

VINTAGE 'IT' BAGS

Judith Miller discovers a whole clutch of stylish collectables

STYLIST CHARIS WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS CAROLYN BARBER





Once the unfashionable preserve of charity shops and jumble sales, vintage handbags are now among the most desirable of accessories. For women seeking a tote as individual as they are, vintage offers so much more than the high street. Much of their appeal can be attributed to the immense and tantalising range of styles available, dating from the Victorian age right up to the 1980s. Designer or unbranded, iconic or unsung, decadent or sensible, novelty or practical, for day or for night, there is an almost endless range of bags to choose from. Moreover, with prices for these purveyors of status and style ranging from under £50 to tens of thousands of pounds, all tastes and all pockets are catered for.

'It' bags

Just as some new designer bags are more sought-after than others, the same holds true for vintage versions by leading designers and fashion houses. The 'A' list of desirable names and brands, from the 1920s onward, includes Chanel, Schiaparelli, Dior, Yves St Laurent, Gucci, Hermès, Halston, Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Prada, Anya Hindmarch, Lulu Guinness, and Nathalie Hambro. All are associated with consistently high quality of manufacture and ingenuity of design.

Iconic, must-have 'it' bags include Louis Vuitton's early 1930s 'Noe' tote bag (currently valued at £400-£800 depending on the style); Chanel's quilted leather '2:55' (worth around £1,000); Hermès' 1960s 'Kelly' bag (named after Grace Kelly and still in production today); Prada's 1990s 'Bowling' bag (£200-£300 depending on condition); Yves Saint Laurent's 'Tuilleries Mombassa' c2005 (worth £500-£800) and, from only last year, Louis Vuitton's 'Tribute Patchwork Bag' – an instant, limited-edition classic, and retailing at £23,484. That, however, pales almost into insignificance when compared to the world record price of £43,000 paid at auction for a 1980s Hermès 'Birkin' bag (named after the 1960s actress and fashion icon Jane Birkin, and also still in

production). When waiting lists for the most desirable bags can stretch to several years it makes sense to buy a vintage version at auction and jump the queue.

As specialist auctioneer Kerry Taylor points out, Hermès bags, especially 'Birkins', invariably create a buzz in the sale room – partly because 1980s originals rarely come onto the market (if you've got one you won't want to part with it!) and partly because they're such a statement. 'It's almost like carrying a Porsche on your arm,' says Kerry. However, as with all top-quality bags, you need to watch out for fakes. Signs to look out for include poor quality stitching and, if there is any, worn gilding. If in any doubt, however, always consult a specialist, or the maker – Hermès, for example, have, for the last 20 years incorporated discreet embossed stamps inside their bags denoting who made it, and when. There's also a useful American website which, for a fee, will check the authenticity of your designer bag (pre- or post-purchase). Visit mypolette.com for more information.

Chic and cheap

If brand names aren't your thing, then you can certainly save yourself some money. For example, there are plenty of good quality unsigned leather and fabric bags out there for well under £100. Moreover, they are available in most forms – including clutch, shoulder, bucket, tote and duffel. There are rich pickings for those seeking something individual, that you won't see someone else carrying. So whether you choose a 1970s cream leather clutch or a Kelly-style 1940s crocodile-effect leather handbag, you know you're getting a big look for little money.

In addition to specialist dealers and auction houses, such as Kerry Taylor, Sotheby's and Christie's, you can find great bags in flea markets, boot fairs, charity shops and jumble sales. If you're prepared to hunt around you could literally bag a bargain! However, as specialist dealer Linda Bee explains, it pays to look closely at your potential

Opening page A 1950s Lucite bag with wirework butterfly detail, £350, from Linda Bee at Grays, London

DESIGNER BAGS Facing page The chocolate brown 'Kelly' bag dating from 1962 carried an auction estimate of £4,000-£6,000 at Kerry Taylor Auctions. The tan leather clutch bag with 'H' clasp is also by Hermès. Estimate £400-£600 at Kerry Taylor Auctions



Bag the best Luxurious Hermès

At time of writing, the world record price for a vintage handbag is £43,000 (including buyer's premium), paid at Christie's in June 2007 for an original 1980s 'Birkin' bag in cherry red crocodile (pictured above). Made by Hermès, and inspired by the actress Jane Birkin, it is rarer, easier to use and more youthful than Hermès' equally iconic 1960s 'Kelly' bag (after Grace Kelly). Even in modest black crocodile (pictured above) it is very expensive, but unusual colours such as green and red can send prices soaring.



DESIGNER BAGS Above 1960's satchel bag with tiger's head clasp by Gucci, £350-£500, at Kerry Taylor Auctions

EVENING BAGS Facing page, from left Brown 1950's beaded Lucite bag, £125, from Bags of Glamour at Grays. Silver 1960's bag, £120; grey 1920's beaded bag with green beaded handle, £85, both from Samaya Ling Vintage Collections. 1930's black and silver checked bag with tassels, £85, from Susie Nelson at Grays. Cream Edwardian floral bag with chain handle, £270, from Samaya Ling Vintage Collections

purchase: 'Avoid leather that's dried out and showing signs of cracking, particularly in the handles or straps as they will inevitably break at some point.' In addition, make sure you check the lining – is it ripped or stained? This may or may not matter to you, but don't forget to look.

Evening essentials

If you're looking for an evening or cocktail bag, there are also plenty to choose from. It's possible to find beautifully intact Victorian and Edwardian beaded bags in good condition for less than £100. The bonus is that they still look perfect with an evening dress today.

Just about all materials are available, including leather and velvet, but the most popular include hand-beaded (originally very much in vogue in the 1890s, and then again in the 1920s and the 1950s), and slinky metal-mesh bags in gold, silver or vermeil (silver gilt) – the latter particularly popular in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. With many makers of such bags now consigned to anonymity thanks to errant labels, entry-level prices are very reasonable – £30-£40 and up – and there are, as with unbranded leather bags, greater opportunities to pick up examples from non-specialist sources, such as boot fairs.

However, make sure you only buy examples in very good condition, as missing beads and damaged mesh are unsightly and difficult or impossible to repair.

The novelty factor

If practicality isn't your prime concern, there are also many weird and wonderful novelty bags out there. The range of forms and styles is considerable. Notable examples include: 'fine art' bags, with subjects such as romantic rural landscapes in tapestry panels; New York firm Walborg's 1940's and 1950's beaded poodle bags; bags from the late-1920's to the 1970's moulded in Bakelite or Lucite into diverse shapes such as fans, caskets and beehives; 1960's painted wickerwork bags with clear and coloured plastic handles. The price range for such bags >




UNSIGNED BAGS From front 1940's brown leather handbag with bone handle, £100, from Linda Bee at Grays. Soft 1930's handbag, £45; 1950's Russell & Bromley black patent leather bag, £115, both at Samaya Ling Vintage Collections



NOVELTY BAGS Above, from left Mother of pearl Lucite bag, c1960s, £250; dark grey 1960s mini Lucite bag, £100, both from Linda Bee; 1950's wicker bag, £90, from Vintage Modes, all at Grays. 1940s Lucite novelty bag, £145, from Samaya Ling Vintage Collections

is about £100-£500.

Whether you favour novelty, practicality or style, a word of warning: collecting handbags can become a powerful addiction. After all, it's not just a question of how many bags you'll want, but how many you'll need. As Miss Piggy from *The Muppets* memorably underestimated: 'I find that it is vital to have at least one handbag for each of the 10 types of social situation: Very Formal; Not So Formal; Just A Teensy Bit Formal; Informal But Not That Formal; Every Day; Every Other Day; Day Travel; Night Travel; Theatre, and Fling.' I couldn't agree more! 

Find out more

View

Museum of Costume, Bath (01225 477789; museumofcostume.co.uk)
Victoria & Albert Museum London (020 7942 2000; vam.ac.uk)

(020 8676 4600; kerrytaylorauctions.com)
At Grays, London: Linda Bee, 020 7629 5921; Bags of Glamour and Susie Nelson, 020 7629 7034; Vintage Modes, 020 7409 0400 (graysantiques.com)

Read

Handbags by Judith Miller (Dorling Kindersley)
Bags by Claire Wilcox (V&A)
Handbags – A Collector's Guide (Millers)

Samaya Ling Vintage Collections, Bristol (07877 057082; samayingvintage.com)
Cristobal, London (020 7724-7230; cristobal.co.uk)

Buy

Christie's South Kensington, London (020 7930 6074; christies.com)
Kerry Taylor Auctions, London

Frock Me! Vintage Fashion Fair, Chelsea Town Hall, London, on 26th Oct (020 7254 4054; frockmevintagefashion.com)