

# How I Dyed and Resurrected an Era Leather Purse

By Laurie Elliott, Santa Clara Valley Chapter

A few years ago, I acquired a Model A era leather purse with a plastic frame. The frame was fine, but the leather was scuffed and the color faded to an uneven funky pink. The lining was in shreds. The “leather” covering on the welting was worn off showing the fabric cording, and there were ink marks that refused to budge. In other words, it was unusable. So, I dyed it black with leather shoe dye, turning it usable once again.



At the time, I didn't take before and after pictures of the process, but have described the steps. The light-colored purse at left is a stand-in for the “before” bag.

You'll need:

- Lincoln Quality Shoe Dressing Shoe Dye and Dye Preparer, or similar products. There may be less toxic products available now.
- Painter's tape, and small clean brushes.
- *Plenty of fresh air.*

Purses like these were found throughout the Model A years, at a variety of prices, leather quality, and leather finishes; smooth, pebbled, or animal hide textures.

**POPULAR SHELL FRAME BAGS**

STYLE A Post-paid STYLE B  
**CHOICE OF 3 STYLES \$2.98 each**

**The New Shell Frame Bags**  
18R703—Colors: Black or new brown. State color. Also state choice of style by letter. Smart of exceptional style are these new bags of “Shell” (simulated) frames. We offer the most popular styles of the day. Smart enough to carry with your best costume. Genuine leathers in popular grains. Each bag neatly lined, and lined with pure and mirror. Style “A” measures 12x12. Style “B” and “C” 9 1/2x12 inches. Be sure to order style by letter and state color. We pay the postage.

**OUR finest GENUINE CALF**  
GORGEOUS SHELL FRAME \$6.95

18R705—Top handle style, as in large view. \$6.95  
18R706—Back strap style, as in small view. \$6.95  
The richness of the genuine high grade calf leather used in this bag, the style and beauty of the Postpaid “Shell” (simulated) frame will appeal to you. Beautifully lined. Large beveled mirror and coin purse. Size, 9 1/2x12 inches.

**WASHABLE PATENT LEATHER**  
18R722—Colors: Black with red Navy with Copenhagen, or all white. State color. Smart flat frameless bag of washable glossy patent leather for spring and summer wear. Mirror and coin purse. Back strap, handkerchief pocket purse. Size, 11x12 1/2 inches. Postpaid \$5.39

**New Shell Frame Popular Shape**  
18R724—C O L O R BROWN or black. State color. Rich looking back strap pouch with “Shell” (simulated) frame. Bag Postpaid of high quality smooth grained genuine leather. Mirror and coin purse. Size, 8x11 inches. We pay postage. \$4.98

**GORGEOUS SHELL FRAME**  
18R790—Colors: Brown or black. State color. High grade large back strap pouch of grained high quality leather. Distinctive “Shell” frame. Silk miter Postpaid lined. Mirror, coin purse. Size, 9 1/2x12 inches. \$6.95

The Sears & Roebuck's 1928 partial page ad, above, describes the purse frames as “Shell.” In other catalogs, “Shell Effect” and “Shell (simulated)” refer to the frames. Quartz and “Quartz Effect” were other terms used to describe the frames.

The purse in the example, below left, from Montgomery Wards Fall/Winter 1929-1930, was described as, “richly embossed heavy steerhide and has hand-laced edges in rose-tinted brown with a rose quartz effect frame and latch.” This is the only plastic framed leather purse I found that was solely offered in brown. All other purses I discovered were offered in brown, black and often tan.

**Montgomery Ward & Co. 1929-1930 Fall/Winter**



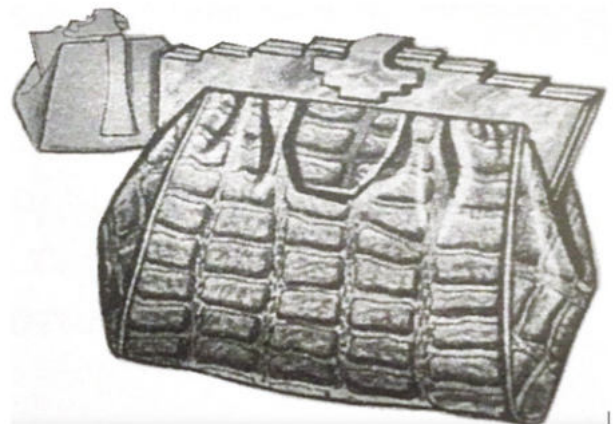
**\$6<sup>98</sup> Frame Has Rose Quartz Effect**

47 E 2052—Size 5¼ by 6¼ inches. We Pay Postage. Rose tinted brown only. Charming smaller pouch of genuine heavy steerhide in rose brown tone with frame and latch of rose quartz effect. Richly embossed and hand laced at edges. Mirror and coin purse leather covered to match. Durable suede lining. A purse for years of wear.

Most of the purses pictured in this article have vertical “back style” handles, as pictured in the sample at right, but some had the choice of short top handles as well.

There were a variety of frame shapes, from boxy to arched. The latching mechanisms were made of the same material as the frame, and virtually all purses came with a small mirror and coin purse inside.

MAFCA Fashion Guidelines, 2015 ed., page 3D-16, item J. Quartz colored frame, fine leather in Ganges crocodile effect.



**National Bella Hess, Spring/Summer 1930**



The purse on the left is interesting for three reasons. The frame is described as “Caraloid” which is probably more accurate than other vague references to sea shells.

Secondly, the purse body is described as “fashioned of Lizard-effect Leather-like Fabric”. I don’t know if this would be a good material to dye, but might be worth the effort.

Thirdly, it was uniquely offered in black, grey, tan, blond or navy blue.

Now that you have your purse to dye, get your work area prepared:

1. Read and follow all the instructions and warnings on your product labels.
2. Dress in clothing and shoes you might splash with permanent dye.
3. Choose a well-ventilated place to work. Even outside, I had to take fresh air breaks.
4. Cover your work surface with a plastic tablecloth and layers of newspaper or other disposable coverings. Have plenty of paper towels or clean rags. Vinyl or latex gloves will save your fingers from staining.
5. Arrange for a place to leave your purse while it dries. It might take several hours, so I recommend somewhere *not in the house*. A clean corner of the garage will work.



When you're ready to start:

1. I suggest you completely cover the purse frame with blue painter's tape. Why risk discoloring the plastic frame? Leave all the leather exposed.
2. The Lincoln Quality Leather Dye advises using the Dye Preparer to clean and remove wax from the leather surface, which I did. The Dye Preparer dried very quickly.
3. Open the purse completely and use a clean narrow brush to work the dye into all the nooks and crannies around the frame, welting and creases.
4. Use a larger brush or rag to spread dye around the remaining areas. I worked on both sides of the purse, propping it upside down over a heavy jar.
5. Use as many coats as it takes to get good color saturation. The color may fade as it dries.

Am I pleased with the results?  
Yes - even with some dye discoloring the shredded lining.

I wouldn't recommend this method for a purse in good shape, but for this one in poor shape, darkening the color was enough to disguise the flaws, give it another life and complete my outfit.



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