



Štěpánka Sekaninová • Eva Chupíková

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ORDINARY THINGS



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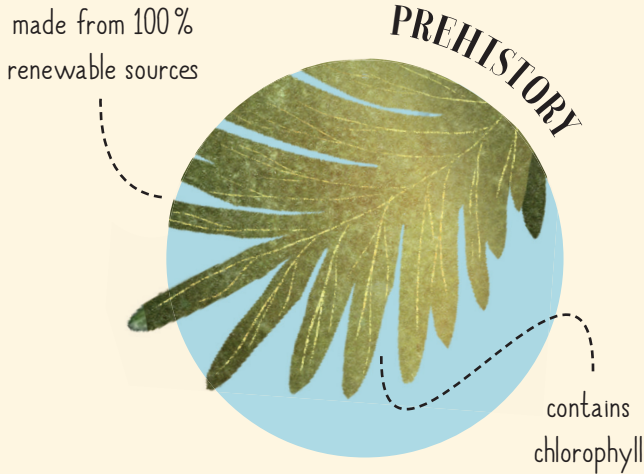
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UMBRELLA

At the beginning, there was a leaf and scorching sun. The leaf turned into a parasol, the parasol into an umbrella. Today, people can choose whichever umbrella they need or like – women’s, men’s, children’s, double, even dog’s. Collapsible, non-collapsible, elegant uniform colour, motley, with coquettish lace, or nicely transparent plastic ones. In brief, the immortal umbrellas have kept us company for centuries, regardless of whether it’s raining dogs or insanely hot.



Oh boy, the sun is shining

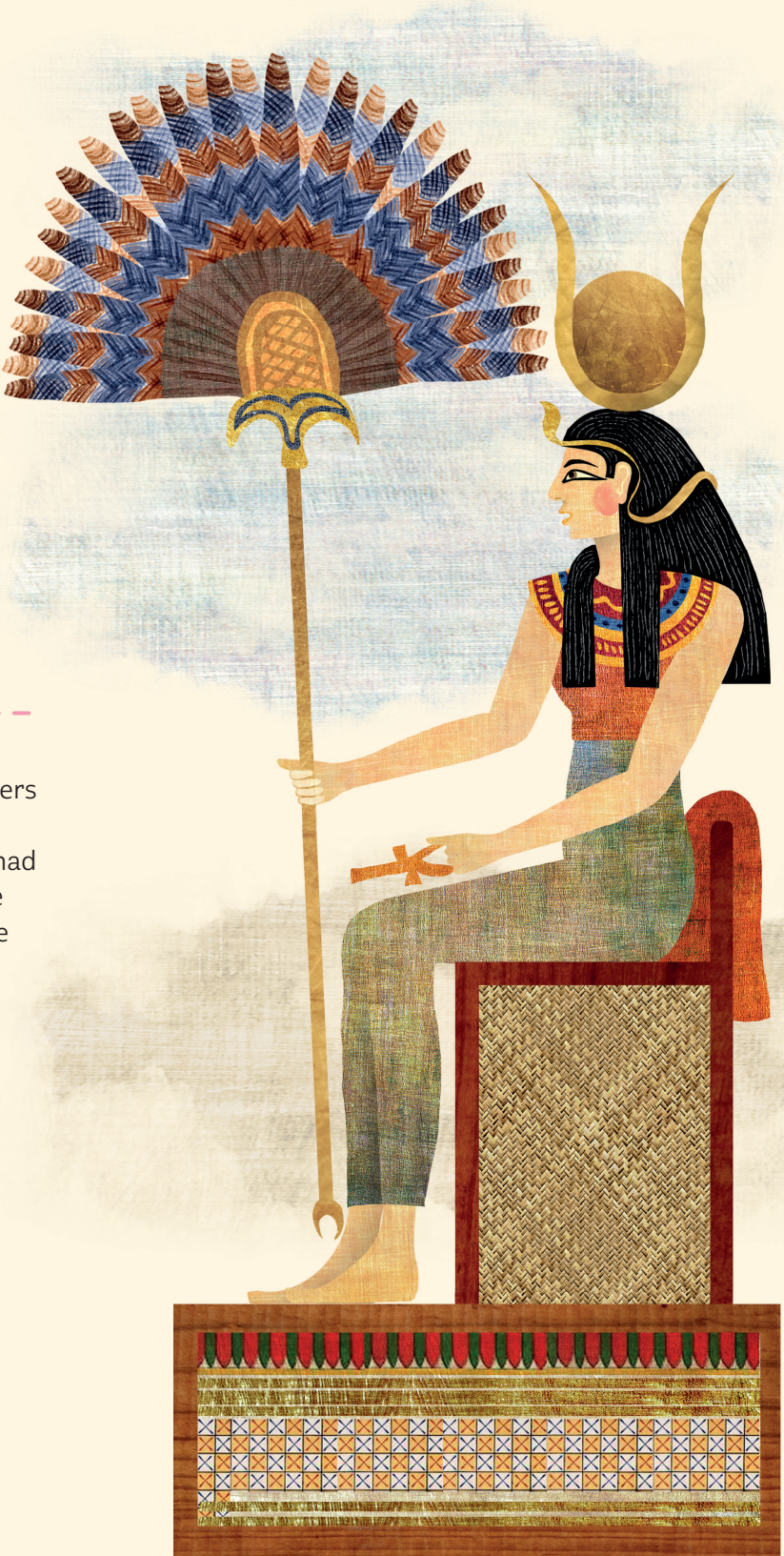
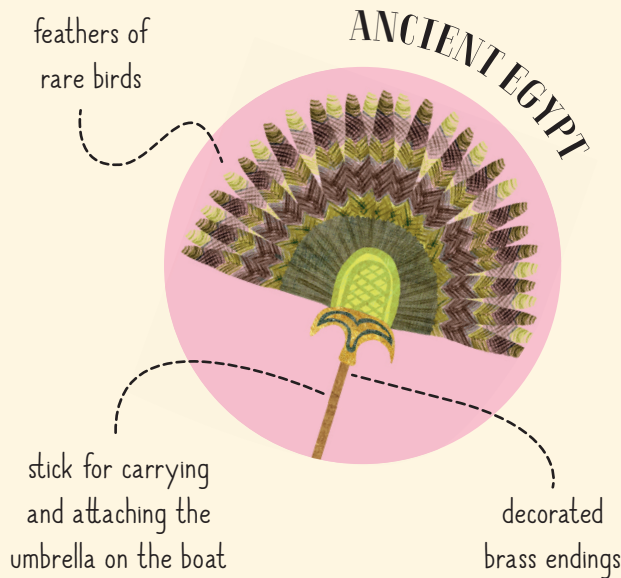
Maybe it went something like this. Once upon a time, deep in the prehistoric era, our ancestors became annoyed with getting headaches from being exposed to direct sunlight all the time, and so they plucked **a large leaf** – a palm one, if at all possible – and hid themselves in its shade. The first primitive umbrella – or rather parasol – saw the light of day.

So you see – the original parasols were nothing but regular palm leaves our distant ancestors, tired from the sun, held above their heads. The most inventive ones covered a pole with leather, and voila! Even better protection from the sun – and possibly from the rain – became available. Today, we can use automatic umbrellas to shield ourselves from the harshest rain in an instant. But back then, the most reliable way to stay dry and not get a sunstroke was to hide in a safe cave or the wonderful shade of trees.

While anyone can protect themselves with a parasol today, back in the antiquity this invention was a prerogative of the ruling classes. Common Egyptians or Mesopotamians couldn't even think of owning such a luxury item, let alone actually own and use it. At the sites of all ancient civilisations and realms, archaeologists stumble upon depictions of slaves who hold a parasol above the head of their master or mistress. Egyptian parasols, in fact, were giant fans made out of the colourful feathers of beautiful birds.

Ancient Egypt

In Egypt, the sun would beat down upon people all day. The poor paid it no mind and worked their fingers to the bone. After all, they had no choice. The more fortunate among Egyptians – **the ruling classes** – had a bunch of slaves fan them and hold parasols above their heads to make sure their skin would be as pale as possible.



TIME LINE →

PREHISTORY

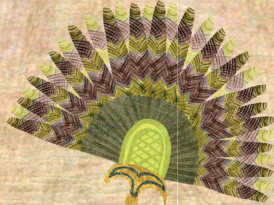
ANCIENT EGYPT

ANCIENT CHINA

ANCIENT ROME

RENAISSANCE

18TH CENTURY



ANCIENT CHINA



Waxed paper provided a great protection from the sun.

Bamboo was a favourite material of parasol manufacturers.

Put the umbrella down, please

Where did parasols start being folded? Probably in China, and it's not a recent invention, either – the original foldable parasol was invented about **2,000 years ago!**

The yellow parasol could only be owned by members of the royal family.



Mainly shield the sun

Yes, you've read that correctly. While we want to be tan in our modern times, ancient nobles emphasised their nobility by keeping their skin almost entirely **unblemished by the sun**. No wonder, then, that it was ancient China specifically that virtually turned into a land of parasols. They started to be used about four thousand years ago, and immediately became an important and indispensable fashion accessory, not to mention a symbol of wealth. The more decorative and decked-out a parasol, the higher the social status of its owner. The most decorative ones were owned, naturally, by rulers.

Originally, Chinese parasols used to be made out of silk and beautifully ornamented with traditional motifs – dragons, flowers, or scenes of nature. Around the 1st century BCE, the silk was replaced with waxed paper. Back then, parasols were the symbol of power and nobility. In China and Japan, their length and colour indicated the owner's social standing – e.g. members of the royal family used red or yellow parasols while rich aristocrats made do with blue ones. In our modern times, red parasols play an important part in traditional Chinese weddings – the bride's father holds it above her, trying to ward off bad luck and evil spirits.

Send it to Europe!

By the Silk Road, of course – an important trade route. So that's what happened. While ladies in ancient Greece took an immediate liking for **parasols**, brave men didn't. The scenario repeated itself further on, in Rome. Though once the parasol got there, it turned into **a real umbrella!**



Roman parasols resemble the Greek ones in appearance and structure.

ANCIENT ROME



oil-impregnated umbrella cover

simple but functional

Against the sun, against the rain

One day, shrewd Romans discovered that if they smeared some oil on the paper which formed the parasol's foldable screen, the whole thing would become **waterproof** – that is, protect them from rain. There's something beautiful about such simplicity, don't you think? And if one decided to attend gladiatorial combat in the amphitheatre, they'd be well-advised to leave their umbrella or parasol at home. Who would be able to see over such a wall of umbrellas the audience brought with them – a giraffe, maybe?

In ancient Greece and Rome, noble ladies adored their parasols. And why wouldn't they? After all, these lavishly decorated screens prevented them from getting a highly undesirable tan. In addition to using parasols to protect their skin, wealthy ladies made their complexion look paler by applying a special make-up, made from white lead. Parasols also were a symbol of their nobility, and thus an indispensable part of their wardrobe. Going out without a parasol? Not a chance! No lady, miss, missy, or missus could afford such a faux pas, and would ever think of committing it.

TIME LINE →

PREHISTORY

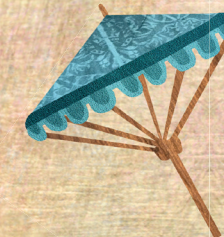
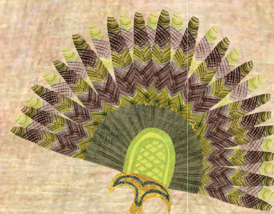
ANCIENT EGYPT

ANCIENT CHINA

ANCIENT ROME

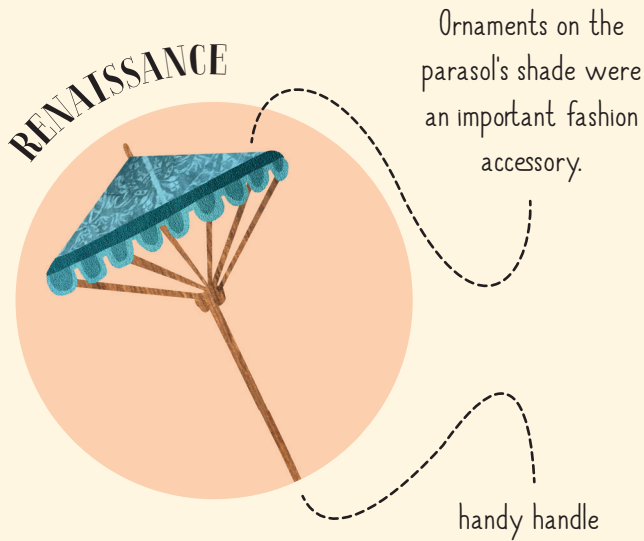
RENAISSANCE

18TH CENTURY



Renaissance

Once Antiquity was over, umbrellas in European countries took a long break and weren't brought back until the progressive **Renaissance** rolled around. Sixteenth-century ladies used them to protect their faces from piercing sunlight, or to shield their elaborate hairdos from rain. Who'd want to look like a drowned rat, huh? While vain women expanded their collection of umbrellas and parasols in order to always have something to match their clothes with, male fops flat out refused to use this feminine tool out of principle. They weren't made out of salt, you know!



Twilight of parasols

Renaissance, Baroque, Empire and Romantic ladies kept anxiously mindful of their pale and sun-beaten cheeks. They weren't going to be simple peasants. However, the 1920s brought fashion and beautifully tanned women and parasols to fashion have retreated.



TIME LINE →

PREHISTORY

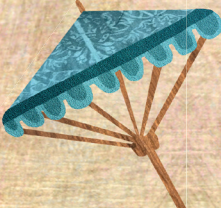
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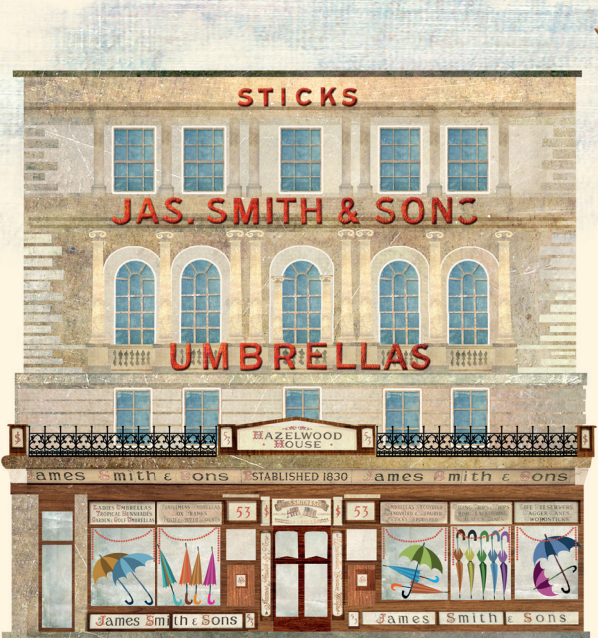
RENAISSANCE

18TH CENTURY



The bravest among the brave

Remember the name of this English gentleman. This 18th century daredevil didn't hold himself back and would stroll around London streets on rainy days, clutching an umbrella above his head. At first, passers-by would cross the road in disgust rather than run into him, but over time realized that it was no act of bravery to have rain pour down their collar. Thus, **Jonas Hanway** taught even the toughest of tough guys to carry an umbrella.



An umbrella, m'lady?

Ding-a-ling! The bell above the shop's door rings and a young couple enters. The woman takes her gloves off and starts looking for a colourful broolly, while the dishy guy who came with her wants his umbrella to be rendered in discreet shades of dark. It's mid-19th century, we're in London, and are peeping into the first ever specialised umbrella shop. It's called **James Smith and Sons**.



What can we hide under an umbrella?

Thomas Jefferson
1743–1826



Coat hanger

Presidents are behind everything – or specifically, **Thomas Jefferson** (1743 – 1826). This American statesman had enough time to do some light inventing when he wasn't too busy with politics. It was he who thought up the first ever coat hanger. Simply put, he refused to wear wrinkly jackets. The next hanger saw the light of day in 1840 and was named after a famous French chocolate – The Etron. It had a beautiful carmine red cover and gilded hook. Why, you wonder? Because it was a wedding gift for Queen Victoria and Albert, her fiancé.

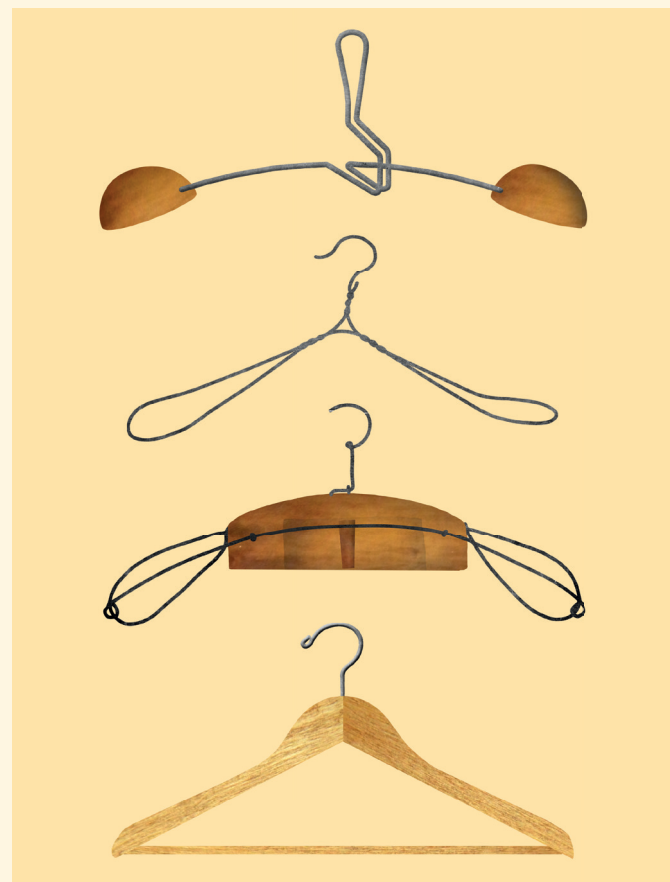
The great French revolution began with handbags!



Wire hanger

Imagine that you have to always listen to your unhappy colleagues who complain constantly that there's a lack of hooks to hang one's jacket, coat, or windcheater on. You'd be sick and tired of it in no time, right?

Mr. Parkhaus who lived in the early 20th century certainly was. Luckily, he worked in a factory where different things were being made out of wire. One day in 1903, he simply ran out of patience, bent a wire, twisted it around firmly, and made a wire hanger.



Bag

Throughout history, people always needed something to put their stuff in and carry it around. There were always some things they'd have to have on them. So what did one do? They'd make a small sac out of leather or reeds, attach a strap to it, and off they went, missing nothing. Sacs with a drawstring survived Antiquity and successfully held up until the Middle Ages. Then, they began to be replaced with leather, so-called **pittance bags** with long straps, often embellished with scenes from the Bible. Some time passed, and when the 17th century came, pittance bags turned into **bags with shoulder straps**, ones we proudly wear to this day. Back then, they were mostly favoured by farmers.



Passenger luggage

The 19th century changed the world – which, naturally, included the way one travelled. People needed something practical they could pack their stuff in, hop on a train, and go. And so passenger luggage came to be. Although ... The very first example of passenger luggage was **a leather sac with a wooden framework** and back straps. It was made around **3,000 BCE** and was owned by a prehistoric man called **Ötzi**. Basically, it was one of the first bag packs ever created.

The 17th century bags were made from leather or cloth and had a long strap that could be easily worn over the shoulder. No wonder they were favoured by pilgrims, craftsmen as well as farmers!



Women's purses

Actual women's purses didn't appear until **the French Revolution**, or rather until it introduced a new fashion trend. Wanting to emphasise their slim waists, the then women refused to follow the traditions established by their predecessors and wear pouches under their skirts. But that doesn't mean they intended to give up their perfumes or other knick-knacks! Thus, the first patterned and embroidered purses came to be, soon becoming an important fashion accessory.

