



## THE JOY OF SHOES

As the lead character in the film *Forrest Gump* explained in his rambling way, "Mama always said there's an awful lot you can tell about a person by their shoes: where they're going, where they've been." If that's true, Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, Canada ([www.batashoemuseum.com](http://www.batashoemuseum.com)) has thousands of stories in its vast collection. If you lined up all of the museum's shoes heel to toe, they'd stretch for three miles. Bata's is the largest collection of footwear in the world—10,000 pairs of shoes covering 4,500 years of history. Among the attractions: shoes worn by such celebrities as John Lennon, Marilyn Monroe, Elton John, and, of course, Imelda Marcos.



John Lennon not only revolutionized music, but also launched the Mod fashion look. The Beatles' signature look included "mop-top" hair, tight-fitting suits, and "Beatle boots." The early-'60s boot at left, on display at the Bata Shoe Museum, was worn by Lennon himself. Also pictured: outrageous platform shoes worn by Elton John in the '70s.

## HOLLYWOOD BRA ART

In April, Frederick's of Hollywood sponsored an auction with Entertainment Rarities.com and Sotheby's to benefit cancer research. The topic: celebrity-designed bras. Among the 40-plus examples auctioned were works by Pamela Anderson, Cindy Crawford, Rod Stewart, Goldie Hawn, and Bette Midler. Pop singer Sheryl Crow found a new use for guitar picks.



Pop singer/guitarist Sheryl Crow found a new use for guitar picks.

Crawford, Rod Stewart, Goldie Hawn, and Bette Midler. Pop singer Sheryl Crow used 150 pink guitar picks to design her bra creation, which sold for \$4,315. The auction's total sales: \$41,510.

## CALIFORNIA FASHION

In celebration of Golden State fashion, the Oakland Museum of California is presenting "Iconic to Ironic: Fashioning California Identity." On view at the museum through Sept. 21, 2003, the exhibition displays more than 100 articles of clothing and accessories—including Michael Jackson's crystal glove, designed by Bill Whitten, and jeans made for James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*. For more information, call 888-OAK-MUSE or 510-238-2200, write The Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., Oakland, CA 94607, or visit [www.museumca.org](http://www.museumca.org).

# HAT OVER HEELS

Accessories are no longer simply fashion complements; they're also highly coveted collectibles.

By Caroline Ashleigh

Think about it—collecting designer fashions involves more than eye-catching clothing. That whimsical hat, those stunning pair of stilettos, and that one-of-a-kind handbag also attract us. Such accessories can tell the story of who you are, who you think you are, or who you'd like to be.

Today, accessories are the driving force behind the business of couture. In many instances, fashion could not have taken flight without them. In fact, accessories have been with us in every culture since time immemorial. Consider the discovery of "Iceman," the body of a prehistoric man dating to 3300–3200 B.C., found sealed in a glacier in the Tyrolean Alps. Iceman had a backpack, a belt with a leather pouch, fur-trimmed boots, and a necklace of stones. Fast-forward to 19th-century Europe, where high-society ladies wore the appropriate shawls, gloves, fans, hats, parasols, handkerchiefs, and shoes for each ensemble.

Although the etiquette of fashion may have dwindled in modern times, the opportunities to enjoy accessories still abound.

## THE ANTI-DEPRESSANT

Accessories are as pivotal today as they were during the Depression, when Americans needed and looked for escapism, and when women had to render their "little black dress" spectacular every time they needed to wear it. A woman could wear an unflattering dress, but if she wore an eye-catching accessory, everyone would forget about the dress and admire the accoutrement.

When you talk accessories, it makes

At right: This 1940s Bes-Ben bird hat had a pre-auction estimate of \$400–\$600 at Doyle New York's April 9 auction but sold for \$2,390, including buyer's premium.



sense to start at the top: hats. And there's one American hat manufacturer whose witty work is commanding an astonishing premium today: Benjamin Benedict Green-Field. Known as "the Mad Hatter

of the Magnificent Mile," Green-Field got started in hats in Chicago. In 1920, he and his sister Bessie founded Bes-Ben, a store that spun off several other shops. Bes-Ben produced its own hat designs that, until 1941, were relatively conventional.

In the 1940s, Green-Field's designs took on a fanciful or "mad" look that quickly distinguished Bes-Ben. Profoundly eccentric, the company frequently custom-designed hats for Hollywood celebrities, including Marlene

Dietrich, Helen Hays, Elizabeth Taylor, Gracie Allen, Judy Garland, Lucille Ball, Arlene Francis, Ginger Rogers, and Carol Channing. Hedda Hopper wore a Bes-Ben hat decorated with razor blades for the premiere of the film *Razor's Edge*.

There were Bes-Ben hats with elephants, donkeys, turtles, rabbits, and fly-



This Bes-Ben creation, "Independence Day" (which includes actual firecrackers), set the auction record for hats in 1999: \$18,400.

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The producers of the classic *The Wizard of Oz* had eight pairs of slippers made for Judy Garland. This particular pair drew \$666,000 at a Christie's auction.

Photo courtesy of Christie's

ing insects. Playing cards, dice, little Buddhas, Folies-Bergere dancers, Sputnik, bullfighters, cigarettes, and matchbooks also showed up as adornments on Bes-Ben hats. And World War II brought hats topped with victory gardens, American flags, and even an "invasion" hat. "Anything that makes people laugh at this point in world history may be said to have its own excuse for being," Green-Field once said.

Bes-Ben also created a collection of hats made of kitchen materials and trimmings, including napkin rings, cookie cutters, a tea strainer, ice tongs, grapefruit knives—just about everything but the kitchen sink.

"I remember a lobster hat we had in our collection: You have to have a sense of humor to wear a hat like that and know who you are," Green-Field once told a Chicago newspaper reporter. "It's a very confident person who wears a lobster on her head, or a hat with little zebras." The zebra hat became the best seller of all, but Green-Field's "wildest," by his own admission, was one that had "9 or 10 rubber mice and a piece of cheese."

Bes-Ben hats were pricey from the beginning, selling for around \$40 to \$1,000. But Green-Field also became known for his annual midnight sale, where he'd knock prices to as low as \$5, finally throwing unsold hats out the door of his store at 2 a.m. Shrieking, jumping, pushing women would fight for the hats, and in the process "they'd tear the buttons off my coat," Green-Field once recalled. "Who'd ever imagine that my 'lids' would become collectors items?"

Collector's items, indeed. On Nov. 16, 1999, a Bes-Ben hat entitled "Independence Day" (photo, p. 7) sold to a collector for an auction record of \$18,400. This festive hat was adorned with an American flag, stars, and actual firecrackers.

On the other hand, several vintage Bes-Ben hats sold for less than \$500 in Doyle New York's April 9 couture auction.

Other popular designs include those by Lily Dache and John and Hattie Carnegie. Dache was a French hat-maker who came to New York in 1924. She established Lilly Dache Inc. offices in New York and Paris and produced quality jewelry, clothing, and cosmetics as well as hats.

### A HARD HABIT TO KICK

Equally important in the accessories market: shoes. It was Imelda Marcos who said, "I didn't have 3,000 pairs of

This Hermès Kelly alligator bag, made in France in the mid-1960s, sold for \$8,000 at Doyle New York's April 9 auction—four times its pre-auction estimate.



Photo courtesy of Doyle New York

shoes. I had only 1,600." Her footwear fetish foretold today's growing acceptance of the "shoe habit."

Whether it's a platform heel, stiletto heel, or heel-less high-heel shoe, 20th-century shoe fashion is often as *tres chic* as it is sometimes just plain crazy. Example: a pair of ruby slippers made for Judy Garland for 1939's *The Wizard of Oz* sold for \$666,000 at Christie's in New York in 2000.

Collectors drawn to this fascinating field find that condition and size problems come with the territory: They often struggle to find vintage shoes that fit. To paraphrase an old saying: "If the shoes fit, buy 'em." Likewise, finding shoes in pristine condition is a challenge. Shoes that don't meet these vital criteria usually sell for less than \$100; those that do can sell for thousands.

### IN THE MIDDLE

Of course, the story of vintage accessories is, to a large degree, the story of handbags. Consider this: You can wear out a pair of shoes, but you'll rarely wear out an alligator or plastic handbag. Another benefit is that it doesn't even have to fit. And for collectors, handbags take up far less space than 1950s poodle skirts or evening gowns.

Handbags come in a variety of materials, from feathers to fibers, but alligator and crocodile skins top most collectors' lists. The Hermès bag, and in particular the "Kelly" bag (named for Grace Kelly), is the ultimate acquisition for enthusiasts of handbag collecting. They can bring up to \$9,500 at auction.

Bakelite purses became popular in the Depression because of their affordability and vibrant colors. Top names in the plastics category are Llewellyn, Rialto, Willardy and Galli. Their purses, in excellent condition, fetch anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500 apiece at auction.

Whimsical, figural bags in the shapes of poodles, ice buckets, and telephones have become—like the best vintage hats and shoes—20th-century collector's icons. ❁

## INSIDE INFO

### ROAD FIND

At last year's Cleveland *Antiques Roadshow* event, I met a collector who brought in a pair of unusual "lotus" shoes made for bound feet. These shoes reflected the Chinese practice of binding little girls' feet to keep them small and delicate, like lotus blossoms. Since the shoes were smaller than 4 inches, I told the owner that they likely were made for a child, adding to their rarity and value. Since foot binding was abandoned in 1911 with the founding of the Chinese Republic, examples like this are becoming more and more difficult to find. The shoes' value: \$450–\$650.

### BIG ON BAKELITE

Around the turn of the last century, Dr. Leo Baekland of Yonkers, N.Y., discovered "Bakelite"—a mixture of carbolic acid and formaldehyde. It soon found its way into the fashion world in the form of vibrantly colored pieces of jewelry and purses—items that have become very collectible over the years. Examples that possess great style and condition may bring \$1,500 or more in today's auction market. In fact, one collector brought in prime examples of Bakelite purses to the Cleveland *Antiques Roadshow* last summer. Originally, she wasn't positive it was Bakelite. I told her that in order to solve the mystery, try these two tests:

- Put a dab of 409 cleaner on a cotton swab and rub gently for a minute. You should be able to detect a very faint to bright yellow color on the tip of the swab if it's Bakelite.
- Hold the item under a stream of hot water. If you can detect the smell of varnish, formaldehyde, or carbolic acid, it's Bakelite.

In Denver in 2001, one of my *Antiques Roadshow* colleagues, Kathleen Guzman, appeared on a segment with a memorable lot of Bakelite. Guzman told the woman who brought in the items that her three Bakelite purses are worth \$500–\$1,500 each—and that her "Philadelphia" Bakelite might sell for \$6,000–\$8,000.

—Caroline Ashleigh