

Can you handle this fashion bag?

PARIS (AP) — A new wave of chic handbags is sweeping this city.

"Hand" is the clue. They have little to do with those roomy shoulder-bags, almost overnight-bag size, which so many of us are used to wearing.

It was a pleasant surprise a couple of seasons ago when fashionable mannequins at Christian Lacroix came tripping out with the most adorable hand-held bags.

In their shapes of heart, oval, feedbag and other clever outlines, nailheaded or studded with metal motifs, the bags and clutches became fashion items for the cognoscenti.

Now it seems that everybody is hopping on the smaller, shapely and/or hand-held bagwagon. They are also adding color to the bag-wardrobe. Fashionable Princess Diana goes for colorful, geometric envelope clutches.

Hermes has staged a comeback of the so-called Kelly bag. This trapezoid shape fastened with a couple of leather straps, hand-held, was so named because it was a favorite of Grace Kelly.

Little "pop" bags in lunch box shapes, purses with cane or bamboo handles dangling from the arm, also tend to add to this '60s revival.

They reinforce the current fashion fad harking back to the starring years of Jackie Kennedy and Audrey Hepburn.

But Hermes is adding a shoulder strap option to the "Kelly" for today's wearer.

Chanel's newest bags (still usually quilted) are tiny and very, very cute. They look hardly big enough to hold a key, much less mad money.

But that doesn't mean women are condemned to itty-bitty fashion pieces, now that travelers and careerists are used to stuffing everything but the kitchen sink into their totes.

Even at Chanel, customers are still buying larger bags. On a recent sale day, "invited" clients were paying around 5,000 francs (upwards of \$800), or about 40 percent less than usual, for fairly roomy quilted bags with the crossed "C" logo.

Many designers and manufacturers are showing shoulder or hand-held bags large enough for practicality, and the search for novelty also means inventive use of color.

At Louis Vuitton, they're branching out from the familiar brown-beige monogram style into bright colors via a striated leather called "epi," a Vuitton texture revived from the 1920s.

Vuitton's new bags go several ways, in sack or feedbag shapes, with some long straps, some short handles. The omnipresent LV initial does pop up, a feature that seems to be essential to label-conscious fans like the Japanese.

Both color and sobriety feature in

bags by Yves Saint Laurent. Arabesques and saddle-stitched welt-seamed bags come in lovely forms to carry on the shoulder, in sizes large enough to contain more than a penny and a lipstick.

The newest looks are in a nail-studded "Y" (for status-symbol lovers) or Oriental arabesques in colorful models, some in fake lizard. Prices here are in the \$300-500 category, considered reasonable for a big-name item.

Like her mentor Saint Laurent, Paloma Picasso also goes in for fancy studding on her sober but beautifully-finished handbags, in buttery-smooth leather, or satins for evening.

Many Picasso models have chain shoulder straps. And as she hires the best artisans to make her goods (and pays for expensive advertising), her bags do not come cheap. They are in the \$500-800 category, right up there with Hermes.

Frederic Castet offers several sizes and shapes of smaller bags in brilliant new shades of ruby, emerald, and tobacco brown ostrich skin, an ecologically acceptable leather with a new-looking grain.

Well down the price scale, La Bagagerie sells finely crafted bags for all seasons. They have several shops in Paris, a few in the Far East and two in New York City.

Those who want to pay less for high quality look to La Bagagerie, whose prices start in the \$40 price range but are usually about \$140 or so for medium-sized, high-quality leather bags.

Their main Left Bank Paris shop is an Ali Baba's cave of great handbag models in all sizes.

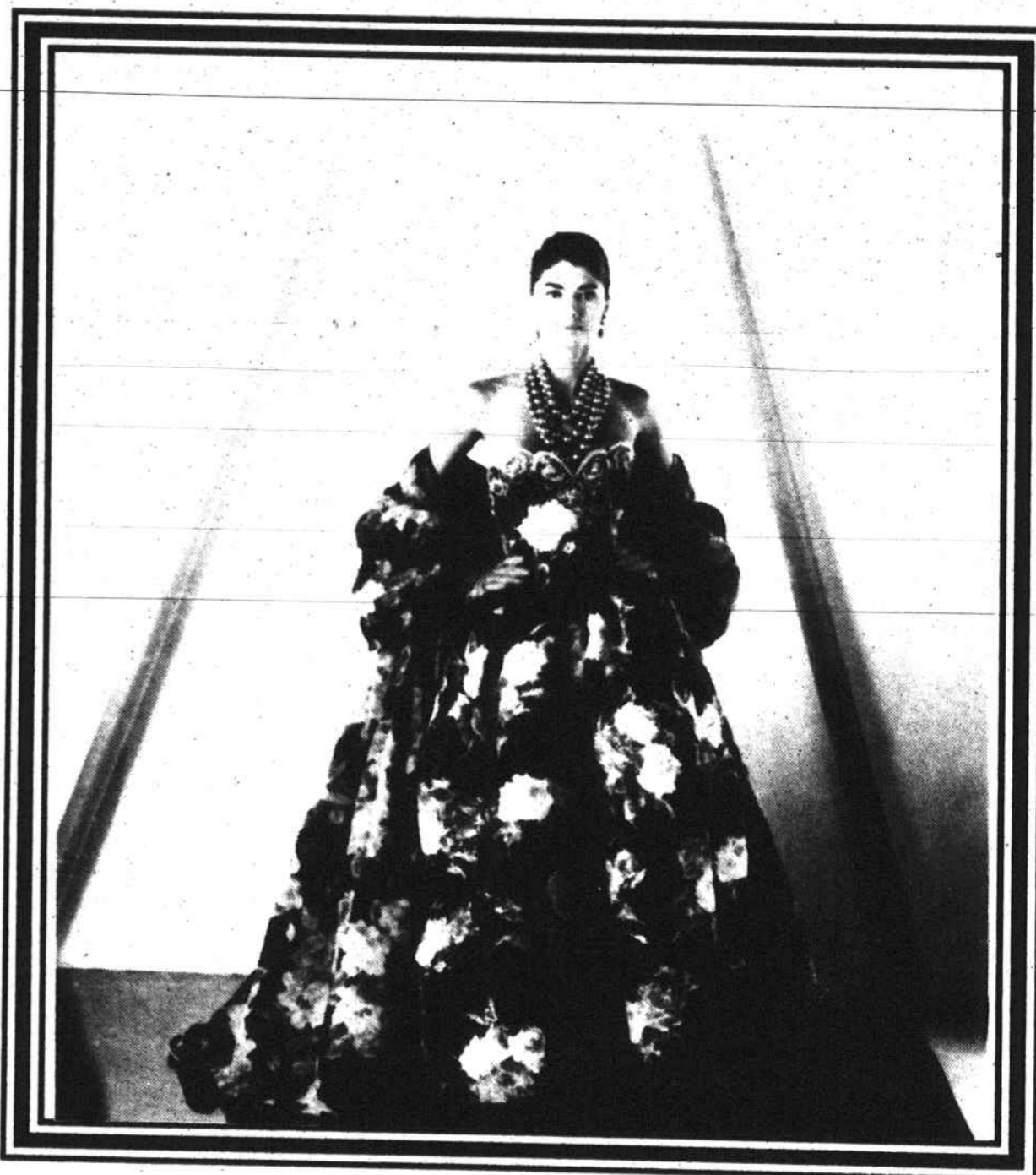
"We don't think women are ready to give up their big bags yet," says spokeswoman Jacqueline LeRoy, who admits that as a working woman she does heft around everything she can in her trendy Bagagerie carryall.

Besides very practical designs with several thief-proof zips, the Bagagerie has come up with some funny ideas. A whole range of box-like bags sport metal doors and padlocks to become veritable little "safes."

Other shapes surface in soft suedes or geometric calfskin — some of the newest and sleekest in hot bicolors for winter or summer.

The Bagagerie shapes and details are designed by a father-son team named Marchaix, who believe in keeping their eye on not just one trend, but all needs for carrying women's (and to a lesser degree men's) essentials and nonessentials.

For those of us who lack a bodyguard, it's best to keep at least one practical shoulder or sling-bag to hug near the waist to discourage potential bag-snatchers.



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