By Shannon Sigafoos of The Morning Call

La ladies, we know this to be a universal truth: When we’re out and about, there are several things we tend to notice about each other – our coats, our shoes, and our bags. Whether we deem ourselves ‘fashionable’ or not, these three wearable items can make a statement about our personalities even to those who don’t know us. Through April 30, 2020, Historic Bethlehem Museums & Sites is centering their multi-site exhibition around the collection of a local woman whose name you may have heard before. PURSEonality features several hundred handbags (out of more than 3,000) from the collection of Ilene Hochberg Wood – bestselling author, designer and fashion consultant.

The exhibition not only chronicles Wood’s fascinating journey into owning what many believe may be the largest collection of (privately held) handbags in the world, but it also captures a decades-long snapshot of what is essentially fashion history – and Wood believes that every bag has its own story to tell.

“It started out as my personal collection. Then it went from being my collection to that I was saving iconic bits for posterity. I felt that they had a powerful story to tell about the times in which they were designed and worn,” says Wood. “I really view collections as a way to study history and culture.”

Taking, for instance, the story of designer Anne-Marie of Paris. Research will tell you that few concrete facts are known about the woman who supposedly had a boutique on the ground floor of a grand hotel, The Hotel Meurice, in 1940s Paris (occupied by German forces until 1944). There, VIP guests could expect to find her striking bags waiting for them in their suites. Anne-Marie’s novelty designs ranged from a champagne bottle to a telephone to a castle or radio – and finding them today has proven to be difficult for even the most serious collectors.

Wood, however, has 24 in her collection – including the Anne-Marie castle bag she refers to as a “unicorn” for its rarity – and all are on display at the Kemerer Museum of Decorative Arts.

“We don’t have a real picture of Anne-Marie. My own hypothesis is that many of the hotels in Paris were overtaken by Germans and they used them as their headquarters, and perhaps she was selling her bags to the Nazis,” says Wood. “I’m dying to know more about her. We know everything about Coco Chanel, but there must be a reason that we don’t know much about Anne-Marie’s story. Maybe she was Jewish, so she wanted little to be known about her personal background.”

Many of the other designers who show up in Wood’s collection have long and storied backgrounds.

Louis Vuitton’s heritage as a trunk maker preceded even the founding of his company; starlet Audrey Hepburn helped to make his Speedy Bag iconic two decades after its initial launch.

Thierry Hermès first established Hermès as a harness workshop on the Grands Boulevards quarter of Paris in 1837; today, the Kelly bag (made famous by actress and Princess of Monaco, Grace Kelly), which is designed in a signature trapezoid shape and made with luxurious leathers and skins, is worn on the arms of the rich and famous.

Artist O.E.L. Graves, who had a long and varied career using experimental materials and whose works were popular among Hollywood elite such as Clark Gable and Bob Hope, used lucite to design purses that look fragile but are actually durable.

And then there are the needlepoints, which are the oldest in her collection and among Wood’s favorites – though she admits that choosing a favorite bag is akin, for her, to choosing a favorite child.

“There is a lot of time, work, effort and money that goes into doing needlepoint. It’s a major undertaking,” Wood explains as she points to a bag stitched with Exeter roses. “I started out as my collection to that I was saving iconic bits for posterity. I felt that they [the bags] had a powerful story to tell about the times in which they were designed and worn,” says Wood. “I really view collections as a way to study history and culture.”

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B"ack in April, we covered the beginning of the renovation of Shafer Construction’s “project house” in north Bethlehem – an undertaking that included an 1800 square foot addition with a Victorian-era octagonal turret, 150-year-old fully functional stained-glass windows, and a Tuscan-style wine cellar.

While the entire project is documented on their Facebook page @historicbethlehemremodeling, Bill and Michelle Shafer were gracious enough to share some behind-the-scenes details and photos of the house, which took a half year to complete. And though Bill Shafer has three decades running his business, making his own home this year’s “Project House” allowed him a new appreciation for customers going through their own home renovations.

“It just lets you realize that’s like on the other side. We did a very similar project in Copoensburg after we got this and we went through the same thing we went through,” says Shafer. Because we had just gone through it, I could help him and say here’s what’s going to happen it’s going to be dirty. It’s going to be dirty. Usually we leave a job site at five o’clock and the homeowners are the ones moving furniture and working around the house at 10 p.m. This time, we were living in it.”

Some favorite features of the house in the Shafer’s own words include:

- The turret’s stained glass windows
- The turrets were built around 150-year-old stained glass windows
- We purchased a matching set from a defunct church in the coal regions and had the triple-paned windows custom made to fit the stained glass, and that dictated the width of the turret. LEDs illuminate the stained glass at night. Since the house is on a busy street, people often stop to look at the house, especially at night. (Note: The stained-glass windows were removed for the Christmas tree to be seen in full view during the holiday season)

- The living room and kitchen

“The fireplace marble was custom made around an antique cast iron parlor heater from a brownstone in Brooklyn. The new addition connected at the kitchen, and it was reconfigured using cabinets bought five years ago, which we feared would be discontinued by the time we needed them. We even used old cast iron floor grates for the heating registers.”

A master bedroom salon: “The master ensuite contains a laundry area, breakfast bar balcony, a huge shower, and double vanities. The space’s bright decor includes an apothecary cabinet from the USS Pennsylvania that was gifted by a family friend. It anchors the color scheme for the room and throws some history into this modern space.”

THE WINE CELLAR: “The big splurge was a custom-made metal railing going to the basement with a grape vine pattern embossed in the rail. At the bottom is a door of a wine cellar in a castle with an old iron gate. We had the spindle pattern made similar to it. When people look down to the grapes such as Dior, Chanel, Burberry and more. The trees were designed to be exhibited alongside the PURSEonality exhibition with corresponding purses, clutches and handbags from Ilene Hochberg Wood’s private collection. For information, visit historicbethlehem.org.