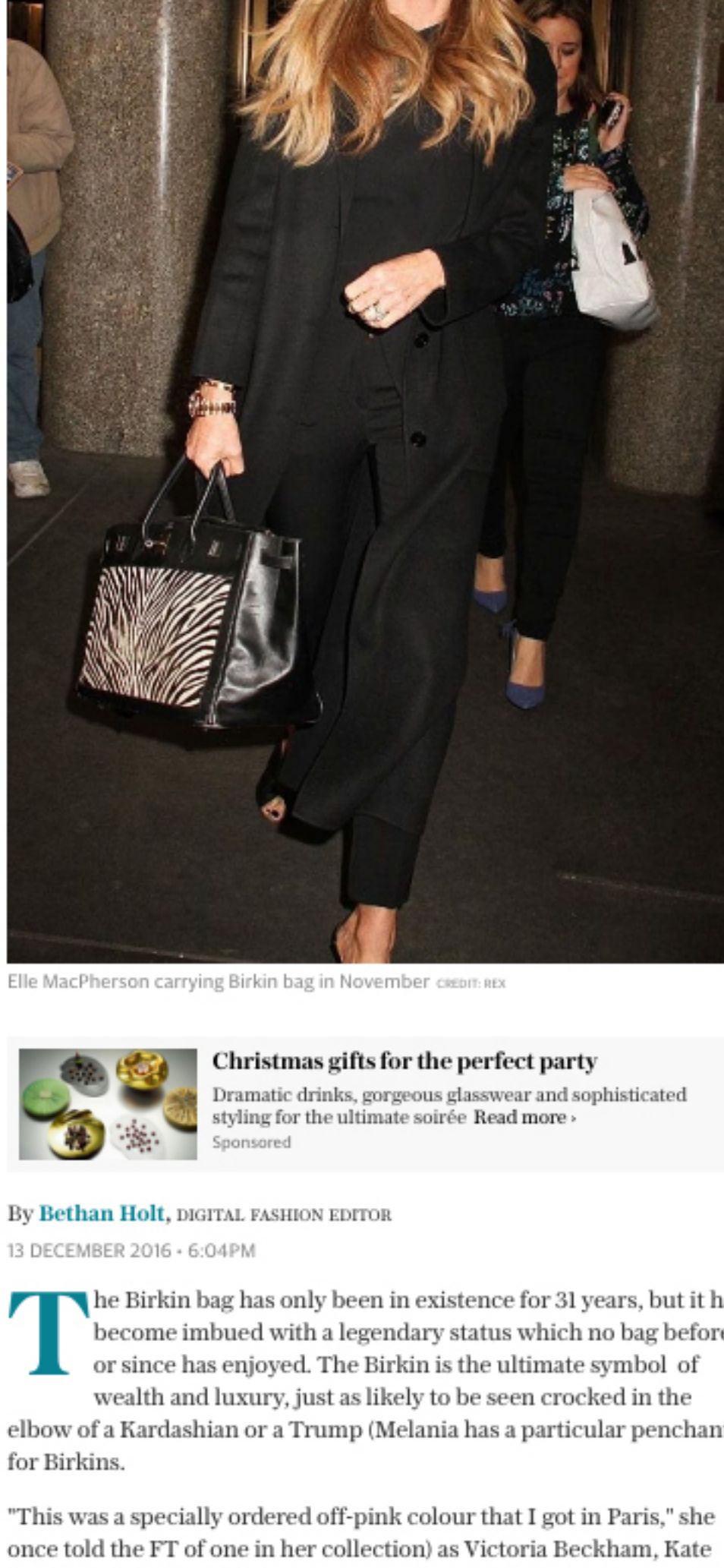


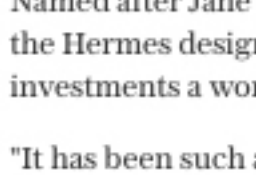
How the Hermes Birkin became the most desired bag in the world



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Elle MacPherson carrying Birkin bag in November CREDIT: REX



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By **Bethan Holt**, DIGITAL FASHION EDITOR

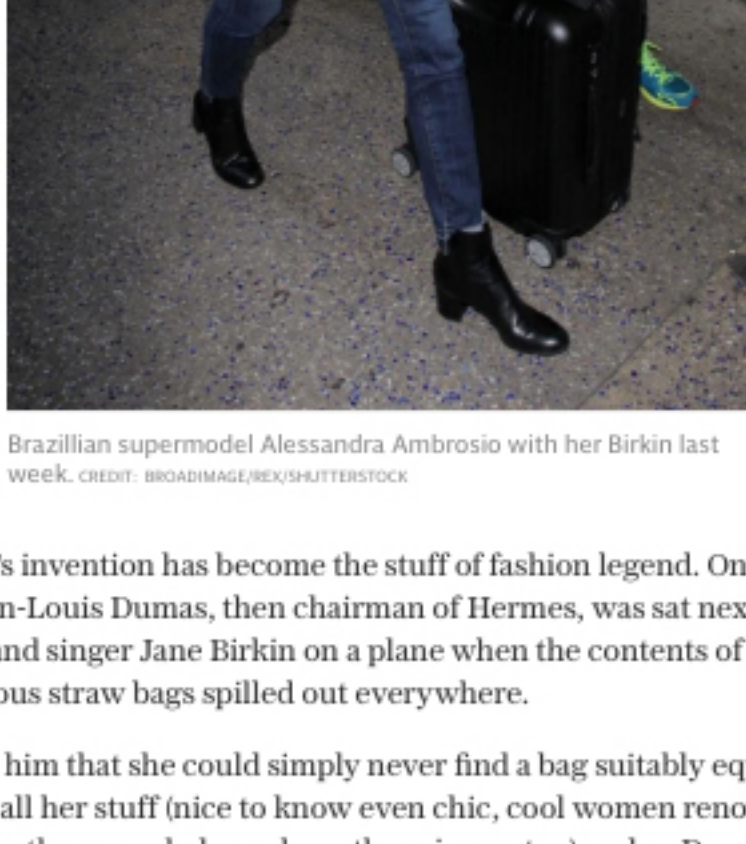
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The Birkin bag has only been in existence for 31 years, but it has become imbued with a legendary status which no bag before or since has enjoyed. The Birkin is the ultimate symbol of wealth and luxury, just as likely to be seen crocked in the elbow of a Kardashian or a Trump (Melania has a particular penchant for Birkins).

"This was a specially ordered off-pink colour that I got in Paris," she once told the FT of one in her collection) as Victoria Beckham, Kate Moss or a high-powered businesswoman.

Named after Jane Birkin - who celebrates her 69th birthday tomorrow - the Hermes designs are still hailed as one of the most valuable and safe investments a woman (or man) can make.

"It has been such a huge success for the past 20 years and it simply cannot go down," asserts Jerome Lalande, an Hermes expert and consultant for Collector Square. Earlier this year, a crocodile skin Birkin with diamond encrusted locks sold for \$300,000 (£236,610) dollars at Christie's in Hong Kong, while many of the Birkins for re-sale on Collector's Square are in the double figures of thousands with one 35cm black version for sale for £26,000.



Brazilian supermodel Alessandra Ambrosio with her Birkin last week. CREDIT: BROADIMAGE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

The bag's invention has become the stuff of fashion legend. One day in 1983 Jean-Louis Dumas, then chairman of Hermes, was sat next to actress and singer Jane Birkin on a plane when the contents of one of her famous straw bags spilled out everywhere.

She told him that she could simply never find a bag suitably equipped to carry all her stuff (nice to know even chic, cool women renowned for their effortless nonchalance have these issues too) and so Dumas resolved to go away and create a bag which would solve the woes of Birkin and plenty of other women trying to cart their stuff around in style the world over.



Melania Trump with one of her favourite Birkins in 2010 CREDIT: STARTRAKS PHOTO/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

The next year the Birkin was born. "A few months later he had designed one which was inspired a little bit by the Le Haut à Courroies - a travel bag which Hermes already did. It changed a little, it was reduced and redesigned," says Lalande.

Given the worldwide fame which the Birkin has achieved since, it would be natural to presume that the style was an overnight hit, but Lalande says that wasn't the case. "At the beginning the bag was not a success. When it was first produced 1985 it wasn't really in demand and not that many people knew about it. Then everyone was still asking about the Kelly," Lalande says.

"The craziness about the Birkin began in the mid 90s. It's like the Rolex watch, we don't know exactly why it became just so popular. I think when people started to be interested in buying Birkin bags, Hermes limited the production which increased the demand even more."

It wasn't until the late 90s and early noughties that things went "totally insane". Lalande remembers that the price of a 'standard' Birkin in Hermes boutique in Paris was around 25,000 francs (which is around £3,000) but "you could instantly sell it for double that."



Victoria Beckham is one of the most famous collectors of Birkin bags CREDIT: REX

Over the years, interest in the Birkin has gone on something of a round-the-world tour, with different segments of the mega-rich fueling hikes in prices. "It was the Japanese who made the market in the first place," says Lalande. "Then the Russians became interested; now it's the Chinese who keep the market high."

The Birkin comes in an array of sizes, colours and finishes which means that two bags can look very different but Lalande says you will always see trends from country to country.

"We sell different sizes to different nationalities," he explains. "Chinese women always want the smallest ones whereas Americans want the biggest. Chinese women are tiny so they are looking for petite bags to match their frames."



Just a few of the 50 Birkin bags on the shelves at Collector's Square headquarters in Paris. CREDIT: REX

Lalande says that thanks to a 50 per cent tax, it pays for Chinese shoppers to purchase their Birkins in Paris where a standard design starts at around 8,000 euros. "That's why there's always a line outside the door," he laughs. But it's near on impossible to get your dream bag.

"If you go to the store you can make a wish. Like ask for a 'dark one' and they'll present you with a few bags. But ordering the precise colour is not that easy. They're not taking any orders right now."



Jane Birkin with one of the straw baskets she preferred before Hermes created the Birkin in her honour. CREDIT: SPA PRESS/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

It's the relative scarcity and attention-to-detail which goes into the creation of Birkin bag which seems to have added to their almost mythical story. Each bag is made from beginning to end by one dedicated artisan and will take around 14 hours to complete. Part of Lalande's job is to scour Europe for very old Hermes pieces which can be used to inform the artistry on new products.

"It's interesting for them because with some bags they have lost the specific knowledge of how to make certain parts, like a handle, for example, so they wouldn't know how to reproduce it so we need an original to study to be able to make a new one."



Jane Birkin with a Birkin CREDIT: REX

The biggest challenge facing the Birkin today is the proliferation of counterfeits on the market. "It's very difficult for Hermes to stop," sighs Lalande. "There are two kinds of fakes: people who buy them knowing they're a fake, the ones which you buy for a few hundred euros just on the street and then there's no doubt about it, you know it's not real."

"You just buy it for what it is and for the price it is. The other type is this super handcrafted style which is designed to confuse the mind of the buyer, that's the most difficult one to combat. People think they're buying the real thing, it would be the same price as a real one."

Ultimately this all acts as further proof that the Birkin is going nowhere. "Those bags are very expensive, but people purchase them as both a pleasure and investment, they are looking for the best value for money - and that comes from Hermes first and foremost."