First-ever exhibition of George Gershwin's engagement with the visual arts

An interview with Baker Museum Director Courtney McNeil, co-curator of *Gershwin and Modern Art: A Rhapsody in Blue*

Barry Grey
5 March 2024

Courtney McNeil is the director and chief curator of the Baker Museum in Naples, Florida. The museum is part of the Artis-Naples arts complex, which also includes the Naples Philharmonic.

Last month, Artis-Naples launched one of the most ambitious and important programs anywhere in the world to mark the centenary of the premiere of George Gershwin's immortal *Rhapsody in Blue*, which received its initial performance on February 12, 1924 in Manhattan's Aeolian Hall.

The celebration included a tribute to Gershwin by Michael Feinstein, the internationally renowned performer, interpreter and archivist of the music of Gershwin, as well as other great masters of the Great American Songbook such as Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Jule Styne, Harry Warren and many more. It also included performances of two versions of the *Rhapsody*—the original for jazz band and the more commonly performed version for full orchestra—played by the Naples Philharmonic under the baton of guest conductor David Robertson and featuring piano soloist Orli Shaham.

Most remarkable was the simultaneous exhibition at the Baker Museum of Gershwin's formidable involvement and achievement in the visual arts, both as creator and collector. From the early 1930s until his tragically premature death in 1937 at age 38, Gershwin demonstrated remarkable talent as a painter, sketch artist and photographer, while building up one of the most important private collections of contemporary art in the 20th century.

Gershwin produced self-portraits and drawings as well as portraits, drawings and photographs of artists and composers, including Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Arnold Schoenberg and Irving Berlin. In addition there were paintings and photographs of close friends, family members and performers, among them a stunning photograph of Ruby Elzy, the original Serena in *Porgy and Bess*.

The composer's personal art collection included works by Picasso, Chagall, Modigliani, Kandinsky, Utrillo, Siqueiros and Noguchi.

The Baker Museum exhibition, *George Gershwin and Modern Art: A Rhapsody in Blue*, is the first-ever major museum show dedicated to Gershwin's visual dimension. It opened on February 10 and runs until June 16. Co-curator and researcher Olivia Mattis has authored a book as an accompaniment to the exhibition that is scheduled to become available in April.

According to the program for the exhibition, Gershwin wrote that his painting and music "spring from the same elements, one emerging as sight, the other as sound."

Two things can be said by way of introduction: First, Gershwin's engagement with the visual arts was more than amateur dabbling and was clearly linked to his musical genius. Second, Gershwin's unique contribution to American and world music was bound up with the fact that he personally knew or interacted with some of the most significant artists, composers, performers and cultural figures in the US and internationally who were on the political left of his time.

I interviewed Courtney McNeil, who co-curated the Gershwin exhibition, on February 14.

**

Barry Grey: If you could, tell us about the exhibition. What was its genesis, the idea for it? What does it consist of? What kind of reception have you've gotten so far?

Courtney McNeil: Sure. This is the first major museum exhibition to explore the visual dimension of the beloved American composer George Gershwin. And it includes amazing modern works of art from his personal collection, art work he made himself, including paintings, drawings and photographs, as well as contemporary art inspired by him or his music in some way or another.

The genesis for this show for me came about five years ago when I met Dr. Olivia Mattis, who is a musicologist who specializes in the intersection between the visual arts and music. I was working at another museum at the time and she was telling me about this idea she had for an exhibition about Gershwin.

I had no idea that his collection was of such great stature, and I agreed to work with her on investigating this idea further. During that time, the pandemic hit. I moved from my former museum to here, and coming here it became even more apparent that this show just had to happen because the Baker Museum is situated within Artis-Naples, a multidisciplinary organization that's also home to the Naples Philharmonic and this wonderful, robust slate of performance-based programming.

In regard to this overlap between music and the visual arts, I feel the Baker Museum is very well positioned to do exciting and meaningful work in a different way than any other museum in the country, really.

Years of preparation

BG: How many years of preparation have there been for this exhibition?

CM: Olivia has been conducting research related to this for 20 years, at least 20 years. She's an independent scholar and she has curated exhibitions at different museums. She lectures on this topic.

It started for her when, in the course of other research, she found a mention in an article or a book that Gershwin owned a Picasso painting, or that Gershwin owned a Chagall painting. She was excited to learn more, but found that nothing had ever been published comprehensively, like the list of works that he owned, an examination of what the visual arts meant to him, and how that played into his creativity in different ways.

Since she's an independent scholar, she needed an institutional partner who could bring the administrative chops to organizing an exhibition consisting of loans from multiple museums and private collectors around the world.

The reason I first met her was that my former museum had a Rodin sculpture exhibition, and members of my staff there brought her in to give a lecture on Rodin and Beethoven, and how Rodin thought of himself as the last romantic and was really inspired by Beethoven's music.

BG: How would you describe the reception so far?

CM: It's been overwhelmingly positive. Our patrons here are informed consumers of culture and I think that the typical Baker Museum patron knows more about music than the average museum goer in the country, just because of our proximity to the Naples Philharmonic and our situation here. So I think there is a built-in appreciation and interest in the project that I wouldn't be able to assume if we were in a different context.

BG: And what about the critical reception? I mean, the *New York Times*, the major media in general. Have there been any reviews of the exhibition?

CM: There have not been any as yet. We're working on that. I would love to tell you we're covered in the *New York Times*. Naples doesn't really have arts coverage locally. The *Naples Daily News* did have an arts writer, but they eliminated that position a while ago, unfortunately. So we're looking to out-of-market coverage.

The one article that we did get was from the *Telegraph* in London. They heard about us because of the book that was published. The exhibition catalog was published by Scala Publishers, based in London. So I'm assuming they heard about us that way.

BG: So after the Baker, is this exhibition going anywhere else?

A world exclusive

CM: This is a world exclusive. You asked before how long it took to organize the show. The research has been going on for 20 years, but the loan requests and the communications with other museums started about two years ago. Every museum has its own process, but every object that's loaned is the result of dozens and dozens of emails and phone calls.

And while the museum loans can take months or years to confirm, private lenders don't always think two years out. And so those loans were confirmed a little bit more last-minute, before the publication was going to print, before we were making our crating, framing, packing, shipping plans.

So the coordination was a challenge to sync, and traveling it to another museum would unfortunately be beyond our staff capabilities at this time, because we have a small number of people, not because they're not talented. They're totally talented and they could do it, they just have too many other things to do.

BG: Could you tell us what's in the exhibition? What different types of works, how many works by Gershwin, how many works that he acquired?

CM: The total number of objects in the exhibition is 63. The exhibition includes other elements too, like music playing in the galleries and wall graphics with contextual photographs and information. The 63 objects break down into 22 works of art owned by Gershwin, 17 works of art made by Gershwin, 18 works of art inspired by Gershwin and 6 documents/ephemera objects.

We made a conscious decision to stick to art objects as opposed to ephemera or artifacts. We wanted to really focus on the art. So we have a few artifacts in the show, mainly magazines or auction catalogs that were contemporary to Gershwin's collecting of the works and include illustrations of them in different contexts.

The only other artifact we have is included in the intro gallery. It is the first page from the original manuscript of *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was deposited with the US Copyright Office. It's in Gershwin's hand, and we really wanted to have one explicit musical connection for all of the music geeks here, to make it really special.

Other than that, we focused on art from Gershwin's collection. We, of course, wanted to include art that was made by him. And we thought a lot about how to present that, because one curatorial impulse could be to just silo it all and say, "Here is art made by Gershwin. Here is art owned by Gershwin."

Doing that, we would have lost the opportunity of illustrating some of the connections between the works in very obvious ways, in very immediate ways that I think are really effective. So we did some intermixing of things.

For example, his painting by Marc Chagall. It's called *Untitled (Old Man with Beard)*. It's in the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York, donated by the family. Gershwin called it *The Rabbi*. And you can see right next to that painting, which is spectacular in its own right, a self-portrait that Gershwin took, a photographic portrait of himself with Irving Berlin. He's standing with his head down and his hand on his chest and his eyes closed, exactly the same as his rabbi in his painting.

It's one thing for us to say we believe that Gershwin was really influenced by these works and looked deeply at them because he hung them in his home and he really lived with them, but to have that visual evidence of it as well is really exciting.

The same thing with his amazing Modigliani portrait, *Dr. Devaraigne*, which has that distinctive two-tone background. It's half red and half blue in the background, because Modigliani liked to put his subjects in a corner and give that dynamic background. Nearby, we have an illustration of Gershwin's own painted self-portrait that's on view at the Library of Congress. Gershwin used the same color background in his own self-portrait. So he was studying these works as visual inspiration, as well as living with them every day and having them in his home.

Works by Gershwin

BG: What kinds of work by Gershwin are in the exhibition?

CM: We have three or four paintings by Gershwin, portrait paintings all of them. We have a number of drawings by him, and those range from a very simple line drawing to a much more complex piece, a shaded three-dimensional drawing that shows his range as a draftsman. And then a number of his photographs as well.

Some of those we've included more for documentary purposes and

others more for artistic purposes. For example, one section of the exhibit deals with his relationship with David Alfaro Siqueiros, the Mexican muralist painter. Gershwin was a funder of Siqueiros' experimental painting workshop in New York, and Siqueiros wanted to paint a portrait of Gershwin. That evolved from just a simple easel portrait to this massive portrait of George playing piano in a concert hall with all his family in the audience.

We always knew that the exhibition could never be a comprehensive presentation of Gershwin's entire collection, because his collection scattered after he died. It went to his mom, went to the siblings, they donated it to museums, they sold some at auctions, some is still with the family.

So we wanted to get a nice representative example of his collection for the exhibition and then to publish in the accompanying catalog as many of the works from his collection as we could find. The exhibition catalog consists of an essay by Olivia Mattis, sort of doing the whole chronology of Gershwin's engagement with the visual arts—when he started collecting, his cousin Henry Botkin, painting lessons that Botkin gave him, and the communication between the two men and how the collection was built.

It contains my essay because I'm more of a contemporary art person and I look at the three contemporary artists who were in the show. So I include Andy Warhol in that, Jeffrey Gibson and Kara Walker. As a museum that focuses a lot on contemporary art, I knew the music would be a great bridge to the Naples Philharmonic, but I also wanted a bridge to the contemporary art world as well.

Exhibition catalog

And then a really exciting part of the catalog is the published correspondence between Gershwin and Botkin about the art collection. It's in the Archives of American Art, and Olivia visited there many times, and transcribed that correspondence. It includes a list of the paintings in Gershwin's collection at the time of his death, which has never been published before.

And although her essay offers analysis, you can also read the exact words that Gershwin and Botkin use to talk about these paintings. It's really fascinating. And then there's a plate section at the end that has as many images as we could buy. All that's in the book.

BG: Among the self-portraits, do you have the one of Gershwin wearing a top hat?

CM: I believe the location of that one is unknown.

BG: Really?

CM: Yes. I believe we thought it was with the family. We weren't able to locate it. One that we did not include, but that I love, was Ira Gershwin's own self-portrait. It was just like George's, except instead of being in a top hat and tuxedo, he's in his underwear. So he's painting in a tank top and his drawers, and it just makes me think he must have had a great sense of humor.

To think that George died so young, and he was only just starting to paint. I can't even imagine what the cultural landscape of this country would have looked like if his music had continued for four more decades. And how his painting and drawing could have evolved. We'll never know.

Enthusiastic public response, critical silence

BG: The first question that arises for me—the public response is very positive, but do you have any idea why there seems to be less than one might expect of a critical interest and response?

CM: Well, we do not often receive that, and that's not unique to the Baker Museum. I think that's true of most museums that are not in New York or a really big city. The art world, it can be very focused and insular geographically. So I think there's not a lot of great opportunities for coverage. I think we have a better shot of getting it for this show than for anything else that we've done in the past few years because it is a unique piece of scholarship that has not been presented before.

BG: It's such an extraordinary subject. And, of course, it is the centenary of *Rhapsody in Blue*. I mentioned, in the interview I did with Michael Feinstein, this article that appeared in the *New York Times* a couple weeks ago with the headline, "The Worst Masterpiece." It is a ridiculous and really ignorant put-down of the *Rhapsody* by one of these racially obsessed postmodernists. He calls the piece "Caucasian" and "corny."

A number of years ago at the University of Michigan they did the first-ever concert performance of the critical edition of the score of *Porgy and Bess*. They held a symposium in conjunction with the performance. It was really miserable because it featured all of this commentary denouncing Gershwin for supposedly stealing music from black composers, and having the gall, as a white man, to compose an opera about black people. I interviewed the nephew of George Gershwin, Mark George Gershwin, and the nephew of Ira Gershwin, Michael Strunsky, who participated in a panel discussion, and they were appalled by the racialist slant of the organizers.

Gershwin had tremendous curiosity and you could say he was eclectic. I'm not sure if that's quite the right word, but he took everything in. And from what I gather, his interests in the visual arts were like that. He was taken by abstract art, by the impressionists, by Chagall. And there's a sense of that, I think, in his music as well.

CM: That curiosity, drawing from many sources.

BG: And synthesizing these many, many different impulses in a unique way.

Gershwin's genius: A unique and popular synthesis of diverse impulses

CM: And I think you see that in his music and you see it in his collecting and his engagement with the visual arts. It takes this thesis about Gershwin the composer and gives a totally different perspective to it. I think it gives more weight to the argument that he was this voracious, endlessly curious, creative person.

BG: But at the same time, in a certain sense, principled, because he did not adapt to anybody. He synthesized the material into something original.

CM: Absolutely. Nobody else was doing quite what he was doing at that time.

BG: You might notice in my interview with Michael Feinstein that he very much believes this. He speaks about Gershwin as channeling impulses, various things. And Gershwin himself, according to Michael, saw himself as a sort of vessel. He gives the example that Gershwin would play something, and he'd go, "Wow, wasn't that great?"

People would say this guy's an egomaniac. But he wasn't really, because he saw himself as some kind of channeling medium. And it seems to me there may be an aspect of that in relation to his artistic interests.

CM: I think those impulses, the musical impulses and the visual impulses, I think he would have said the same thing about both, that he was a vessel for them. I also heard Michael Feinstein make that point,

both in your interview and in an interview I did with him here at the museum. I think that a future line of inquiry for other scholars could be looking at this from a spiritual perspective. Because I do think it seems like there was something almost spiritual about how Gershwin thought, about his creativity in different ways.

BG: It always strikes me as sort of miraculous. He came from this family of Jewish immigrants, lower middle class, no musical background. Where did his genius come from? One needs to seek a social, historical, material source.

CM: I'm really grateful for your interest in the exhibition and the project. We've got some national media that we're working on. So maybe the next time we talk I'll have some links to share.