

The Hermès Kelly Bag

The Hermès Kelly bag is one of the few quintessential luxury handbags. Today it is a well-known classic, with a silhouette adaptable to every outing, but the bag began its life as a revolutionary concept. It simplified life for early owners, giving them the space to carry personal items that previously would have been left behind, while blocking the prying eyes of paparazzi and casual onlookers alike. The Kelly bag paved the way for the modern handbag industry, and 88 years after its introduction, it continues to feature on the runway and the shoulders of prominent women everywhere.

Hermès was founded in 1837 just north of the Louvre Museum (then the Royal Palace) in Paris, France, and

initially was primarily a manufacturer of leather goods for European noblemen. They achieved early success, winning numerous awards for their saddles, reins, and harnesses that sold alongside a selection of clothing items to French aristocrats, Russian tsars, and the British royal family.

The equestrian tradition continued to guide the company into the early 20th century. The first Hermès bag, the *Haut à Courroies* (“Strapped Top”) was designed in 1900 and helped riders carry their saddles with them. This traditional connection to high society continued through the early 20th century as Hermès established its full-custom *couture* apparel collection in

1929, shortly after making its American debut.

In 1922, Hermès manufactured its first handbag, and in 1935 introduced the Kelly bag under its original name, the *Sac à Dépêches*. Designed to be light and easy to carry, (literally “Dispatch Bag”) the *Sac à Dépêches* was intended to transport important documents and materials but soon became popular as an everyday carry due to its more spacious design, which allowed women to carry more personal items than with previous, envelope-sized bags. Within two decades of its launch, the bag became popular amongst the film stars of Los Angeles, coinciding with the Hollywood Golden Age and forever connecting the brand with the glamorous fashion of the era.

It is at this moment that the history of Hermès becomes entangled with the history of a young actress from



Pennsylvania. Grace Kelly, the Oscar-winning actress and Princess of Monaco, is best known for her leading role in several Alfred Hitchcock films, including *To Catch a Thief* and *Dial M for Murder*. It was during the filming of *To Catch a Thief* that she was introduced to the Hermès *Sac à Dépêches* by the acclaimed costume designer Edith Head. Kelly reportedly became so enamored with the bag that she refused to return it after filming and was soon regularly photographed with the bag in public.

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After marrying the Prince of Monaco in a marriage televised to over 30 million people in 1956, Kelly soon became pregnant with their first child. Not yet ready to announce the pregnancy to the world, she used the bag to shield herself from the paparazzi in a famous photo published in *Life Magazine*. This iconic image shot the *Sac à Dépêches* from respected amongst fashion experts to the quintessential "It bag", and Hermès associates soon became overwhelmed with requests for "that Kelly bag." The connection between the two was created



and the *Sac à Dépêches* was eventually renamed for Grace Kelly in 1977.

After reaching the heights of popular fame thanks to Grace Kelly's famous adoration of the bag in the mid-century, demand for the Hermès Kelly bag has remained consistently high. Each bag, hand-made by a single artisan in a process taking over 18 hours, is closely guarded by Hermès and is notoriously difficult to purchase. Despite the Kelly's retail price of over \$10,000, gaining access to purchase the bag requires building a relationship with the Hermès brand, typically by acquiring as much as \$50,000 in other Hermès merchandise in a multi-year process. On the resale market, Kelly bags maintain a strong valuation over the years, with most bags selling for well over twice their retail value.

This intense rarity of the bag inspires a devotional following amongst

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celebrities and regular customers alike. The Olsen twins, the Kardashian family, and Beyonce have all proven themselves fans of the design as has Victoria Beckham, one of Hermès's most prolific collectors. The bag continues to make regular runway appearances and is frequently seen on the shoulders of women in New York, Paris, and London.

Michaan's Auctions is proud to offer a beautiful example of the Hermès Kelly Bag in Black Clemence Leather in our November gallery auction on Friday, November 17th. The auction features notable names headlining the fashion,

fine art, and jewelry departments including luxury handbags by Hermès and Louis Vuitton, significant works by Constantin Kluge, Jose Vela Zanegtti, and Keith Haring, while the jewelry department showcases an astonishing golden pocket watch and jewelry by Gioielmoda and Lunch at the Ritz.

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