

Robin Gibson obituary

Forward-looking curator at the National Portrait Gallery



Robin Gibson and his dog Ted. Photograph: Nick Sinclair

Robin Gibson, who has died of cancer aged 66, was one of the key, but least obtrusive, curators of the modern [National Portrait Gallery](#) in London. He was responsible for the opening of Montacute House, Somerset, as an outpost, was a strong devotee of the BP portrait award from its origins in 1980, at least as committed to contemporary as historical portraiture, and the curator of many memorable exhibitions. These included *The Portrait Now*, which coincided with the opening of the new 20th-century galleries in autumn 1993, and ended with his remarkably wide-ranging survey of 20th-century portraiture, *Portraits of a Century*, to celebrate the millennium.

Gibson was born in the village of Goodrich, south Herefordshire, near the river Wye, and his father worked as a community officer in Hereford. Following Wychcrest preparatory school outside Malvern and a village school in rural Hampshire, he went as a chorister to New College choir school in Oxford, and, after his voice broke, the Royal Masonic school in Bushey, Hertfordshire. He read modern languages at Magdalene College, Cambridge and, after a year in Heidelberg, fine arts. After graduating in 1966, he took the museums course at Manchester University and worked briefly at Manchester City Art Gallery, before being recruited by Roy Strong to the staff of the National Portrait Gallery in 1968.

He began by looking after the late 18th-century portraits, then helped to establish the photographic collection, including the acquisition of Bill Brandt's archive. When Strong left to run the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1974, Gibson assumed responsibility for Montacute, a collaboration with the National Trust that was important in making the National Portrait Gallery's reserve collection available to an audience outside London. He published a catalogue of the Clarendon collection of 17th-century portraits in 1978, but his interest, as evident from an exhibition of 20th-century portraits in the same year, was less in the history of portraiture than in its continuing practice.

Recognising Gibson's abilities, John Hayes, who took over from Strong as director, created a 20th-century department in 1983. It consisted of Gibson as its head, with Honor Clerk as his assistant. They were a quietly formidable combination, who built up the contemporary collection by an astute policy of acquisitions, often adventurous commissions, and a run of imaginative exhibitions, including Glyn Philpot, John Bellamy and *Lawrence of Arabia*. In 1984, they opened a 20th-century gallery, which broke with tradition by including film and hanging portraits on rotating carousels.

Through the operation of the BP portrait award, they acquired an exceptionally good knowledge of young practitioners, making friends with many of them. Gibson particularly liked championing the underdog, and there will be many painters, not just the famous ones such as Maggi Hambling and Tom Phillips, who remain grateful for his encouragement. His personality, which combined wilful reticence with strong beliefs, is very evident in the BBC Omnibus television film that Patricia Wheatley made in 1993, marking the opening of the new ground-floor galleries. Asked what he thought of a particularly hideous portrait that the trustees were determined to acquire from a prominent donor, Gibson's face made the answer only too clear.

Hayes retired that same year, and a number of the trustees encouraged Gibson to consider himself as a candidate to be director. Although he was immensely popular with staff and always quietly thoughtful, neither he nor Malcolm Rogers, the other favoured internal candidate, were appointed. When I was

unexpectedly selected instead, Gibson became, from 1994, an enormously considerate and loyal chief curator, guiding discussion in curatorial meetings with his encyclopedic knowledge, encouraging the acquisition of less obvious portraits, bringing his dog Ted into the office and responsible for a string of popular photographic exhibitions, including Annie Leibovitz, Richard Avedon and Bruce Weber. His last and most remarkable exhibition was his survey of 20th-century portraiture, based on one portrait for each year of the century, which demonstrated the wide-ranging, occasionally idiosyncratic, but invariably intelligent nature of his expertise.

In 2001, he took early retirement, turning to a part-time, voluntary post at London Zoo. This enabled him to care for his long-term partner, Tom Gligaroff, with whom he lived in a flat in Islington and a small house at Hempstead, Essex, where he played the church organ for more than 30 years. Before Tom died, they moved to Thaxted, but neither was able to enjoy the rural idyll for as long as they hoped. Gibson was appointed an OBE in 2001 and is survived by his sister, a nephew and niece, and Hitesh Mistry, the partner of his latter years.

Robin Warwick Gibson, art curator, born 3 May 1944; died 9 August 2010

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