

A pictorial toast to Playboy's very first playmate in the seventh anniversary December 1960 issue; an autographed headshot of the actress sold for US\$14,400 in 2007



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# OBJECTS OF DESIRE

If tragedy had not taken the life of **Marilyn Monroe** in 1962, the actress would have celebrated her 85th birthday next year. **Andy Round** discovers how Asian interest in Marilyn memorabilia continues to grow as auction prices rise and rise

# M

Margaret Barrett, director of entertainment memorabilia for Bonhams & Butterfields is on the phone from LA. She says she is sitting beside a table, that once belonged to Marilyn Monroe, with a book of Jim Morrison poetry on top of it. "Two of my favourite icons together in one place," she laughs down the phone. "Sometimes people come into my department and start moving things around to sit down and I tell them to be really careful; some of those things used to belong to Marilyn."

Barrett has to be cautious, celebrity memorabilia is big business these days and it doesn't get any bigger than Monroe. If you want a major return on your millions, forget about investing in shares or property, you need an item of clothing that once belonged to the world's most famous screen goddess. "I attended a 2009 sale at Julien's and watched in disbelief as a simple white terry robe that belonged to Marilyn sold for US\$120,000," says life-long Monroe collector Scott Fortner. "In 1999, it sold for US\$18,400."

Despite dying tragically of an apparent overdose at the age of 36 in 1962, Monroe's seductive appeal appears to be immortal. "If she had lived, she would have been 85 next year but we will never see her ravaged by time," Monroe collector, former wrestling promoter, probation officer and retired investment banker David Gainsborough Roberts says. "I've probably only spent about US\$450,000 on my collection but it's worth a gigantic amount now, possibly even US\$20m. But at the time, I didn't buy to sell. I don't buy to sell anything."

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Shot, signed and dated by George Zimbel during the filming of *The Seven Year Itch* in 1954



Gainsborough Roberts is a flamboyant legend in memorabilia circles. He was first inspired to collect as a child when his grandmother gave him a piece of wood said to be from Nelson's Victory. Today his collection swamps his Jersey island home and includes the clothes that Bonnie and Clyde wore when they were killed and a death mask of bank robber John Dillinger. The 20 dresses in his collection as well as dozens of other items of memorabilia such as pill boxes found with Monroe when she died and a postcard — stating: "No, I'm not pregnant" — are now being exhibited at the Jersey Museum until the end of the year.

Like Gainsborough Roberts, Fortner has also loaned dozens of items from his "six-figures-or-more collection" to a huge show of Monroe memorabilia that was shown at the California's Hollywood Museum in August. "My favourite items? I feel particularly protective of items in my collection that Marilyn considered favourites when she owned them, such as a mink fur collar she was photographed wearing several times in 1955 and 1956," says Fortner. "I also have items from when she was young, such as her first camera."

Both collectors source their material from reputable auctions as well as reliable individual sources. Gainsborough Roberts says he became friends with Monroe's masseur Ralph "Rafe" Roberts before he died. "He saw her almost every day for three years and was probably one of the last people who spoke to Monroe before she died," the collector says. "He's always maintained that she didn't kill herself and that the overdose was a terrible accident."

Of course, Monroe is also a focus for hero worship from contemporary celebrity collectors. Lindsay Lohan, who recreated Monroe's *The Last Sitting* photo session in *Vogue* (1962) with



(Left) Shoot with *Life* magazine photographer Allan Grant in her recently purchased Brentwood home in July 1962

(Below) This Italian-style chair, used in the July 1962 *Life* magazine photo shoot, was sold for US\$35,000



PHOTOS: JULIEN'S AUCTIONS



Mid-century modern daybed from the office of Monroe's therapist. She began treatment after suffering a breakdown while filming *Misfits* in 1961

## { Monroe's *magic* }

Collector David Gainsborough Roberts

*"I bought my first Monroe dress for £15,000. In those days, it was a lot of money and everyone was saying, 'Who is that crazy man?' From then, I was married to Marilyn. How can I afford it? I don't have a wife, I don't have children and I don't have a mortgage"*

Visit [www.jerseyheritage.org](http://www.jerseyheritage.org) for information on Gainsborough Roberts' memorabilia exhibition in Jersey

Memorabilia expert Katherine Williams, [christies.com](http://christies.com)

*"I always advise anyone, who wants to buy memorabilia, to buy from a reputable auction house or dealer. Do plenty of homework and buy something you have an emotional, personal response to. It may not go up in value but at least you can live with it if you love it"*

CEO Darren Julien, [juliensauctions.com](http://juliensauctions.com)

*"Why do people collect memorabilia? They want a piece of film or rock 'n' roll history. Some people may want to diversify their portfolios and regard memorabilia in the same way as an original work of art, but most collect because they are passionate about their favourite star"*

Collector and curator Scott Fortner, [marilynmonroecollection.com](http://marilynmonroecollection.com)

*"The Marilyn I find most fascinating is the woman that longed to be taken seriously as an actress as she struggled to move away from the typecast roles of the dumb blonde. Today, the demand for her property is increasing with prices shooting through the roof. She is a golden investment"*

Visit [www.thehollywoodmuseum.com](http://www.thehollywoodmuseum.com) for information on the memorabilia exhibition in California featuring items from Fortner's collection



A rare 1953 first issue of Playboy magazine featuring Monroe on the cover

Director of entertainment memorabilia Margaret Barrett, [bonhams.com/us](http://bonhams.com/us)

*"Are there other icons like Monroe? Michael Jackson died young and tragically. People get sentimental. When he died I was with someone who was 15 years younger than me and we both felt a very strong sense of nostalgia. Now he is gone, he will never sign another thing again"*

Times journalist Sara Buys who recently visited Gainsborough Roberts' exhibition to try Monroe's clothes

*"Monroe was five feet five inches, just over eight stone and probably a 30E. What made her body extraordinary was the 13-inch difference between her chest and hip measurements and her waist. In her younger years, she would have been 36-23-35"*





PHOTOS: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD, 2010

A pair of mixed cut, colourless paste, triple drop fringe ear pendants with clip fittings;  
Monroe wearing the black silk jersey stole trimmed with white fur up for auction



original photographer Bert Stern for *New York* (2008), told the magazine she had bought an apartment where Monroe once lived and filled it with “a lot of Marilyn stuff”.

During a landmark sale of Monroe’s estate by Christie’s in 1999, singer Mariah Carey bought Monroe’s childhood piano for US\$662,000 (“It belonged to her mother and was a piece of her childhood,” the singer says); Tommy Hilfiger bought a pair of her jeans and boots for US\$112,000, and Massimo Ferragamo bought back a pair his company’s red stiletto heels for US\$42,000. The highlight of the auction, however, was the sale of the famous dress Monroe wore to sing a breathy *Happy Birthday* to US President John F Kennedy. It sold for a staggering US\$1.2m, a world record for a dress that has still not been broken.

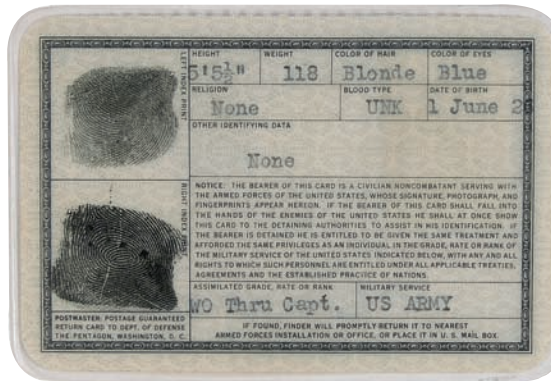
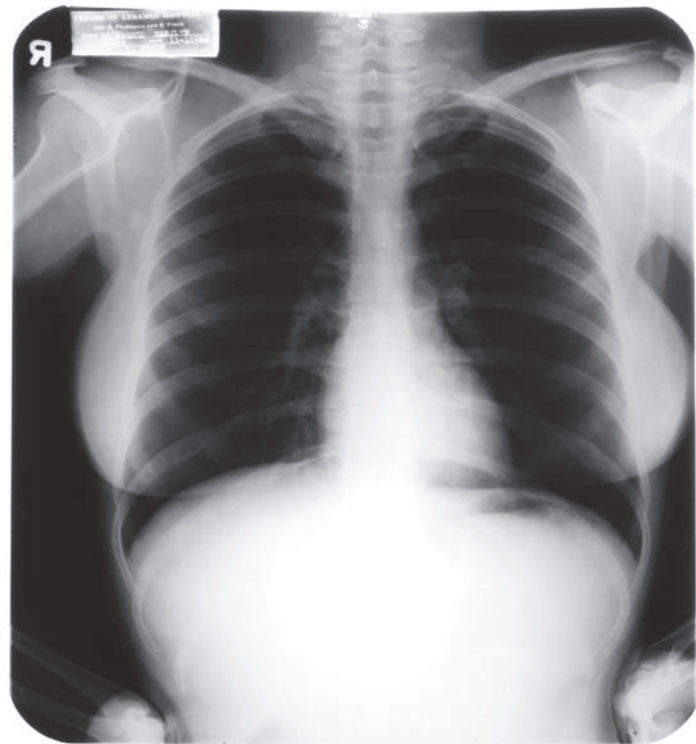
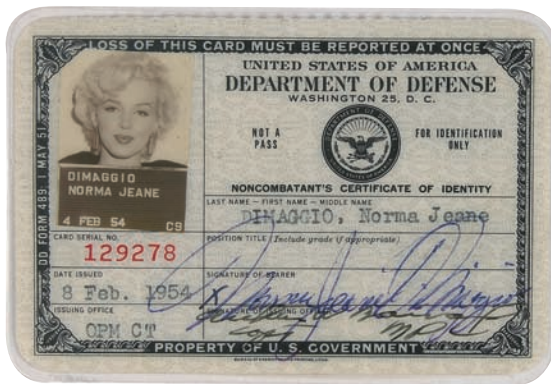
“The fact that this sale achieved US\$13.4m in total in 1999 from 576 lots is a reflection of the incredible enduring appeal of Monroe’s legend,” Christie’s London memorabilia expert Katherine Williams says. Stephanie Connell at Bonhams agrees: “A lot of actresses get lost in the midst of time but Monroe endures whether it’s in Warhol paintings or her association with historic figures. There is no doubt she is an icon.”

In June this year, American auction house Julien’s was preparing a memorabilia sale that included X-rays of Monroe’s chest taken in 1954, a chair the actress used in a photo-shoot and the couch she sat in when she visited her psychiatrist. “Can you imagine the stories that couch could tell?” says Darren Julien,



(Clockwise from top left) Black silk jersey evening dress with rouches on body and sleeves, and black silk tiered detail attached to hip; wool tailored jacket with a deep fox fur collar; white fox fur muff worn by Marilyn Monroe to the world premieres of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and *Some Like It Hot*; natural mink collar Monroe regularly wore when living in New York City, to Milton Greene photo shoots, interviews and off the set when filming *The Prince and the Showgirl* in England; '50s hand-tailored sleeveless silk dress with weights sewn into the lining's hem to keep it lying flat when worn.





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SHAAN KOKIN/ULIENS AUCTIONS

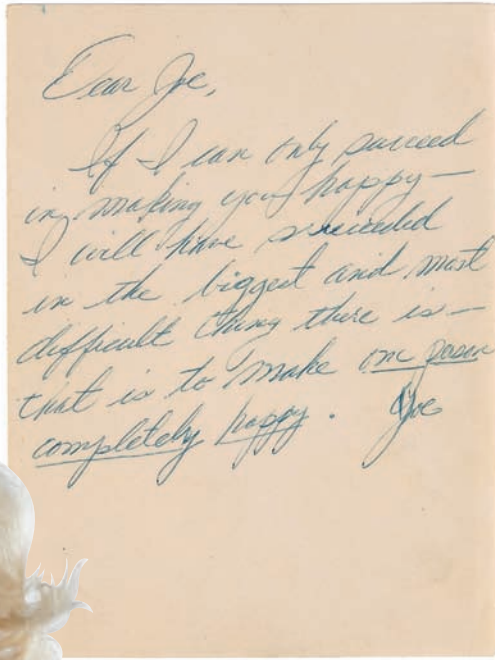
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(Clockwise from top left) A 1954 identification card, which Monroe used when she performed for the troops in Korea and while she and Joe DiMaggio were on their honeymoon, sold for US\$57,000 in 2008; Monroe's chest X-ray, dated 11-10-54, obtained by a young radiology resident, was used to show students when he later taught at the school; a personal working script from the film which was eventually titled *The Prince and the Showgirl*, co-starring Laurence Oliver and produced by Marilyn Monroe Productions in 1956





(From top) The day after this photograph was taken in 1956, the young star legally changed her name to Marilyn Monroe; the handwritten letter to Joe DiMaggio, thought to indicate a potential desire to reunite with the baseball star, was sold for US\$36,000; a fringed, silk, fuchsia stole worn by model Suzie Kennedy



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the company's CEO, speaking from Tokyo, where the items were appearing on television.

"Why am I in Asia? Well, particularly China and Japan, there is a fascination with Western pop culture and plenty of large bidders. The combination of Monroe's troubled family story, her appearance in history's most famous films, a tragic death and her personal connection to some of the most iconic

personalities in America's history from JFK to Joe DiMaggio is an intoxicating celebrity mix. Some celebrities may just be well known in specific countries. But Monroe, like Elvis or The Beatles, has an international fan base."

Julien's previously sold US\$1.03m worth of Monroe items in its 2005 sale, including her Joe DiMaggio divorce papers (US\$4,800), her personal book of telephone numbers (US\$90,000), and a picture of a rose she painted and dedicated to JFK (US\$78,000).

Like all collectors, dealers and auction companies, Julien warns of the importance of provenance. "We do not sell anything that we cannot authenticate through photographic evidence or reputable sources," he says. "Marilyn had a lot of assistants and every week we are shown

things that are just fake. On one occasion, we were offered hair curlers that were supposed to be Marilyn's but they had been manufactured in the '70s, long after her death."

Barrett at Bonhams & Butterfields says the most heart-breaking part of her job is telling would-be sellers that a studio assistant probably signed the "Marilyn" autograph they have just inherited from their grandmother. "There are also people who think you can buy a '50s fur, add a fake letter of authenticity and sell it for a fortune," she says. "The good thing about Monroe is that she was photographed virtually every day of her life so it's comparatively straightforward to check items."

Still, from receipts, tickets and autographs to photos, dresses and even household items, there are plenty of genuine items to appeal to Marilyn collectors of all budgets. And when a genuine item arrives at auction at a price that's right for the collector, the sensation is indescribable. "I can remember handling an identity card that once belonged to Monroe and it was an genuine electric thrill," says Barrett. "Even in an ID picture she looked glamorous."

For Gainsborough Roberts, it's a unique feeling. "These things are linked to real people, not images in a photograph or actors in a film. The sensation is childlike. I actually own this piece of history! And it's actually in my front room! People say that I could have had a holiday for what I pay for an item, but I don't want a week in France, I want this excitement." ■