

## Bowie / Collector

by Kate Chertavian

One day in the summer of 1993, Iman Bowie came into the gallery on London's Cork Street where I was freelancing. David had shared with her a small drawing of a sculpture by Lynn Chadwick and she was on the hunt for the work, which she intended to give to him as a gift. It was a version of his *Teddy Boy and Girl* that had won the International Sculpture Prize at the 1956 Venice Biennale. Although I didn't yet know David, his interest in this sculpture, with its musical references and incredible energy, made perfect sense. *Teddy Boy and Girl* is one of Chadwick's best-known bodies of sculpture that helped rocket the artist to international fame. The series eloquently embodies the emergent 1950s British Pop culture as they depict post-war music-mad teens in their Edwardian frock coats dancing with arms in the air. Standing at the gallery's front desk Iman and I fell into conversation about the beauty of the image sketched on the paper in front of us and she asked if I might help her source the sculpture. I found it at the Mayor Gallery, an exquisite and rare iron work filled with plaster and iron filings that stood about 19 inches high. The unique sculpture had come to them from the collection of Sir Roland Penrose, himself an artist, as well as a historian, poet, and major promoter and collector of modern art. Penrose had in all likelihood bought the sculpture directly from his friend Chadwick in the late

50s. At the time of purchase I had no idea if I would see Iman again but remembered thinking that it spoke volumes not only about their beautiful relationship, but also David's evident ability to focus keenly on artists and images that were critically important and art historically relevant. *Teddy Boy and Girl* is not included in the sale, as it remains in the family's personal collection, but its acquisition does stand, however, as a great example of the intimate and thoughtful process that occurred when David and Iman made a purchase.

Soon after our first meeting, Iman called me again and asked me to meet with David for tea at their hotel. Excited to meet him, but with no expectations of David's knowledge of art, he quickly showed himself to be a dynamic, knowledgeable and voracious collector of many fields with an extraordinary artist's eye. We spoke that day of a shared love of British and Contemporary art, including Charles Saatchi's ground-breaking show *Young British Artists I*; Chadwick and Butler and the sculptors of the 50s; West End theatre and food. David was an incredible conversationalist. He could swing easily from topic to topic and his energy was deeply infectious and familiar. I was so excited about our conversation that I ran home, scooped up my collection of artist's monographs and Arts Council catalogues (he subsequently purchased an entire collection) and



This page: Lot 13 (detail)

returned to the hotel to share them with him. Shortly after, David picked up the phone to engage me as his art advisor and curator.

Each work in David Bowie's collection is an intimate window into the mind of this iconic and hugely influential artist and musician. It is a perfect reflection of his varied relationships and his visual and intellectual pursuits. As a collector David was an omnivore whose acquisitions closely mirrored his extraordinary talent. The art that David collected over twenty years drew from his wide pool of interests. He swung through a century of art, touching on abstraction, figuration, movements, mediums, subject matters and tones, all with the ease of a musician/artist who resisted being defined by a singular image. His visual memory was extraordinary; he never forgot an image he was shown, and would frequently recall something that was sent to him months before, cross-referencing it to a catalogue raisonné or artist's monograph that he was thumbing through at the time. David might have collected in a high-octane manner, even rapidly at times, but he always had complete focus. Collecting for him was restorative adventure. He collected deep veins of 50s British sculpture, post-Modernists, early Cubists and Vorticists, Expressionists, Neo-Romantics, outsiders and poets. He ignored popular opinions and fashionable choices, choosing instead to

collect in a very honest and understated way. Working with David was exhilarating, as despite his frantic work schedule he managed to dedicate a tremendous amount of time and energy to his collection.

Many works in the collection were bought at auction. David would receive all the current catalogues, marked with works of interest, which we would then discuss at length. I would travel to wherever David was working – a studio, a hotel suite living room – with a catalogue in one hand and a stack of transparencies in the other he would run through the works on offer.

'Cherv, should we look to buy a Sutherland or the Minton? Is the William Scott [Girl Seated at a Table, lot 13] worth going many times over its high estimate? What about the late Bomberg self-portrait, you said it was good but it's really hard to read. Let's go and view the ones we like tomorrow... do you have time to go over to see them now? Can you see if we can get Graham [Southern] or Rachel [Hilderley] to the warehouse? Tomorrow I have time at 11; will Susie [Pollen] be able to show me the Nicholson? Do you like anything in the Virtue show at Bernie's [Jacobson]?'

David chose artists he admired and responded to intellectually and emotionally, no matter their popularity. In a single sale we would pay a record price for a Harold Gilman or Bryan Wynter but also scoop up a far more



David Bowie beside his Portrait of Iggy Pop at Eduard Nakhamkin Fine Arts Gallery Benefiting The American Cancer Society - November 27, 1990. Kevin Mazur, Getty Images





This page: Lot 10 (detail)

modest group of works from strong but undervalued artists. His collection houses many surprises and often the contrasting artists within the collection make his personality as a collector come alive. With Peter Lanyon's *Trevalgan* (lot 4) we are spun around the Cornish headlands looking at the landscape with abstracted grace and power, while in Winifred Nicholson's *St Ives Harbour* (lot 2) the talented artist seduces us with a simple composition and limited palette. *St Ives Harbour* also reminds us of works by Winifred Nicholson's husband Ben, and of Christopher Wood and Alfred Wallis, and all the intimate relationships in St Ives in the 20s, 30s and 40s.

Looking at David and Damien Hirst's *Beautiful, hello, space-boy painting* (lot 5) reveals the deep connections David had with fellow artists: I imagine him on a ladder pouring paint onto spinning canvas as he chats with Damien about painters they both admire. The great colourist Howard Gilman's *Interior (Mrs Mounter)* (lot 10) takes a different track. Painted in the studio of his boarding houses on Fitzroy Street at the end of the First World War, Gilman paints an intimate portrait of his landlady. It is one of Gilman's most important paintings as it perfectly captures the breakdown of social class, the brightening of a palette, and the starkness and intimacy of a room you are not invited into. The collection tells so

many stories and it was a source of inspiration to him, a personal joy that he shared with his family, friends and fellow artists.

David was a serious, gifted collector. He read and wrote about art in depth and had deep friendships with critics, publishers, gallery owners and fellow artists. As his collection grew, we spent hours discussing possible purchases from artists, gallery shows and current auctions. Piles of books would be spread at his feet as we discussed pre- and post-war political history, historical context, writers and artists both well-known and obscure.

David understood and identified with a group of artists who were, in their individual ways, responding to wider European art movements. He also loved the outliers and the obscure; he never shied away from the chaotic noise or reflective quiet of an individual artist's work. He understood the creative process so could identify the qualities needed in a great work of art. Over the course of 20 years David built an incredible collection, and I am immensely proud and honoured to have been part of its creation.

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