

ARTSY

Sotheby's Is Auctioning Off David Bowie's Art Collection

Artsy Editorial
By Isaac Kaplan
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Portrait of David Bowie by Gavin Evans. © Gavin Evans, courtesy of Sotheby's.

Some 400 works collected by the late David Bowie will be auctioned by Sotheby's in a three-part sale this coming November, the auction house announced on Thursday. The collection includes pieces by Frank Auerbach, Damien Hirst, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose *Air Power* (1984) is the top lot, estimated to go for up to £3.5 million. Hailing from London, Bowie collected works by fellow countrymen Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland, though his eclectic and global taste drew him to pieces by Basquiat, Marcel Duchamp and Ettore Sottsass, the Italian founder of the Memphis Group, whose *'Casablanca' Sideboard* (1981) is expected to fetch £4,000–6,000.



Romuald Hazoumé, *Alexandra*, 1995. Image courtesy of Sotheby's.

Bowie also took an interest in [contemporary African art](#). The piece *Alexandra* (1995), an assemblage by Beninese artist [Romuald Hazoumé](#) that harkens back to Duchamp, is estimated between £5,000 and £7,000. “On the whole it will be international artists who are relatively fresh names for people. It will be intriguing,” says Simon Hucker, Senior Specialist in Modern & Post-War British Art at Sotheby's. For those interested in taking a peek firsthand, roughly 30 works—meant to “give a sense of how eclectic and unscripted” the collection is—will be exhibited in Hong Kong, New York, and Los Angeles in the leadup to the London sale. “We’re being really careful to pick things that are representative of his tastes and his interests,” adds Hucker. “With this sale we’re doing what he would have liked to have done: get an international focus on these artists.”

Though hailed and beloved for his revolutionary musical career, Bowie's infatuation with the visual arts is less well-known. “Art was, seriously, the only thing I'd ever wanted to own,” the musician remarked to the *New York Times* in 1998. Four years earlier, Bowie had been invited to join the editorial board of *Modern Painters*, for which he interviewed seminal British artists such Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. Bowie also contributed reviews, including one of the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale. Though he studied art and design and was painter throughout his life, Bowie's most famous intervention in the art world came when he threw a party at Jeff Koons's Manhattan studio for fictional artist “Nat Tate,” a creation of novelist and friend William Boyd.

This genuine personal interest in the arts manifested in a collection that reflects Bowie's interests, not just those of the market. “He could have gone out and bought a Rothko, a Pollock, a Warhol. He could have gotten art advisors to go out and cherry-pick for him. But he didn't,” Hucker says. Instead, “he read, he researched, he did it all himself. He talked to dealers and people he would chat about art with but he very much taught himself to look and trusted his own judgement. He was very interested in finding things that were a bit out of the way.” Known for charting his own path through the music industry, Bowie also looked to collect artists who operated beyond the mainstream conventions of the art world. “You can see [collecting] Basquiat as part of that,” says Hucker, along with pieces created by the so-called “outsider” artists who practiced art therapy at the Gugging Institute in Vienna.

Bowie lived in New York from 1993 until his death but, upon being diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2014, he paid one last visit to London. The numerous 20th-century British artists in his collection suggest his home was never far from his thoughts—or his music. “My God, yeah! I want to sound like that looks,” Bowie said of Auerbach, whose *Head of Gerda Boehm* (1965) is estimated at £300,000–500,000. Auerbach fans may recognize the work from a 2001 Royal Academy retrospective of the artist, to which Bowie lent the piece anonymously.

But even when collecting works by artists from his homeland, Bowie looked for the unexpected. “He liked the idea of artists who were participating in wider international movements but gave them a particularly British twist,” says Hucker. Though the Bowie family “are keeping certain pieces of particular personal significance,” according to a spokesman for the estate, “it is now time to give others the opportunity to appreciate—and acquire—the art and objects he so admired.” If one wants to know exactly how art influenced Bowie, it’s best to listen to the man himself: “It has always been for me a stable nourishment. I use it,” he said in the past. “It can change the way that I feel in the mornings. The same work can change me in different ways, depending on what I’m going through.”

—Isaac Kaplan

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