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Sewing under the

HAMMER

*Michelle Rowley goes behind the scenes with
auctioneer Lucy Bishop, who specialises in
the sale of rare and exceptional fashion*



Lucy Bishop

Lucy Bishop has the fascinating role of auctioneer and specialist at Kerry-Taylor Auctions in London, the world's leading auction house of exceptional fashion. Accepting only the very best of vintage and contemporary fashion, haute couture, celebrity wardrobe pieces and rare antique costumes for its sales, the auction house has sold thousands of beautifully sewn garments at eye-watering prices. Michelle Rowley chatted to Lucy to discuss her enviable work and some of the incredible pieces she has been fortunate to work with.

Hi Lucy, I have to start by saying I am disgustingly jealous of your job! How did you become a fashion historian and auctioneer?

Oh, thank you! I am very lucky. I was always interested in fashion history, but when I finished university, I didn't know what I wanted to do – someone suggested I should ask Kerry (the eponymous Kerry Taylor who established the auction house after working at Sotheby's for many years) if I could intern for her. So that's what I did. I fell in love with all aspects of the work and have never left! I undertook a Master's in Fashion History at the London College of Fashion whilst working for Kerry. Meanwhile, I worked

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Head to www.instagram.com/kerrytaylorauctions if you'd like to see more of their incredible garments



Jerkin, Lot 101,
20/11/17, sold
£60,000 hammer

Gown of Princess
Ramaisindrazana



my way up from taking out the bins, putting items on hangers and steaming the clothes, then photographing the clothes to finally becoming an auctioneer.

What's your favourite part of your job?

The physical auctioneering is actually a really small part of my job. The heart of my role is the specialist part, going out to value items we have been contacted about. You never know what you are going to find and what situation you are going to walk into. What I really love is that I am learning every day. Having handled hundreds of garments over the years, I have gained a huge amount of knowledge. However, there is not a single day where I don't learn something new. I also love the human element of my work. Often people are selling clothes because of a loss – be that of a loved one, a relationship or even weight. I enjoy meeting so many different characters and hearing their stories.

What are some of your favourite garments that you have sold?

A vibrant cyclamen pink satin and dark burgundy velvet court gown belonging to Princess Ramaisindrazana will forever be one of my favourite pieces because of its fabulous back story. Princess Ramaisindrazana was the influential aunt of Queen Ravalona

III, the last Queen of Madagascar who was forced into exile following France's invasion in 1897. The dress is a Madagascan interpretation of French couture, most likely made by skilled dressmakers on the island. We sold the dress alongside an incredible archive of the Queen and her aunt's personal effects, which tell their fascinating story. We study fashion, but fashion is really social history. We wanted their story to be told,



You never know what you are going to find

and we were so pleased that the gown was not separated from the archive and that the complete collection returned to Madagascar. As auctioneers, we are also historians. In terms of my favourite pieces for their design, it is two amazing ballgowns from John Galliano's Princess and the Pea Collection, which were huge. They were too big to fit in our studio and took several people to manoeuvre them. Such outrageous and fantastical creations!

What is the most expensive piece you have sold?

That would be the late Princess Diana's midnight blue velvet evening gown by Victor Edelstein, which she famously wore when she was twirled around The White House dancefloor by John Travolta. We actually sold it twice, the second time for a staggering £220,000. The first time it was purchased by a lottery winner to cheer his wife up because she had broken her leg! He later sold it through us, and it was bought by Historic Royal Palaces.

What is one of the oldest pieces you have sold?

The majority of what we sell is 20th



Gown of Princess
Ramaisindrazana



ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

Michelle is a sewing teacher, writer, maker and passionate reader. Follow her latest dressmaking accomplishments on Instagram [stitchywhitney](#) and [booksatmybedside](#) to see what Michelle is reading next

Century fashion. We sell some items from the 18th Century, but any further back is very rare. In my career, I have sold fewer than a dozen pieces that are pre-18th Century.

One of the oldest pieces was a man's red velvet jerkin from the 1600s, with looped fringes and silk covered buttons in remarkable condition. It was incredible to see because usually, you would only ever see something like that in a painting. It sold for £60,000.

How do you protect such precious items whilst they are in your care?

Moths are our number one enemy! When people bring in items to be valued, we usually ask them to step outside before opening their bags as we can't risk any moths entering the building. Anything fragile is laid flat in museum-grade boxes. These items are stuffed with acid-free tissue paper, and we ensure they are kept out of sunlight.

Do you ever sell items made by home sewists?

In our more general vintage fashion sales, you can find gorgeous examples of handmade 1940s dresses, which are a dream for exploring construction and design. We are open to the public before our sales, so you can come and view the items up close to study them. We sold several little smocked floral Liberty print dresses with Peter Pan collars, worn by the Queen and her sister Princess Margaret as children. It was charming to see that, even though they belonged to royalty, they had handsewn



Galliano, Princess & the Pea collection, S/S 1996, Lot 290, 14/06/16, sold £17,000 hammer



Audrey Hepburn's Oscar dress, Lot 175, 29/11/2011, sold £70,000 hammer

Princess Diana Travolta dress, Lot 237, 9/12/19, sold £220,000 hammer

alterations and repairs. Historically the UK has a long history of austerity and make do and mend when it came to clothing.

Do you think clothes were made to last longer in the past?

Definitely. A lovely example of someone

who thought about the longevity of a garment was Audrey Hepburn. We have sold some of her dresses. Famously tiny waisted, she used to have all her couture Givenchy clothes deliberately made with extra seam allowance so that they could later be altered to fit her friend Tanya. What a fantastic idea!