



# The woman, the bag, the myth

Auction of the original Birkin highlights an enduring fascination with two icons

BY MARISA MELTZER

The world is in the throes of Birkin mania.

This month the original Birkin bag, made by Hermès for the British actress Jane Birkin in 1984, sold for \$10.1 million at Sotheby's in Paris.

The way Ms. Birkin wore it, festooned with nail clippers and stickers for political causes, has led to its own slang: to "Birkinify" one's bag. The omnipresent Labubu plush toys that fans like to hang on their bags are said to have been inspired by the way Ms. Birkin affixed eclectic trinkets to her Birkins. Riffs on the Hermès classic, the Boatkin, have become sought-after novelty items that fetch their own hefty prices.

On social media, explainers proliferate on how to emulate Ms. Birkin's late 1960s, carefree, bourgeois-bohemian style, with sheer crocheted dresses and ballet flats.

All of this is happening two years after her death on July 16, 2023, following a cancer diagnosis and more than a decade of treatment.

She was a cult figure, particularly outside France, where she lived most of her life. Ms. Birkin, who was born in London, became a revered actress who appeared in more than 70 films and a musician whose most famous song, "Je t'aime... moi non plus," with Serge Gainsbourg, was a worldwide hit. In 2023, the black-walled house on the Left Bank where the couple lived opened as a museum, and tickets to tour the residence sell out months in advance.

In "Jane B. by Agnès V.," a 1988 documentary directed by Agnès Varda that was made as Ms. Birkin was turning 40, she dumps out the content of her original black Birkin — the first "What's in My Bag?" video, perhaps? Out of the beaten-up black vessel tumbled multiple notebooks, a Swiss Army knife, newspaper clippings, Maybelline Great Lash mascara, pencils, cash, cigarettes, a Dostoyevsky novel and Scotch tape. She fixes her gaze on the camera with a wry look and says: "Find out anything after seeing what's in the bag? Even when you show it all, you reveal very little."

Jane Birkin knew the bag had more name recognition than she did. During her life, people would ask if she was the same Birkin as the bag. She'd say, "Yes, and the bag is going to sing now!"

In person, the original Birkin looks as if it might have been found in a ship-

wreck, with its fraying handles and mottled leather patina and marks from where she had affixed Doctors Without Borders and Unicef stickers. The nail clippers she had dangled from the bag were still there.

It was designed in collaboration with Jean-Louis Dumas, then the Hermès chief executive. In a kind of rom-com-style meet cute, the two sat next to each other on a flight from London to Paris and came up with the idea for a holdall that would be more suitable than the baskets Ms. Birkin had carried as bags since she was a teenager.

"She didn't treat it as an art piece," said Adam Lena, a couture dealer from Warsaw who went to the public viewing at Sotheby's. "It's just a normal bag for every day. That's the amazing thing about it. She didn't treat it as an heirloom."

Everyone else has a very different relationship to the bag. It's nearly impossible to walk into an Hermès store and just buy one. Someone who wants a Birkin has to establish a relationship as a customer of the house, often buying scarves or wallets or sweaters or smaller bags, before they are "offered" one, in Hermès parlance.

The bag cost \$2,000 when it was released in the mid-1980s. Today the least expensive Birkin at retail in the United States would sell for more than \$10,000, depending on size, color and the material in stock.

Interest in Birkins has boomed all summer. The luxury e-commerce site 1stDibs sent out a news release that noted a surge in searches for Birkin bags, with a 484 percent year-over-year increase in the first three months of 2025, and a 5 percent rise in the week following the Sotheby's auction announcement in early June.

Faye Landes, a longtime retail analyst, compared the value of the Birkin prototype to that of a pair of sneakers worn by Michael Jordan in a basketball game. "There are no doubt millions of people who want to be icons," Ms. Landes said. "Very few people have either the talent or the resources to make the full effort to become one."

At 4:16 p.m. on July 10, bidding on the original bag began. Some 270 participants from 38 countries had registered for that day's auction after the bag had been displayed in Asia, Europe and the United States.

As in a scene from a movie, there were gasps as the figure rose from \$1.7 million, rapidly increasing in a nine-way bidding war that played out over 10 tense minutes.

One bidder was Jennifer Rubio, a founder of the luggage company Away. "I was worried it might disappear into a private collection, never to be seen again," Ms. Rubio wrote in an email. "I bid on it with the intention of donating the bag to a museum like the Costume Institute at the Met because I genuinely believe it belongs in the public eye."

The bidding ended at \$10.1 million, including a buyer's premium, the bag going to Valence, a Japanese fashion conglomerate. Strangers cheered and hugged each other.

A news release from Valence stated that it intended to exhibit the bag.

Representatives for Hermès did not respond to a request for comment on the auction.

The truth is that owning a Birkin has become shorthand for making it. Many Real Housewives and Kardashian-Jenners own them. (Rick Dick, the name of an artificial intelligence meme artist on Instagram, posted a parody video of Kim Kardashian breaking the glass of the Sotheby's display and stealing the bag. Ms. Kardashian reposted it.) Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy, another perpetual object of style obsession, owned a large black one. So what could be more indicative of success than owning the original Birkin?

What would Jane Birkin think of all this? It's a good question, one I've been pondering in the last two years as I worked on my biography, "It Girl: The Life and Legacy of Jane Birkin."

She was known to have a very dry, very healthy sense of humor. Her friends once ordered a cake shaped like a Birkin bag for her birthday.

As someone who eschewed plastic surgery on her own face, she would probably find the so-called Birkin Body — a \$75,000 body lift from the neck to the knees offered by Dr. Ryan Neinstein — darkly funny.

She might even have taken a shine to the divisive Labubus. She'd had a beloved stuffed toy named Munkey since childhood until she buried it with Mr. Gainsbourg, her lover who died in 1991.

Ms. Birkin lived a life full of surprises and contradictions as she confronted motherhood, sexuality, fame, consent, abuse, respect. It is a legacy that is com-





plex and worth looking at closely. Her image was taken away from her, over and over, and yet she worked to take it back and wrestle with her own history.

She owned five of the Birkin bags over the course of her life, and she remained close to the brand, even walking the runway for the designer Martin Margiela's

now highly coveted ready-to-wear collections for Hermès. The fine knits and loose, slightly masculine trousers suited her personal style in middle age and beyond, which doesn't have as many style explainers, but should.

But the Hermès bag that is synonymous with her to this day? Its creation

myth didn't warrant even a sentence in Ms. Birkin's diary. Her life cannot be summed up in one outfit, one relationship, one song, one role or even one bag.



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**The Hermès Birkin prototype, far left, was created for the British actress and singer Jane Birkin, near left, in 1984. The bag sold for \$10 million this month.**