



BIDDING FOR A STAR

Like it or not, celebrity items which might have been expected to go for a song are reaching record auction prices.

text PHILIPPA ANDERSON

feature

The talk across the auction rooms in Europe and the US is not about Picasso paintings, Ming vases or Chippendale chairs, but the rising interest in celebrity items. Considering the astonishing prices these items have been sold for over the last year or so, it's not surprising the chatter is becoming louder.

Remember the iconic black dress Audrey Hepburn wore in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*? It was sold for more than HK\$7 million at a Christie's London sale at the end of last year. Designed by Hubert de Givenchy for the much-loved 1961 classic film, the dress far outreached the pre-sale estimate — establishing a new world auction record for a dress made for a film. A previous record as such was for the blue gingham dress worn by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, which fetched more than HK\$2 million in 2005. A recent auction of singer Cher's household possessions — everything from her clothes, furniture and cars — grossed more than HK\$27 million.

From London to Los Angeles, the craze to own a celebrity item is booming. Sotheby's in London led the way in the 1980s. Today, Christie's seems to sell the most interesting items through its London and New York sale rooms, and both auction houses collaborate with California-based auctioneer Julien's Auctions. Established just four years ago to specialise in entertainment memorabilia, Julien's Auctions has built a strong reputation with Hollywood stars. Recent dedicated sales have included items connected with Barbra Streisand, Debbie Reynolds and Marilyn Monroe.

Why this huge interest in celebrity cast-offs? Darren Julien, President of Julien's Auctions, explains that while interest in the 1980s was mainly for exhibits from rock-themed restaurants, the market is fuelled by collectors and fans these days. "Collectors are looking for investments while fans are driven by

emotion and memories which push up prices. Celebrity items often have a nostalgia factor. People are thrown back to a point in their lives when they remember a celebrity wearing a particular dress, or they recall seeing a particular film. They want to own that item to preserve the memory," says Julien.

Sarah Hodgson, head of popular entertainment at Christie's, comments, "The market really took off in the 1980s and the interest has just [continued to] grow. There is a massive demand, but items like the Hepburn dress are real one-offs. The film is a classic and the dress has become an icon in its own right."

STAR QUALITY

A logical conclusion follows the price trend of celebrity memorabilia: the more popular the star, the more popular the item. "Items connected with Hollywood goddesses, like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, always sell well. As do those from the heroes of the moment, like James Stewart and Cary Grant. The 'live fast, die young' brigade also attracts a loyal following, particularly Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. And of course anything remotely connected to the Beatles, Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix is much in demand," says Hodgson.

Julien confirms this. Even early original photographs of Monroe can fetch good prices. A print of the famed blonde idol by Andre de Dienes recently fetched more than HK\$20,000 in Julien's winter auction. And it wasn't even signed. The issue for Julien is not selling the items ("With Monroe and Presley you can't go wrong") but finding the items to sell. A recent Julien's sale was predominantly for the estate of early Canadian film pioneer Mary Pickford, but also included items from pop stars like David Cassidy, Madonna and Bruce Springsteen.

Real gems, linked to the most collectable stars, are becoming increasingly difficult to come across. With more



Early pictures of Marilyn Monroe fetch good prices

collectors than items, demand is pushing prices up. And establishing an item's provenance is a major task. Julien claims to turn down 95 per cent of the items he is offered. Christie's faces the same situation. "We turn down far more items than we accept. Where possible, we go back to the source. The piece is checked against the original film or even with the artist, if alive. We have massive files of autographs and handwriting samples at different stages of many famous people's lives," says Hodgson.

Handwritten lyrics of famous songs fetch particularly high prices. Recently, the lyrics for the Beatles' song *Maxwell's Silver Hammer* went under the real hammer. The lyrics were written in 1968 and soon after, Paul McCartney gave them to Barry Miles, his biographer and a former Apple Records employee. Despite the fact that the single page sheet represents an early working version of the composition — the last four lines of the lyrics are omitted and include deletions and alterations to the text as McCartney worked out the song's wording — the item fetched almost HK\$1.5 million.

Helen Hall, head of entertainment memorabilia for Christie's New York comments, "Early McCartney lyrics rarely appear on the auction market and this



▲ Items connected with the Beatles sell well

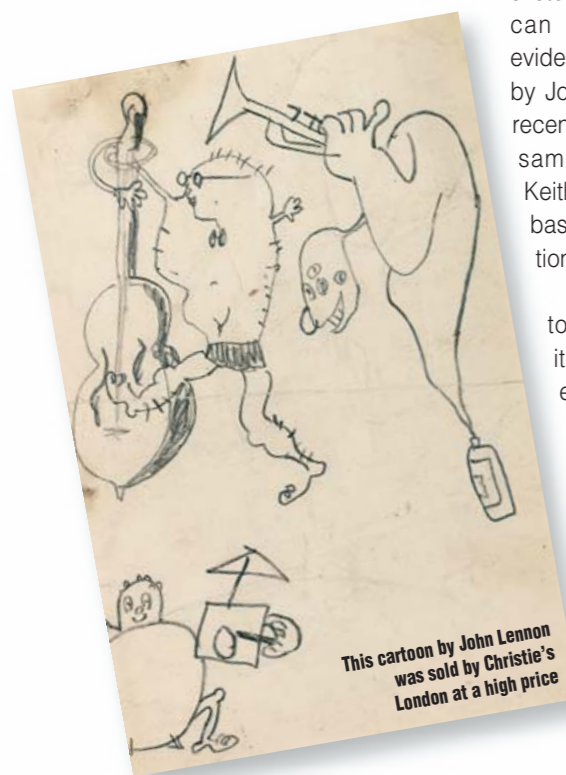
represented a very rare opportunity for collectors and fans." Even a simple sketch or doodle by one of the Beatles can fetch astonishing prices, as evidenced by some scribbled cartoons by John Lennon which were sold at a recent Christie's London auction. In the same sales were items owned by Keith Moon of The Who, including his baseball boots and various presentation discs.

Film memorabilia also appeal to fans and collectors. *Star Trek* items continue to be the rage as evidenced by a massive sale of 1,000 lots by Christie's New York last year. Popular items also range from guns used in James Bond films to the 'bad taste' reindeer sweater worn by would-be boyfriend Mark Darcy (played by Colin Firth) in the film *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

Has the Internet made a difference? "Without a doubt," Hodgson affirms. "It's made auctions more accessible worldwide and we can distribute catalogues online. Bidding online adds to the frenzy and by next year all Christie's auctions will be live [on] the web."

Julien agrees, "We used to have around 250 bidders per sale before the Internet. Now we are getting more than 3,000. Smaller items are available on auction sites such as eBay. The online bidder is now just as important as the phone bidder."

According to Julien, the online buyer has an advantage in that they don't get caught in the hype of the sale room. "It's impossible to exaggerate the emotion in the sale room. We have seen feverish bidding for items. And if recent sales are anything to go by, the trend looks set to continue." ▲



This cartoon by John Lennon was sold by Christie's London at a high price

feature



COLLECTORS GET THEIR CHER

When multi-award-winning international star Cher decided to have a lifestyle change last year, she put the contents of her home up for sale. It was a rare treat for fans and collectors around the world.

More than 700 lots of paintings, furniture and decorative works of art from Cher's remarkable Italian Renaissance-style residence in Malibu, California, went under the hammer in the Beverly Hills two-day auction, organised by Sotheby's with Julien's Auctions.

Spanning 40 years of Cher's career, the sale also included approximately 200 items from her professional and personal wardrobe, including a stunning array of original gowns and costumes designed by American fashion icon Bob Mackie.

The sale achieved more than three times the pre-sale estimate at HK\$27 million. A portion of the proceeds from the sale benefited The Cher Charitable Foundation, which aids a number of charities.

"Cher's influence is so remarkably broad that anything from her life and career is highly collectible," says Darren Julien, President of Julien's Auctions. "Cher has always had a progressive and innovative style from her fashion to her homes."

The highest price achieved was for Cher's black 2005 Bentley Continental GT Coupe, which sold for more than HK\$1.5 million to an anonymous bidder via the telephone. Among the other highlights were a fine Gothic revival brass bed and other items of Gothic revival furniture. The top selling costume was a Bob Mackie-designed rock 'n' roll outfit, worn by Cher during numerous concert performances, which after furious bidding finally sold to loud applause for almost HK\$500,000.