



For a design element that has been around for more than 40 centuries, tassels are looking remarkably fresh. Today's tassels come in hundreds of fibre combinations and thousands of styles, and can be used to adorn everything from drapery to purses to shoes. But throughout history, tassels have sometimes been more than a mere decoration. Tassels on the hats of bishops and cardinals or on the epaulet of a soldier's jacket indicate rank. Tassels hang from Jewish prayer shawls to indicate adherence to the law as commanded in the book of Numbers. Graduates move a tassel from one side of the mortarboard hat to the other to signify that they've earned their diploma. Women of the Philippines adorn wedding hats with tassels to assure them a loving marriage.

Swinging Singles

BY SYDNEY SCHWARTZ HARDIMAN

Originally, tassels were merely the means of finishing the warp ends of woven fabrics and rugs. They appear in Egyptian tomb paintings and were known to hang from the swords of Japanese Samurai warriors. Nomadic tribes likely introduced them to the west during the time of the crusades. In the 15th century, tassels decorated purses, cushions, chair backs, and hangings such as tapestries — even horse harnesses and falconry equipment. But tassels gained true fame in 17th century France during the reign of Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette. Large tassels made with lush gold and silver fibres were popular in the court of Versailles. As the excess of Louis' court gave way to the French Revolution in the late 1700s, tassels became smaller and were made from less extravagant materials. By the turn of the twentieth century and through the world wars, tassels were no longer hand-crafted, but instead, were mass-produced and often mediocre. Consequently, they lost much of their appeal.

But tassels are back, and they are better than ever. One-of-a-kind, hand-crafted tassels have found favor among the design houses. No matter which materials comprise the tassel — glass, raffia, wood, crystal, silk, beads, ribbon, metallic fiber — a tassel still consists of three main elements: the head, the neck and the skirt. A tassel can be simple or complex, subtle or showy — but in the hands of a good designer, a tassel can add a richness and polish to whatever it adorns. Forty centuries later, the tassel still swings! »