

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

### Level 2: Intermediate

#### 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. Find the following words in the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. a noun meaning *a public occasion when things are sold to the people who offer the most money for them* \_\_\_\_\_ (1)
2. a noun meaning *a set of clothes that are worn together* \_\_\_\_\_ (1)
3. an adverb meaning *only* \_\_\_\_\_ (3)
4. a noun meaning *a woollen jacket that you fasten at the front with buttons or a zip* \_\_\_\_\_ (3)
5. a phrasal verb meaning *persuade someone to do something (two words)* \_\_\_\_\_ (5)
6. a noun meaning *the things that you own* \_\_\_\_\_ (6)
7. a noun meaning *an amount that you guess or calculate using the information available* \_\_\_\_\_ (9)
8. a noun meaning *an award given in the US each year to the best writers and performers in music* \_\_\_\_\_ (9)
9. a noun meaning *an object that was made some time ago and is historically important* \_\_\_\_\_ (10)
10. a noun meaning *something that someone has achieved that continues to exist after they retire or die* \_\_\_\_\_ (10)

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**26 May, 2021**

- 1 In April, Julien’s Auctions in California held an auction of Janet Jackson’s personal belongings, including some of her stage outfits. Buyers included Kim Kardashian, who bought Jackson’s outfit from the music video for her 1993 classic “If” for \$25,000.
- 2 “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 only trades in celebrity items.
- 3 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 cardigan Kurt Cobain wore for Nirvana’s MTV Unplugged performance (sold for \$334,000).
- 4 “After we sold Kurt Cobain’s guitar for over \$6m last year, buyers wanted the cardigan,” 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 refused to sell it.”
- 5 There has also been a rise in auctions of items that celebrities still own, as opposed to property from fan collections. So items at auction may belong 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 says.
- 6 “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.”
- 7 The house had similar auctions for Ringo Starr, Nancy Sinatra and Bette Midler. Julien says that hosting auctions for top celebrities makes it easier for others to organize one themselves.
- 8 “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 enjoyed the process of creating an amazing video for her fans and surprising the fans on the day of her birthday, coming on the screens in the auction room to thank them for attending.”
- 9 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 more than 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.”
- 10 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 to 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.”

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Janet Jackson bought Kim Kardashian’s outfit at auction.
2. *Julien’s* is the only auction house that deals in pop-culture items.
3. Kurt Cobain’s guitar sold for more money than his cardigan.
4. Julien’s only sells items from celebrities who are dead.
5. At first, Janet Jackson didn’t want to sell her items at auction.
6. BTS’s costumes sold for a lower price than the estimate.
7. If a song is nominated for a Grammy, this can increase the value of an outfit.
8. Bob Dylan wrote the lyrics for “Lay, Lady, Lay” on a laptop.
9. Britney Spears sent a handwritten letter to Kurt Cobain.
10. Some celebrities believe auctions can help them to build their legacy.

#### 4 Key language

a. Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- |             |               |
|-------------|---------------|
| 1. auction  | a. culture    |
| 2. pop      | b. belongings |
| 3. big      | c. video      |
| 4. music    | d. portrait   |
| 5. self     | e. house      |
| 6. personal | f. money      |

#### 5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Pop stars are more famous than classical painters.”
- “Collecting things is a strange behaviour.”
- “It is stupid to pay this much for a cardigan.”

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## 6 In your own words

- a. In the Warmer (activity 1), there is a reference to the Pink Star diamond. Search online to find out more information about this item. Write a short report (150 words), including some of the following information:
- when and where the diamond was found
  - how big it is and what it weighs
  - where it was sold at auction
  - who bought it and where it is now