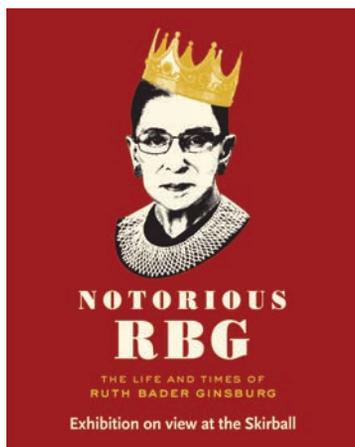


PROFILE

by Gillian H. Clow

Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg

The first museum retrospective of the beloved Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg delivers a cross-generational crowd-pleaser



A VISIT TO A MUSEUM in Los Angeles the whole family will enjoy may be a hard sell—the Getty’s renaissance paintings, for example, may not click with the same family members whose definition of museum includes the Instagram-friendly candy or ice cream pop-up varietals. The Skirball Cultural Center’s exhibit on Ruth Bader Ginsburg, however, combines informative facts about the beloved associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, with inviting pop culture elements and tactile experiences for the museum goer, making the exhibit a cross-generational crowd-pleaser. A trip to the Skirball to learn about “RBG” just might leave one feeling inspired, informed, and stocked with Instagram-worthy content.

“Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg” is on view now through March 10 at the Skirball Cultural Center in

Los Angeles. Coinciding with the 25th anniversary of Justice Ginsburg’s appointment to the Court in 1993, the exhibit is based on the *New York Times* bestselling book of the same title, and was created in partnership with the book’s authors, attorney Shana Knizhnik, the creator of the viral Tumblr social media account that anointed Justice Ginsburg with the “notorious” moniker, and journalist Irin Carmon.

The Tumblr’s origins are worthy of their own exhibit. It began after the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*,¹ in which the Court struck down two provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, one of which required certain states and local governments to obtain federal preclearance before implementing changes to their voting laws or practices and the other containing the coverage formula that determined which jurisdictions are subjected to the preclearance based on

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Ruth Bader Ginsburg at Columbia Law School

their histories of voter discrimination.

In its 5-4 decision, the Court found that the coverage decision was based on 40-year-old data, rendering it no longer responsive to current needs and thus a burden on federalism. In her dissenting opinion, Justice Ginsburg famously wrote that eliminating the preclearance requirement when it has and continues to work to stop discrimination “is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.”

In the wake of this decision, then law-student Knizhnik said someone on her Facebook feed referred to the justice as “The Notorious RBG,” and from there the Tumblr account was born, catapulting Justice Ginsburg from an esteemed legal mind to “RBG,” pop culture icon. The “Notorious RBG” is not only synonymous with civil rights and the fight for equality for all but also is a *Saturday Night Live* character, a meme, a source of fitness inspiration, and

the subject of both a recent documentary and a dramatized feature film.

Woven throughout the exhibit is a clear emphasis on how fiercely Justice Ginsburg fought and continues to fight for equality. From her early days as an attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union, she believed men and women deserved equal treatment

under the law. In *Weinberger v. Wiesenfeld*,² she represented a male plaintiff who was denied special benefits under the Social Security Act’s gender-based distinction of 42 U.S.C. Section 402(g) which permitted widows, but not widowers, to collect special benefits while caring for minor children. The Court found in a unanimous decision



Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg dissents in *Epic Systems v. Lewis*, May 21, 2018

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE SKIRBALL CULTURAL CENTER

that this distinction violated equal protection rights. The Skirball exhibit illustrates Justice Ginsburg’s long-held belief that gender equality improves the lives of everyone—not just women—and her home life, as well as her professional life, reflects this belief. For example, the exhibit shows that her husband, tax attorney and tax law expert Martin “Marty” D. Ginsburg, did the cooking in their marriage until his death in 2010 and supported Justice Ginsburg as a true partner.

The overall exhibit is a unique treat for

the senses. Each section is artfully labeled with the name of or lyrics from a Notorious B.I.G. song (“Stereotypes of a Lady Misunderstood,” “I’ve Got a Story to Tell,” “Hypnotize”) printed in graffiti by feminist street artist Maria “TooFly” Castillo.

The exhibit includes a sample robe and collar, a “jabot” as they are officially called, from Justice Ginsburg’s Supreme Court wardrobe. We learn that her neckwear has meaning: one signals that she will announce the Court’s majority opinion, another signals her dissent, still others have personal mean-

ing. Also on view is a 1996 portrait of the associate justice by American artist Everett Raymond Kinstler, on loan from the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery.

Museum visitors are able to watch home videos of RBG with her husband, Marty, browse through yearbooks from her Brooklyn high school days to her time at Cornell, Columbia, and Harvard, and can visit “listening stations” to hear her deliver oral arguments, majority opinions, and dissents in landmark Supreme Court cases such as *U.S. v. Virginia*,³ *Bush v. Gore*,⁴ *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company*⁵ and *Shelby County v. Holder*.⁶ Brightly colored exhibit areas tip off visitors that they may touch the items in those areas, including a yellow kitchen reminiscent of the one Justice Ginsburg shared with her husband, stocked with his recipes and cooking utensils. Visitors can also don a replica Supreme Court robe and jabot and sit at a mock SCOTUS bench, sure to delight the millennial museum-goer.

While the exhibit does a phenomenal job of informing visitors about Justice Ginsburg’s fascinating and inspiring life, the references to the Tumblr account and RBG’s status as a pop culture icon could be emphasized more. The exhibit includes just one small section with a few commissioned works by modern artists. With “RBG” having a virtual life quite disparate from the life of the real Justice Ginsburg, true RBG die-hards might have wished to see an *SNL* clip or two, scenes from her workouts with her personal trainer, or any one of the numerous RBG memes that have come to stand for the fight for civil liberties.

A visit to the Skirball to learn more about the life of this dynamic person is a worthwhile one and likely to be popular with people of all ages and interests. Everyone from hip-hop heads to attorneys to elementary school-aged children are likely to be impressed by and draw inspiration from RBG.

¹ *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013).

² *Weinberger v. Wiesenfeld*, 420 U.S. 636 (1975).

³ *United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515 (1996).

⁴ *Bush v. Gore*, 531 U.S. 98 (2000).

⁵ *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.*, 550 U.S. 618 (2007).

⁶ *Shelby County*, 570 U.S. 529.

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