

the quintessential fashion accessory. Katya Foreman tracks its history.









By Katya Foreman

around a cool £1.5m (\$2.3m). Among other celebrities with Birkins to burn, Kim Kardashian has been chastised for using one as a gym bag, ditto Kate Moss – as a nappy bag. In 2012, a \$100,000 (£63,675) crocodile-skin Birkin was reportedly set on fire (then bisected by chainsaw) by Francesca Eastwood, daughter of Clint, in a so-called art project conceived by her photographer boyfriend, Tyler Shields – an act that reportedly led to death threats.

(When the smoke had cleared, it was claimed the bag was, in

Created in 1984, the iconic bag boasts as its namesake muse

happy accident, borne out of an exchange between Birkin and

Paris-based British actress Jane Birkin. Its existence was a

fact, imitation. Even more heinous.)

ultimate status symbol in the arm-candy stakes, with a starting

price around £5,600 (\$8,500), rising every year – continues to

rule the roost, as the prized possession of the deep-pocketed

few. Victoria Beckham is rumoured to own around 100, costing

former Hermès chief executive Jean-Louis Dumas on an Air France flight from Paris to London in the early '80s. Birkin, who had been upgraded, ended up sitting next to the executive; when the contents spilled out of her bag, Dumas suggested she needed one with pockets, and this sparked a conversation about her ideal accessory. As she recounted to The **Telegraph in 2012**, the actress ended up doodling her specifications for "a handbag that is bigger than the Kelly but smaller than Serge [Gainsbourg]'s suitcase" on a sick bag. The rest is handbag history.



carried in the hand or on the wrist, with four studs on the base, the Birkin represented a new, modern statement from a fashion

epitomised Hermès' world. The only other Hermès bag to carry a celebrity moniker, their Sac à Dépêches, was renamed in 1956 after Grace Kelly was snapped using it to shield her pregnant belly, having first been introduced to the item on the set of Hitchcock's To Catch a Thief. The Birkin arguably played a major role in making Hermès the fashionable house it is today. "It opened Hermès up to new markets and customers, but it also changed the typical Hermès client," says Jérôme Lalande, an antique dealer specialising in 20th-Century leather goods. "Hundreds and hundreds" of Kellys

and Birkins have passed through his hands during his career,

as both a long-time collaborator of Hermès, sourcing items for

house known for its traditional, classical stance. Up until that

point, the Kelly bag – ladylike, stiff and boxy by comparison –

the house's museums, and the bag-and-luggage expert at second-hand luxury goods specialists Collector Square, an eboutique with a showroom on Rue Bonaparte in Paris. In the bag According to Lalande, the Birkin wasn't an immediate hit: it only really took off in the late '90s, at the dawn of the It-bag era. Thirty years on from its launch, demand is such that there is no longer a waiting list for the bag, in the classic sense of the term.

"It's a wish list, not an order list. They don't take orders any

more; you just have to hope," says Lalande, who estimates that

auction. The most expensive bag ever to go under the hammer,

according to WWD, was a red Porosus crocodile Birkin with

there are some 200,000 Birkins in circulation. And the Birkin's

limited availability has undoubtedly helped its success at

18-carat white-gold and diamond 'hardware', sold for \$203,150 (£129,355) at auction in Dallas in 2011. In the past seven years 348 have been auctioned versus 1,074 Kelly bags, according to a report by Collector Square. The rarest styles are generally the most expensive, it says, with bright colours the least common on the second-hand market. Topping the rank are pink or purple Birkins, which on average

sell in leather for between 12,000 and 16,000 euros (£9,000 -

£12,500).

France."

Bag ladies

that of a lizard-skin bag.



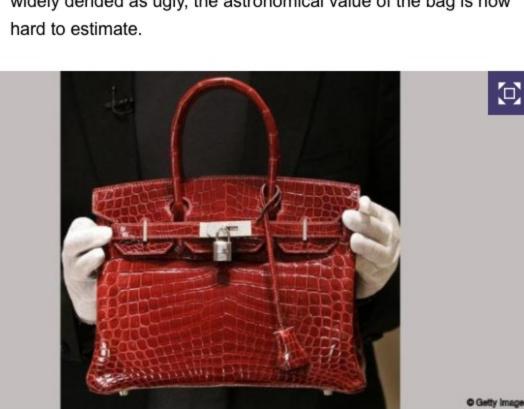
"There are some very good copies from Italy, and even from

Despite the array of animal skins and rainbow range of colours now available – over 20 shades of blue have been used over the years, ranging from blue-green to indigo – the Birkin's original design has hardly changed (save for a few minor adjustments e.g. on the lanyard that houses the lock key, says Lalande). The size has evolved, however, from its original 35cm, with variations including mini and travel sizes added

over the years. The price scale goes from basic leather to

crocodile versions; a Porosus crocodile bag goes for five times

Precious metals and diamonds on the hardware entered the picture around seven years ago, according to Lalande, following a rise in clients from emerging markets. In terms of customising, apart from choosing the colour of seams and lining it pretty much stops there. Once they're out of the shop, customising (or even defacing) the Birkin has become a trend among celebrities in recent years. For Christmas 2013, Kanye West bought fiancée Kim Kardashian a \$40,000 (£25,470) Birkin custom-painted by George Condo, the artist who illustrated his My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy album cover; widely derided as ugly, the astronomical value of the bag is now



Ironically perhaps, Ms Birkin was herself the first to de-chic the bag, roughing it up, plastering it with badges, stickers and worry beads, and bemoaning its tendonitis-inducing properties.

Birkin bags are now available in an array of colours and animal skins - from

crocodile to lizard (Getty Images)

"There's no fun in a bag if it's not kicked around, so that it looks as if the cat's been sitting on it – and it usually has. The cat may even be in it!" Birkin told Vogue.com. "I keep saying to Hermès to make it out of plastic or cardboard, then it wouldn't be so heavy. But if people want to go for the real thing, fine. If they go for copies, that's fine too. I really don't think it matters..."

Being associated with such an extravagant item doesn't sit comfortably with the down-to-earth actress, though she uses it to her advantage. Not only has Birkin owned four in her lifetime,

eventually offloaded in the name of good causes, she also "got

Hermès to fork out for my charities once I saw the fortune they

were making. A certain amount of money every year goes

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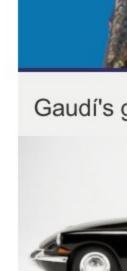


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