

“It’s cooler to hang Lennon’s guitar than a Picasso”: pop culture wins out at auctions

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Match the items sold at auction with the amounts people paid for them.

- | | |
|---|------------------|
| 1. Kurt Cobain’s guitar | a. \$48 million |
| 2. Leonardo da Vinci’s <i>Salvator Mundi</i> painting | b. \$71 million |
| 3. a 1960 Ferrari 250 GTO | c. \$6 million |
| 4. an 1856 British Guiana postage stamp | d. \$450 million |
| 5. the Pink Star diamond | e. \$10 million |

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

artefact auction bidder cachet cardigan
estimate flux Grammy iconic legacy lyrics
memorabilia millennial monied outfit

1. An / A _____ is a public occasion when things are sold to the people who offer the most money for them.
2. If things are in _____, they are in a condition of constant change.
3. If something is described as _____, it is very famous and well known, and believed to represent a particular idea.
4. An / A _____ is an object that was made some time ago and is historically important.
5. If someone is _____, they are rich.
6. An / A _____ is someone who became an adult in the early twenty-first century.
7. _____ are objects that people collect because they belonged to someone famous.
8. An / A _____ is a woollen jacket that you fasten at the front.

“It’s cooler to hang Lennon’s guitar than a Picasso”: pop culture wins out at auctions

Level 3: Advanced

9. An / A _____ is someone who makes an offer to buy something at an auction.
10. _____ is a special quality that makes people admire someone or something, or makes them want to have something.
11. An / A _____ is an amount that you guess or calculate using the information available.
12. An / A _____ is a set of clothes that are worn together.
13. An / A _____ is a prize give in the US each year to the best writers and performers of music.
14. _____ are the words of a song.
15. An / A _____ is something that someone has achieved that continues to exist after they stop working or die.

“It’s cooler to hang Lennon’s guitar than a Picasso”: pop culture wins out at auctions

Level 3: Advanced

Sales of items from celebrities such as Janet Jackson and K-poppers BTS are trending – and reframing what goes under the hammer

Priya Elan

26 May, 2021

- 1 Is celebrity merchandise the new Monet? Auction houses are in flux, with more and more pop culture items being sold under the hammer for six- and seven-figure sums.
- 2 In April, Julien’s Auctions in Beverly Hills hosted a three-day auction of Janet Jackson’s personal belongings, including some of her most iconic stage outfits. Buyers included Kim Kardashian, who bought Jackson’s outfit from the music video for her 1993 classic “If” for \$25,000 and, on Instagram, said she was “such a fan” of the singer.
- 3 “A collector recently told me: ‘It’s cooler to hang John Lennon’s guitar on my wall than a Monet or Picasso,’” says Darren Julien, the owner of Julien’s, the only auction house that trades exclusively in celebrity items, explaining how twentieth-century pop-culture artefacts have become the new classic paintings, thanks to a generation of monied millennials.
- 4 Although Christie’s started its rock and pop memorabilia section in the 80s, Julien’s, which began in 2003, was the first auction house to deal exclusively in pop-culture items. Early auctions included the dress in which Marilyn Monroe sang “Happy Birthday” to President John F Kennedy (sold for \$4.8m in 2016) and the green cardigan Kurt Cobain wore for Nirvana’s MTV Unplugged performance (sold once in 2015 for \$140,800 and again in 2019 for \$334,000). The Unplugged guitar went for more in 2020.
- 5 “After we sold Kurt Cobain’s guitar for over \$6m last year, we had buyers who wanted the cardigan that we sold for \$334,000,” says Julien. “The sale of the guitar made \$334,000 seem cheap. We had one client who offered over \$600,000 to buy the cardigan from the winning bidder, but the buyer in our 2019 auction declined to sell it.”
- 6 Julien says that the shift from antiques and classic portraits to memorabilia was a long time coming. “When I started working with Sotheby’s in 1999, collectibles were almost looked down upon as something for fans only,” he says. “It’s been slowly shifting.”
- 7 There has also been a rise in auctions of items still owned by the relevant celebrities, as opposed to property from fan collections. So items under the hammer may well owe their cachet to celebrities who are still alive and performing. “I remember, when I was trying to talk Cher into doing the auction nearly 15 years ago, she said: ‘But I’m not dead,’” Julien recalls.
- 8 “Those auctions showed celebrities and this market that you don’t have to be dead to have a successful auction of your belongings,” he says, mentioning a Barbra Streisand auction in 2009. “We’ve noticed that items are still selling for big money, even though the celebrity is still alive.”
- 9 The house went on to have similar auctions for Ringo Starr, Nancy Sinatra and Bette Midler. Julien says that hosting auctions for top celebrities makes it easier for others to jump in and have one themselves.
- 10 “Janet Jackson was one of the most difficult people to talk into an auction because she’s so private,” he says. “Even Janet was surprised at the results and she really got into the process of not only creating an amazing video for her fans to see in her box set but surprising the fans on the day of her birthday, coming on the screens in the auction room to thank them for attending.”
- 11 In January, Julien’s auctioned seven outfits from K-pop boyband BTS. The costumes from their 2020 video for “Dynamite” sold for \$162,500, far above the \$40,000 estimate. Does Julien think selling off items by relatively new pop-culture figures is the future trend? “Yes, especially if it’s a band or someone as hugely popular as BTS,” he says. “If you take a set of outfits that are worth \$2,000 and put them on BTS, have them perform in them in a music video and then the song is nominated for a Grammy, you just increased the value of those outfits 81 times.”

“It’s cooler to hang Lennon’s guitar than a Picasso”: pop culture wins out at auctions

Level 3: Advanced

- 12 In June, 2021, artefacts being sold will include Bob Dylan’s handwritten lyrics to “Lay, Lady, Lay”, a handwritten letter by Britney Spears that she sent to a school boyfriend and a self portrait by Cobain. “These lifestyle auctions have now become a way for celebrities to do something that helps build their legacy,” Julien says. “Many of these items belong in museums or in the hands of people who can properly preserve them, and it also takes the pressure off storing so many items for celebrities.”

© Guardian News and Media 2021

First published in *The Guardian*, 29/04/2021

“It’s cooler to hang Lennon’s guitar than a Picasso”: pop culture wins out at auctions

Level 3: Advanced

3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. How does Julien’s auction house differ from other auction houses?
2. When did Christie’s auction house begin selling pop memorabilia?
3. Which item mentioned in the article was sold for the most money?
4. How much did one client offer for Kurt Cobain’s cardigan?
5. How was collecting memorabilia regarded when Julien first started working at Sotheby’s auction house in 1999?
6. Why was Cher surprised when she was invited to auction some of her belongings?
7. Why was Janet Jackson a difficult person to persuade to have an auction?
8. How did she surprise her fans?
9. What is the effect of a song being nominated for a Grammy award?
10. What do lifestyle auctions help celebrities to do?

4 Key language

a. Match the phrasal verbs in the left-hand column with their meanings in the right-hand column.

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| 1. get into | a. do something after doing something else |
| 2. look down on | b. persuade someone to do something |
| 3. go on to | c. start enjoying something |
| 4. jump in | d. buy and sell something |
| 5. talk into | e. regard something as inferior to something else |
| 6. deal in | f. become involved in something very quickly |

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- “The musicians and actors of today are more relevant to people than famous painters or writers from the past.”
- “People only buy these artefacts because they want to sell them later and make a profit.”
- “People who pay a fortune for these items are basically stupid.”

“It’s cooler to hang Lennon’s guitar than a Picasso”: pop culture wins out at auctions

Level 3: Advanced

6 In your own words

- a. Search online for examples of celebrity memorabilia that have been sold at auction. Choose one of the items and write a short report (about 200 words). You could include information such as:
- what the item was
 - who the celebrity is and why he or she is famous
 - how much the item sold for
 - who bought it
 - why they bought it
 - what they plan to do with it