, seeing their handwriting, reading their letters really brings a box to life,' he says.

By the second half of the 19th century vanity boxes were being produced for every level of the market - exotic wood, cut crystal and solid silver being replaced by cheap mahogany, pressed glass and silver plate. But by the Edwardian age with the expansion of rail travel and the arrival of the motor car, the wooden travelling box was supplanted by the leather suitcase and an era of elegance drew to a close. Suddenly old-fashioned dressing boxes were either broken up, their contents removed and scattered, or at best, put away in the attic. Today it's hard to find an early Victorian vanity case in complete and perfect condition. The best examples were expensive when they were first made and good pieces can still sell for £4,000-£6,000 and considerably more. 'For the very rarest pieces, in top condition, with complex mechanisms, lots of amazing

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FIND OUT MORE

What to read

- **Vintage Luggage** by Helenka Gulshan, Philip Wilson Publishers, includes a helpful directory of makers of travelling vanity cases and other luggage.

- **The Schiffer Book: Antique Boxes, Tea Caddies & Society 1700-1880** by Antigone Clarke and Joseph O'Kelly

Where to buy

- **Richard Gardner Antiques.** Eastrop House, 3 East Pallant, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 1TR. 01243 533772; richardgardnerantiques.co.uk

- **Hampton Antiques.** 01604 863979; hamptonantiques.co.uk. The London Silver Vaults. Chancery House, 53-64 Chancery Lane, City of London WC2A 1QT. 020 7242 3844

- **Antique Boxes at the Sign of the Hygra.** 2 Middleton Road, London E8 4BL 020 7 254 7074; hygra.com

“For both sexes a travelling dressing case provided a little home from home, where you could fix your hair, write your letters and store your valuables”

