

MATERIAL CULTURE

Sylvia Plath's Life in Objects

A tartan kilt, fishing rod and dragon pendant were among items auctioned recently.

By KATE BOLICK

For the many feminist critics who have excoriated Ted Hughes's treatment of his first wife, Sylvia Plath, there was poetic justice of a sort in the auction of the poets' belongings by their daughter, Frieda Hughes, at Bonhams in London in March. Plath's lots, which included clothes, jewelry and childhood drawings, outsold Mr. Hughes's mostly literary remnants (which is to say, books) twice over and then some, earning \$551,862.

The pleated green tartan kilt Plath wore as a Smith College undergraduate, with blue-lettered name tape affixed to the waistband, swished home with A. N. Devers, a writer and rare-books dealer based in North London, for \$3,012. (To Ms. Devers's surprise, it fits.)

Peter K. Steinberg, an archivist in Boston and an editor of "The Letters of Sylvia Plath," paid \$885 for her fishing rod.

Estimated to sell for \$2,838, a dragon pendant stamped Coro, a popular brand of 1950s costume jewelry, went to an anonymous buyer for \$14,178, "which is a lot for a piece of costume jewelry," said Matthew Haley, the head of books and manuscripts at Bonhams.

To Plath devotees, the necklace is a tantalizing totem of the pyrotechnics generated by her relationship with Mr. Hughes. A Maltese cross flanked by two dragons, the baroque design is completely unlike Plath's other accessories, a mostly feminine assortment of rhinestones, hearts and flowers.

"The pendant has a Hughean sensibility; it's a little edgy for the time, and even has a whiff of the occult," said Heather Clark, whose biography, "Sylvia Plath: The Light of the Mind," is coming from Knopf next year. "Maybe Hughes gave it to her. Or maybe she chose it with him in mind."

Plath wears the pendant in several well-known photographs taken after she was married, including two by Rolie McKenna at the National Portrait Gallery in London, in which she appears both knowing and impossibly young.

'Ted Likes This'

Why would a daughter choose to part with such meaningful objects? Ms. Hughes, 58, a painter and poet herself, was a sleeping toddler when her mother committed suicide with a gas oven at age 30 in 1963, and in her 30s when her father died in 1998, of cancer. Her younger brother, Nicholas, a biologist, hanged himself in 2009.

She declined to comment on the sale further than her introduction to the auction catalog, in which she writes movingly that it all began with the Victorian mahogany armchair her father bought for Plath, originally covered in "a coarse, shiny black fabric worn through at the front edge of the seat," which she remembers scratching the backs of her legs as a child. Once she was an adult, she had the chair reupholstered in pink, for her bedroom.

"It recently occurred to me that this chair would vanish into the mass of other furniture I own, and become invisible, as would the jewelry, when one day I was in no position to explain their provenance," Ms. Hughes writes. "If I wished to sell some items, then others would have to go too, because presented together, they made up a snapshot of a mutual history."



WHY WOULD A DAUGHTER CHOOSE TO SELL THESE OBJECTS?

And so they went: Plath's heavily underlined thesaurus (\$19,491); her battered gray leather wallet stuffed with ID cards (\$12,403); her "Joy of Cooking," with "Ted likes this," scrawled next to a recipe for breaded veal slices (\$6,201); a yellow checked summer frock (\$1,417); the Victorian armchair (\$1,599).

The top lot was Plath's signed prepublication copy of her autobiographical novel, "The Bell Jar," which first appeared in Britain in 1963, a month before her death, and today is a staple of high-school English classes. It sold to an anonymous buyer for \$124,150.

The mint green Hermes 3000 typewriter on which Plath wrote "The Bell Jar" fetched \$46,071 (also from an anonymous buyer). Her husband's Silver Reed 500 typewriter sold for \$4,977.

That a collegiate kilt was deemed valuable signals a possible paradigm shift in the rare-books industry. When Ms. Devers entered the field last year, she immediately noted that the sexism pervading all other workplaces applied there as well, resulting in a gender imbalance of representation and sales.

Her business, the Second Shelf (the title is borrowed from an essay by Meg Wolitzer), traffics exclusively in rare books by women, with the hope that paying attention to women's literature will increase its market price in all realms.

Ms. Devers has also observed a gender difference in collection habits. "Broadly speaking, men want pristine copies without

dedications or signatures, while women are moved by beautiful dedications and also the normal wear and tear that tells a story of a book being valued," she said.

In the skirt, she saw not only Plath's background, but also the struggle of an era. "My mom had that skirt. It was worn by an entire generation of women who had to present as perfect all the time," Ms. Devers said. "Plath was miserable, but she created art, and the skirt is a representation of that struggle."

For now, Ms. Devers is wearing it around the house, and in Instagram photos. She hasn't decided yet whether to sell it.

Watches, Merit Badges and a Prom Dress
Gail Crowther, the author of "The Haunted Reader and Sylvia Plath," who attended the auction preview but didn't buy anything, said that because Plath wrote often about her clothing, seeing the garments in person was akin to their "leaping off the page, quite a powerful encounter."

Accustomed to studying papers in archives, Ms. Crowther appreciates how objects offer a visceral understanding of a subject. "You can see her physical dimensions in a dress in a way you can't get from a photograph," she said. "Clothing can almost reanimate someone." She noted that Plath's mother, Aurelia, kept everything of her daughter's, even crumpled bits of tracing paper that Sylvia scribbled on as a child, giving scholars unusual access to her material world.

People outside the literary field were also

Items that once belonged to Sylvia Plath that were featured at an auction included, clockwise from lower left, an Hermes 3000 typewriter, well-worn wristwatches, dresses and a dragon pendant.

drawn to the sale. Suzanne Demko, who lives in Silver Spring, Md., and leads clinical teams in rare tumor research at the Food and Drug Administration, paid \$7,087 for three well-worn wristwatches, their thin leather bands cracked and fraying.

"I went bananas looking through the catalog, and when I saw the watches I thought, 'I have to have these,'" she said. "There's just something about them — the juxtaposition of a day-to-day object marking time, and marking her time, until she died." She plans to display the watches at home in a vitrine, and eventually leave them to Smith College, Plath's alma mater.

Among the Plath items the college already holds are her Girl Scout uniform and prom dress, acquired in 1985 and available for the public to see by appointment.

Kiki Smith, a theater professor at Smith, has curated the Smith College Historic Clothing Collection since the mid-1970s, when it began with costumes salvaged from the theater department; today it contains 3,000 pieces. Of special interest are what she calls "women's uniforms" — the everyday clothes that shape a woman's life, from maternity clothes and housedresses to waitress uniforms and the suits female lawyers wore when first appearing in court. "It's an archive of women's lives told through objects, offering a tangible connection to history," she said.

Plath's prom dress is a novella about promise and defeat rendered in nylon net and silver lamé. She bought it in downtown Northampton, Mass., on Feb. 28, 1953, marked down from \$50 to \$30, which we know because of a letter she wrote to her mother: "I am most elated today, for this morning I bought the most exquisite formal on sale."

The next morning, she rhapsodized about it in her diary: "Sunlight raying ethereal through the white-net of the new formal bought splurgingly yesterday in a burst of ecstatic rightness. Silver high heels are the next purchase — symbolizing my emancipation from walking flat-footed on the ground. Silver-winged bodice of strapless floating-net gown. It is unbelievable that it could be so right!"

By the time it appears in "The Bell Jar," however, the dress is a symbol of dashed illusions, "a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle."

Plath's Girl Scout uniform also speaks volumes. Until May 20, it can be seen at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington as part of the eclectic "One Life: Sylvia Plath" exhibition. When asked why she chose the uniform over the prom dress, Dorothy Moss, a curator at the Smithsonian, noted the plethora of badges, which could be read as evidence that the poet was Type A from the start.

To Ms. Moss, those badges reveal something more than mere ambition — that Plath's curiosity and embrace of learning were also bottomless. "She threw herself into experience for experience's sake," she said.

Presumably, a mind so voracious might approve of her clothing going to the highest bidder. After all, Plath was once a fan herself. When she lived in New York City during her infamous Mademoiselle internship, she haunted the West Village trying to meet Dylan Thomas. She was thrilled to later move into Yeats's former house.

The narrator of her poem "Last Words" writes of not trusting the spirit, which "escapes like steam" and "won't come back." But

Things aren't like that. They stay, their little particular lusters Warmed by much handling. They almost purr.

Pulp Nonfiction: Podcasts Go Mass-Market

Parcast, a new network, is saturating the audio field with lurid story lines.

By JONAH ENGEL BROMWICH

In the last three months, Parcast, a little-known podcast network, has introduced four new shows. Each one has shot to the top 10 on the Apple Podcasts chart within a week of its premiere.

It's an unusual feat in an industry where prestige is often characterized by high production values and slow audience growth.

With hundreds of thousands of downloads each, three of the four Parcast series — "Tales," "Unexplained Mysteries" and "Female Criminals" — have become some of the more popular new podcasts of 2018. (Two episodes of the fourth, "Gone," were released unexpectedly last week.)

All owe their success to Max Cutler, 27, a graduate of the University of Arizona's entrepreneurship program, who created the company in 2016.

Mr. Cutler was among the many millions who tuned in to the hit podcast "Serial." When he was looking to start a media company two years ago, he thought he might be able to make podcasts of similar quality while cutting costs on individual episodes.

"If a company is spending that much money, there's money to be made," he said.

Parcast, based in Los Angeles, is one of several upstarts that are saturating the market with relatively cheaply produced podcasts, relying on lurid subject matter to draw in listeners. Mr. Cutler compared Parcast's scripted stories about true crime and conspiracy theories to "reality TV on steroids."

On a recent episode of "Female Criminals," the hosts told the story of Bonnie Parker (yes, that Bonnie) using a mix of historical fact, pop psychology and rampant speculation. Halfway through the episode,



"Female Criminals," "Tales" and "Unexplained Mysteries," all from the Parcast network, are some of the year's most popular new podcasts. Two episodes of the network's 10th show, "Gone," were released last week.

for example, they cite an unnamed work by the psychologist J. William Worden and wonder aloud whether Bonnie had an antisocial personality disorder. Another Parcast show, "Conspiracy Theories," markets itself with the on-brand tagline "the truth is

rarely the best story."

"Female Criminals" made its debut on March 21. By April 10, it had been downloaded more than 368,490 times, according to data from ART19, a company that measures podcast listenership. And while a recent report found that 56 percent of podcast listeners were male, the audience for "Female Criminals" was 90 percent female.

Podcast listenership has grown steadily since "Serial" popularized the medium in 2014. Still, converting newcomers into regular listeners is no small task. Data released

Scripted tales deal with true crime and conspiracy theories.

by Edison Research and Triton Digital last month showed that 124 million people in the United States have listened to a podcast, but only 73 million listened to at least one every month.

Parcast has based its business on making programs for podcast skeptics. Like the authors of paperback thrillers and producers of cable television before him, Mr. Cutler has found that stories of violence, sex, conspiracy and intrigue are catnip for the uninitiated listener.

Some industry observers say the network has gamed the charts with a savvy business model and tawdry topics.

Nick Quah, who writes the industry newsletter Hot Pod, said he respected the network's cunning but wished "we could move past blaring death and tragedy as an overt creative strategy."

Parcast produces 10 weekly or biweekly

shows. They take advantage of a quirk of the Apple Podcasts chart, which appears to reward an influx of new listeners rather than the overall size of an audience. As Mr. Quah put it, "it's a hotness meter, not a bigness meter."

Parcast also advertises aggressively for its own programs, often plugging a new offering within the opening minutes of an episode. The strategy appears to be working: Each new podcast charts high upon its debut, placing it in a prime position to be discovered on iTunes. Those who listen are then ushered toward the next premiere.

Mr. Cutler would not disclose how much money the company has made but indicated that his strategy was working. The company's revenue in the first quarter of 2018 was 95 percent of what it had earned through the entirety of 2017, he said.

Other boutique podcasting studios put significantly more time and energy into each show. Pineapple Street Media, for instance, spent nine months producing the six episodes of its blockbuster show "Missing Richard Simmons" and almost a year on 10 episodes of "Heaven's Gate." (The studio helps to produce The Times's "Still Processing" podcast.)

But Jenna Weiss-Berman, a co-founder of Pineapple, said that she was not too worried about competition. She pointed out that creators with different visions had a common interest in the health of the industry.

"If someone listens to his show 'Cults' and listens to the 'Heaven's Gate' episodes, they'll be really excited to hear our multi-part audio documentary about 'Heaven's Gate,'" she said. "Podcasts are still in a place where we can all kind of work together."