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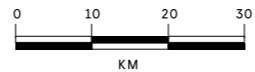
PART. 2



OTTAWA

HOW THE ZIP OPENED UP THE 20TH CENTURY

BY MANUEL CHARPY*



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“Eight buttons means eighteen seconds lost each day,” avers Parisian antiques dealer Pierre Nioxe. [...] “All my trousers are fitted with zip fasteners.”

“The days that the zips get stuck, Monsieur loses an hour,” [his servant] Chantepie remarks, “and I get the blame.”

“Buy me some mechanic’s overalls!”
“That’s not what Monsieur should be wearing!”¹

Such is Paul Morand’s “Man in a Hurry”: obsessed with living in the perpetual present of speed, down to the slightest details. But time catches up with him and he is felled by a heart attack. The zip fastener was a heresy in a social sphere where sophistication meant having servants and time. An antiques dealer covered with zips: luxury

objects in the 1920s and 30s were just like this kind of surreal chimera.

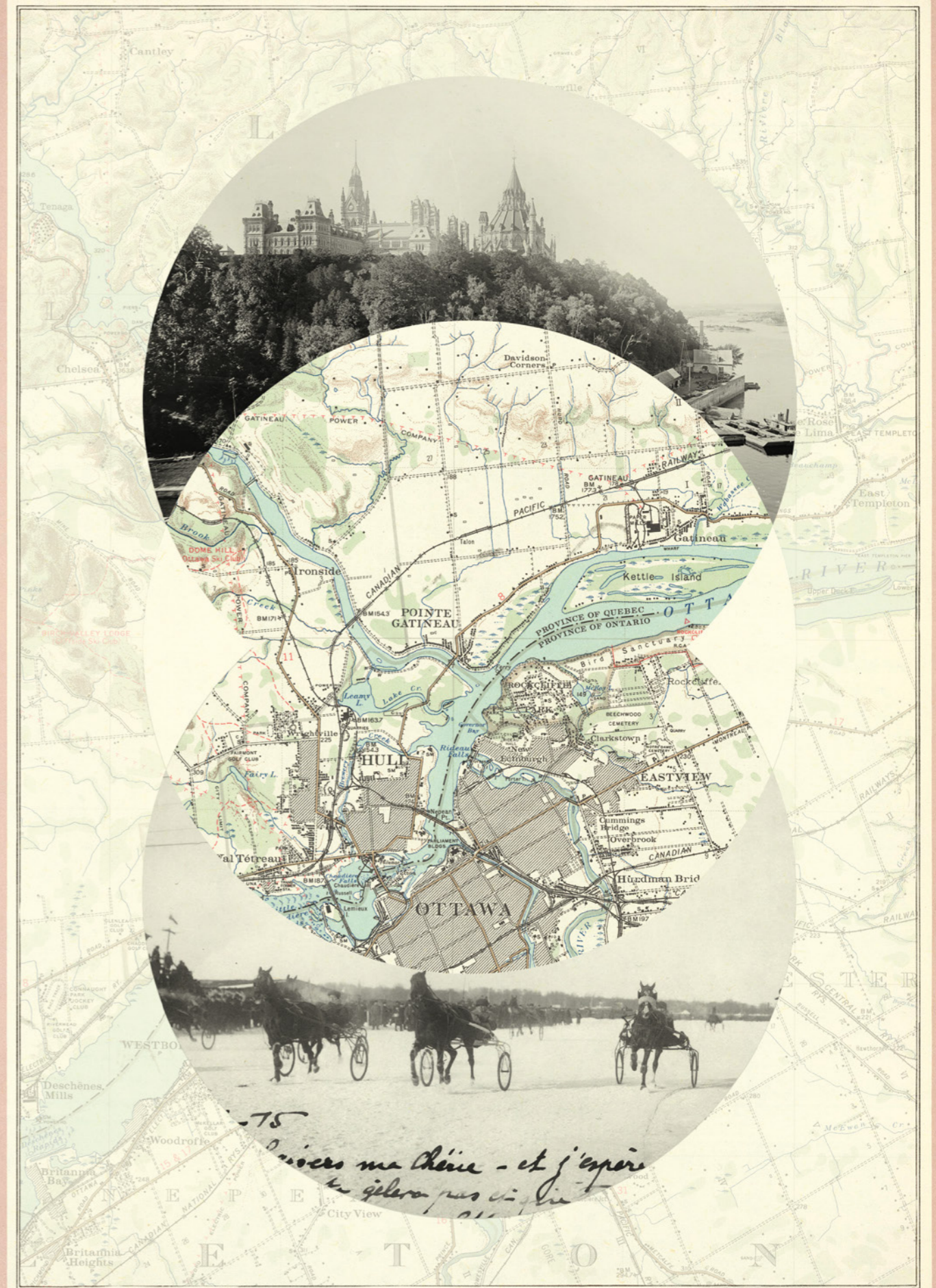
PROTECTING SECRETS

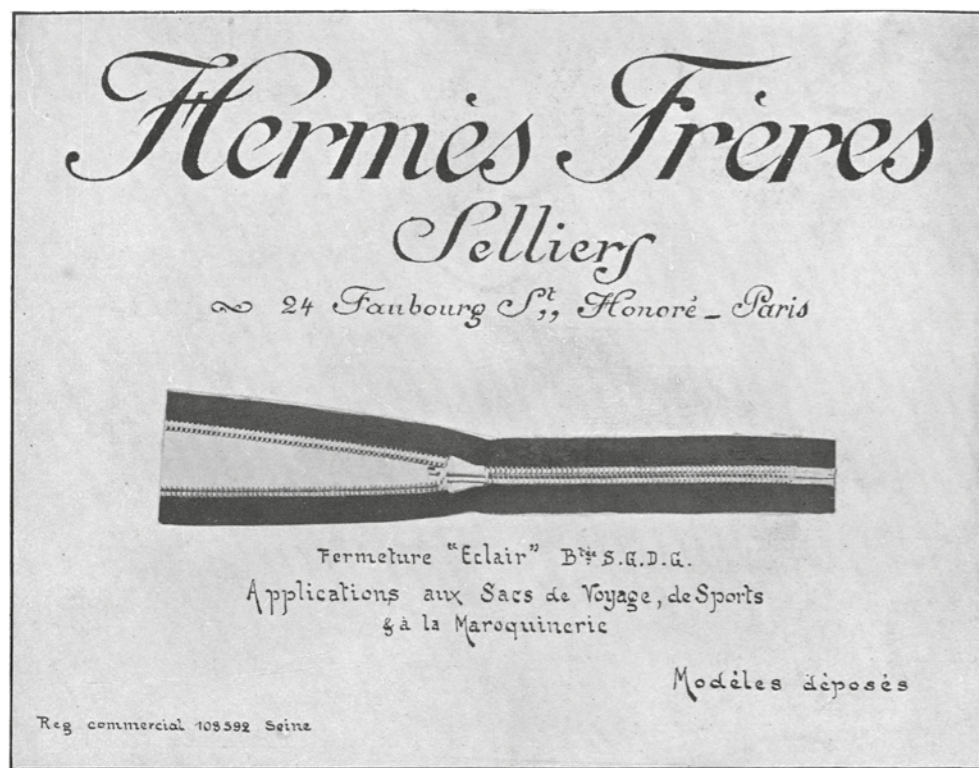
The question of fastening mechanisms has a long history in high society. In the 18th century the aristocracy cultivated its inner life and invented a world of privacy in its apartments, fashioning objects to which it could confide its secrets. Letters and personal diaries were penned when seated at the aptly named secretaire. Locks on drawers and roll-down tops secured confidences and memories. These modest metal fittings became the sine qua non of secrecy, protecting the soul’s torments from the curiosity of servants. Mistresses and masters of the house were never without their bulky bunch of keys.

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1. Paul Morand, *The Man in a Hurry* [1941], London: Pushkin Press, 2015.

2. Walter Benjamin, “The Interior, The Trace”, in *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.





Hermès Frères Selliers, catalogue, 1923

In the 19th century this taste spread to the bourgeoisie. To protect the fastness of its privacy, it developed a host of padded cases and sealed boxes for its gloves and handkerchiefs, its savings and its souvenirs.² The private diary, which taught young girls the art of soul-searching and the culture of secrecy, was in turn covered with leather and protected by a bronze lock. Privacy took refuge behind leather and bolts. It is no surprise that the turnbuckles on Hermès handbags are like keys stuck in a lock.

And when a gentleman of the 19th-century left the home that was his castle, jacket and waistcoat protected a host of inner pockets, sealed off by buttons and watch or wallet chains similar to the chains used to secure apartments. If needed, he would carry a portfolio (sometimes ministerial): a briefcase with a lock.

For women, secrets were held in the hand. Long confined to lowly status, accompanied by servants, a lady carried neither official

papers nor money. She stored in her bag the impedimenta of self-mastery: notebook, souvenirs, make-up, salts and a mirror. In tooled and gilt leather, or in silver thread for the ballroom, the handbag had to be inviolable. Starting in the 1850s, access was prevented by an articulated metal jaw.

TRAVEL BAG

When travelling, comfort and privacy were packed together in nécessaires and caskets holding the wherewithal for nose-powdering, refreshment and divertissement. But, after 1845, the ever-increasing speed of city life ushered in change. As well as English trunks and portmanteaux, the modern gentleman also needed a supple bag that was easy to use. This was called the “travel bag”, “overnight bag” or, more prosaically, “railway bag”. The closure was central, the unwanted spillage of personal affairs in public places being as much a concern as theft. Saddlers developed ways of securing these bags,

3. Lebrun, *Manuel complet du bourrellier et du sellier contenant la description de tous les procédés usuels, perfectionnés ou nouvellement inventés, pour garnir toutes sortes de voitures, et préparer leur attelage, suivi d'un vocabulaire des termes techniques*, Paris: Librairie Encyclopédique de Roret, 1833; and *Album d'articles de voyages*, Godillot Père et Fils, 1842.

4. See the patents by Boucheron: Patent for a Boucheron fastener system, applicable to travel bags, shopping bags, game bags, etc., 1848 (patent no. 1BB7013); and Boucheron et Thépenier, Fastening device for travel bags, 1851 (patent no. 1BB12155). The Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle has over thirty patents issued between 1850 and 1871 concerning fasteners for overnight or travel bags, purses, ladies' bags, pouches, purses, etc.

sometimes with a chain.³ Padlocks secured with keys or, as of the 1850s, codes, were indispensable, and sometimes developed into genuine “bag jewellery”.

In parallel, a large, jaw-like system using springs and keys was developed by the locksmith Boucheron in the late 1840s.⁴ Quick, strong and safe, it appeared on the Squaremouth bags that soon became emblematic of the medical profession. As one dictionary of trade products enthused in 1900: “The humble overnight bag, or railway bag [...] has become an elegant, comfortable, even luxurious item that meets all the needs of modern progress.”⁵

For its part, Hermès set about introducing the sliding mechanism of the zip into its collections. The system for which it took out a patent was put into action on wallets and purses, on briefcases, travel bags and, in 1923, the *Auto* handbag. Over the years that followed, a series of patents for zip fastening systems combined swiftness of closure with security, notably on zippers whose pull-tab was itself a padlock.⁶ In 1929 even the popular Manufrance catalogue was offering an elegant model that “fastens and opens instantaneously all the way up simply by sliding a zip. [...] A padlock fastens this zip and makes the bag absolutely inviolable. This model of bag is incomparably supple and light, thanks to its closure system, which does away with heavy, rigid metal fasteners.”⁷ For women's bags, however, prudence prevailed: the zip was on the inside, sometimes on the back and the main pouch was closed using straps and a turnbuckle.

NOT LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT

The protection of privacy also concerned clothing, even at its most refined. Mechanics entered the sartorial arena. Antoine Gibus offered gents top hats whose



Frimas leather dress, sports collection autumn-winter 1930

5. “Voyages (articles de); Sacs et trousseaux”, *Dictionnaire du commerce, de l'industrie et de la banque*, Paris: Guillaumin et Cie, 1899-1900.

6. The main patent was the one by the Swiss Martin Winterhalter: Zip fastener, 1926 (patent no. 601390); for locking fasteners, Julius Lampferhof: “Fermoir-éclair” fastener with key-locking hook, 1930 (patent no. 694681).

7. “Articles de voyage”, *Catalogue de la Manufacture française d'armes et cycles de Saint-Étienne*, 1929.



Aviator's outfit in leather, sports collection autumn-winter 1930



Leather golf bags, 1922

frame sported hinges and springs, while handbags and umbrellas became foldable.⁸ Women squeezed into corsets made with metal lathes and secured with busks that looked like locks. For men, hooks and grips held trousers and braces.

Sartorial slovenliness was dreaded, being synonymous with the dissolute life of the bohemian artist or woman of loose morals. Buttons and hooks might come unsewn, threatening an unseemly gape. For women, this worry was averted by placing the fastenings of dresses, skirts and bodies down the back. For both sexes, too, privacy was protected by layers, like those double curtains in the home. The toothed slide fastener, a kind of mechanical stitch, reassured. When the engineer Aronsson, from the first Universal Fastener factory in the USA, brought the system to Paris in about 1910, it was for clothing, as the

advertisement for his “American all-purpose fastener” confirms: “Its flexibility offers security and speed. All elegant and practical women will choose it, and thus avoid the frequent and so very undignified opening of their skirts and bodices.”

The “close-all” also kept another, more ambiguous promise. With its help women could “dress quickly and all on their own”.⁹ An advertising poster shows a woman undoing her own corset, much to the amazement of her husband and the stupefaction of her chambermaid.

But even when richly coated in nickel, the sliding fastener was considered too vulgar for city wear. Like the machinery beneath prestigious coachwork, this new contraption had to be concealed: on the back for women's clothing, inside the jackets of men's suits and under a fabric flap for the trousers. The disquiet turned

8. Antoine Gibus, Patent for a top hat that folds in a perpendicular direction, 1834 (patent no. 1BA4521) and Sophisticated Mechanical Hats, 1837 (patent no. 1BA6418); Steeve Gallizia, “La mécanique des intempéries. Parapluies et ombrelles: évolutions et dérivés à travers les brevets d'invention”, in “Les saisons”, *Modes pratiques, revue d'histoire du vêtement et de la mode*, 2018.

9. Advertising card and poster, “Madame s'habille seule avec le ferme-tout américain qui remplace boutons et agrafes pour fermer jupes et corsages”, chromolithographic poster by L. de Plas and G. Alexandre, Paris, c. 1910.

Archives Hermès

Photography and printing Draeger/Archives Hermès

erotic. In 1930 *Comœdia*, a journal of theatre and fashion, warned: “Beware Hermès zips, fair ladies, for whom this is a pleasant way of replacing your press-studs. They may be all very charming for the professionals of love, as far as speed of dressing and undressing goes, but that has drawbacks.” One, it continues, being that a dance partner might accidentally catch hold of “the pull that hermetically closes Madame's dress” and thereby risk undressing her in full view.¹⁰ The zip now had potential as an erotic device.

ZIPPY

The sliding fastener was not immediately desirable. Its success was at first industrial. Unlike buttons and hooks, it was quick and easy to fit with a quick stitch. Once perfected in the USA in the early 20th century its success came from orders made by the military industry and, in France, from its use on tarpaulins, tents, postal sacks, and then in the new worlds of camping – for sleeping bags, rucksacks and rubber shoes – and the automobile. It was when he saw it on the top of a Cadillac between the United States, where it came into being, and Canada, where it was applied industrially, that Émile Hermès, then on a mission for the French cavalry, had the idea of importing and using it in his collections.¹¹

The slide fastener entered the high-end dressing room via new practices. It appeared first on the leather carapaces cladding the accessories of modern man: cameras, binoculars, chronometers, cigarettes, then soon entered the practical but distinctive world of automobiles and aviation and found its place on the bags toted by sportsmen playing golf or tennis. It was all right for aristocrats to hurry, but only in the pursuits of leisure. Coats were now inspired by those of drivers and pilots. Hermès used the zip for driving gloves and muffs, and its *Auto* bag now became *Bolide*.

The zip fastener was associated with speed. Its swiftness of use became its selling point – hence the French brands Fermeture Éclair, a literal translation of the Canadian Lightning Fastener, and Vitex, which emerged in the mid-1920s.¹²

A sign of radical modernity, the zip shocked. It was too mechanical, too simple to use for the world of elegance. “In the modern tone,” wrote a chronicler for the *Figaro* in 1924, “that of Madeleine Vionnet, there are no hooks or press studs. Nothing! Sometimes, on collars, a zip, a simple movement of which is enough to open or close a neckline. And that is all!”¹³

While automobile manufacturers helped by saddlers were fitting their convertible roofs with zips, a piece of advertorial in the magazine *Femina* announced that these could be replaced by “leather coats, but they need to be impeccably cut. Hermès has made one in dark red leather, which opens at the front from top to bottom by means of a metal zip”¹⁴. The coat could be opened and closed with one hand, leaving the other free to hold the wheel. And when, in 1925, Madeleine Panizon created a driver's hood, it had an immense zip running from the top of the head to the back of the neck.¹⁵ In this way the hermetic fastener signalled modernity while protecting the wearer from the cold. Like a number of other houses, Hermès used zips on clothes for skiing, a new sport that encouraged the use of technical fabrics and new forms.

In a car, on a plane or on skis, the zip fastener represented the vibrancy of modern life – after all, didn't they start calling the Amish “hook-and-eyers” precisely because they rejected this modern accessory?

By the 1960s, zipping up or unzipping a pair of jeans, a bag or a sports top was becoming an everyday action. Which meant that special care was needed to make such fasteners elegant. Hence those splendid bags that combined little fastening systems from the past with the mechanics of speed, designed to defy time.

10. *Comœdia*, “S.g.d.g.”, 24 August 1930.

11. The patent application was made in 1914 (validated in 1917) by Gideon Sundbäck for Universal Fastener, USA; production began in the late 1910s at the Lightning Fastener factory in Saint Catharines, Ontario, Canada (*The Canadian Patent Office Record and Register of Copyrights and Trade Marks*, vol. 61, 1933).

12. The first factory in France was built near Rouen (Petit-Quevilly); Bickford translated Lightning Fastener as “fermeture Éclair”. See patent no. FR610006, Improvements to Fasteners, 1925, Lightning Fasteners Limited.

13. *Le Figaro*, 14 May 1924.

14. *Femina*, 1 July 1926.

15. Design by Madeleine Panizon, the professional name of Madeleine Buisset. Kept at the Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris.

