

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

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-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. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

auction belongings cardigan celebrity cooler item

1. An / A _____ is when you sell things to the people who offer the most money for them at a public event.
2. An / A _____ is an individual thing, usually one of several things in a group or on a list.
3. An / A _____ is a woollen jacket with buttons or a zip.
4. If something is _____ than something else, it is more fashionable or more attractive.
5. Your _____ are the things that you own.
6. An / A _____ is a famous person.

estimate Grammy legacy lyrics outfit persuade

7. If you _____ someone, you make them agree to do something by giving them reasons why they should do it.
8. An / A _____ is a set of clothes that you wear together.
9. An / A _____ is an amount you guess or calculate using information you have.

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

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

10. An / A _____ is an award given out each year in the United States to the best writers and performers in music.
11. _____ are the words of a song.
12. A person’s _____ is something that they have done that continues to exist after they retire or die.

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

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

Priya Elan

26 May, 2021

- 1 Julien’s Auctions, an auction house in California, began in 2003. It was the first auction house to sell only pop-culture items. Its first auctions included the dress in which Marilyn Monroe sang “Happy Birthday” to President John F. Kennedy (its final price was \$4.8 million in 2016) and the cardigan Kurt Cobain wore for Nirvana’s MTV Unplugged performance (its final price was \$334,000).
- 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. “After we sold Kurt Cobain’s guitar for over \$6 million last year, buyers wanted the cardigan,” says Julien.”
- 3 There has also been an increase in auctions of items that celebrities still own, and not just 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 persuade Cher to do the auction nearly 15 years ago, she said: ‘But I’m not dead,’” says Julien.
- 4 “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. “We’ve noticed that items are still selling for lots of money, even though the celebrity is still alive.”
- 5 “Janet Jackson was one of the most difficult people to persuade to have an auction because she’s such a private person,” he says. “Even Janet was surprised at the results, and she really enjoyed 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.”
- 6 In January, Julien’s auctioned seven outfits from K-pop boyband BTS. The costumes from their 2020 video for “Dynamite” sold for \$162,500, much more than the \$40,000 estimate. Does Julien think selling items by new pop-culture figures is the future trend? “Yes, especially if it’s a band or someone popular like BTS,” he says. “If BTS perform a music video in outfits that are worth \$2,000 and then the song is nominated for a Grammy, you just increased the value of those outfits 81 times.”
- 7 In June, 2021, they will sell handwritten lyrics by Bob Dylan, a handwritten letter by Britney Spears that she sent to a school boyfriend, and a self portrait by Cobain. “These lifestyle auctions are a way for celebrities to do something that helps build their legacy,” Julien says.

© Guardian News and Media 2021

First published in *The Guardian*, 26/05/2021

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

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. When did Julien’s Auctions begin?
2. How much did someone pay for Marilyn Monroe’s dress?
3. Who was she singing to when she wore that dress?
4. How much did the auction house get for Kurt Cobain’s guitar?
5. Which was more expensive, Kurt Cobain’s cardigan or his guitar?
6. When did Cher have an auction?
7. Why was it difficult to persuade Janet Jackson to have an auction?
8. When did K-pop boyband BTS make a video for “Dynamite”?
9. How much did their costumes sell for?
10. How much were their costumes really worth?

4 Key language

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

- | | |
|------------|-------------|
| 1. pop | a. video |
| 2. auction | b. person |
| 3. self | c. house |
| 4. future | d. portrait |
| 5. music | e. trend |
| 6. private | f. culture |

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Pop stars are more famous than classical painters.”
- “It’s crazy to pay a fortune for a cardigan.”

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

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

6 In your own words

- a. The text describes some of the items belonging to famous people that an American auction house has sold. Imagine that you have just spent a lot of money on a famous item of pop culture. What did you buy?

Write a short text (100 words) describing the item. Answer some or all of the following questions.

- What did you buy?
- Who did it belong to?
- Where did you buy it?
- How much did you pay for it?
- What will you do with it?