

Retrospectives

Streisand Shops the Museum Store

By GREG M. SMITH

Abstract: The author examines the tensions between high and low culture on display in two 1960s Barbra Streisand television specials. The programs situates both the art museum and the department store as sites for participational consumption by women.

Key words: Art museum; Barbra Streisand; commodity; department store; media literacy; television special

In the 1960s American art museums faced another of their cyclical crises of relevance, causing them to reevaluate their role in American society. The dominant paradigm in most traditional art museums was the display of "great works," aesthetic objects existing outside of time and space for the museumgoer's pure contemplation. Because such works were universal in their artistic appeal, they were expected to reach across barriers of time and space to speak to the patron's sensibilities. The insights of great individual artists enriched the consciousness of museumgoers, who briefly shed their individual subjectivities to encounter the eternal verities of beauty and truth.

Outside the walls of the art museum, these eternal verities were in much disarray. The feminist and civil rights movements began publicly questioning whose idea of beauty and whose concept of truth were being articulated. The relevance of historical tableaux and delicate still lifes created for wealthy patrons came into question in an era increasingly aware of social inequities and gender and racial politics. How could the museum maintain its position as the repository of classical beauty while attracting a population that pondered if black was beautiful or if nudes were sexist?

Some museums attracted audiences with the promise of the new. Museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York City offered new movements of new artists, marketing to a hip audience with a modern pop sensibility. Some began to question the nature of the museum itself (as Duncan Cameron publicly did in 1972), whether the...
museum should alter its fundamental function from a treasury of art and history to a forum airing multiple perspectives on the nature of the aesthetic and the historical. In the 1960s the museum, like many other institutions, needed to justify its relevance to the changing society around it.

Barbra Streisand entered into this public discourse about the nature of the museum on March 30, 1966, when CBS broadcast her second television special entitled *Color Me Barbra*. Half of the hour-long special, shot on location in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, depicted Streisand interacting with works of art in a distinctive manner that owed as much to Buster Keaton as it did to Clement Greenberg. In this article I examine some of the meanings generated by Streisand’s unusual and highly public visit to the art museum at a moment of museological crisis. I hope to shed light on television’s role in this crucial historical moment in the popularization and the commercialization of the museum.

During the museum portion of *Color Me Barbra*, Streisand scampers through the abandoned museum, looking at various artworks. Certain paintings attract her prolonged attention, and as she contemplates them, she is transported into the paintings themselves where she performs a song. After showing Streisand examining an Modigliani portrait, the camera cuts to a studio recreation of the painting’s setting, where Streisand sings Michel Jourdan’s world-weary song “Non, C’est Rien” *en français* (later released as a single in English as “Free Again”). While viewing Thomas Eakins’s “The Concert,” Streisand “pops” into the painting, donning an exact reproduction of the model’s dress to sing the contemporary love song “One Kiss.” In the show Streisand also appears dressed head-to-toe as Nefertiti in an Egyptian tomb singing the Rodgers and Hart standard “Where or When” and as Marie Antoinette in a drawing depicting a guillotining, where she sings a broadly comic version of Chopin’s “Minute Waltz” (complete with lyrics). In a manner befitting Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.* or Julie Andrews and company popping into sidewalk chalk drawings in *Mary Poppins* or Mia Farrow in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Streisand crosses the frame boundary and becomes literally immersed in the work of art. Within that work she finds a stage to perform her songs, exhibiting her own artistry in the context of high art.

This strategy obviously is intended to associate Streisand with great art, thus elevating her status in the cultural sphere. But this strategy also has bearing on the public understanding of the museum by providing a depiction of a museumgoer utterly absorbed in the work of art. *Color Me Barbra* shows that museum art can be involving to a thoroughly modern woman. Rather than depicting museumgoing as a distantly dull mode of respectful observation, this television special shows a mass audience an example of a patron imaginatively participating in a work of art.

Museums in the 1960s did not offer patrons the opportunity to appear in a Eakins painting, of course, but they did offer some environmental experiences in addition to the traditional gallery with various paintings. Museums took advantage of the depth of their collections to create period rooms, in which the entire decor (furniture, paintings, ephemera, etc.) attempted to re-create a historical moment in an idealized form. Such environmental re-creations, which mimetically represent other cultures as coherent wholes, are what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls “in situ” exhibitions. She usefully distinguishes in situ approaches from the more frequent mode of museum exhibition, which she calls an “in context” approach. This approach to museum display sets the object in historical or classificatory context through the use of explanatory labels, catalogs, lectures, and docent or taped audio tours. In situ exhibitions attempt to re-create the gestalt of a period environment, whereas in context exhibitions rely on printed and spoken words to situate individual objects in a particular interpretive framework (historical or otherwise). In situ exhibitions realize historical space for the museumgoer; in context exhibits require the viewer to assemble the individual objects into an imaginative mental space.

When Streisand wanders into a recreation of an ancient Egyptian palace or a Louis XIV chamber, she is engaging in the same activity that any patron of the Philadelphia Museum of Art can do: visiting an in situ period room. Is there anything particularly groundbreaking about the concept of period rooms in museums in the 1960s? The practice dates back to the turn of the century and provided the inspiration for the more popular version of this tactic in department stores. The model room became a fixture of the downtown department store in the 1920s and 1930s, with Macy’s at one time having sixty-five such rooms (Harris, “Museums” 162).

Streisand’s experiencing art in a cohesive re-creation of a period environment was not remarkable during the 60s, but what was remarkable was the construction of in context exhibits as in situ exhibits. By popping into paintings hung on a neutral gallery wall, Streisand turned these artworks into environments. Television transforms the two-dimensional painting into three dimensions and then transmits this to the two-dimensional television screen. The in situ environmental display becomes the norm in this televisival version of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and traditional gallery displays are fitted to this norm. Streisand shows that through an act of imagination a museumgoer can overcome the distanced contemplative posture usually associated with such gallery hangings and can interact with the work of art in a compelling manner.

Streisand demonstrates that art can be put on and taken off like a garment. Outside the painting she wears a simple, black dress with a white, lacy pinafore. When inside the artwork she wears a careful reproduction of the clothing worn by the model, and when she returns to the real world, she is wearing the pinafore just as before. When she appears in a painting, she dons the same hairstyle and clothing worn by the painting’s model. When she performs in an in situ environment
(such as the Louis XIV room), she wears period clothing (for instance, a powdered period wig). In a gallery with twentieth-century art, a mere series of glances at cubist paintings is enough to transform her simple dress magically into a garishly colored, Vasarely-influenced pop art dress (complete with a similarly mod hairdo).

The boundary between the world of the artwork and the real world is permeable not only to Streisand but to objects in the real world as well. Streisand usually enters and exits the paintings without noticeable change to the artwork, the museum space, or her real world self. When she enters the Modigliani painting, she sings her song in a dress identical to the one the model wore, but when she returns to the real world of the gallery, she is still wearing the Modigliani dress she wore in the painting, not the real world pinafore outfit. In addition, the model has disappeared from the Modigliani painting hanging on the wall, leaving only an empty chair in the picture frame. The last scene of the on-location museum section of Color Me Barbra takes place in a re-created ancient Egyptian palace full of hieroglyphics. After Streisand sings ‘Where or When’ dressed as an Egyptian princess, she exits and the camera tilts up to a close-up of a hieroglyphic drawing of Streisand’s face over the archway.1 The final moment of the special’s museum section emphasizes that this immersive experience with art can change the outside world. Patrons can carry portions of the world with them in their rarefied encounter with art, or they can transform their surroundings after they emerge from this experience. The artwork itself may be different after having come in contact with a flesh-and-blood individual. Once the barrier set up by traditional aesthetic distanciation has been broken down, an exchange can occur between the real and the depicted worlds.

Streisand’s museum visit is unusual not only because of the way she interacts with the imaginative worlds of the paintings but also because of the way she interacts with the artworks as material objects. She is constantly handling the art, touching it, stroking it. She shines the head of a nude female statue, she touches her hand run along tapestries as she passes by, she adjusts picture frames on the wall, she touches a painting to feel Eakins’s dress, she drinks from the fountain in the center of a re-created Mediterranean piazza, she sips tea from an ornate silver service, and she eats the petit fours she finds in the Louis XIV room. Obviously the museum guards had the night off when they were shooting this special. Color Me Barbra shows Streisand physically interacting with the art in a way that would get most patrons thrown out of the museum. She violates some of the basic rules of museumgoing (such as, “Don’t eat the exhibit”). She acts more as if she were handling the merchandise in a department store instead of examining priceless works of great art.

The history of the museum and the department store are strongly intertwined, as recent work by William Leach and Neil Harris (Cultural Excursions) has detailed. Born at the same moment in history, the museum and the department store have vied throughout the twentieth century for position as the primary locus of aesthetic display in American culture. Department stores responded to the museum’s high-toned positioning with a kind of reverse snobism: “Artists never made [works] for museums and galleries. They made them to be worn, to be used, to be looked at, to be appreciated, to be loved” (Rigby and Rigby 503). It is not surprising, then, that Streisand’s previous television special featured an on-location romp through Bergdorf Goodman’s department store. This famous showpiece from Streisand’s first television special makes for an instructive intertextual comparison with Color Me Barbra’s museum visit.

My Name Is Barbra, which aired April 28, 1965, was one of the more celebrated television specials of the ’60s, winning Emmy awards for best concept, choreography, staging, musical direction, and outstanding achievement in entertainment. Perhaps the most unusual portion of the special was an extended sequence shot on location (in an era when musical/variety specials were almost exclusively studio productions). The special showed Streisand schticking it up in the opulent setting of Bergdorf Goodman’s, wreaking havoc on the jewelry, fur, cosmetic, and hat departments while performing a sardonic medley of poverty songs (“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’”).

This bravura set piece would have been well known to many viewers watching Color Me Barbra, a special that is similarly structured to the acclaimed and popular My Name Is Barbra. Both specials feature unusual on-location sequences in which Streisand interacts with objets d’art, one in a commercial setting and one in a conservatory (thus inviting the intertextual comparison).

There are seemingly some purely performative factors at work in this comparison. Streisand appears to be a performer who simply likes touching things. For instance, at one point while she strolls along a raised walkway during the concert portion of My Name Is Barbra, Streisand reaches down into the orchestra pit and playfully tweaks the tuning peg of one startled violinist.
Performative factors aside, the important point is this highly public example of a woman handling artworks as if they were merchandise to be felt and sampled. Streisand interacts with the department store merchandise more vigorously and energetically than she does with the museum pieces, but the style of physical activity is remarkably similar, even if Streisand shows more restraint with priceless works of art than she does with hats and furs. Streisand in *Color Me Barbra* more closely resembles a woman shopping than she does a reverent museum patron who carefully observes the boundaries of art.

It is this emphasis on the artwork as economic object that Neil Harris argues is responsible for the gains in popularity made by American museums after World War II. Highly publicized purchases of art for outrageous prices gave museums a public relations opportunity to show that they were displaying objects of obvious market-proven value. "[I]ronically," Harris says, "it was this transfer of interest to original artworks and authenticated historical relics that would make the museum a truly popular institution. The metamorphosis of the museum from a group of educational warehouses into a set of artistic, historical, and scientific treasure chests coincided with a public obsession with collecting as the key to enriched experience and entry into a world of specialized knowledge" (*Cultural Excursions* 91). Art museums after World War II did not gain bigger audiences through a new populism. Instead they relied on a reassertion of high culture elitism, substantiating their subjective aesthetic values through the economic spectacle of spending enormous sums of cold hard cash in the ultimate arbiter of value, the marketplace. Museumgoers visited galleries to see these singular works of art and evaluate if they were indeed worth the exorbitant price tag. The activity of shopping for and buying great art became foregrounded in the discourse about the museum. Just as collecting commodities was a basic dynamic reinforced in the American consumer, the collecting of aesthetic commodities became a highly visible mode of interacting with the art world.

It is important to note that *Color Me Barbra* does not depict Streisand as simply surrendering to the all-powerful appeal of great works. She is obviously a choosing entity who attends to certain works that intrigue her and rejects others that do not fit her tastes. Streisand is not passively drawn toward the art; she selectively and actively chooses which objects to interact with, much more like a shopper than a person transfixed by the aura of an artwork. Streisand takes an erratic path through the museum, frequently reversing her course to examine this or that piece of art. She looks for artworks that she would feel comfortable in "trying on." For instance, the first painting that she gives extended attention obviously matches the way she envisions herself: a singer in mid-performance, much like Eakins's painting. The criteria for her selections seem rooted in representationality and gender. She can place herself within the relatively representational spaces depicted by Impressionist and post-Impressionist painters, but when she is confronted with Cubism, she cannot immerse herself in the disjointive world depicted by the painting. She does not pop into the Cubist works; instead, she walks rapidly around the room, glancing at painting after painting but always staying outside them, singing the bongo-driven number "Gotta Move." Streisand almost bounces off the walls, entrapped in this nonrepresentational wing of the museum where she obviously cannot immerse herself in a coherently depicted world. Streisand chooses representational art and rejects the modern.

In addition, gender seems to be an important criterion in Streisand's choice of immersive experiences. In each instance Streisand occupies a feminine subjectivity in the works of art (Marie Antoinette, Nefertiti, and Eakins's and Modigliani's women). When she masquerades, she dresses across history but never cross-dresses her gender. Streisand's highly visible choice of paintings models a coherent strategy of how a modern woman of the 1960s might select among the various aesthetic representations open to her.

We see Streisand accept particular images of women proffered by the museum, but we also see her overtly rejecting others. After having popped into several different artworks, she pauses in front of a portrait of three reclining female nudes. She looks at it, then looks straight into the camera; back at the painting, back at us, and then she nods "no" to the camera as if to say, "I don't think so." In so doing, she acknowledges the long history of the female body on display for the aestheticized sexuality of the male museumgoer's gaze, and she refuses to occupy that position. If the position of the nude acknowledges the model's complicity with the spectator, as John Berger argues (53–54), Streisand rejects this position and playfully denies it to her spectators. The classical high art of the museum is addressed to men, in contrast to the department store, whose inception in the 1870s–90s was based in luring women into the public sphere with the promise of fulfilling fantasies of luxury. The high-class address of the department store intended to flatter the women of lesser class positioning, encouraging them to buy goods that would allegedly raise their habits.

Both the museum and the department store interpellate their audience
with tones of “uplift.” The democratic fantasy of the museum says, “Yes, you can have class if you make the imaginative effort to deal with art on our terms.” The department store frames its democratic class fantasy in economic terms: “Yes, you can have class if you can afford to pay for it.” Both reinforce classist norms of taste while seeming to open access to those willing to make the effort. Streisand’s relative restraint in the masculinist sphere of the museum (compared to the department store with its environment constructed to appear feminine) and her careful selection of which images to adopt remind us that these institutions also differ in their gender address.

The museum and the department store offer two related fantasies: being able to cross class barriers to become involved in timeless art and being able to revel in the abundance commodity sphere of luxury. The two televisual depictions of these institutions acknowledge that the actual institution often falls short of the promise it extends. No one would be allowed inside Bergdorf Goodman’s or the Philadelphia Museum of Art if he/she interacted with the commodities in the way that Barbra Streisand does in these specials. Museums and department stores have personnel whose job it is to contain their patrons’ interactions with the goods. Guards keep you from touching the Eakins, and clerks keep you from stomping on the furs. Significantly enough, both the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Bergdorf Goodman’s are unpopulated in these television specials except for one person: Streisand herself. These specials articulate the fantasy of what you might be able to do if you weren’t hampered by the disciplinary personnel maintaining a sense of decorum in these institutions. Without these guardians circumscribing one’s behavior, one is free to shop to one’s delight.

Museum art is kept protected not only to prevent physical damage to priceless artifacts but also to guard these rarefied images from symbolic mischief by unauthorized persons. Drawing a mustache on the actual Mona Lisa would not only be irreparable physical vandalism but it would also do semiotic violence to the reverential aura museums create around works of great art. And so the museum of the 1960s is caught in a quandary. As a means of gaining popularity, it encourages a more active, participatory approach to traditional in context gallery hangings, an alternative that takes its cue from the in situ environmental exhibits. However, once the patron is actively interacting with the art, this opens the possibility that he or she might do physical or symbolic violence to the great work. Once the patron is involved in the artwork, he or she may have either a reverent response or a parodic one. A participatory spectator cannot be controlled as precisely as a distant one and thus may be responsible for heretical acts such as stomping on a fur. Streisand responds reverently to certain artworks, such as the Modigliani, which prompts her to sing an intensely dramatic song in its original language (French) without translation, as if the song’s emotionality can speak to the audience across cultural barriers just as all great art should. Streisand also makes fun of certain pieces of art in which she finds herself. In the Louis XIV scene she sings lyrics to Chopin’s originally instrumental “Minute Waltz” in a mixture of Borscht Belt and parodically operatic voices. As Streisand sings, “Although I know that this isn’t his intention, Chopin isn’t here to make an intervention,” once you provide participatory access to a work of art, there’s no one who can intervene to enforce contemplation and arrest the urge toward parody, satire, or just bad taste.

Color Me Barbra, a truly schizophrenic text, goes on to present another historically significant mode of cultural display, one that Bourdieu explicitly opposes to the “icy solemnity” (34) of museums. After wandering through the museum, Streisand goes to the circus. On a garishly colored circus set, she dances with penguins, sings love songs to llamas, belts out songs while bouncing on a trampoline and swinging on a trapeze, works with performing lions and ponies, and sings to an antateer (while both she and it are in profile) “we have so much in common” (“Small World”). To explore the intratextual connections Streisand foregrounds between the circus and the museum would require another article, but suffice it to say that both segments of the special depict the popular pleasures of both these institutions as being participative and interactive, not distancing and contemplative.

Color Me Barbra articulates that the central problematic of the popularity of the 60s art museum was a matter of aesthetic participation, and it places the onus for this imaginative participation on the museum patron. Eakins’s and Modigliani’s works do speak to the contemporary woman, according to the text, if she will actively project her subjectivity onto the artwork, actualizing its aesthetic space into an imaginative virtual space. The solution is not for the museum to revamp its mode of display to encourage a more participatory form of engagement. There’s nothing wrong with the museum, according to the text. The crisis of museum popularity is a crisis of the museumgoers’ imaginations. Patrons should be able to do for themselves what the television cameras do for Streisand: placing themselves in the pictures on the wall. Color Me Barbra demonstrates that the traditional aesthetic goal of immersion is achievable, but it mystifies the process by which this goal is achieved. Putting yourself into a painting is as easy and magical as a television edit. Color television opens up a new avenue for popularizing the art museum, but by depending on a uniquely televisual device (the edit) the effortless immersion Streisand models for mass audiences remains a televisual fantasy.

Having articulated a vision of a museum whose primary dynamic is interaction and immersion, the museum shown in Color Me Barbra abdicates responsibility for creating such a museum and suggests that the patron should do the work of making the art relevant. This public discourse about the museum voices a contemporary doubt about the relevance of high art but answers this doubt with an old-fashioned solution: Change the patron,
not the museum. Although this particular text reinforces the elitist mode of display still favored today by displays of classical museum art, other museums noted the same problematic and took an alternative route. Individual exhibits by contemporary artists began in the '60s to create environments that asked for physically participative acts by their patrons. Certain institutions designed entire museums (particularly children's museums) around encouraging such interactions. Recognizing the potential popularity of a more interactive mode of museum display, these museums and artists in subsequent decades created spaces that attempted (with varying degrees of success) to provide an alternative to pure aesthetic contemplation. These innovations remain relatively tangential to the mainstream art museum, however. Children's museums and individual exhibits of contemporary art may encourage a physically participative patron, but the museum itself by and large has not restructured itself to encourage such actions.

The primary means through which the museum chose to integrate the tactile pleasures of owning commodities and the aesthetic pleasures provided by great art is the museum store, which bolstered museum budgets enormously in the second half of the twentieth century. As Neil Harris notes,

The immediate gratification felt by the department store customer in the act of purchase, and the experience of handling objects and learning more about them, was the joy of the fair-goer, are united in the museum store, and seal the museum-going experience for many visitors. Appropriately enough in our culture, it is a commercial setting which legitimates an aesthetic setting. . . . The importance of the store lies not simply in its financial returns but in the means it offers for the museums to influence

directly consumer taste. In a sense, they can create their own instant customers. ("Museums" 172)

The museum store offers a version of the pleasure Streisand demonstrated: the pleasure of shopping for and handling artworks that have been officially designated as great art. Of the two modes of interaction with art depicted in Color Me Barbra (art as interactive environment and art as tactile, collectible commodity), clearly the latter has been most widely adopted in the consumer culture of American society.

I am not arguing, of course, that Color Me Barbra radically changed the course of museum history. I do believe that this innovative musical special exposed tensions in the contemporary conception of the museum in a way that is perhaps more subtly nuanced than many museologists of the day were able to do. To revisit this text is to reopen the possible alternatives for museum display that were being discussed in the early 1960s. Color Me Barbra shows an instructive televisual fantasy of an art museum, one that in some sense looks forward to the present-day art museum on CD-ROM and that looks backward to a time-honored fantasy of individuals transcending their subjectivities to appreciate art. Revisiting such complicated public meditations on the nature of the museum enriches our sense of the fantasy object behind 1960s museum-going and behind the marketing of the museum today.

NOTES

1. This is a hieroglyphic version of the same childlike drawing that is seen at the beginning of the special. The drawing also is featured on the cover of the album Color Me Barbra.

2. Lynn Spigel situates Color Me Barbra as an example of how the television variety special presented modern art using a schizophrenic mix of vaudeville and high culture (290-92).

3. In 1965, the year before Color Me Barbra, CBS publicly announced its commitment to broadcasting its entire prime-time schedule in color. Specials such as this one in 1966 strongly accentuated the fact that they were in color (particularly significant in depicting art), attempting to lure people into purchasing color television sets.

WORKS CITED


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