

# Talk of the tote

## What your handbag says about you

By TOM SYKES

A purse isn't just a place to keep your lipstick — it's a statement. When domestic diva Martha Stewart showed up for her first court appearance toting a \$12,000 Hermes Birkin bag, some observers saw it as a sign of confidence and classic style.

"The choice of this very expensive bag expresses her status," says image consultant Michelle T. Sterling, president of Global Image Group, "and it is also an authoritative bag. It's got a solid structure. It's saying, 'I mean business today.'"

Others called it a hand-stitched symbol of arrogance.

"Martha wasn't thinking when she took this to court," says image adviser Jill Bremer of Bremer Communications. "The message this bag gives is, 'I don't care about poor people. I have

nothing to do with them. I am rich and untouchable.' People just don't recognize the importance of these details when it comes to the image you project."

In the wake of Martha's Birkin moment, we asked a panel of experts to tell us what messages other stars' bags are transmitting.



The Birkin heard 'round the world.

Weighing in were three image consultants — Sterling, Bremer and Catherine Bell, founder of a group called Prime Impressions — who make a living telling corporate honchos what to wear.

We also threw in Michael Kucmeroski, senior fashion editor of Esquire magazine, to offer a male point of view. "Like a tie on a man, when a bag is right, it really adds sex appeal to a woman's outfit, but if it's wrong, it can ruin everything," he says. "Bags are a place to really express yourself. They say a lot about who you are."



### Gwyneth Paltrow

**Catherine:** I don't think this bag is making much of a statement at all. It's just a big sack.

**Jill:** This is a great bag. I think it's saying, "I'm classy but youthful. I can play the trends, but I can still act my age."

**Michael:** It says, "Don't come near me!" She wants attention, but she wants it on her own terms.



### Britney Spears

**Michelle:** The fur spots and the monogramming tell you she has a colorful personality, a creative style and a sense of her own individuality.

**Jill:** This says, "I'm cool, I'm successful." This is the Birkin equivalent for her generation.

**Michael:** This bag makes her look very bitchy.

### Marisa Tomei

**Catherine:** This bag says, "I'm relaxed, I'm off-duty, take me or leave me, I don't care."

**Jill:** Marisa looks very relaxed. The bag is letting us know she's bohemian, but it is also saying, "I don't like pretense."

**Michael:** I think this bag is trying to say that she's a no-nonsense girl who doesn't need to be flashy to be beautiful.



Jamie McCarthy/PAC



### Christina Aguilera

**Michelle:** This bag doesn't go well with her outfit, and she needs to think harder about how to pull her look together. If it says anything, it says, "I'm different from everyone else."

**Catherine:** A white bag projects wealth because it's not going to stay white for long. It also shows she wants to be thought of as fashion-forward — anyone else would just use a duffel.

**Michael:** It just screams, "Look at me."

### Kristin Davis

**Michelle:** The feminine pink gives off the message that she is very feminine, very approachable. She's saying, "I'm soft and kind and caring."

**Catherine:** This bag says, "I'm safe, I'm not flamboyant and I don't want to be the center of attention."

**Michael:** It says, "I'm matronly and boring."



Wendy Speck/ABC

Brian Pratt/Splash News