House & Home

Where geniuses

Interiors | Desks that belonged to

eminent figures from Sir Terence

Conran to Joan Didion command a

high premium, writes Helen Barrett

scruffy, seemingly ordinary desk sits in a corner at the syracuse University School of Architecture. Its lamister under the structure of the s

such as 945 Madison Avenue in Manhat-na, aka the Breuer Bullding, on its tatty, laminate surface.

Syracuse, which also holds about half of Breuer's archives, acquired his desk in 2019 as a gift from a benefactor. It is still in service — Speaks uses it to spread out posters and drawings. Physical evidence, including original designs and surviving photographs of Breuer sitting behindlt, give the deek substantial monetary value: as high as \$250,000, according to a 2019 report cited by Speaks. Desks that were once the property of famous or notable people intrigue us, perhaps in way other relies do not. They bear witness to — and, we might hope, retain traces of — the geniuses who once laboured at them. According to experts, a reliquary of a genius can command a high premium, almost impossible to predict. Secret drawers, accessories, scratches or scraps of remaining paper can all help raise the price.

"It's about as close as you can get to the person without buying the actual





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(Clockwise from top) Sir Terence Conran at the walnut desk he designed, which sold for £20,400 at his London estate sale last year; Jackie Collins's birch desk sold in 2017 for £5,500; ebonised

ebonised pearwood desk by Jarl Eklund, 1924; Syracuse architecture dean Michael Speaks at the desk of Marcel

Breuer, acquired in 2019; 'Everyone wants a photograph of themselves sitting behind

person," says Charlie Thomas, UK group director for house sales and private and iconic collections at Bonhams. "That's what makes these sales so exciting. It's very difficult to second guess the uplift that people are willing to pay. The value is decided by the fans." In recent years, otherwise unremarkable pieces have far exceeded estimates at auction, including cast-offs that once belonged to Joan Didion, Sir Michael Caine, Sir Roger Moore, John le Carré and many more. In Los Angeles, a squat, faintly Art Deco-style desk in ebonised caine, Sir Roger Moore, John le Carré
and many more. In los Angeles, a squat,
faintly Art Deco-style desk in ebonised
birch at which Jackie Collins wrote
many of her wildly popular raunchy
novels, sold in 2017 for £5,500 — more
than twice its lowest estimate.
"Ordinarily, that's something we wouldn't sell . . . it
would probably be a tenth of
that without the provename." says Thomas.
Didion's desk, which she
used at home, sold last year for
\$60,000. Her desk accessories
sold for nearly \$23,000.
A battered desk designed and
used by Sir Tercence Conran, the
British product designer and
retailer, was among several sold
at his London estate sale last
year for \$2,200 — nearly three times its

lowest estimate. A walnut desk, also designed by Conran and made by Benchmark Furniture, sold for £20,400. Perhaps the most striking premium was achieved by the desk at which Hilary Mantel wrote her Wolf Hall tribudy, which, judging by its catalogue picture, looks like any bog-standard self-assembly number in marmalade pine. It fetched more than £5,000 last year. Even the smallest desk takes on talismanic qualities if it once belonged to a professional hero or heroine. About 15 years ago, Thom Brisco, now director of a London-based architectural practice, was working as a trainer when he voluntered to help clear out his bos's office. "There was this collection of relics, kings he had gathered across time," he says. "And he had this one unit. I hadn't seen it before, but as we were taking it out, my boss explained its history." The unit was a 1970s desk extension in creamy white plastic. —'a sold little block of at hing" — mass manufactured in Italy by Stile Neoll. It was uurremarkabe and, unlike Bruers' desk, came with no formal provenance. But to Brisco its lineage was priceless.

Brisco's boss was the architect James of the Pritzker prizewinning internation in Internation in the extension had once belonged to the Pritzker prizewinning internation in the proper in the prizewinning internation in the prizewinning interna

architect Sir David Chipperfield. Brisco believes Chipperfield used it, possibly as a student, and gave it to Fobert when he was a junior employee. "I asked Jamie if I could have it and he gave it to me," asys Brisco. "I think he regretted it later."

'It's about as close as you can get to the person without buying the actual person. The value is decided by fans

"Somehow it just followed me around, like a little droid. Now I'm trying to start a small office, and it sits there as a reminder that lonce worked with Jamie, and Jamie worked with Chipperfield." Today, Brisco uses his hero's desk cabi-net to store drawings. But a desk's value does not always lie in a former owner with an Illustrious

net to store drawings.
But a desk's value does not always lie in a former owner with an illustrious amme. In the fine furniture market, "tis not necessarily the person who owned it that defines the importance of the piece, but the commissioning that went into the commissioning that went into Modernity, a gallery specialising in 20th-century Modernist furniture.

Holt sells one-off desks often by Nordice of the commission o

year, crowds gathered around another unique piece, a dazzling Art Deco desk that once belonged to Paul Dupré-Lafon, one of France's leading architects and furniture designers, made to his specifications in 1928. It took centre stage in Parisian dealer Galerie Marcilhac's stand.

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Dupré-Lafon, who has been described as the "decorator of millionaires", was known for expensive lamps, ashtrays and so on in the functionalist style, designed for the private homes of 20th-entury Parisian society. His sizeable desk of black pearwood came with accountrements a scarlet-leather insert and an inlaid tray that made paperwork disappear at the touch of a slim brass handle; a chunky swivel-chair, also in red leather; a light-fracturing desk lamp; even Dupré-Lafon's pearwood waste-paper bin.

Other desks are acquired by musems and cademic institutions for their sheer originality.

Chelsea College of Arts in London, for example, owns the "Plying Trowel" desk and chair, prototypes by Barney Bubbles, the graphic designer who once worked for Cornara and went on to design album covers for Hawkind, he Dammed and Elvis Costello, among others.

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Bubbles' desk, commissioned by record company boss Jake Riviera in 1981, is shaped like a bricklayers' trowel propped up by a pile of wooden blocks that resemble a stack of books — a visual propped up by a pile of wooden blocks that resemble a stack of books — a visual joke, perhaps a provocation on the futility of deskwork. Chelsea a cquired the desk to serve the college's MA curating and collections students, who learn by proximity to examples and object handling, says Donald Smith, former director of exhibitions (it is currently in storage awaiting restoration).

Perhaps, in an era of atrophied working arrangements — co-working, hot-desking, kitchen tables at home — a big, autonomous, private desk appeals to our deepers fantaspies of status and success. If it is imbibed with the presence — or even the ink spills — of an illustrious former owner, so much the better.

Eventually, Syracuse will have to address the dilapidated state of Breuer's desk. But then, conservation presents a problem, says Speaks. "With these things, the last thing you want to do is refurbish them," he says. "There is patina. And if, by some osmosis effect, Breuer's genitus has seeped into the desk, well, that would be finished."

▶ 14:30 Palais de la Bahia Fleur candle by D'Orsay x LRNCE £90 With notes of clove and cardamom, this cardanion, this candle is inspired by Morocco, where the ceramic vessel is made by hand.



Notes on a candle

Interiors | Nothing brings a cosy feel

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to the home like beautiful flickering

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► Museum candle holder by String



▲ Wooden candlesticks by Lucas Castel for ABASK

Made from 19 interchangeable hand-carved pieces which can be mixed and matched. abask.com



► Buto glass candlestick by





Irving & Daughters £98
Handmade in Italy
and available in
three colours.
ci-dauahters.com





▼ Monument candle holder by Joe Sweeney

