FINANCIAL TIMES

David Bowie's personal art collection for sale at Sotheby's

Although he had a highly public career, the legendary musician was a quiet buyer of modern British artworks

It is eight months since the death of David Bowie, and the world is still struggling to make a rounded and accurate judgment on his life. It is not just because of the secretive nature of his demise, which was tightly controlled by Bowie himself, and hauntingly poignant. We are rightly certain of Bowie's genius, but don't yet know what to make of Bowie the man. How to reconcile the artistic persona, full of fearless gear shifts and raucous diversions, with the man who was, according to those who knew him best, quiet, intimate, gracious?

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Some personalities are destined to defy reductionist homilies. But one of the best clues we have as to Bowie's inner state of being lies, perhaps, in the way he went about indulging in his greatest passion: collecting art. It was, said the singer himself in a New York Times interview in 1998, the only thing he had ever wanted to own. "It has always been for me a stable nourishment," he added. "I use it. It can change the way I feel in the mornings."

When Sotheby's announced that it was selling Bowie's personal art collection, estimated at a relatively modest £10m, in London on November 10 and 11, it may have attracted the world's attention. But most of the world will not have recognised many of the names represented in the sale. Aside from a couple of "trophy" names — Jean-Michel Basquiat, Damien Hirst — the most interesting painters in Bowie's collection belong to a lesser tier, in terms of market price at least: modern British artists such as Harold Gilman, Peter Lanyon, David Bomberg, whose understated landscapes and interiors captivated the musician.

"There is something very English about them," says Beth Greenacre, who curated Bowie's collection over the past 16 years. "And that is what David was: he retained his passport, no matter where he lived. And these pictures form a narrative about him, and his interests. He was an observer, and he was a historian. He really looked back at history to understand his current position, and that is what these artists were doing too."

Greenacre describes the "glowing beauty" of Gilman's Interior (1917) in quietly revolutionary terms. "It was very controversial to use these very French colours for a domestic Camden interior. And Lanyon changed the face of English landscape painting. David collected him in depth."

"His pictures describe him perfectly," says Kate Chertavian, an art consultant who worked full time for Bowie in the 1990s, and, like Greenacre, is talking about the collection for the first time. "I revisited them after he died, having not seen them for a few years, and my first reaction was that they were a great description of the man I knew and loved. It is quite a tender portrait of him."

'Interior (Mrs Mounter)' (1917) by Harold Gilman

Bowie's musical journey was fast-moving, voraciously eclectic and protean. Yet Bowie the art collector, as defined by both women, was reflective, serious and wary of any kind of limelight. "What I got from the get-go was that it was very important for him to have untrammelled access to the artists," says Chertavian. "He loved talking to them. That is who he was: a very genuine man. He didn't want any pomp and circumstance."

She first met Bowie in 1993 when the singer's wife, Iman, popped into a gallery in which she was working, and showed her a drawing, on a napkin, by Bowie of a Lynn Chadwick sculpture which she was trying to source. "She wanted to give it to him as a gift. And I was just so struck by the idea that this beautiful, amazing couple gave gifts like that to each other," she says.

> The brash pieces in the sale are the tonal opposite of the modern British collection

Chertavian found the work, and was asked to meet Bowie in a hotel a few days later. "He would make you feel so comfortable in his company you would think he

was part of your family," she says. "He asked lots of questions, he was fishing." She responded to the meeting by driving straight home, and returning to the hotel reception "with all the art books in my library" for Bowie's perusal. Soon afterwards, he rang her and asked if she would work with him.

"Did we call them art consultants in those days? I was a runner," she says self-deprecatingly. "A batman, to share these adventures with him." Those adventures took place in galleries all over the country, where Bowie sightings were common. Chertavian believes visiting and talking to gallerists had a "restorative" effect on him. "He understood and appreciated the quiet moments and the noisy moments," she says. Greenacre recalls Bowie's insistence on visiting St Ives to engage properly with Lanyon's abstract Cornish landscapes. "It's only when you go to St Ives that you can understand the work. You have to bob your head over the cliffs."

From left: 'Casablanca' sideboard (1981) by Ettore Sottsass; 'Beautiful, shattering, slashing, violent, pinky, hacking, sphincter painting' (1995) by Damien Hirst

Bowie's serious and scholarly approach to building his modern British collection was in contrast to his mixed feelings about contemporary art and its rambunctious "scene". Although he enjoyed the company of some of its artists — he collaborated on a spin painting by Hirst that he subsequently bought, and which is included in the auction — he remained aloof from the contemporary circle. "I could never get him to come to a fair with me!" says Greenacre. "He loved to support young artists, but he was not so interested in the market." His interests towards the end of his life took him further back in history, towards medieval British art, she says.

> The collection became a source of inspiration, of solace, and of restoration,

> for his musical activities

Bowie's taste for the theatrical manifested itself in his collection of contemporary furniture by the Italian postmodern designer Ettore Sottsass and the Memphis group. The brash pieces in the sale are the tonal opposite of the modern British collection, but satisfied his "intellectual curiosity" about outsiders and outliers, says Chertavian. "They may not be, in my opinion, fabulously beautiful, but they are prescient in some way, and David had a prescient eye. He could see things in work that was awkward, and may not have made sense."

The Basquiat painting, "Air Power" (1984), is the most valuable in the auction, estimated at up to £3.5m. Bowie acquired it in the wake of his performance as Andy Warhol in Julian Schnabel's 1996 biographical film *Basquiat*. The artist was the subject of a typically effervescent profile by Bowie in one of his articles for Modern Painters: "He's milking the diction-dairy, wiping up the puddles of Anglo detritus and scoffing the lot. He's stealing us limb by word."

Peter Lanyon's 'Trevalgan' (1951)

Bowie's burgeoning interest in modern British art developed during a relative lull in his career in the mid-1990s, although the period did produce the acclaimed

Outside album. The dystopian, experimental work featured a harrowing self-portrait on its sleeve, and was fraught with end-of-the-millennium anxiety.

I ask Chertavian if Bowie's interests in art and music complemented each other. "Yes, I definitely saw how the collection became a source of inspiration, of solace, and of restoration. We used to talk in his studio, in his dressing rooms, and [the art and music] felt very connected." As with all serious collectors, she says, Bowie assembled his collection to "enjoy it, on a deep level. Collections can be a coat of armour, or an exploration. And he was a great collector."

Her abiding memory of Bowie is of an inquisitive and confident collector, who knew his own mind. "Did I point him to good pieces? Absolutely. But did I ever tell him what to buy? No, never." Greenacre enjoys the thought of the Bowie collection of underestimated and undervalued works visiting New York later this month and imagining the singer's reaction. "David will love that," she speaks about him, as if he were still alive, "having all those Brits over there, standing on their own."

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