



A true original: Jane Birkin's first Hermès handbag to go on sale in Paris next month

Kim Willsher
Paris

A unique Birkin handbag, the only one of its kind made for the British-born singer and actor Jane Birkin, is to go on sale in Paris.

The prototype model of the sought-after Hermès bag, which Birkin used for nine years, is expected to fetch a six-figure sum at auction next month.

Well-used and still bearing traces of the stickers that Birkin irreverently stuck on the smooth black leather, the bag comes complete with the nail clippers she attached inside.

The head of handbags and fashion at Sotheby's, Aurélie Vassy, said that it was unique.

"It was the first bag given to Jane Birkin and it's obvious that she made remarks and suggestions about the prototype.

"It's not Le Birkin we all know and love, which was a kind of collaboration between her and Hermès," Vassy said. "The prototype is a one-off. There is no other bag like it in the world."

The creation of the Birkin bag is a fashion legend that came about after Birkin's chance encounter with Jean-Louis Dumas, then the head of the French luxury goods company, on a commercial flight from Paris to London in the early 1980s.

In a 2018 interview with CBS, Birkin, who died in July 2023, said:

"I found myself next door to a very polite gentleman and I had my agenda [diary] as usual banged full of bits of paper and everything and the whole thing fell to the ground.

"So I picked it up and he said: 'You should have pockets in that agenda' and I said: 'What can you do, Hermès don't make it with pockets', and he said: 'I am Hermès.'

"I said: 'Why don't you make a handbag that's a bit bigger than the Kelly and not as big as my suitcase, which weighs a ton?' There was the sort of vomit bag and I did a wee sketch and he took it with him and a month later I got a call from Hermès saying would I come and have a look at this bag."

In 1994, Birkin auctioned the prototype bag to raise money for a French Aids charity. It was auctioned again in 2000 and bought by the current owner, a collector of luxury goods.

Birkin's subsequent relationship with the bag, which sells for thousands of pounds new and hundreds of thousands secondhand, was mixed. Hermès gave her four more bags but in a 2012 interview she described it as the "bloody Birkin bag", complaining it was heavy and "snobbish".

Three years later, she asked Hermès to rename a crocodile-skin version of the bag because of con-

cerns over the treatment of the animals used to produce it.

The original bag has been exhibited at MoMa in New York and the V&A Museum in London. The prototype is a different size to later models, has a shoulder strap and brass hardware, later replaced with gold-plated hardware, clasps and "feet" instead of small studs on its base. It also has the initials "JB" stamped on the front flap.

"People love it because of its origin and its history. It's like a celebrated work of art; it has an energy and soul of its own," Vassy said. "This bag was the very beginning of Le Birkin and we know Jane was proud to have it."

Birkin bags can command prices of up to £300,000 even without the allure of Birkin's prototype. On the Sotheby's website, an estimate of the value of Birkin's original bag can be obtained "on request". It will be sold in Paris on 10 July at the end of haute couture week.





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Aurélie Vassy
Sotheby's

The original Birkin bag, which will be auctioned at Sotheby's next month





► Jane Birkin
at her mother's
house in London
in 1996. Birkin
bags, which were
named after her,
sell for hundreds
of thousands
of pounds
secondhand

PHOTOGRAPH:
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