

For whom the till rings

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No sooner had the bell tolled for Ronald Reagan than the tills started ringing for everyone else. Even as his fellow Americans were shuffling in their thousands past his coffin in their shorts and T- shirts, more than 6,300 items of Ronald Reagan memorabilia were being consigned for sale by enterprising citizens through the internet auction site, eBay.

Most were autographs - whether written by the 40th president's famous automatic signing machine or by himself it was difficult to tell. The list included a signed napkin from the presidential election campaign of 1984, as well as an autographed copy of his memoirs at \$4,000. One investor was even trying his luck on a jelly- bean jar purported to have been dipped into by the president while he was flying on Air Force One. This had the added bonus of Reagan's signature, scripted "in gold". The Gipper may have just died, but his posthumous career - as the focus of celebrity collectables - had only just begun.

As such, many challenges lie ahead for the 40th US president, recently deceased. For buyers are spoilt for choice when it comes to celebrity memorabilia. Think of all those garments thrown from hotel windows by Michael Jackson; those pointy bras once championed by Madonna; the floaty dress in which Marilyn Monroe endured the upward draught from that pavement vent. All of these now change hands for serious money. But the biggest money-spinners of all are

the souvenirs associated with a given star's early, and tragic death.

As such Reagan made a distinctly bad move by surviving his assassination attempt in 1981 and then living on to the age of 93. Mementoes associated with President Kennedy, in contrast, are sure-fire winners because of Lee Harvey Oswald's success with the trigger. Lucky old Zapruder family, whose head, Abraham, just happened to be filming the Kennedy's progress through Dallas that fateful November day in 1963 when the president was shot dead. After one of the longest sales pitches in celebrity-death memorabilia, Abe's descendants finally managed to wrest a payment of \$16m (pounds 8.7m) from the US government for his 26-second footage 36 years later in 1999. And even then, they had been arguing that \$30m would be a rather more acceptable figure.

Likewise, Nancy Reagan, for all her merits, provides nothing like the love interest that Monroe did for Kennedy. One cannot imagine that the Reagan portfolio will yield a treasure as fine as the Rolex watch Marilyn gave "Jack" on his birthday in 1962. Complete with the inscription: "Happy Birthday Mr President" followed by a poem that includes the line "let passion burn on lips and eyes", it is ultimate proof that the two were enjoying a steamy affair. It's yours from the dealers Moments in Time of Washington, New York, for \$4.75m.

Mind you, there's always the exception to prove the rule. According to a recent survey of autographs written by

celebrities who are now dead, Hitler's is the highest earner, averaging \$5,950 a go, while in comparison, Marilyn Monroe limps behind at \$4,950, followed by President Kennedy and Princess Diana at \$3,500. But when it comes to greatest increase in value over the past four years, the surprise winner is Her late Majesty the Queen Mother. Following her death, after a blameless and some might say boring life aged 101 in April 2002, a run-of-the-mill signature by her rose by a stonking 354 per cent to \$1,250. The talk among aficionados however is that this was a blip caused by sentimentality, and that it won't last. Sorry Ronnie.

The best way to understand this market is to think back to religious relics, particularly Christian ones. For centuries, both the possessions and the person of deceased saints were venerated, with ever increasing morbidity and credulity. As such the remains of martyrs had the most currency, particularly when they suffered long and horrible deaths. Examples include various bones of St Francis of Assisi, one of the fingers from St Anna, and, of course the famous Shroud of Turin - the ultimate Christian relic. Then in 1517, Martin Luther came along and spoiled the fun. Apart from condemning the exercise of worshiping body parts as repugnant and contradictory to true faith, he discovered enough pieces of the "True Cross" to make an entire fleet of ships; enough examples of Christ's foreskin to equip a glove factory. Even with the support of die-hards from the Roman Catholic church, relic collecting was relegated to the back seat for the next five centuries.

Now, thanks to the confidentiality offered by the internet, and of course its ease of access to millions of potential buyers, this market is back with a vengeance. Not only are actual Christian relics extensively being offered for sale once more, with splinters of the bones of St John the Baptist and earthly remains of other saints up for grabs, but the definition of "relic" has widened to include the possessions of dead rock and film stars - and presidents.

As it happens, the market in Christian relics is being policed by a 200- strong outfit called the International Crusade for Holy Relics. **Run by a professional photographer and devout Catholic called Thomas Serafin, it uses two lines of attack.** One is to object vociferously whenever it discovers any religious relics up for sale on the grounds that such sales violate Canon law. The other is to "rescue" them from the indignity of being touted around by buying them up. Hence a recent exhibition at the Glendale Forest Lawn Museum in California, which included such "first class" relics (as the ICHR calls them) as three black nails said to have been forged from the nails used to crucify Christ; chunks of His manger, and a fragment from Joseph's cloak.

There are no such strictures against the trade in celebrity-death memorabilia, however, with the result that this market is going from strength to strength. Choice examples include the pair of "pants" worn by Motown blaster Marvin Gaye, when his Dad murdered him during a family row in 1984. Initially offered up by Gaye's loving sister to the dealer Michael Kronick of Startifacts in Minneapolis, complete with blood stains, they have now been snapped up

for an undisclosed sum by a private collector. The list continues with Kurt Cobain's heroin spoon. Even though it can't be implicated in his death - a syringe was used then - it is still powerfully redolent of his tragic passing. Then there's Eva Peron's shroud, sold by Christie's auctioneers in Rome this March for \$195,000. This could easily have represented an overlap between the two categories of relics, only the Pope refused to have her canonised.

Meanwhile John Reznikoff, archivist at the university of Westport in Utah, has formed an incomparable collection of celebrity hair. Listed in the Guinness Book of Records for owning the largest such collection on earth, not only does Mr Reznikoff possess strands taken from the severed head of Charles I and from around the bullet wound in the head of Abraham Lincoln just after his assassination, but he even has one removed from the dead Marilyn Monroe by her embalmer in 1962. According to the dealer Michael Kronick, a routine tuft - comprising 10 single hairs - from Marilyn Monroe or JFK's head would put you back by about \$1,000, while Elvis Presley's would cost \$800.

Collectors like Mr Reznikoff are careful to present themselves as normal people. By possessing such items, they insist, they are merely bringing history to life for themselves and their visitors. Meanwhile, the dealer Michael Kronick states blandly that his buyers are "wealthy business types who own the best of everything (cars, homes, art etc)" and are now, "looking to buy the most unusual items on earth."

Unfortunately, it is not possible to attempt an assessment of the psyches of whoever bought the refrigerator in which the Milwaukee serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer stored the skulls of his 17 victims, because the buying was done in darkest secrecy. Not to mention the tools with which he dismembered them and the vat in which he boiled their bodies. All were offered for sale in 1996 following a ruling by the local District Attorney, who said they should be sold off to raise funds for the families of Dahmer's victims. This decision was repeated two years later in respect of the 10ftx12ft mountain cabin in which the Unabomber, John Kaczynski, assembled his weapons, before killing three people and injuring 23. How preferable is the British tradition of razing to the ground the houses of our serial killers.