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!”

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 secrétaire. 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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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.¹

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 Frères Selliers, catalogue, 1923 travel bags, purses, ladies' handbags are like keys stuck in a lock. For women, secrets were held in the hand. And when a gentleman of the 19th-century left the home that was his castle, jacket and waistcoat protected a host of inner impediments of self-mastery: notebook, souvenirs, make-up, salts and a mirror. In tooling 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 necessaires 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, sometimes with a chain.² Padlocks secured with keys or, as of the 1870s, 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.³ 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 back, or railway bag [...] has become an elegant, comfortable, even luxurious item that meets all the needs of modern progress.”⁴

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.⁵ 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.”⁶ For men’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

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¹ Lebrun, Manuel complet de la fabrication et du usage contenu de l’apprêt de tous les produits usuels, perfectionnés ou nouvellement inventés, pour garnir toutes sortes de voitures, et préparer leur attelage, sorti d’un vocabulaire des termes techniques, Paris: Librairie Encyclopédique de Roet, 1833, and Albin d’articles de voyage, Godillot Père et Fils, 1842.

² See the patents by Beucheron Patent for a Beucheron fastener system, applicable to travel bags, shopping bags, game bags, etc., 1844 (patent no. 01307); and Beucheron et Thépaut, Fastening device for travel bags, 1875 (patent no. 03472). The Invention Nationale de la Propriété Industrielle has over thirty patents issued between 1875 and 1885 concerning fasteners for overnight or travel bags, purses, ladies’ bags, pochettes, parures, etc.

³ Lampreff “Fermoir éclair” fastener with key-locking hook, 1929 (patent no. 04968).

⁴ Voyages (articles de); Sacs et trousses”, Dictionnaire de commerce, de l’industrie et de la banque, Paris: Guillaumin et Cie, 1899–1900.

⁵ The main patent was the one by the Swiss Martin Winterhalter: Zip fastener, 1926 (patent no. 601390); for locking fasteners, Julius Lampreff: “Fermoir éclair” fastener with key-locking hook, 1929 (patent no. 04968).

⁶ Voyages (articles de); Sacs et trousses”, Dictionnaire de commerce, de l’industrie et de la banque, Paris: Guillaumin et Cie, 1899–1900.
frame sported hinges and springs, while handbags and umbrellas became foldable. Women squeezed into corsets made with metal lathes and secured with busks that threatened 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, pri-

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 erotic. In 1930 Comedia, 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 accident-

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end dressing room via new practices. It appeared first on the leather carapaces of modern man: cameras, binoculars, chronometers, cig-

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frame sported hinges and springs, while handbags and umbrellas became foldable. 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. A system that encouraged 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, pri-

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10. Comedia, “A.g.d.g.”, 14 August 1930.

The sliding fastener was not immediately desirable. Its success was at first indus-

11. The patent application was made in 1914 (validated in 1917) by Galfore, Sandwick 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. 46, 1933).

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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 chronicle 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!”

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”13. 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.14 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 fas-

terner represented the vibrancy of modern life – after all, didn’t they start calling the Amish “hook-and-eyes” 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.

13. Le Figaro, 14 May 1924.
14. Femina, 1 July 1916.