'A new world in my view': the art of Sister Gertrude Morgan

10 January 2020

FINE ART | ARTISTS

Main image:

Sister Gertrude Morgan in her prayer room at the Everlasting Gospel Mission in New Orleans, photographed by Guy Mendes in 1973. © Guy Mendes

Highlighted sale

Outsider Art

–

NEW YORK

17 JANUARY 2020

Learn More

Sister Gertrude Morgan expressed God's message through art and song, and won admirers ranging from Andy Warhol to actor Robert Duvall. Three of her works are offered on 17 January

Following a series of divine revelations in 1957, Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900–1980) began to paint. 'Jesus just took my hand,' she maintained. For the next 16 years, the self-styled 'Bride of Christ and housekeeper for Dada God', who dressed only in a white nurse's uniform, imparted her ecstatic visions of a New Jerusalem on old scraps of cardboard and paper.

On 17 January, three paintings by this remarkable self-taught artist are offered in the Outsider Art sale at Christie's in New York.

Get the best stories from Christies.com in a weekly email

Sign up now

*We will never sell or rent your information. Privacy Policy

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900-1980), *New Jerusalem*. Acrylic and ink on pieced card. 6¾ x 7¾ in (9.5 x 19.6 cm). Estimate $3,000-5,000. Offered in Outsider Art on 17 January 2020 at Christie's in New York

Sister Gertrude's communications with God had in fact begun some 20 years earlier in the 1930s, when the Lord had impelled her to leave her husband of 10 years, and her home in Columbus, Georgia, to travel the southern states of America spreading the gospel through prayer and song.

Such a subversive, radical act by a black married woman was unheard of at the time. 'Just be sure and give Jesus credit for what I do,' she said in an interview in 1973. 'He's the one that deserves all the praise. He's the one that made me do it.'

In 1939, she settled in New Orleans — 'the headquarters of sin' — where she became a fixture in the French Quarter, jangling her tambourine and exhorting the public to 'wake up and hear about Jesus'.

Dealer Larry Borenstein discovered Sister Gertrude's paintings, and it was not long before the New York art scene came calling

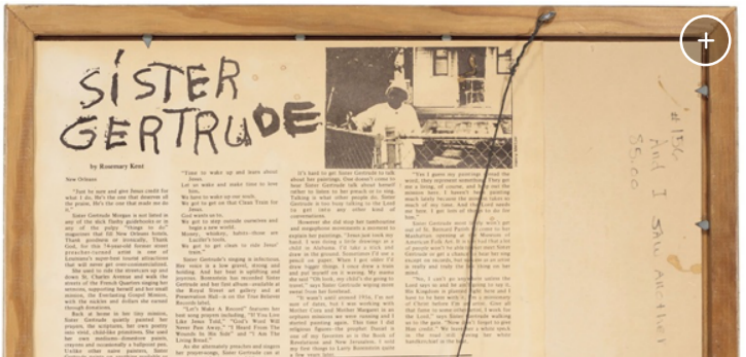
Later, she established the tiny Everlasting Gospel Mission in a shotgun-style house in the Lower Ninth Ward. It was here, in the 1950s, that she began to paint, adorning the outside of her home with pictures of the New Jerusalem — a place populated by angels and skyscrapers filled with people of all races.

Inside the house, she created an all-white prayer room where she would evangelise through a paper megaphone.

Sister Gertrude Morgan on the porch of her Everlasting Gospel Mission in New Orleans, photographed in 1973. © Guy Mendes

The ministry survived on small donations until the early 1960s, when art dealer Larry Borenstein (1919-1981) discovered Sister Gertrude's paintings. Borenstein was well connected and it was not long before the New York art scene came calling, bringing money, notoriety and entry to the counterculture.

Her paintings were featured in national exhibitions, including a show at the Louisiana Arts and Science Centre in Baton Rouge and the American Folk Art Museum in New York. Andy Warhol (1928-87) sent Rosemary Kent down to speak to the painter for the first issue of *Interview* magazine in 1973, with Kent explaining to the *New York Times* that, 'Andy was totally enthralled by her work. It takes a sophisticated eye to see that, hey, this is not just scribbling, this is something important'.



Related feature

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author, the legendary film director and the outsider artist

Read more

Andy Warhol's Interview

E. LORENZ BORENSTEIN GALLERY
810 ROYAL STREET
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA 70130

Art

New Orleans Soul to Travel

By EUBA CLADE

Louisiana Soul

Rosemary Kent's profile of Sister Gertrude Morgan for *Interview* magazine lines the back of her painting, *And I Saw Another Angel* (below)

Famous actors began buying Sister Gertrude's work, including Vincent Price and Robert Duvall. Cara Zimmerman, specialist in Outsider Art at Christie's, thinks that it was her openness and honesty that appealed to collectors. 'Her soul is evident in each drawing and painting,' says the specialist.

In 1971 Larry Borenstein, founder of the art gallery that became Preservation Hall, a revered New Orleans institution, recorded Sister Gertrude singing. The album they released was called *Let's Make a Record*.

The record is a mini masterpiece: the intimacy of the space amplifies the driving rhythm and raw authority of Sister Gertrude's voice, one honed on the street as a preacher. Her songs reflected her utopian vision of a world in which people of all races can live in harmony.

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900-1980), *And I Saw Another Angel.* Paint on card. 10⅝ x 16 in (26.3 x 40.6 cm). Estimate $4,000-8,000. Offered in Outsider Art on 17 January 2020 at Christie's in New York

Years later, the director Ava DuVernay used Sister Gertrude's song *I Got a New World in My View* in the Martin Luther King Jr biopic *Selma*, explaining that the music echoed the hopes of the African-

Americans marching for their right to vote.

In our video above, Ben Jaffe, who succeeded his father Allan as the director of Preservation Hall, recounts his family's relationship with Sister Gertrude and his own memories of the indomitable 'Nurse of Dr Jesus', who died when he was nine.

'People have described her as the Janis Joplin of gospel,' he says, 'for the fervour and intensity and the sheer belief in what she was saying.' Music producer King Britt, who remixed Sister Gertrude's album in 2005 to critical acclaim, recalls 'the first time I heard her voice it just pierced my whole spirit'.

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900-1980), *Let's Make a Record.* Acrylic and ink on printed record sleeve. 12¼ x 12⅜ in (31.1 x 31.4 cm). Estimate $2,000-4,000. Offered in Outsider Art on 17 January 2020 at Christie's in New York

But as Sister Gertrude's renown grew louder, she became wary. 'I'm a missionary of Christ before I'm an artist,' she said. 'Give all that fame to some other artist.' Painting and singing were simply ways of communicating God's message, and as her art work became collectable, that message was obscured.

In 1974, Sister Gertrude stopped painting altogether, explaining she was too worried about the world to concentrate on art. She needed to be preparing for 'a new heaven and a new Earth'.

Sign up today

Christie's Online Magazine delivers our best features, videos, and auction news to your inbox every week

Subscribe

For the rest of her life, until her death in 1980, she preoccupied herself with alerting people to the coming apocalypse.

'I stand alone,' she sang. 'Not tripping, just saying, I'm different, ain't hanging on the coattails of the next man, I got a new world in my view.'

Related lots

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900-1980)
New Jerusalem
Price Realized USD 10,000

—

Lot 2 | Sale 17860

View Lot

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900-1980)
And I Saw Another Angel
Price Realized USD 7,500

—

Lot 35 | Sale 17860

View Lot

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900-1980)
Lets Make A Record
Price Realized USD 5,625

—

Lot 102 | Sale 17860

View Lot

James Castle (1899-1977)
Untitled (Female Figure In Coat)
Price Realized USD 5,625

—

Lot 1 | Sale 17860

View Lot

Minnie Evans (1892-1987)
Untitled (Faces, Serpents, Animals, Angels), 1966
Price Realized USD 32,500

—

Lot 3 | Sale 17860

View Lot

Bill Traylor (circa 1853-1949)
Man On White, Woman On Red / Man With Black Dog, Double Sided, 1939-1942
Price Realized USD 507,000

—

Lot 4 | Sale 17860

View Lot

View all

Related auctions

Outsider Art

—

NEW YORK
17 JAN

Browse Sale

You may also like

Related content

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author, the legendary film director and the outsider artist

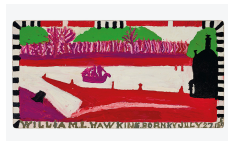
Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, on the gift from Steven Spielberg of this record-breaking work by Bill Traylor...

An act of faith: *Peaceable Kingdom* by Edward Hicks

The Peaceable Kingdom paintings by Edward Hicks are among the most widely celebrated icons of American folk art today — ...

Collecting Guide: Key periods of American furniture

Our guide to the forms, ornamentations and carving styles, illustrated with lots from Important American Furniture, Folk...



The inside track on Outsider Art — the artists to know

American Folk and Outsider Art specialist Cara Zimmerman profiles the artists aspiring collectors should know about...

10 things to know about William Edmondson

An introduction to the Outsider artist taking the art world by storm...

What I've learned: John Hays, Deputy Chairman

Lessons from 36 years with Christie's, including remarkable discoveries and how it feels to change consignors' lives...

Related department

Outsider Art

Related artists

Gertrude Morgan

© Christie's 2021