

Collecting vintage typewriters

Old-school chic, literary pedigree and undervalued models are repositioning these collectables for a cool new crowd, says Mark C O'Flaherty



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One of the standout items in a recent London auction of the personal effects of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes was the typewriter on which Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* in 1961. It went under the hammer for £32,500 at Bonhams – significantly more than an identical mint-green Hermes 3000 that belonged to Jack Kerouac, which went for \$22,500 at Christie's in New York eight years earlier.



Sylvia Plath's 1959 Hermes 3000, sold for £32,500 at Bonhams

There are two distinct markets for antique and vintage typewriters – one is for items that were once tools of literary

giants. “The allure is that when seated in front of one, with hands hovering over the keys, you can picture very clearly that author poised, ready to write,” says Luke Batterham, senior valuer at Bonhams. The other is for machines collected purely for their mechanical and design appeal, such as examples including Ettore Sottsass’s elegant Valentine typewriter for Olivetti, from 1970, which has estimates at auction from just £200.

“As with the resurgence of vinyl records, vintage typewriters are on the up,” says George Blackman, the UK’s foremost restorer of the machines. “And older models in particular, such as the 1920s black enamel varieties, are fetching high prices. We recently refurbished a 1910 Imperial B model, which when finished was worth around £1,000.” He currently has a portable 1938 Imperial in full working condition for £299.



1960s Olivetti Valentine, £619 from 1stdibs

At the top end of the market for design pieces sits the Sholes & Glidden, the first successful commercially produced machine, made between 1873 and 1878. Its wood feed rollers and keys combined with Victorian floral motifs on its black panels make it an ornate beauty. “A great S&G will set you back about \$20,000,” says Greg Fudacz, owner of antique typewriter dealership The Antikey Chop. “The value is a direct result of its desirability, not necessarily its rarity. About 5,000 S&Gs were made and about 500 have survived. I know one collector with 14.” Fudacz specialises in rare machines; highlights include a c1899 Commercial Visible No 6 (\$4,200) and a Chicago No 3 (price on request) – one of just 14 known to exist.



A 1938 Imperial B, £299 from George Blackman

Working models hold special appeal. “It’s a nice surprise to come across a typewriter that’s over 100 years old and still works perfectly,” says Natalia Petrova, the dealer behind London Typewriters. “We have creatives who buy from us intending to write novels.” Two of her rarest machines are an Invicta (£200) from the 1950s, and a Royal Standard (£400) from the 1900s. Apart from the most specialist, highly priced pieces, typewriters represent value for speculators. Richard Polt, editor of quarterly magazine ETCetera, is a global authority on antique machines, with his own collection of over 250. He believes some early-20th-century models are undervalued at present: “It’s because they have familiar-looking mechanisms. But rare makes will be increasingly appreciated, including the Visigraph from the US, Hesperia from Italy and the British Empire from the UK. Electronic machines from the 1980s and 1990s could also be a good long-term investment. Rare models in working condition can currently be had for little or nothing.”

As Scott Kernaghan, an Australian collector who also produces the typewriter-lover podcast Type O +VE, explains, the collecting community is disparate: “There are the pre-second world war collectors, who are usually the most regarded and prominent,” he says. “But there are also modern-era collectors. That camp is very much about who wrote what on what typewriter.”

The two camps share a similar passion for the story behind a

machine. Maksim Suragevin is a Moscow-based businessman with over 500 typewriters in his collection. “I have a lot of rare machines,” he says, “including the Hammond 1, Odell 1, Odell 4, Mignon 2 Red and the Sholes Visible. I always think: ‘If only some of them could tell what they have typed’.” One of his favourite stories is attached to his Smith Premier 10, from 1907, housed at the French Embassy in St Petersburg before the revolution, and then confiscated and used at the NKVD (later the KGB) headquarters. A Smith Premier 10 would usually have an estimate of £150 to £200 at auction, but Suragevin’s could go for much more because of its provenance.

When it comes to the most storied machines, this isn’t a market for the casual collector. Steve Soboroff is a Los Angeles Police Commissioner with 38 typewriters that have an estimated value of over \$3m; it counts as one of the most impressive collections. Among the previous owners of his machines are John Lennon, Ernest Hemingway (his Halda travel typewriter sold for \$65,000 in 2013) and Tennessee Williams. Cost hasn’t been the only issue. “When I wanted to buy Maya Angelou’s typewriter, I had to be interviewed by her relatives,” says Soboroff. “And getting the typewriter used by Jerry Siegel to create the first Superman comics took five years of discussion with his family.” These machines often represent an immensely resonant literary history that doesn’t come cheap, or easily.