



ON THE BLOCK

The following items, featured in recent and upcoming auctions, give an idea of the value of vintage celebrity-worn Western couture:

- Actress **Barbara Stanwyck's** *Annie Oakley* dress from her first film for RKO (1935): estimated value, \$4,000–\$6,000.
- Late-1940s pair of **Arizona State boots** by Acme Boot Co.: estimated value, \$4,000–\$6,000. (Only 18 of the original 48 pair of "State Boots" by Acme are known to exist.)
- **Clayton (The Lone Ranger) Moore's** black leather mask: selling price, \$4,150.
- **Nudie** (Nudka Cohn)—designed cowboy boots adorned with inlaid spurs and horses, gold lamé, pink, blue, and turquoise rhinestones, and pave heels: estimated value, \$1,000–\$1,500.
- **Gene Autry** 1962 cowboy shirt (designed by Nudie) with embroidered thunderbird design: estimated value, \$200–\$300.

Other items we've seen (at Los Angeles-based High Noon Auctions, www.highnoon.com) include a 1930s **Hoot Gibson** child's outfit in faux leopard complete with hat, vest, and chaps, with a \$400–\$600 estimated value. Gibson was a star of Western silent films in the 1910s and '20s.

WHERE TO FIND IT

For decades, avid collectors have flocked to Goodwill and Salvation Army stores hoping to find a hidden Western wear diamond in the rough. Today, collectors scour the flea market fields of Brimfield in Massachusetts, the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, and the Triple Pier Expo in New York City, among countless others, for indigenous Western textile art in the form of a rare Nathan Turk embroidered shirt or regular store-stock items with original tags. Meanwhile, the Internet has usurped mail order as the most popular method for purchasing Western wear, taking the genre from a regional audience to the national and international marketplaces. Such auction houses as Sotheby's, which conducted an online auction of Lone Ranger clothing in 2002, and EntertainmentRarities.com, which features wonderful examples of Western wear costumes and accessories of our favorite silver-screen and country heros. Check out other Internet auction sites, such as Amazon.com and eBay for a plethora of vintage cowboy collectibles such as boots and suits.

HOPPY WEAR

My older brother had a penchant for anything Hopalong Cassidy. He especially treasured a Cassidy drinking mug. And he insisted on wearing only "Hoppy" underpants. Too bad he didn't keep them in their original packages. At one recent auction run by Ted Hake of Hake's Americana & Collectibles, a pair of vintage "Hoppy" boy's underpants sold for \$173. —Caroline Ashleigh

GO WEST(ERN)

What's hot in vintage couture? One appraiser makes a case for Western wear, drawing on her own attachment to the threads our favorite cowboys and cowgirls popularized.

By Caroline Ashleigh

"I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy..."
—*The Cowboy Lament, 1886*

From the minute I slipped into my miniature cowgirl ensemble and sashayed onto the playground as a little tike, I felt, instantly, like a larger-than-life character. Such an outfit has the power to transform you: It was a



This Gene Autry outfit, designed by Nudie, is at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame Museum.

two-piece bright turquoise gabardine riding outfit, accented with gold leather and rhinestones. It came with hat, split fringed skirt, holster, play pistol, belt, bandera, boots, and spurs that went *jingle jangle jingle*. When I wore it, I exuded attitude and style. It seemed to create an aura that made all of the other little buckarettas and buckaroos feel like they were in the presence of royalty.

That's when I fell in love with fancy cowboy clothes. It's turned into a life-long love affair.

Fast forward to the summer of 2003, Oklahoma City, Okla. An *Antiques Roadshow* event draws an unexpected surprise, one that stirred up the cowgirl in me. The



This gabardine outfit, c. 1958, by famed designer Nudie is accented with gold leather and rhinestones. It was owned by actress Gail Davis and passed on to her daughter, who donated it to the Autry Museum of Western Heritage. Its value at auction would be \$1,000–\$1,500; a similar outfit without the celebrity connection: \$250–\$450.

son of Western swing bandleader Merl Lindsay brought in an eye-opening lot of killer Western attire. "Dad saved everything," he said, "and here it is." The pieces all came from his late father's performance wardrobe. (Merl, active in the 1930s through the early '60s, was known for such hits as "Stolen Kisses" and "Little Red Wagon." He died in 1965.)

Lindsay's outfits were remarkably clean—virtually untouched and unworn for at least 30 years. Among the treasures: a three-piece blue gabardine suit with stripes made by noted designer Nathan Turk (more on him later). Adorned with a cactus motif, royal blue piping, red embroidered arrow points, and burgundy insets, the outfit won a spot on camera for an *Antiques Roadshow* segment; so too did a smashing two-piece purple and seafoam green ensemble by Harris Tailoring of Ft. Worth, Texas. The latter outfit's shirt—with its triple-tiered yellow, white, and purple fringe, and emblazoned with roses intertwining all the way down to the legs of the purple

The author owns Birmingham, Mich.-based Caroline Ashleigh Associates Inc. (www.appraiseyourart.com) An *Antiques Roadshow* appraiser since 1996, she's a certified senior member and regional representative for the Appraisers Association of America.





Marlene Dietrich and Jimmy Stewart—whether they knew it or not—were fashion trend-setters in *Destry Rides Again*, a 1939 Universal Studios film.

pants—is reminiscent of traditional Polish folk dress.

Putting a price on such a collection is difficult, but we came up with values that might have surprised Merl Lindsay himself: \$2,500 for the Turk suit and \$850 for the Harris Tailoring outfit.

Collectors pay a premium for vintage Western wear, obviously, if it has a celebrity connection (see “On the Block” sidebar, p. 7). Clayton “The Lone Ranger” Moore’s white Stetson cowboy hat, for example, sold at Sotheby’s for \$3,100 in 2002. Vintage Stetson hats with no connection to a celebrity regularly sell in online auctions for under \$100.

There’s value in vintage Western wear also because it transcends the fickleness of fashion. These clothes are perennial; if we can no longer roam the range, at least we can dress the part! At the same time, we’re seeing elements of Western style returning to fashion magazines and runways every year.

GROWING UP COWBOY

So what is it about Western wear that grabs our attention? First of all, keep in mind that baby boomers grew up in the golden age of cowboy culture. And America’s love of everything cowboy doesn’t end with the boomers. Just as they were raised on Hopalong Cassidy, a new generation of youngsters fell in love with Western style because of Woody, the cowboy hero in 1995’s highest-grossing film, *Toy Story*.

And just as kids from the 1940s and ’50s would buy “Hoppy” toys, books, comics, records, outfits, and other items, a new generation buys similar objects related to Woody and his “yodeling cowgirl” friend Jessie, who appeared in *Toy Story II* (the highest grossing animated film of 1999). In fact, you’ll find Woody action figure packages adorned with the advertising slogan, “With real western wear from the movie.” Manufacturers know, obviously, that deep in the soul of practically every American kid is just a



Jessie of *Toy Story II* fame.

little bit of a cowboy or cowgirl achin’ to get out.

Without a doubt, movies and television have had more to do with creating the Western wear market than any other influence. Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and The Lone Ranger rode across the silver screen throughout the 1940s and ’50s. In the early 1960s, wildly popular Western television shows—from *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* to *Maverick*—thundered into living rooms. It was during this period that “Cowboy Cool” met Nashville.

The quintessentially cool man of country music, the late Johnny Cash, explained in his 1971 song, “*I’ll try to carry off a little darkness on my back/Till things are brighter/I’m the Man in Black.*” Cash’s attire and his unique take on Western style influenced countless rock and pop artists over the years, all the way up to Madonna, who took on a country persona for her 2000 album, *Music*—the album cover, her promotional videos, and the publicity photographs.

The modern-day master tailor who brought mass media attention and razzle-dazzle to the Western wear scene was a Russian immigrant by the name of Nudka (“Nudie”) Cohn, a.k.a. “King of the Cowboy Couturiers,” “Dior of the Sagebrush,” and “The Original Rhinestone Cowboy.” Nudie influenced the Western-wear industry for nearly 40 years, whipping up costumes for Hank Williams, Hopalong Cassidy, Clayton Moore, Ronald Reagan, Liberace, Elton John, the Rolling Stones, and Elvis Presley, among others. In 1957, he was commissioned to create the most expensive suit he had ever made—a 14k gold lamé outfit bejeweled with 10,000 rhinestones. Over the years, Nudie is said to have sold Elvis \$100,000 worth of clothes, today worth \$400,000–\$500,000.

Another immigrant who created a market niche was Nathan Turk from Minsk, Poland. Beginning in the 1930s, movie studios began commissioning Turk to design costumes for Westerns.

By the 1940s, Western musicians began frequenting Turk’s shop in Van Nuys, Calif. He created the blueprint for most of the successful country bands: a unique ensemble for group leaders to set them apart from their cohorts, who wore identical matching outfits. Among those who adopted the style: Merl Lindsay.

In fact, after coming across the afore-



Merl Lindsay in a ’50s press photo.



Here’s one of the Merl Lindsay-owned pieces brought to an *Antiques Roadshow* event by Lindsay’s son.

mentioned Lindsay duds at *Antiques Roadshow*’s Oklahoma City event, there was only one thing I could do. Before saddling up to the bar with my fellow appraisers, I got decked out in full Western plumage—my fringed black and silver studded cape, snaffle buckled belt, and Manolo Blahnik rhinestone-encrusted spurred stilettos. Just like that, I was transported back to the playground with all my little buckaroo buddies. I’m still in love with fancy cowboy clothes and spurs that go *jingle jangle jingle*. ❁

SOURCES & RESOURCES

You’ll find plenty of examples of vintage Western wear at various museums. Here’s a selective list of institutions worth checking out:

- **Autry Western Heritage Museum** (www.autry-museum.org)
4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles, CA 90027
Phone: 323-667-2000
- **Buffalo Bill Historical Center Museum** (www.bbhc.org)
720 Sheridan Ave., Cody, WY 82414
Phone: 307-587-4771
- **Country Music Hall of Fame** (www.halloffame.org)
222 5th Ave. South, Nashville, TN 37203
Phone: 800-852-6437
- **National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum** (www.cowboyhalloffame.org)
1700 NE 63rd St., Oklahoma City, OK 73111
Phone: 405-478-2250
- **National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame** (www.cowgirl.net)
1720 Gendy St., Fort Worth, TX 76107
Phone: 817-336-4475
- **Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum** (www.panhandleplains.org)
2503 4th Ave., Canyon, TX 79016
Phone: 806-651-2244
- **Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum** (www.royrogers.com/museum-index.html)
3950 Green Mountain Dr., Branson, MO 65616
Phone: 417-339-1900 (recorded message) or 417-339-1900 (box office)
- **Texas Rangers Hall of Fame** (www.texasranger.org) I-35, Waco, TX 76702
Phone: 254-750-8631
- **Tom Mix Museum** (www.okhistory.mus.ok.us/mus-sites/masnum31.htm)
721 N. Delaware, PO Box 190, Dewey, OK 74029-01990. Phone: 918-534-1555