JANE BIRKIN



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JANE BIRKIN

Icon of Style

by Sophie Gachet

Illustrations by Caroline Andrieu

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“My look
is a cocktail.

I’m not as nicely
turned out as the
French,
but I don’t care
like the
English.”

–Jane Birkin

Introduction

How did an Englishwoman who arrived in Paris at the age of twenty become a fashion icon? Jane Birkin is not just timeless; she has become immortal. As soon as you say her name, you envision her silhouette and her look. From her very British minidresses to her sweaters, jeans, and sneakers, she developed a style that continues to charm people of all generations, even after her death. It is fascinating to watch the evolution of Jane B., whose ingenuous nonchalance gave way to effortless style. It is this casual elegance, above all, that defined her. As she confided in 2021, "I'm so laid-back about everything, you can't imagine . . . I just don't give a hoot. Is that what it means to be Parisian?"

Undoubtedly the most Parisian of all Englishwomen, she established her emblematic style almost despite herself, without much of a second thought—she wasn't the type to have an elaborate communication strategy. Above all, Jane was sincere and spontaneous. She was able to evolve with the times from the moment she arrived in France in a seductive boho minidress to her fortieth birthday, when she adopted her famously androgynous jeans-and-sneakers combo. The sex symbol of the sixties became the casual-chic figure of her later years, all while keeping this inimitable mix of candor and gravity with her eternal smile.

To understand Jane's talents and instincts, we can start by looking at the fashion fairies watching over her cradle. She was born on December 14, 1946, in Nottingham, England, and her godfather was Victor Stiebel, the great English fashion designer of the 1930s and 1940s, who dressed Jane's mother, actor Judy Campbell, as well as actresses Katharine Hepburn and Vivien Leigh. Jane's father, David, was himself a child of the fashion bourgeoisie, born into the Birkin & Co. lace dynasty. And it was thanks to her paternal grandfather that she was able to meet the queen of England, who came to visit the family lace factory in 1960. For the occasion, her mother had made her a special dress, and she was the one to present Queen Elizabeth II with a bouquet. Her godmother, too, was influential: flamboyant actor and poet Sarah Churchill, who also happened to be the daughter of Winston Churchill.

Jane had a generally happy childhood. As she recounts at age fifteen in her published journals, *Munkey Diaries: 1957–1982*: "I wonder if most people . . . " wear tight skirts and stockings, and eyeshadow and lipstick. All the older kids do and, although I thought it was horrid to do that, I sometimes

wonder if I'm wrong and I am babyish not to." But these appear to be considerations she quickly forgot; once she made it past adolescence and entered Swinging Sixties London, she dressed as she lived, freely and without worrying about what others thought. She always seemed to be one step ahead of the fashions of her time, and never tired her audience.

Jane was an international star, and her aura seems eternal. She passed away on July 16, 2023, at the age of seventy-six, but she continues to influence generations of women who copy her look or wear the Hermès bag christened after her. Her style has never gone out of fashion, and in certain ways her relevance and influence only continue to grow. The proof is in the legendary Birkin bag, designed by Jane herself. It continues to break sales records, and its average price on the secondhand market has more than doubled in the last five years. It just goes to show that, on top of everything else, Jane's fashion ideas are smart investments, too.

Jane was a mix of French nonchalance and British cool. She often opted for chic and timeless items, with clean lines and neutral colors. And whether she liked it or not, Jane always had considerable influence over the fashion world, and many of its top designers have regularly paid tribute to her. In 2007–2008, she posed with her youngest daughter, Lou Doillon, for the catalog of French apparel company La Redoute, photographed by her eldest daughter, Kate Barry. And in 2022, she created a capsule collection of essentials for Jean Touitou's brand A.P.C. When asked about her style, she replied, "I'm not a fashionista, and I don't have a lot of clothes. I just know what I like, and I like comfortable things. I think it's important to feel good in what you wear." One thing is obvious: Whether for her famous bangs, her Hermès handbag, her wicker basket, or just her everyday outfits, Jane Birkin is a fashion muse with a truly inspiring story.

