

# Wendy Stevens Industrial Chic

BY ANDREA DINOTO

*La Camisa*, 2011  
etched stainless steel,  
powder coated finish,  
leather  
8 x 14 x 1 1/4"  
PHOTO: KATE LACEY



*Lace Clutch*, 2012  
etched stainless  
steel, leather  
4 3/8 x 7 x 1 3/4"  
PHOTO: STUART TYSON







*Penne Purse*, 2010  
etched stainless steel, leather  
4 1/4 x 9 x 3 1/3"  
PHOTO: CAREN DISSINGER

A WENDY STEVENS HANDBAG is as much an architectural construction as a piece of handheld jewelry; as much a fashion accessory as a freestanding object of inspired design. For these seemingly contradictory reasons, you won't find her exquisitely engineered, pierced metal creations in stores where trendy, high-fashion bags are sold. "I'm not in handbag departments," Stevens affirms, "because my work is not related to anything in the handbag realm." Indeed, Stevens's bags are works of functional art offered in museum shops and jewelry stores, as well as, surprisingly, fine-craft furniture galleries.<sup>1</sup> She also shows her work at prestigious craft fairs, and at annual design shows in New York, London and Paris. Clearly, her bags have extraordinary crossover appeal, so much so that one upscale Denver florist bought several of them to use as display containers for flowers. And Stevens reports that although Takashimaya, the luxury department store, which closed in New York in 2010, sold hundreds of her pieces (at first they were displayed with jewelry) "they could never pinpoint who my customer was."

Apparently, what diverse buyers do commonly experience, upon encountering a Stevens bag, is a coup de foudre, i.e. love at first sight. A "Wendy" bag is like no other, except for the fact that you can put things in it—essentials, like a cell phone and credit cards in the smaller clutch and wallet versions, but also glasses, and, well, whatever, in the more commodious satchels and totes—although no gym clothes, please.

Each of Stevens's 35 to 40 different bags is a sculptural form distinguished by a particular pierced (or in a few cases, embossed) motif. She creates her patterns using a computer-aided design program; the actual piercing is accomplished by means of an industrial etching process, which, Stevens explains, "also has application in the aerospace and computer circuit industries." She works alone, in a 2,000-square-foot studio-workshop adjacent to her home in a rural area about 45 minutes outside of Philadelphia. In addition to her computer, the airy workspace houses hand tools essential for shaping and surface finishing, including hand rollers, brakes, and presses, plus metal stakes used in the assembly process for joining the leather gussets to the metal forms. There's also a nifty red forklift to transport heavy stacks of metal sheets around the shop. "A lot of my equipment," says Stevens, "is what you'd find in a place that makes gutters and roofs."

On the day of my visit, Stevens had set out examples of finished or in-progress bags in what amounted to a stunning group portrait in which individuals vied for one's attention. Gleaming rivets are hand-set against satin-finished steel. All

are hinged at the bottom and many have magnetized closures, but those with clasps or latches feature sleek, bespoke hardware produced to Stevens's specifications by artisans outside of Bologna, Italy,

**"A lot of my equipment," says Stevens, "is what you'd find in a place that makes gutters and roofs."**

*Button Bag*, 2013  
etched stainless steel,  
steel cable, leather  
5 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 3"



*iPhone holder*, 2012  
etched stainless steel, leather  
4 3/4 x 2 3/4 x 5/8"  
(fits the iPhone 4 and 5 series)  
PHOTO: STUART TYSON

and with whom she communicates in fluent Italian. A few bags have handles made of industrial cable. The *Button* evening bag, for example, nonetheless achieves astonishing elegance, given its materials. There is no part of Stevens's operation—including packaging—that is not meticulously thought out and executed, with the result that each bag impresses with a certain purity of design and inevitability of form. Her bestseller, of which she's sold about 1,000 units in stores and on her website, is the crossbody iPhone slip case (lace-patterned, if you wish) which accommodates the 4- and 5-series phones, keeping them hidden but accessible. It's a clear-cut case of a designer adapting to modern life, with Stevens demonstrating that fashion, function and

cutting-edge technology can happily co-exist.

How Stevens came to develop her unique urban-industrial aesthetic is a story as counterintuitive as the designs of the bags themselves. She never went to art school, nor did she grow up thinking of a career as a designer. Instead, she initially pursued a love of languages—specifically Italian and Spanish—which led to a first career in the late 1970s teaching a bilingual program in California public schools. Eventually, citing unreasonable workloads, and the reluctance of the state administration to pay for the program, she became disenchanted and around 1980 decamped to New York City. "I had friends in the art crowd," she says, "performers, painters. I had never made anything



Baguette, 2007  
etched stainless steel,  
leather  
2 1/2 x 4 3/4 x 1 1/4"  
PHOTO: STUART TYSON



and had no idea what I was doing, just trying to survive.” Stevens became enthralled by the city itself, particularly the sheet metal everywhere—on the street, in phone booths, at building sites, and piled up for sale along the Bowery and Canal Street. “I loved all that,” she says, “but I didn’t know it until I got to New York.”

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Riding the subway every day to a job she hated, Stevens became fascinated with what sorts of bags people carried, and her first project, with a friend, was a wearable wallet made out

of some copper she’d found. In 1983 or thereabouts, she sold her first hand-pierced metal bag collection to Henri Bendel, and her new life as a designer was launched. Admittedly, it was at first a bumpy ride, as she struggled to learn about metals and methods of fabrication, going so far as to ask plumbers working in her apartment building for welding tips. She acquired a rep, Lewis Dolin, who not only helped her get established but also introduced her to her husband, Will Stone, then a designer of steel furniture.

In the 1990s she moved with Stone to rural Pennsylvania, the site of their current home; then in 2004, a devastating fire totally destroyed Stevens’s studio, taking with it her entire inventory. It was a life-changing event that forced her

to reconsider her basic approach to her work. “The journey that started with hand-punching a piece of copper with hammer and nail was really important for me,” she says. “It just lasted too long, and it took my whole studio burning to the ground to lead me to a technology that was going to make this much more interesting.” She simplified her line, eliminating pretty much all but bags—she’d been making items like metal picture frames, belts, barrettes, vases, and desk accessories as well—and suddenly found she had the time to develop a new way to design and build them. Her foray into computer-aided design was transformative, opening new aesthetic possibilities in perforated metal. She taught herself AutoCad, the program she now uses to create complex repeat patterns; then, as she explains, “the drawing goes to film, film adheres to metal and it’s acid-etched.”

The process virtually transforms sheet steel into lightweight, diaphanous “fabric,” yet one that retains its inherent strength. Stevens uses this reticulated steel to build a bag with the architectural concerns of balance and function. “The challenge for me,” she says, “is to take a piece of sheet metal and make it look feminine, tactile.” For some designs, Stevens introduces color—black, steel gray, or vivid red—by means of powder coating. Whether creating a flat-sided box shape, as in the *Baguette*, or bending the metal into graceful volumetric forms (*La Camisa*<sup>2</sup> billows slightly, while *Bucatini* and *Penne* are cylindrical, as their whimsical pasta names suggest), Stevens forms a container in which identical metal sides are hinged at the bottom, then affixed with supple gussets and straps for easy opening and wearing.

Inspiration for her pierced patterns comes from many different sources. *Fiddlehead Fern*, *Berry* and *Grapevine* speak of plants found on Stevens’s property; the shape of the *Bib* bag is based on her daughter’s bib. The *Paris Purse*’s polygonal motif is Stevens’s response to the astonishing latticed metal façade of the Institut du Monde Arabe in that city; the *Polar Purse* is named for “polar array,” an AutoCad term, while the *Binary* bag spells out Stevens’s name in binary code, a subtle signature that only another code writer might discern. On a recent trip to Italy, Stevens spied a manhole cover in a “camo” pattern that, she mused, might one day inspire a bag.

In sizing bags, especially metal ones, scale is critically important, she says. “There’s nothing worse than a clunky oversized handbag, in metal, that does not fit the body. There has to be kind of a drape.” In fact, her bags are surprisingly light, no heavier than a leather bag of comparable size. In 2010, Sigrid Ivo, curator of Amsterdam’s elegant Tassen [Handbag] Museum<sup>3</sup>, invited Stevens (they had met at a craft fair in London) to mount an exhibition of her metal bags, subsequently acquiring four of her designs for the permanent collection. Seen in historical context, one in which metal bags are not altogether unknown,<sup>4</sup> Stevens’s bags nevertheless stand out as distinctly modernist in concept and design. The Tassen Museum features a collection of more than 4,000 handbags, ranging from 17th-century “pockets” to contemporary designer bags by the likes of Prada and Hermes. As Ivo

Fiddlehead Fern Bag, 2013  
etched stainless steel, leather  
6 x 9 1/2 x 2"  
PHOTO: STUART TYSON



Bib Bag, 2012  
etched stainless steel,  
leather  
8 x 7 3/4 x 2 1/2"  
PHOTO: STUART TYSON





*Polar Purse*, 2010  
 etched stainless steel, leather  
 6 1/2 x 8 x 1 1/4"  
 PHOTO: KATE LACEY



points out, silver, silver mesh, cut steel, brass and modern metals, such as aluminum, have been used for handbags over time. The minaudiere, a solid metal, often bejeweled, evening case (first made by luxury firms, such as Rodó, Cartier and Tiffany, in the 1920s) was designed to carry cosmetics and perhaps cigarettes, and might be seen as a precursor to Stevens's metal clutches. But her distinctive use of industrial materials and processes sets her work well apart from say, the glittering figural fantasies of Judith Leiber, or clutches made from exotic leathers produced by many of today's luxury brands. And for all their appearance of delicacy, Stevens's bags are surprisingly tough, even the near-transparent lace clutch. So much metal was

removed to create the pattern, Stevens at first feared it might collapse. And they clean up quickly, with Windex! Women who own and wear Stevens's bags talk about them as "practical and intelligent,"<sup>5</sup> "versatile, dressy or casual,"<sup>6</sup> and in the words of Maxine Weintraub, who recently retired as a buyer for the shop at Chicago's Museum

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of Contemporary Art, irresistible. Weintraub has watched Stevens evolve as a designer over many years and notes that her bags have always been among the museum's best sellers.



*Binary Bag*, 2012  
 etched stainless steel, leather  
 7 3/4 x 10 1/2 x 1 3/4"  
 PHOTO: STUART TYSON

As she puts it, "Nobody doesn't want one!" One reason for their extensive appeal might be that a Stevens bag asks of a woman what the designer has asked of herself: to edit her life down to essentials easily transported in an object of enduring chic.

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1. Stevens notes a full third of her sales come from jewelry stores, like Szor Collections in Dallas, which carries seven of her bags. Owner Jerry Szor calls them "a perfect compliment" to their stock of contemporary fine jewelry. Another third of sales comes from galleries such as Pritam and Ames in East Hampton, NY, which sells a selection of small

objects along with its main collection of artist-designed furniture.  
 2. *La Camisa* (shirt) was among the items bought by the High Museum in Atlanta's gift shop for sale during its 2014 "Dream Cars" exhibition.  
 3. Because the core collection was originally formed by Ivo's mother, Hendrikje Ivo, the museum carries the formal name of Tassen Museum Hendrikje, *tassen* meaning "bag."  
 4. In 2008, the Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim presented *Faithful Companions*, an exhibition of metal handbags dating from the late 19th century to the 1920s.  
 5. Bebe Johnson, a partner in the East Hampton furniture gallery Pritam & Eames, whose credo is "beautiful objects for everyday life," sells Stevens's bags, describing them as "a fusion of design, fashion, and craft."  
 6. Diana Zadarla, gallery manager at Pritam & Eames, carries Stevens's *Drop Bag*, which she describes variously as "good to go to dinner with, age appropriate, versatile, dressy or casual." "I love to look at it," says Zadarla, "and it will last forever."