

# MONEY FOR NOTHING

*We all know that famous people are idolised, but what makes someone pay thousands of dollars for a single tissue? Step inside the bizarre – yet lucrative – world of celebrity collecting*



WHEN SCARLETT JOHANSSON WAS A GUEST ON THE Tonight Show with Jay Leno in 2008, she told the host she was catching a cold, and he handed her a tissue. After sneezing on it twice, leaving a trace of lipstick, she put the tissue up for sale on eBay. It sold for US\$5,300, with all proceeds going to the charity USA Harvest. It's probably one of the more bizarre celebrity item sales yet, but Johansson's tissue sale vividly illustrates the attraction of celebrity memorabilia. And it's not just teenagers idolising their favourite movie stars – it's people with money to invest.

"High-profile celebrity auctions have become a very big business," says Darren Julien, the CEO of Julien's Auctions, an auction house specialising exclusively in celebrity memorabilia. "Christie's and Sotheby's now are focusing on it. For us, it's our core business; it's what we do. Over the past decade it has grown by about 60 percent, just in popularity. What's really helped turn around this market is it has become an investors market."

Rapidly, celebrity memorabilia is becoming just as valid a collecting pursuit as collecting fine art. Julien's is responsible for selling items such as George Harrison's Gibson SG guitar, which went for \$560,000, a gown from Princess Diana that went for \$144,000, and a jewelled glove from Michael Jackson's "Bad" tour that sold for \$330,000.

"Many of our clients also collect fine art," Julien explains. "They say they want to diversify from the paintings, and it's more fun with the Western pop culture. These are people who buy Monets and Picassos and

they're looking at how these items are going to increase in value over time. We just sold Michael Jackson's Thriller jacket for \$1.8 million. It's definitely reached the point where these items are as sought after and considered as collectable as fine art."

Within the memorabilia market, there are stratifications of value. Vintage Hollywood is often to be found at the top. "It really takes somebody that has a global appeal," says Julien. "I'd say Michael Jackson is one of the most collectable; it's the same with Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. Icons that are known all over the world are going to be the safest investments. Whereas someone like Britney Spears, she's not actually made a comeback so it's questionable right now whether she's somebody that will become highly collectable down the road. You have to really look at these things like you would fine art: you're banking on that these people are going to continue to be around for the long haul."

It isn't just investment value that drives collectors to these items, of course. There's a true passion and sentimental value behind many of these purchases. "It's buying a memory," explains Julien. "It's something people feel emotionally attached to. It's a way for a fan or a collector to buy something from their childhood." ▽

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“DURING THE DAYS OF MARILYN MONROE OR ELVIS, NO ONE WOULD HAVE GUESSED AT THE FUTURE VALUE OF THE SMALL ITEMS THE FAMOUS OWNED.”

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Johnny Cash owned and played guitar; John Lennon jacket worn in 1966 Life magazine photo shoot; Michael Jackson stage worn glove from “Bad” tour

“The fascination really can’t be explained,” adds Scott Fortner, an avid collector of Marilyn Monroe memorabilia who runs the website [www.marilynmonroecollection.com](http://www.marilynmonroecollection.com). “It’s something I’ve experienced since a very young age. My collection started with books on Marilyn, and then eventually moved into other aspects including pieces formerly owned by Marilyn herself. I’ve become an authority through years of research and also talking with people who actually knew Marilyn Monroe. But people feel compelled to collect celebrity memorabilia for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it’s a way to have something special in regards to a person that is in some way special to you. Others collect as an investment only.”

Of course, there can be significant financial reward to collecting the items of icons like Marilyn Monroe. “Marilyn Monroe is proving to be quite an investment,” says Fortner. “Single items from Marilyn’s personal wardrobe are selling for six figures. Film costumes sell for millions. For the most part, Marilyn’s items are increasing in value. For example, a cocktail dress that originally sold in 1999 for \$23,000 recently sold for \$348,000. That’s an incredible increase in value.”

Obviously celebrity items are extremely rare, one of a kind items. Julien’s high-profile standing as the only major auction house devoted to celebrity memorabilia helps its business, as well as its Beverly Hills location.

“We’re known as the auction house for the stars, so we deal directly mostly with the celebrities or their estates. That’s where we get the majority of the property,” he says. “You have to be very careful with authenticity and provenance, checking where the items come from, so the majority of our stuff comes directly from the celebrity. But if we do get something that doesn’t come to us directly, we

have to thoroughly research the provenance. Sometimes that means it was sold through Christie’s and they get the provenance in the catalogue, or we can verify with the studio. So if it’s a costume Marilyn Monroe piece, we track down where it was sold originally, how it got into private hands, so it’s quite a process. It’s very important you buy from a reputable auction house when collecting these items.”

The surprising thing is that many celebrity items come from the celebrities themselves, like Scarlett Johansson’s tissue. Often, celebrities sell their own things to raise funds for charities. “William Shatner sold his kidney stone for \$75,000,” says Julien. “It’s a crazy phenomenon when it gets into things like that. The sales we get are for Cher,

Barbra Streisand, and now we’re doing an auction for Bette Midler in November.”

“The reason they held on to these things so long is not because they thought they’d increase in value, it’s because of the memories, or they liked the design, or these items are part of their legacy and their career,” he continues. “What celebrities tend to do is to hold auctions to benefit their charities. People like Cher and Barbra Streisand don’t need money. It also preserves the pieces. When somebody spends a lot of money on an item, they usually display it because they made an investment. It’s often items celebrities have just laying around. We sold the contents of Cher’s house. She would make these necklaces while she was on tour. The estimate on these pieces was \$200 – \$400, and they sold for \$6,000 – \$10,000. These are just plastic pieces, but it’s because they were handmade by Cher.”

During the days of Marilyn Monroe or Elvis, no one would have guessed at the future value of the small items the famous owned. “People would give it away or throw things out,” says Julien. “We had a lady who consigned to us a pill bottle of Elvis Presley’s, with a prescription from his doctor. She said when Elvis was alive, she was digging through his trash outside of Graceland. She just wanted something of his that had his name on it so she took it. We estimated it at \$400 – \$600, but we sold it for \$5,500. It was just an empty pill bottle. I don’t think Elvis would have thought that things like that would ever be valuable. Even the Beatles gave most of their items away without realising someday these items would be worth the kind of money that they are.”

WORDS JESSICA GLIDDON Jessica’s parents were mortified when she told them she was becoming a gardener. They changed their tune when they discovered she was selling blades of grass trampled by the stars for \$100 each. Clever Jessica.