

Serge Gainsbourg

the exact word



A multidisciplinary artist, Serge Gainsbourg (1928-1991) explored fields as varied as painting, music, literature, photography, advertising and cinema. His production as a songwriter, its iconic richness, the variety of styles and musical colours it approached, continues to fascinate and inspire.

In search of modernity, the author constantly renewed himself over his 33-year career. His aesthetic sense irrigates his entire work, even the graphic form of his manuscripts.

Of his 550 songs, whose titles cover the walls of this exhibition, many are part of our collective culture: "Le Poinçonneur des Lilas", "La Javanaise", "Bonnie and Clyde", "Initials B.B.", "Melody Nelson", "Je suis venu te dire que je m'en vais", "Ex-fan des sixties", "Aux armes et caetera", "Love on the Beat"... They all are rooted in a literary landscape where classic references and pop-culture coexist. Serge Gainsbourg's personal library reflects his tastes, his passions, and nourished both his work and the development of his character.



PART 1

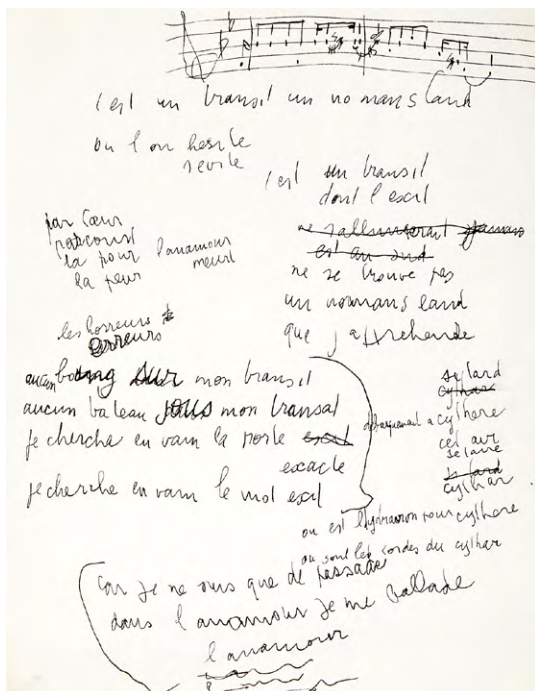
The literary landscape



Serge Gainsbourg in his office in 1979 © Christian Simonpiétri_Sigma via Getty Images

Serge Gainsbourg presented literature as a major source of inspiration in several interviews. To him, like painting, it belonged to High Culture, contrary to Chanson, which he considered a “minor art”. He repeated that opinion, notably in 1986 during his much talked-about heated face to face with Guy Béart. In his personal pantheon, classics going from Latin poetry to Elizabethan theatre crossed the path of poets Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire, the inflammatory prose of the Marquis de Sade, the Romantics, Symbolists and Surrealists, as well as some leading authors of the French Modern Novel of the late 19th and 20th century.

Pop-culture also took centre stage: biographies of musicians, detective novels and comics, books about art, photography and cinema... Marked by his childhood reading, Serge Gainsbourg fed his writing with numerous references, allusions and quotations, inserting the whole of his creation in a vast network of intertextuality.





Shooting for the album *L'Homme à tête de chou*. © Serge Gainsbourg
Maison Gainsbourg

PART 2

From literary double to media double

From Lucien Ginsburg to Gainsbarre, Guimbard, as written in his false documents during the Occupation, or Julien Grix (or Gris), a name he used for a few unreleased songs in 1955, the intricate character of Serge Gainsbourg developed through manifold identities.

His library provided him with material to build up his image and metamorphoses: some literary characters left a manifest imprint on his work. The figure of the literary double is drawn from 19th Century literature and writers like Guy de Maupassant, Oscar Wilde, or Edgar Poe.

In his own work, he put up a smokescreen by playing an ambiguous singer-narrator. For the press, he became *The Man with a Cabbage Head* (*L'Homme à tête de chou*), as a nod to his 1976 album – a title Gainsbourg borrowed from a sculpture by Claude Lalanne alluding to Shelley's *Frankenstein*. A visionary in his relationship with the mass media when their influence was growing, he staged this duality by creating a mediatic double. First a song character, Gainsbarre took shape through contact with the journalists, to finally eclipse his creator, in the tradition of literary doubles, from *The Horla* to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

PART 3

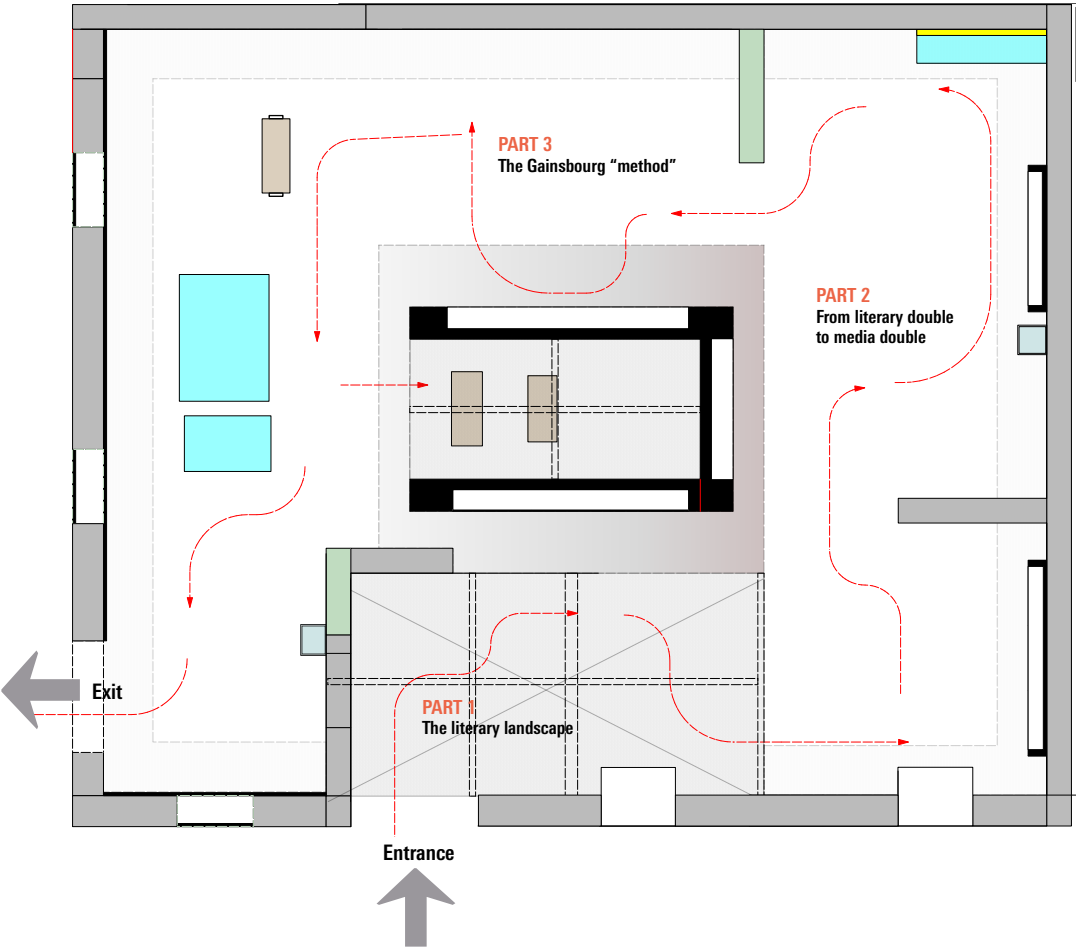
The Gainsbourg “method”

A master of the use of words, in tune with his time, Serge Gainsbourg was part of all the avant-gardes. A chameleon-author, he knew how to adapt to the style of his performers and to the musical colours in vogue. He began his singing career in the ageing Rive-Gauche chanson, then drifted onto Nouvelle-Vague jazz. Over the course of his 33-year career, he ventured into tropical rhythms, calibrated yé-yé hits, and successfully acclimatised to rock, pop, reggae and funk. His ability to constantly reinvent himself makes him the most modern author of his generation.

A worthy heir to the Dada movement, Surrealism and Post-Modernity, he mastered the art of collage: he borrowed, recycled, distorted, adapted, to finally bring his own style into being. He only abandoned syntax for the sake of rhythmic or sound discoveries: acrobatic rhymes in “ex” for “*Comment te dire adieu*”, alliterations in “av” for “*La Javanaise*”... Consecrated as a “hard-working/substantive minor artist” (“*artiste mineur de fond*”, mineur meaning both “minor” and “miner”) by Claude Nougaro, a contemporary expert in rhythmic modernity, Serge Gainsbourg undoubtedly raised chanson to the rank of major art, whatever he may have said.



MAP OF THE EXHIBITION



READING ROOM

EXHIBITION CREDITS

General curatorial committee (Bpi)

Monika Prochniewicz and Caroline Raynaud

Associate scientific curators / Maison Gainsbourg

Anatole Maggiar and Sébastien Merlet

Production manager

Marguerite Héliot

Scientific advisors

Laurent Balandras and Stéphane Hirschi

General Management

Philippe Poissonnet

Exhibition management

Louis Lentz de Andrade

Management of the Maison Gainsbourg collections

Louise Caron

Scenography

Agence NC Nathalie Crinière

Project manager: **Aude Weinich**

Graphic design

Xavier Morlet

Public Relations

Faits & Gestes

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La Maison Gainsbourg

Le Centre Pompidou and INA

Media partners

Transfuge, Connaissance des arts and Libération

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USEFUL INFORMATION

Bibliothèque publique d'information

Place Georges-Pompidou - 75004 Paris

01 44 78 43 51 - www.bpi.fr

Metro Hôtel de Ville / Rambuteau

Hours

Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays 12-10PM

Saturdays, Sundays, and public holidays 10AM-10PM

Closed on Tuesdays

Find the songs from the exhibition on Tympan
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- **45-minute guided tours for groups** by reservation, possible every morning (except Tuesdays, weekends and public holidays)
- **Workshops for the general public** or specific audiences, by inscription


Contact, information and booking

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- a video in the French Sign Language (LSF) when the dedicated icon  is shown

- Tours adapted for people with disabilities
- for people using the French sign language (LSF)

Wednesday February 15 • 3PM

Monday March 13 • 6PM

Saturday April 1st • 11AM

Contact and information

lecture-handicap@bpi.fr

- for the visually impaired, upon request to the Souffleurs d'Images association

01 42 74 17 87

contact@souffleursdesens.org



ASSOCIATED PROGRAMME (ONGOING)

Monday February 20 • 7PM • Petite salle du Centre Pompidou

Variations on Gainsbourg

Concert by trombonist **Daniel Zimmermann**, with **Pierre Durand** on guitar, **Jérôme Regard** on bass-guitar, and **Julien Charlet** on drums, on the occasion of the release of the album *L'homme à tête de chou in Uruguay, variation sur la musique de Serge Gainsbourg*.

Monday March 13 • 7PM • Petite salle du Centre Pompidou

Musical show by Le cabaret de Madame Arthur

Monday April 17 • 7PM • Petite salle du Centre Pompidou

What is left of our Gainsbourgs?

Singing Serge Gainsbourg, from the 1950s to today

Round-table with, among other guests, **Chloé Thibaud**, author of *En relisant Gainsbourg*, and **Laura Louiss**, singer and songwriter of the concert show *Sais belle et tais-toi*.