

OBJECTS OF *Desire*

IF TRAGEDY HAD NOT TAKEN THE LIFE OF MONROE IN 1962, THE ACTRESS WOULD HAVE BEEN PREPARING TO CELEBRATE HER 85TH BIRTHDAY NEXT YEAR. **ANDY ROUND** DISCOVERS HOW MEMORABILIA ASSOCIATED WITH THE SCREEN LEGEND CONTINUES TO HAUNT THE WORLD'S AUCTION ROOMS COMMANDING RECORD-BREAKING PRICES

A Twentieth Century Fox black and white publicity postcard. Sold for £4,750 at Christie's



» INVESTMENT: MARILYN MONROE «



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Margaret Barrett, the director of Entertainment Memorabilia for Bonhams & Butterfields is on the phone from L.A. 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 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 Forner. "In 1999 it sold for US\$18,400."

So what's behind these incredible prices? "You ask little kids today and they know who she is even if they have never seen her films," says Barrett. "I think the further we get away from Monroe's life the more mysterious she becomes. You see so many celebrities reinventing her look and so many pictures of her everywhere that she doesn't seem real. I think memorabilia reminds us that she was a real person."

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



COURTESY OF BONHAMS & BUTTERFIELDS

LEFT:
Clockwise from top left to right: A 1936-1939 Yankee baseball owned by Marilyn and signed by Joe DiMaggio, Lou Gehrig, Johnny Murphy, Joe Gordon, Bob Johnson, Chez Sanger, Red Rolf, Chad Ruffing and Ted Lyons. Sold for £3,500; Marilyn's mixed cut, triple drop fringe ear pendants with clip fitting. Sold for £8,750; An evening stole of black silk jersey trimmed with white fur, with a photograph of Marilyn wearing it. Sold: £42,050; A handwritten, signed letter from Marilyn. Sold for £2,750; A rare 1955 Marilyn Monroe calendar. Sold for £500; Marilyn's three-quarter length evening dress. Sold for £9,375; Marilyn Monroe during the filming of *The Seven Year Itch*. Sold for £812; A rare first issue of *Playboy* magazine, 1953. Sold for £3,000; Marilyn's tailored wool jacket with fox fur collar. Sold for £39,650; Eight magazines all featuring Marilyn Monroe on the cover. Sold for £250; A 1960 copy of *Playboy* magazine. Sold for £2,500 at Christie's

ABOVE:
Clockwise from left to right: A Marilyn Monroe signed photograph. Sold for US\$14,400; A Marilyn Monroe signed 1954 'US Department of Defense' identification card. Sold for US\$57,000; A Marilyn Monroe letter handwritten to Joe DiMaggio. Sold for US\$36,000; A 1950s Marilyn Monroe cocktail dress. Sold for US\$13,200; 1950 Marilyn Monroe twice-signed contract with Twentieth Century Fox. Sold for US\$8,540; 1946 Marilyn Monroe signed contract with Twentieth Century Fox. Sold for US\$48,000 at Bonhams & Butterfields

investment banker David Gainsborough Roberts tells *Jumcrab*. "I've probably only spent about US\$450,000 on my collection but it's worth a gigantic amount now, possibly even US\$20 million. But at the time I didn't buy to sell, I don't buy to sell anything."

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 runs at California's Hollywood Museum until August 31. "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's 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



From left to right:
 Marilyn Monroe's
 white fox fur muff;
 Marilyn Monroe's
 personal mink fur collar;
 Marilyn Monroe's lime
 green Pucci blouse
 from Scott's Monroe
 collection

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 'Last Sitting' *Vogue* photo session with original photographer Bert Stern for *New York Magazine*, 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 said); 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 suede 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\$1.2 million, a world record for a dress that has still never been broken.

"The fact that this sale achieved US\$13.4 million 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."

At the time of going to press, 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 used to sit on when she visited her psychiatrist. "Can you imagine the stories that couch could tell?" says Darren Julien, the company's CEO, speaking from Tokyo where the items were appearing on Japanese television. Julien's previously sold US\$1.03 million-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 1970s 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



INVESTMENT: MARILYN MONROE

Monroe's magic

COLLECTOR DAVID GAINSBOROUGH ROBERTS

"I must have 20 costumes including the black cocktail dress she wore in *Some Like It Hot*. It was so tight she had to be picked up and lowered into the bicycle for the last scene. I started collecting in 1991 when I bought my first Monroe dress for about \$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. There was no getting away from it. How can I afford it? I don't have a wife, I don't have children and I don't have a mortgage."

■ For details of Gainsborough Roberts's Monroe memorabilia exhibition in Jersey visit jerseyheritage.org

COLLECTOR AND CURATOR

SCOTT FORTNER - WWW.MARILYNMONROECOLLECTION.COM

"There is just something magical about Monroe. She's a modern day Cleopatra. Young, modern starlets are often compared to her and that's amazing considering she died nearly 50 years ago. 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. Bidding at auction is a tough call at times. You make decisions based on what's happening around you. But today the demand for her property is increasing with prices shooting through the roof. She is a golden investment."

■ For details of the Monroe memorabilia exhibition in California - featuring items from Fortner's collection - visit thehollywoodmuseum.com

MEMORABILIA EXPERT AT CHRISTIE'S.COM KATHERINE WILLIAMS

"The provenance or source of memorabilia is always of paramount importance. The items in our 1999 sale of Monroe items were directly from her estate and impeccable. I always advise anyone who wants to buy memorabilia to buy from a reputable auction house or dealer. At Christie's we have research teams that ensure the history of an item and the story of the seller match up. Do plenty of homework and buy something to which you have an emotional, personal response. It may not go up in value but at least you can live with it if you love it."

CEO OF JULIENSAUCTIONS.COM DARREN JULIEN

"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. Once I was being shown around an unnamed celebrity's home and they asked what could be done to improve the collectability of their possessions. The answer is for them to pass away. When celebrities die it makes a big difference because their output ceases. A few years ago we sold George Harrison's Gibson SG from the late 1960s for US\$560,000. It's probably worth over a million now. And Lennon is still the most collectible of The Beatles."

DIRECTOR OF ENTERTAINMENT MEMORABILIA IN LA AT BONHAMS.COM/US, MARGARET BARRETT

"Are there other icons like Monroe? Michael Jackson died young and tragically. When a celebrity is huge in death they have been huge in life. Michael Jackson's music has touched the lives of several generations. 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."



COURTESY OF SHARH KONIGLUB'S AUCTIONS

Clockwise from left to right: Marilyn Monroe chair used for the July 1962 photo shoot for *Life* magazine. Estimate: US\$2,000 to US\$4,000; Marilyn Monroe's pink Pucci blouse. Estimate: US\$2,000 to US\$4,000; Marilyn Monroe's therapist couch. Estimate: US\$800 to US\$1,200 at Julien's Auctions

probably signed the 'Marilyn' autograph they have just inherited from their grandmother. "There are also people who think you can buy a 1950s 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 paid for an item, but I don't want a week in France, I want this excitement" ♦