



UNIVERSIDADE  
CATÓLICA  
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**PEGGY GUGGENHEIM, AN ARTIST THAT DID NOT PAINT  
THE COLLECTOR'S IDENTITY AS A WORK OF ART**

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica  
Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Culture  
Studies - Management of the Arts and Culture

By

Camilla Mongini

Catholic University of Portugal

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## **Abstract**

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection house- museum in Venice opened its doors as part of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in 1980.

Peggy Guggenheim, founder of the collection, is a key character in the development of modern art both in Europe and in the U.S. between the Twenties and the Seventies of the past century. Her private and personal life is deeply linked to the collection she put together during her life. She was not just a great collector and patroness of the arts, she was also a great art dealer and educator, through her role as a bridge between Avant-garde and Abstract Expressionism.

However, her role in the arts is currently not sufficiently examined in the existing literature. The issues of her difficult identity in a process that brought to the revolution of modern art will be studied in parallel with the empowerment of Peggy Guggenheim as a Jewish woman. Being a gatekeeper and a free woman, her heritage nowadays is still perceived both in the Venetian Palazzo that hosts her collection and in an approach to art typical of women.

This research fills this gap and paves the way to further studies on this attractive figure.

## **Keywords**

Peggy Guggenheim, Collection, Modern Art, Museum, Avant-garde, Identity, Empowerment, Heritage, Venice, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

## **Acknowledgments**

I sincerely thank my thesis supervisor, Professor Ana Cristina Cachola for engaging fully with the topic. I also thank the Lisbon Consortium for creating an enjoyable and stimulating working environment.

My deep gratitude goes to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection's staff for the help in opening their archive to me and for the encouragement through the writing process. I particularly thank Grazina Subelyte for providing useful, critical and constructive remarks.

Finally, I thank my family for the constant support, despite the distance, during the long writing process of this research.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

“I dedicated myself to my collection. A collection means hard work. It was what I wanted to do and I made it my life’s work. I am not an art collector. I am a museum.”

Peggy Guggenheim, *Peggy Guggenheim and Her Friends*, 1970-76

Peggy Guggenheim’s personality is worldly renown, mostly due to her eccentric lifestyle, her freedom and extravagance. My personal interest in this unique woman of the past century is related to my internship at the Venice Peggy Guggenheim Collection Foundation, now run by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, host at Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. This program was founded in 1980, one year after the death of Peggy Guggenheim, and gives the chance to young students in the arts and culture to experience a one-, two-, or three-month internship and collaborate with the education department of the museum. I worked there for three months, between September and November 2018, developing interest and passion in the multifaceted figure that is Peggy day by day. Accomplishing the different duties required by our contract means, of course, research deeply artistic movements, artists, artworks and, of course the Guggenheim family and the collecting process that put together a fundamental collection of masterpieces, that an international and enthusiastic public now daily enjoys.

I aim to fill a gap that links together the more fictional and romanticized aspects of Peggy Guggenheim’s life with the strategy on which building a collection, the Venice collection, in this case, is based. The memories and vicissitudes of this woman have been told throughout the years and through various means of communication, keeping a sense of compatibility that lacks completeness. While articles, documentaries, biographies, thesis, exhibition catalogues and academic art history essays have been written in the past and present century, managing to bring parallel aspects together, the goal of this research is proving, through a broader study, the peculiarities of a collection that is now fundamental, but that has not been originally based on technical knowledge in the field.

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning the quotes: the translation of quotes from other languages is mine.

As explained earlier, the personality of this great collector of the past century shaped modern art, both in the European and American contexts. Furthermore, the peculiarities of the Peggy Guggenheim Venice museum, that now hosts the collection, must be researched in the specific circle of friends, lovers and acquaintances Peggy was surrounded by during her entire life. Networks and destiny, more than a deep artistic academic knowledge, together with extravagance and economic possibilities made this collection a fundamental step in the development of an artistic era. I will then investigate these peculiarities through both an analysis of Miss Guggenheim's life and a unique personal knowledge experienced inside the Foundation.

As introduced from the very beginning, by the same title of this thesis, the idea of Peggy Guggenheim as a fundamental member of the artistic circle of the European scene of the 20<sup>th</sup> century makes her more an artist herself than a usual collector. Her life becomes her masterpiece while the identities of her biography and her collection shed light on each other. The love she felt for the art and the artists she has always tried to protect and sustain against the more traditional movements is at the base of her collection. Starting with the idea of selling art, Peggy Guggenheim soon realized that she was more interested in showing art and making people aware of the revolution of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Being a bridge between American and European art, avant-gardes and later developments of more contemporary art, I aim to show how the real sustain of this collection is not to be found in a proper logical way of collecting artworks related by an artistic knowledge and an organized project, but rather into a strong personality and her relationships, following the path of a curious destiny.

The identity of a certain aspect of modern art history depends on the personality of Peggy Guggenheim, and this research aims to critically analyze the methods on which the collecting process was based, and the importance of this saving acts against the sinking that Second World War would have meant.

Different and multiple sources researched through the figure of Peggy Guggenheim and her collection. As presented in the bibliography, the autobiography written by Peggy, the catalogues from exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and at Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, documentaries, articles, critics, essays on modern art and previous thesis, are all fundamental documents in the shaping of this

collection. As previously introduced in the section dedicated to the relevance of this research, all these existing sources are structured in a really specific way, analyzing the topic through either an artistic point of view or a more personal one. The personality of Peggy attracted attention and interest for her importance in the art historical context and her extravagance. The collection is broad, private of a real connection and rich of masterpieces. My goal is to research these elements together, bringing a more complete point of view on this collection peculiarities.

My goal is to use all the available sources and develop a critical study on the peculiarity of this collection starting with the definition of what it means to be a collector, how the phenomenon started and developed during the centuries. Shaping the differences between women collectors, and, specifically, the two collections related to Hilla Rebay and Marguerite Guggenheim, the focus moves then on an analysis of the biography of Peggy, trying to find a *fil rouge* in the collection. The relevance of a description of the collection is approached too, going through the artistic movements on which the collection is based. Fundamental in proving my thesis is the more qualitative analysis, based on interviews with women currently working in different departments of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection of Venice. Answering to both general and personal questions, the peculiar eye of people working daily in the environment founded by Peggy Guggenheim motivates the characteristics that make the collection unique.

The first chapter begins with the history of art collecting, focusing on collecting art in the U.S. between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, I underline, following the different sections of this chapter, the figures of women collectors, trying to motivate some common characteristics and differences. What is proved through this chapter is how women collectors were fundamental in the birth process of institutions related to modern art. The gender and characteristics of what meant to be a woman in that era shaped a new and specific way of collecting, opening to an art contemporary to their time.

The central chapter tells the story of Peggy Guggenheim: her biography is narrated through different chronologic and geographic sections, characterized by the presence of specific characters. I follow the years of her life, underlining the artistic passion that starts being developed, as long as the different steps that bring to putting together this collection. As introduced, each section has different secondary actors moving on the stage, that will

influence, in a way or another, Peggy's existence.

Starting with New York and the youth of this woman, I portray the members of the family and its inner circle, describing, often through Peggy's own words, a family history. Peggy used to say that her heart was truly beating for the old continent, Europe she first met in the Twenties, where Paris conquered her through its bohemian circle. It is in these years that Peggy met for the first time artists and men of culture that showed her the universe of the historical avant-gardes guiding her towards the new revolutionary art of the beginning of the past century. These years are also linked to the "king" of this circle, the passionate and jealous Laurence Vail, writer and her first husband.

After Paris, London is the new scenario of these years. It is the middle Thirties that Peggy for the first time develops the concrete idea of investing in art, meeting artists, writers, journalists and extravagant appearances in her path. It is in 1938 that Guggenheim Jeune opens its doors to the public, and the destiny of a myth is finally defined. This gallery remains open for just two years, a short time, during which, a specific artistic style is imposed: surrealist, abstract, innovative. This space hosted exhibitions considered vulgar and scandalous by the British government, criticized by the press, misunderstood by the public but that, surely, always put Peggy in the news pages, bringing her fame and publicity. After the closing of her gallery, Peggy started a new project. With the help of Read, that wrote for her a 'shopping list', containing artworks and artists seen as fundamental for the new project of Peggy, a museum in London. Due to the incoming threat of the Second World War, unfortunately, this idea had to be abandoned, and the return to Paris was signed by the famous motto of buying on artwork every day. Without forgetting the 1937 Munich exhibition portraying the so-called, degenerated art, *Die Ausstellung "Entartete Kunst"*, the risk taken from Peggy in these years was enormous and astonishing. Saving artists and art, commonly defined as forbidden and requisited or destroyed, became a mission for the American protagonist of this biography.

The next chapter of Peggy's life takes place in New York where Peggy Guggenheim finally opens an art gallery: Art of this Century. Through an analysis of the different exhibitions programmed for this artistic space, and through a section dedicated to the architecture of the gallery, built by Kiesler, another step in the creation of the collection is made. Again, not just selling art, but showing it, starting a revolution, knowing the New

York school, being the patroness of Jackson Pollock and Abstract-Expressionism.

After the six years spent in New York, in 1948 Peggy Guggenheim flies back to Europe, this time to the beloved Venice. This section of her life is the final and most important one, as it is with the Biennale of 1948 that the entire collection is portrayed in the pavilion built by Carlo Scarpa. In these years the project of Palazzo Venier dei Leoni starts and, with the exhibition of contemporary sculpture, opens its gates to the public. The collection is now open to visits, even if in continuous expansion. Peggy Guggenheim dies in 1979, after having donated the entire collection to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

The identity of Peggy Guggenheim as a woman, Jew, and American covers the second section of this chapter. Following the idea of Peggy Guggenheim as a ‘victim of her time’- as Greenberg defined her - her biography is analyzed through this complicated identity. The critical analysis of Peggy’s life continues through a section on her artistic identity: collector and patroness, savior but also dealer and educator (Greenberg 1946)<sup>2</sup>.

The third chapter represents an investigation of the identity of her collection. Palazzo Venier dei Leoni houses the Italian branch of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, as decided by Peggy Guggenheim before her death. The first section of the chapter focuses on the peculiarities of the collection and its display in Venice. Through an analysis of the different artistic movements, artists and schools, I aim to portray the complexity of this collection in its unity. Furthermore, it is functional to introduce the last section of this research that, bringing together Peggy’s personality and the peculiarities of the collection, on an artistic point of view, reveals the specificity of this research.

The conclusion of this thesis presents the heritage of Peggy Guggenheim, using interviews, as earlier explained, as fundamental part of the annexes, claiming the peculiarity of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

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<sup>2</sup>Clement Greenberg used the pseudonymous Hardesh to write his 1946 critique on Peggy Guggenheim.

## **Chapter 1: The phenomenon of collecting in the U.S. between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The first chapter of my thesis introduces the history of a collection and what this collection means. Evolving to a museum open to the public, the statement made through the choice of specific artworks in a specific context is available to a large number of visitors. Museum studies are deeply related to a message that is never neutral but shaped by a cultural identity. Different agents interact in the process of selection, organization, display, curating subjectively. My research is framed in the idea of a modern era presenting, in its society, peculiar characteristics through which Peggy Guggenheim moved.

The history of this collection represents, nevertheless, a phenomenon of empowerment by our woman protagonist, working against the society rules, creating an artistic heritage that, without her, would have not been preserved.

The identity of a certain aspect of modern art history depends on the personality of Peggy Guggenheim, and this research aims to critically analyse the methods on which the collecting process was based, and the importance of this saving acts against the sinking that Second World War would have meant.

We are then starting from the assumption that the concept of the museum is intimately linked to that of 'cultural good' and that the expansion and democratization of this concept have contributed to the major transformations of the museum structure.

### **1.1.1. Museum and collection (Mottola Molfino 1998)**

It seems appropriate to trace a brief historical-sociological analysis of the evolution that the museum has undergone as a social metaphor.

In its embryonic configuration, therefore, the museum was before all a meeting place for the intellectuals to debate and research towards the development of knowledge. The fruition had a highly individualized character: the museum was the microcosm of the scholar, the place in which to abandon oneself to speculative activity, focused on objects and works that are gradually populating it, testimonials of the great ancient civilizations.

Beyond the numerous semantic declensions that the term museum assumes over the centuries, what is gradually becoming consolidated is therefore the symbolic reference to the past, which defines the first type of relationship between works and space that welcomes them. This link remains for a long time exclusively aimed at creating an environment able to stimulate, through the contemplation of the works in it contained, creative reflection and knowledge development. Over time, the museum has lost its individual dimension, while retaining a highly subjective characterization, as a projection outward of the owner's personality; together with the spread of the phenomenon of *patronage* and the flourishing of large private collections shown to an audience that remained however restricted and always belonging to the same social class as the owner family. The intent was to communicate the wealth and prestige of the house. It is the museum as a tangible symbol of the conquest of the powerful.

The French experience of the post-Napoleonic period may be significant: it is of 1793 the decree with which the royal collections of the Louvre were transformed into Musée Central des Arts which, in 1804, will become the Musée Napoleon, at that time the largest and most important museum in the world. The creation of a structure museum fed also by the many riches stolen as spoils of war, configured it as one of the many ways to communicate both the "*grandeur*" of the nation and the sovereignty of the people, recipient and at the same time owner of what is kept in museums (Solima 1998).

The museum becomes also capable of collecting the revolutionary ideals of universality and democracy, sublimating them in the free use and accessibility of artistic heritage not only for artists, free to be able to contemplate and study works of their great masters every day, but also for the citizens of every social class. The museum becomes "public in a totally new sense, that is, open to the public, of public utility " (Lugli 1992, 20).

Therefore, new instances arise along with the generic protection and conservation, which led to a disorderly and undifferentiated accumulation of everything that seemed worthy of being somehow 'protected' by the economic and social transformations, which they had inevitably led to seeing even the entry of visitors reluctantly.

The transition from the traditional private collection to the public museum is definitely realized during the 19th century when the alternation in the power of the bourgeoisie

determines the birth of numerous museums that are understood as ‘means of mass communication’: in 1824 the National Gallery of London was established, in 1830 the Glyptothek in Munich, in 1840 the Hermitage was built in Petersburg e then the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The birth of the ‘American museum’, the Metropolitan, dates back to this century, which stands as an expression of the private initiative of magnate’s industry sensitive to the passion of collecting, also conceived as a land of investment and tax reduction.

American museums are, unlike European ones, open to scientific disciplines and new artistic techniques. In less than a century American museums have become relevant institutions, both under the qualitative and organizational profile, endowed with great financial resources, imposing themselves as a model of twentieth-century museums in terms of managerial aspects and contact with the public. If we want to summarize the profound transformation of the museum, in its history up to the previous century, we can see how it takes place mainly along three guidelines:

*The recipients of the collections:* the museum from a meeting place having one initially personal and intimate connotation, then sees his social dimension prevail, opening up to collective use.

*The contents of the collections:* initially selected based on their evocative and spiritual power, then chosen in a fragmentary and chaotic manner for the ability of works to arouse feelings of respect, admiration, and wonder, therefore for the value and the aesthetic meaning of the works of art contained; another scientific criterion was certainly fundamental in the selection.

*The museum as a symbol:* born to meet the needs of the matrix personalistic (a prince, a sovereign or the dominant political class) and over time it becomes the spokesman of multiple instances of communication (prestige and power first, democracy and freedom then) that can convey through his works.

Throughout the 20th century the museum acquires a dimension that is no longer uniquely either collective or cultural, but which includes both in the widespread interaction that characterizes the meeting between demand and supply of cultural goods. This different

awareness also determines significant changes in the planning of the spaces of the museum structures, which begins to be guided by the principle of multiple functionalities. What was the first place of observation, culture, and contemplation for a selected bourgeois audience, today it is an element of mass education and entertainment.

Precisely because of this new way of relating the museum to the space surrounding it, the museum begins to be seen by the public as an alternative meeting place, which ends up intensifying moments of contact and mutual interaction. The museum is not anymore just a building in which the works of arts are placed displaying a collection, but increasingly acquires a meaning that transcends its physics dimension, to become a social metaphor, “a means by which society represents his relationship with his history and with those of other cultures” (Lumley 1989, 6). The museum structure itself, therefore, ends up representing at the same time a powerful and visible communication tool as well as a possible pole of cultural attraction with strong symbolic power, around which a ‘country’, understood as a territory of any size, can build its own identity projecting it towards the outside.

### **1.1.2. The phenomenon of American collections**

"It has become fashionable to have taste," wrote James Jackson Jarves towards the 1860 - in New York private galleries are becoming almost as common as private stables " (Lynes 1949, 38). When J. J. Jarves, writer and art theorist, made this observation, in the United States there was verifying a radical change: the taste of the public, which had been for years so detached and indifferent towards the fine arts, began to embrace them enthusiastically.

Art critics and theorists have wondered about what had determined this inversion of attitude towards art collecting, moving from disinterest to becoming one fashion and a passion very much in vogue in the salons of New York, Washington and Boston. Their astonishment was not originated just from the consciousness that Americans had previously been biased and disinterested in the arts but, above all, from the fact that the United States could not have that taste for beauty, that passion for the collection of objects from the past since the country was born a hundred years before and therefore without a great tradition and a past to which bind.

In Europe, the origins of collecting date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when powerful patrons and secular or religious collectors began to collect *mirabilia* (spoils fruit of military campaigns, precious liturgical objects but also curious and rare profane objects), to classify them recreating in this way in their collections the world order according to the humanistic principle, and above all to obtain prestige and personal power<sup>3</sup>. The secular collections of the Renaissance courts, with their luxurious and rare objects and their cosmopolitan character, represented in the eyes of the subjects and of the rivals the power of the prince. Contrary to what happened in Europe, in the United States, before the mid-nineteenth century, there was no collecting nor ancient nor modern. The strategic change in collecting and in American taste, giving thus the start to this phenomenon occurred at the end of the Civil War in 1865 and lasted until the collapse of the American stock exchange in 1929. Economic development was certainly one of the springs that favored the birth of the phenomenon of American collecting, immediately after the bloody civil war - secession: in the North there was an impulse to industrialization, there was an expansion of the railways, the relations with French and British capitalism increased. The expansion of the whole economy and the increase in the value of the dollar created enormous fortunes, thus favoring the conditions for the birth of new occupations and professions related to a leisure class.

The new American millionaires turned to the model of Europe and in a particular way to the Age of Taste of England in the years between the 17th and 18th century when the increase in wealth and the advent of new classes pushed the aristocracy and the medium-high social levels to identify a field of common interests and attitudes that made them feel as "the cultural, social and political heart of the nation" (Pears 1988). The distinctive features of the new ruling classes were not just the elegance in the dressing and education, but art collecting became one status symbol of economic power and an aristocratic trait.

Once the model of European collecting was exported to the U.S., the wealthy Americans driven by the desire for legitimacy, nobility, or by Philanthropic aspirations began to buy paintings, sculptures and everything that represented beauty. The common denominator of

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<sup>3</sup> For a satisfactory overview of this trend see A. Luigi, *Naturalia et Mirabilia. The encyclopedic collecting in Europe's Wunderkammern*, Milan, 1983. On this same topic, see also L. B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism, The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States 1790-1860*, Chicago-London, 1966.

these art collectors and ‘creators of taste’ is that nobody bought for simple necessity or for practical use but they were all somehow fanatics and self-centered: the reasons that encouraged these men and women to invest their fortunes and legacies, seemingly unlimited, in works of art were different. There was the pursuit of pleasure and beauty that derived from the sight of works of art considered beautiful; there was a desire, in owning artistic artifacts, to arouse in people feelings of admiration, curiosity, jealousy, wonder and even shock. Often these people thought of ‘identifying’, through the possession of the works of great painters as if the disposition of famous paintings allowed them to embody the importance, fame and charm of such personalities. Collecting was often considered a means for social promotion and sometimes also used to legitimize inherited wealth.

According to Krzysztof Pomian (2001) collecting art had become one tool used by American women (especially widows or not married) to socially and culturally free themselves in a society permeated by Protestant values, for which the woman could not have one autonomous social position.

Mrs. Potter Palmer, Isabella Stewart Gardner, Paul Getty, John G. Johnson, and the Rockefellers are some of the most famous American collectors' names: pleasant and self-centered individuals, with a spasmodic need to ‘be in the know’ through art or philosophy and with the craving for hunt and grab everything that friends and antique dealers thought Interesting.

As we will enquire later for Solomon. R. Guggenheim and Peggy Guggenheim, it will precisely be the influence of the circle of writers, artists, and merchants-connoisseurs, of whom these people loved to surround themselves, who will refine the tastes of these simple and inexperienced art buyers, turning them into collectors. Soon they learned to evaluate the advice they received, a read through the trades of the merchants and rely on their own discernment in judging the intrinsic value of a work of art. If on one hand the phenomenon of American collecting was favored by the economic development of the East Coast and the Midwest Americans, on the other hand the high offer allowed its development. Holland, France, Italy and Spain were home to the great painters and none of them countries took effective measures to protect their Heritage Artistic Congress. The American Congress on the other side, just to encourage the entry of works of art in the United States, voted a law (the Payne-Aldrich Tariff of 1909) which removed any import

tax to works of art older than twenty years and which included deductions tax for public utility donations.

In 1913 the exemption was extended to contemporary art thanks to the intervention by John Quinn, a New York lawyer and collector of works from the artistic avant-garde. These tax breaks allowed collectors to bring to the U.S. the heritage and works of art they had collected during their wanderings in Europe.

The museum-houses, a term used to indicate these accumulations of works of art in the homes of the collectors, had their first formulation in Europe in the central decades of the nineteenth century and found their great fortune in the bourgeois culture in the last quarter of the century. In this form of a museum of their own private collections are embodied some typical ideas of nineteenth-century culture, which explain the deep reasons for the birth of this form of museumization. Among these ideas a new vision of the past, rooted in the taste of the 'picturesque' produced by Romanticism. Museum houses of the nineteenth century tended to reconstruct, even with minor objects and smaller fragments, the life of the past.

During the nineteenth century the use and recovery of the past changes in collecting intent to become a model of life, one prestige tool. The collecting culture, assumed with enthusiastic adhesion by the high industrialized society of the American East Coast, therefore produced in the United States the most magnificent specimens of house-museums. Many of these houses were conceived from the beginning by their creators-gatherers, like future museums, others were simply richly decorated with antiques objects and paintings and successively transformed.

The flowering of American museums of the first half of the twentieth century and their growth sprang precisely from private collecting and from the initiatives of the wealthy donors who, in some cases, offered money, land, works of art and, sometimes, entire collections but, often, they were founders of museums themselves. The result of American art collecting was therefore a passage from the private sphere of art to the public sphere that Krzysztof Pomian defines as "Democratization of art", ie presence of most artistic masterpieces no longer in private collections but in public museums open to all.

### **1.2.1. Women collecting in the United States of America**

The period between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century is considered to be the "Golden Age" of American Collecting: private collections, donations of patrons and flourishes of museums and houses-museums are at the center of a dynamic and strongly active phenomenon within the American upper bourgeoisie. This second part of the first chapter of the work focuses on the research of the conditions that led to this increase, as well as the study and analysis of the importance of the role of women in the large-scale development of American collecting (Pomian 2001).

In years when the dollar is strong, the U.S. is an ever-expanding country, wealth is increasing within the upper bourgeois class of the new continent and with it the trend towards the investment in art collecting and patronage seen as a mission of elevation is emerging. Not forgetting the often humble and simple origin of migrant ancestors, there is a deep widespread desire to find its own historical and artistic identity, within which to exploit the status of benefactor and patron of the arts to cleanup a past left behind together with the old continent. The need to build an identity of its own in the world of intellectuals, thinkers, and artists, finds fulfillment in the preference of American collections for novelty.

While old Europe is immersed in the struggle between the Academy and the overpowering and acceptance of the so-called Historical Avant-gardes, the American dynamism and tendency towards a fruitful future with respect to a stale present and a distant past, make it possible for the phenomenon in question to start (Pomian 2001, 29). The new continent thus creates its own essence in contrast to the lifestyle still perpetually aimed at the splendor of the past that characterizes Europe.

More specifically, in the embrace and the delicate issue of the development of American art collecting at the end of the nineteenth century, one cannot fail to notice the importance and number of women, wives and widows of the rich American bourgeoisie, who have made a fundamental contribution to the great cultural entities of the country, through a collection specifically new, modern and exotic (Mamoli Zorzi 2001).

"Without doubt, the collecting of contemporary art does demand much courage" (Mamoli Zorzi 2001, 27). The interpretation of this quote then introduces the question of

the gender of collecting, so there is undoubtedly a typically masculine way of collecting and one strongly connoted by the woman. We can rightly speak of an entire museal movement in which women carve out a very important role.

If collecting and possessing precious and valuable objects represent the achievement of a status, conferring power and well-being, as well as recognition to its owner, the echo of this statement, is reflected with even greater weight on the women involved in the history of art since the 19th century. The method, the areas of interest, the success and the wills and dreams of men and women differ, reflecting on a strong social, economic and political component in the U.S. of the past two centuries.

Powerful women, artists, collectors, and patrons, have existed already in times older than the modern age (Gere and Vaizey 1999), but only in the nineteenth century the phenomenon begins to be studied and names of great women of the past appear in the research of the scope. Thanks to the interest and the study of women's collecting, we are therefore able to continue to outline peculiarities typical of this microcosm of change in the field of art collecting, specifically American.

As mentioned above, the artistic field to which the interest of women collectors and patrons is concentrated in these years is modern art (Pomian 2001). This innovative current and not yet recognized by the Academy is perfectly suited to the taste and needs of women who, often being in a state of marginality with respect to the masculine society of the time, naturally welcome the innovation of an art that has not yet found its place in the study of the discipline, nor patrons ready to invest in it, in its development and its future recognition by the public. The woman of American high society, often relegated to the passive state of mere decorative object in her husband's life, finds her voice in this way, expressing with energy and dynamism the desire to activate herself in the artistic process not of the production of art, but in her protection and defense.

The education of women, more thought than men in the arts, is finally being applied. Justified by having more time to devote to the discovery of novelties in the artistic field, abandoned by husbands engaged in family business, what represented a pure pastime, slowly becomes a full-time job and much more. The woman's open-mindedness does not make her fear the risk of novelty and experimentation, making her a pioneer in previously

unknown areas. In this way, deeply differentiated fronts are formed: an innovative and modern collection, which risks investing in new market innovations, a tendency to create a new fashion, not to follow a dusty past already recognized overseas. On the other hand, the more traditional collection of men, anchored to the tastes of the Academy, in the emulation of European colleagues and in the desire to clean up a wealth obtained through hard work and not lineage.

Bold and less conventional in choices, animated by a strong desire to assert her role, the American woman differs from the European for this desire for adventure, detaching herself from the protective wing of the spouse, in a society in which the skill of these new collectors comes to acquire a strong social connotation. The idea of social promotion and public recognition of the role of women, which nourishes the hope of a reflection of the phenomenon into an increase of the rights and into the idea of women as a political personality who supports the man in the society and does not follow him, is typically American. In the United States, the public existence of women is directly linked to their autonomy and emancipation. Starting from the niche innocently carved in the field of modern art, we move to a role-playing game based on power and its acquisition by the woman. "It takes nerve as well as taste to be a collector", so Lousisine Elder Havemeyer, art enthusiast and advocate of the cause of suffragettes and women's rights, describes this craft that led women to see farther than man, fascinated by the freshness of an art that was also revolutionary.

In a historical period, the end of the 19th century, in which it is the museum that is the center and heart of the city, representing the identity of the people that is slowly coming to define itself independently, the woman understands the need to educate the citizen, making private collections accessible to the public, demonstrating once again her commitment to the realization of a project larger than a cabinet of curiosity open only to a privileged class of a few (Hughes 1999). Private donation to museums, opening of foundations and houses to the public, behind which lies a strong pedagogical patriotic will, are characteristics of the women of this century, animated by a strong emotional involvement (Gere and Vaizey 1999).

### 1.2.2. Great women collectors

Introducing great American collectors, a key role plays Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924) (Carter 1972). An eccentric prominent figure in Bostonian society, Isabella was struck at a young age by the tragic death of her son, followed by her first trips to Europe and the East, with the initial purpose of having fun and forgetting. During these trips, the Gardners began to be drawn strongly to the idea of putting together an art collection, initially more classic and later modern and less traditional. Following the advice of the famous Berenson, starting in 1886, this collection begins to be put together, with the aim of making it a modern and innovative museum in Fenway. Fenway Court opened its doors in 1902, making Isabella the owner of the most precious and fine American collection.

Louisine Elder Havemeyer (1855-1929), collector, activist, and suffragette, is considered the first to introduce Impressionism in the United States of America. At the young age of twenty, fascinated by the strong personality of the artist and adviser Mary Cassatt, during the first of many trips to Paris she discovers and buys Degas and Monet, thus starting a career that will continue at the time of her marriage with her husband Henry, passionate about Japanese art. The couple became the world's largest collectors of Impressionism, sensitizing the public to this novelty through donations and exhibitions, held in their residence that was then to be specially opened to the public. Louisine, as told in her memoirs *Sixteen to Sixty: Memoirs of a Collector*, published in 1930, devoted her life to art and feminist movements, believing in the educational power of the former and even ending up in prison for the latter (Weitzenhoffer 1986). Upon her death, most of the Havemeyer collection was donated to the MET, with the sole condition of keeping the donation identifiable as such and keeping it permanently accessible to the public. This donation represents the largest in the history of the Metropolitan Museum (Tomkins 1989).

Modern art, art in those years considered contemporary, encompassing the historical avant-gardes only in the late-era accepted by American museums, was on the contrary preferred by the Stein family. Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) in particular lived her life in Paris where, at number 27 rue de Fleures, she welcomed the American community of expatriates like her, members of the Parisian bohemian and anyone who was "someone" in that phenomenon of experimentation and artistic innovation of Paris in the first half of the

20th century. This rebellious woman is remembered as a legend, a queen in the world of artists who revolved around the Montparnasse district, the artists of the historical avant-garde. Opening her living room to the artists and intellectuals of the time, Gertrude set herself as a counselor and patron of art. She was one of the first to feel the arrival of the artistic revolution in Paris and to take an active part in it. Picasso's personal friend, Gertrude, as well as other family members such as her brother Leo and sister-in-law Sarah, put together a fundamental collection of works that were then dispersed into different institutions (Gere and Vaizey 1999).

Strongly linked to the Stein's family and their influence in the Parisian art world, the sisters Claribel and Etta Cone (1864-1929 and 1870-1949) cut their place within the great American women and collectors, for their passion for modern figurative art. Coming from Baltimore, where they had rightly met Leo and Gertrude Stein in the late 19th century, the two sisters put together a vast collection, which included Impressionist artists, Van Gogh, Gauguin and, mainly, Matisse. This collection consists of different sections, it is composed not only of artists considered modern, but by pieces considered decorative arts, especially tapestries. These two sisters, who collected independently but almost in a compatible way, decided to open their apartments to the public of Baltimore, to raise awareness of contemporary art, waiting for the opening of a wing expressly dedicated inside the city museum. These quirky and enthusiastic sisters are the symbol of what became the new European Grand Tours, discovering a new art that had to be discovered by their overseas compatriots (Richardson 1985).

### **1.2.3. Opening to Modern Art**

During the period between 1870 and the 1930s, the phenomenon of American collecting and the subsequent birth of museums followed a series of milestones where women initiated the process of creation and birth of these cultural organs.

In 1874 in Cincinnati, a committee was created to represent the city's artists and their works in the exhibition held in Philadelphia in 1876. A year after this first success, the committee was renamed the Women's Art Museum Association, to raise awareness of the need for an art museum created according to innovative and experimental criteria. The museum opened its doors in 1886 and the association was officially dissolved (Trapp

1981).

The 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia (officially titled The International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine) is an important step not only from an economic point of view and visibility for the American industry but also a great event that changed the tastes and futures of American art collectors (Grauman Wolf 2013).

To celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, this universal exhibition is organized within Philadelphia's largest municipal park, Fairmont Park, housing 5 main pavilions and 200 minor ones, including 37 countries. About 10 million visitors traveled to Philadelphia in this occurrence.

The floor dedicated to the exhibition of art objects, the Memorial Hall, housed artists from the Barbizon school as well as impressionists, old masters not only Dutch and Flemish but also of Italian origin and, for the first time, Spanish masters such as El Greco and Goya. In addition to these innovations in the Western world, much emphasis was given for the first time to Asian and Eastern art. Having access for the first time to this unknown art and, in many cases, innovative, the taste of American collectors slowly veered in the direction of these new discoveries.

It remains of paramount importance to emphasize, once again, the role of women in this international fair. The women were refused the opportunity to exhibit in Memorial Hall, for reasons related to traditions and decorum. Elisabeth Duane Gillespie, Benjamin Franklin's great-granddaughter and feminist activist, decided to open a floor especially dedicated to women: this exhibition space was born not only to exhibit works of art and decoration created by women but went much further, exhibiting works of mechanics and engineering created by women specialized in areas seen at the time as specifically masculine.

The importance of this first exhibition of modern and women's art remains a milestone in the history of American collecting at the end of the 19th century (Grauman Wolf 2013).

It takes forty years to finally see the American scene opening to art to this day regarded as modern. In the winter of 1913, the International Exhibition of Modern Art, also known as the Armory Show (Martinez 1993), opened at the 69th Regiment Armory.

As early as December 1911, during the meeting of the members of the Association of American Painters and Sculptures, the members of this association had expressed a desire to talk about contemporary art in the U.S., to show North American artists and to introduce for the first time the term "avant-garde" in a US territory. The idea of leading the tastes of the public by opening their minds and not simply following the fashions and the market eventually led to the inauguration of this exhibition in New York, which would be attended by a total of 87,000 visitors.

The first contact of the public with the avant-garde, the Fauves, the Cubist and Futurist art takes place in this large exhibition space. Although two-thirds of the artists present were American, it was the Europeans who surprised and shocked an audience accustomed to figurative academic art. An unsuspecting audience that had never observed anything like this did not know how to approach and accept these novelties from overseas. The accusations and criticisms were very strong, this art was considered insane and immoral, even a non-art, a challenge to the aesthetics and authority of the classics.

In 2013, a hundred years after the Armory Show, this exhibition is now considered a fundamental revolution for New York society (Vitale 2013) New-York Historical Society art historian and chef Valerie Paley talks about a revolution that puts in doubt the pillars and the worldview of the 19th-century. At a time when 'all sort of things is happening', the Armory Show fits into a much larger context than the artistic one.

Marcel Duchamp's *Nude descending stairs*, which so disaffected the visitors, represents, in its disintegration of a body unrecognizable in its human form, the metaphor of the ferment and the will to destroy the past and get rid of the chains imposed by the recognized authority, building a new world in the search for an aesthetic and a revealed truth new and more suitable for the modern man.

It was thanks to the Armory Show of 1913 that Cézanne became part of the Metropolitan Museum of art's collection, with *View of the domain Saint Joseph/The poorhouse on the hill*, for the first time a work by the artist became part of a public collection. The impetus for this acquisition was given by the curator Brysen Borroughs,

considered one of the protagonists of the process of opening the MET to modern art.<sup>4</sup>

In September 1921, the museum opened the Loan exhibition of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, which is the first attempt to put contemporary European artists in dialogue with artists now accepted and praised by North American critics. Fundamental to the artistic education of the public, this exhibition is organized at the will of a group of artists and collectors who considered it essential to make visitors discover the continuation of the history of art at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Picasso, who through this exhibition makes his first appearance in an American museum, and Matisse, are considered the most subversive artists of their era, they are also the most loved or, on the contrary, hated. This exhibition represents a chronological history of the evolution of art from concepts and ideologies that transcend the Impressionist revolution and evolve towards new frontiers (Tinterow and Stein 2012).

Katherine Dreier (Clark 2006) was an artist and inventor of what is regarded as the predecessor of all contemporary art museums on American soil. Independent and with strong resolutions, Katherine encountered the avant-garde during a trip to Europe, when she had the opportunity to visit the living room of the famous Gertrude Stein, queen of the Parisian bohemian. Fascinated and strongly impressed by the novelty of the artists present within the collection of the different members of the Stein family, the artist decides to buy the first of a long list of paintings belonging to the new generation of emerging artists. In addition to her visit to the famous Parisian hangout, Catherine was amazed by the works of Vincent Van Gogh, on display at the 1912 Sonderbun Exhibition in Cologne.

Back in the U.S., following her participation in the Armory Show, she realized how this exhibition had irreparably revolutionized the American artists' scene and how art collecting would be touched deeply by the new discoveries on display during the event.

Following this fact, in 1916 she founded the Society of Independent Artists, independent of any art school and based on the desire to push the public to take an interest and appreciate the art of living artists, and not to be locked up in the admiration of a distant past. Founded

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<sup>4</sup> Born in 1869, he spent the last twenty years of his life working for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He joined this institution as an assistant to the English curator Roger Fry. When his superior left his job in 1909, he took his place. During the years spent in the service of the MET, Borroughs made an commitment to enlarge the museum's collection, welcoming contemporary art in particular in its time.

by American and European artists who stand up as protectors of contemporary art, such as Marcel Duchamp, William J. Glackens, Albert Gleizes, John Marin, Walter Pach, Man Ray, John Sloan, and Joseph Stella, the association organizes in 1917 what would have been the largest art exhibition in the history of the United States up to that time. For only six dollars to whatever artist requested it, it was allowed to exhibit his work in this vast Salon des Refugiés, there was no jury nor criticism, only freedom of expression dominated the scene.

The friendship with Marcel Duchamp, described by Katherine as a "modern-day Leonardo", lasted the woman's entire life: counselor and mentor, Duchamp joined her colleague in a new project, which would last until 1950: the Société Anonyme. Founded in 1920 with the collaboration of Man Ray, this group aimed to create a program to study and promote the international avant-garde through traveling exhibitions, conferences and support for emerging artists. Crucial, the 1926 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, considered one of the most impactful and successful exhibitions of the 20th century in the United States of America. Explosive and irreverent, the nature of this exhibition was the innovative set in which the works came to life:

"Dreier had four galleries in the exhibition made up to resemble rooms in a house to illustrate how modern art could and should readily integrate into an everyday domestic environment, and there was also a prototype of a "television room," designed in conjunction with Frederick Kiesler, which would make any house or museum a worldwide museum of art by illuminating different slides of masterpieces with the 'turn of a knob. Concurrent with the exhibition the Société sponsored eighteen lectures, fourteen of which were delivered by Dreier herself" (Angeline 1998).

Abstract art was to be the protagonist of this exhibition that so marked the next American context. For the first time, the United States met the surrealism and the art of Kandinsky, to which the exhibition catalogue was dedicated.

Three years after this egregious success, the association's slow decline begins, somehow competing with the two first modern art museums that open their doors in New York. Katherine's willingness to defend contemporary living artists whom she saw as friends in the first place will never materialize in a museum where she could have permanently exhibited her collection combined with that of the Société Anonyme. In 1939, the first

project of its kind, called The Heaven, named after the place that was supposed to be dedicated to welcoming and exhibiting this collection, Katherine's home in Connecticut, failed. In 1941 part of the collection was donated to the Yale University art gallery but Dreier soon realized that it was impossible to continue funding acquisitions and exhibitions for the American public.

This extraordinary woman died in 1952, having paved the way for modern art in the U.S. Marcel Duchamp, a trusted friend, was committed to safeguarding the collection, which became part of a fundamental hoof in the MoMA collection and the Solomon Guggenheim Museum of Non-Objective Art.

The MoMA, Museum of Modern Art, was founded in New York in 1929 thanks to the strength and the hard work of the great American women: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan.

Animated by the desire to break away from the futile collecting of works of art as a pure show of power and high economic possibilities, these three women strongly believed in the educational power of art and its pedagogical value according to the public. Art is for these three women a cause and not a way to achieve status and social recognition, Abby, Lillie, and Mary stood up as protectors and spokesmen of modern art in the United States of America. Great aesthetes, art enthusiasts, and philanthropists, these three women make a living example of the importance of the female component in the development not only of American collecting but also of the new museums of the state.

Mrs. Rockefeller comes from a family of collectors and art lovers and continues this tradition once married. Having differing opinions from her husband about the artistic genre to be preferred, Abby understands how crucial it was to reduce the time between the process of creating a work and the glory granted to the artist by the audience. Mrs. Rockefeller met Miss Bliss during a trip to Egypt. Miss Bliss was very impressed by the novelties introduced in the U.S. in 1913 during the famous Armory Show. From the meeting with Mrs. Rockefeller was born a new and courageous project. The third creative personality and founder of the Museum of Modern Art is the art teacher Mary Quinn Sullivan. This trio of independent, curious and enterprising women is the basis of an ambitious project that still plays a fundamental role in the Western art scene.

Characterized by a more refined taste and financial resources that allowed complete intellectual freedom, "The Ladies" followed the advice of the artist Arthur Davis and understood the need for an official organization that allowed the public to get closer and discover modern national and international art. MoMA became a laboratory headed by a Board of Trustees that never in history had so many women held such an important position. A year after the Great Depression, as if to symbolize the need for a cultural rebirth of the country and the spill from obscurantism that so closed the minds of critics, amateurs, and artists related to the academy, MoMA opened its doors. Director of this institution was appointed Alfred H Barr, who will have to deal with the many issues that his role included. First of all, the question of how to match the interests of a foundation that created the tastes and dynamics of contemporary art, and by its nature in perennial becoming, with the need to begin to put together a permanent collection that educates the public at the stages of art history and its immense change between the 19th and 20th centuries, remains open for a long time. In 1952 the MoMA opened a part of the museum for what is its permanent collection which, to this day, remains a milestone in the history of museology.

The last woman we will cover in this chapter is the figure of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, founder in 1930 of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Coming from a wealthy American family, this heiress who loved luxury and aesthetics, will devote her whole life to American artists, supporting economically and practically their rise in the country's artistic framework. Gertrude will become the great patron of living artists, filling a niche left free from the markedly European interest in the context of modern art in the U.S. Animated by a deep faith in the national creative and artistic talent, Gertrude is one of the main protagonists of the process that will lead to open the way for American intellectuals to accept and appreciate those artists who, until the 20th century, were seen with hostility and suspicion and who would never otherwise have been accepted by the authority of the academy.

At the age of twenty-five she resumed her interest in art, convincing herself to be an artist and, more specifically, a sculptor. In 1914, Whitney Studio opened in Greenwich Village, a meeting place for young contemporary American artists who were looking for support and hope. This place becomes the first step towards identifying Gertrude Whitney as a patron

of American art. It is here that in 1916 John Sloan had his first non-collective exhibition. It was this artist who defined the American artists of his generation as "Artists, in a frontier society like ours, are like cockroaches in kitchens – not wanted, not encouraged but nevertheless remain" (Sloan 1939).

A year later Gertrude was on the board of the Society of Independent Artists we talked about earlier, ready to expand its cultural action with the opening of a new space dedicated to the free expression of its compatriots: the Whitney Studio Club, where debates, parties, and research alternated. The firm's offer was educational and philanthropic in its innovative identity of almost patriotic support of this group of rejects.

More than a decade later, in 1929, when the Whitney's artistic weight was gaining value, Gertrude offered her collection to the Metropolitan Museum, animated by the desire to go and enrich this temple of art with American artists who had never crossed those doors to be exhibited there. In the course of a strong debate about the value of this art, the collection and the gift were rejected. That same year the MoMA opened its doors, once again focusing on modern European art, and completely overcoming the art of the country. Gertrude Whitney decided to fund her own museum, which would focus only on American art. In 1931, the Whitney Museum of American Art opened its doors with Juliana Force as its director (Berman 1989).

From a small town in Pennsylvania, Juliana will be hired by the Whitney as her literary agent and will consequently accompany her and her business throughout her life, defending her memory and victory within the museum of the 20th century. At Gertrude's death it is in fact this fiery and enterprising woman who takes the reins of the museum, defending it until her death, in 1948, when she prevented the merger with the MET.

This concludes this all-female American adventure, which has allowed modern European art and not to begin to impose itself on the artistic scene of the great institutions.

### **1.3.1. Solomon R. Guggenheim and the Museum of Non-Objective Art**

After this section on women collectors and patronesses of the art in the United

States of the last century, in order to discuss the protagonist of this research, Peggy Guggenheim and her Modern Art Collection, it is necessary to deepen the circumstances that led to creating the Foundation that today manages it. This section, preliminary to the second chapter, traces the origins of the Guggenheim family at the time of the great reborn of American collecting, at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection is an integral part of the Solomon R. Foundation Guggenheim,<sup>5</sup> a private non-profit organization. Peggy Guggenheim donated her collection and the palace that houses it to this institution based in New York in 1976. Although currently, the *Peggy Guggenheim Collection* is a geographically separate autonomous entity, the merger of both institutions meant a great contribution to those artistic genres that were absent in the funds of the original New York collection, marking the beginning of the international development of the Foundation.

In the early 1900s the Guggenheim family, famous for its business and its immense fortunes, began to take his first steps in the artistic field by starting the unique art collection that is now still admired and envied today, the result of their interest in art and of the consequent social relevance of collecting.

The Guggenheims were one of the wealthiest and most famous families in the Jewish community of New York which accumulated its wealth thanks to the many activities they managed to undertake when their members arrived in the United States.

In 1848 (a year of political upheaval in Europe) Simon Guggenheim and his son Meyer abandoned the Legnau ghetto in German-speaking Switzerland to sail to Philadelphia, dreaming of freedom and success. At that time Philadelphia and Pennsylvania were in fact one of the most liberal places in the United States, besides being important political, cultural and economic centers. Father and son taking advantage of the opportunities offered

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<sup>5</sup> «Provide for the promotion of art and for intellectual improvement or moral of men and women driving their education, illustration and aesthetic taste, and developing the understanding and appreciation of art by the public; establish, maintain and operate, or contribute, to establishment, maintenance and operation of a museum or museums, or other sites or sites suitable for public display of art; to make a toast adequate provisions of readings, publications or other information public or instruction in connection with it, and provide scholarships, grants or similar contributions in connection with those purposes; acquire by purchase, gift, gratification, request or otherwise, works of art, including paintings, photographs, prints, prints or other objects of art, books and furniture, and any and all fixed facilities concerning this or, convenient accordingly » (Guggenheim Foundation).

by the newfound freedom began many activities that unfolded from the food field to the sale of lace and embroidery imported from Switzerland.

Meyer was the true architect of the family luck thanks to his investments in manufacturing and imports that led him to become a millionaire as early as 1880. The immense wealth of the Guggenheims, however, derived substantially from the exploitation of metals: in 1879 Meyer bought the shares of some lead and silver mines in Leadville Colorado and in 1890 took control of the American Smelting and Refining Company, now one of the legendary companies in the history of American capitalism.

In 1888 Meyer and his wife moved to New York in the Upper West Side with their children who were brought up paying special attention to culture and especially to work, making sure they always stayed united because the future of the M. Guggenheim 's Sons - the family business of which all the family members were members - depended on its union and strength.<sup>6</sup>

In the years in which it was fashionable collecting art among New York high society, Solomon R. Guggenheim (1861-1949) alongside his wife Irene Rothschild, as well as the other members of his family, invested most of his vast wealth in the collection of paintings. His apartment in the Hotel Plaza in New York was decorated not only with works by the ancient European Renaissance masters but also with paintings by Impressionists, who entered the US since 1860.

Decisive for Solomon's aesthetic maturation process, and of his subsequent story as a collector was the meeting, in 1926, with Baroness Hilla Rebay von Ehrenweisen.<sup>7</sup> Born in Alsace in 1890, she early expressed her will to become an artist. Hilla Rebay would have been a painter, art collector, mentor, patroness of the art for her entire life, strongly influencing the art world of the past century. Believer of the theosophist theory that the inspiration is a matter of the divine, she strongly focused on the link between art and religion, aiming to build a temple for contemplation and elevation of the spirit through artistic creation and knowledge. She lived her life in Europe until 1927, being a talented and charming woman who had several important mentors, she was introduced to the avant-

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<sup>6</sup> For further references to the Guggenheim family see Davis (1988).

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the figure of Hilla Rebay, see SM Lukach (1984).

garde by Franz Feneon<sup>8</sup> and Hans Arp, exhibiting her works in the Sturm Gallery in Berlin run by Herwath Walden. It is in this context, that Hilla Rebay met Kandinsky and Rudolf Bauer, two personalities that would have changed the course of her life. It is with this experience that she started being obsessed with Non- objective painting, believing that just through it the contact with the eternal would have been possible. When she finally arrived in the United States, she started the intimate friendship and fundamental art partnership with Solomon Guggenheim that would have made her dream true.

From 1929 until 1937, the era of an authentic European avant-garde that the American public was only vaguely aware of, Rebay led Solomon Guggenheim on a European tour and introduced him to the work of Vasilij Kandiskij, Albert Gleizes, Marc Chagall, Robert Delaunay, and other avant-garde artists, thus modifying his ideas to turn him, in the early thirties, into a fan modern art collector.

If at the beginning of the twentieth century the "historical avant-garde" (Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Abstract Art, . . .) were acting strongly on the sensibility of the European public trying to revolutionize and distort the rules of language, these artistic movements were banned in the United States because they opposed the conservatism of the Academy. This strong reluctance towards the growing wave of modernism, which was beginning to arrive from Paris, Rome, Munich and Berlin, and other European art centers, started changing when from the late twenties on some collectors bravely began to open up to the avant-garde: initially, as the critic K. Pomian (2001) points out and how it was previously discussed in the previous section of this chapter, it was mainly women a change their artistic preferences, to radically break with the tradition and were earlier than men in accepting new artistic trends; these were subsequently conditioned by the women and it is no coincidence that the collection choices of Solomon R. Guggenheim were influenced by a woman passionate about Modern art.

Since then Baroness H. Rebay was loyal to one artistic expression, which tended to the total abolition of the recognizability of external objects, the notions that guided the formation of the collection were based on the belief of the superiority of the non-figurative painting.

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<sup>8</sup> Art critic and artistic director of the Banheim Jeune Galery in Paris.

The collection was to consist "of autonomous works in their formal perfection" (Messer 1988, 24) and devoid of recognizable images or traditional themes. It was done however a subtle distinction between "nonfigurative" and "abstract": while the latter consisted of a process of synthesis of observable reality, as in Cubism, the former avoided any reference to reality.

According to this distinction the purest spirits of the "nonfigurative" were Vasilij Kandinsij, Rudolf Bauer and Hilla Rebay herself since they aimed to achieve a painting capable of expressing spiritual content through visual means, but with the same immediacy and "abstractness" of music.

The influence of Baroness Rebay was of fundamental importance for Solomon Guggenheim, not only for the artistic direction in which he was convinced to invest but also because she was, in the mid-thirties, the one supporting the idea of establishing a museum whose revolutionary exhibition setting could match the spectacular originality of the kind of art he would exhibit.

By attributing a leading role to the museum dedicated to non-painting objective, she argued in particular that the institution should aim at dissolving the traditional and restrictive separation between the object and its spectator, creating an open context in which the viewer could actively face the work of art through a relatively exercise immediate imagination. Ultimately, Rebay and Guggenheim thought of a museum founded on the repudiation of the commonplace seeing in the museum's static deposits or archival reliquaries. On the 1<sup>st</sup> June 1939 they inaugurated the first public seat of the Art of Tomorrow: Museum of Non-Objective Painting in a former motor show on 54th East Street in New York, where works likewise were exhibited as "Spiritual".

The relationship between Hilla and Peggy, two muses of modern art, has not been easy. We will later talk about the epistolary exchange between the two women at the end of the '30, in which a strong competition emerges. From the autobiography of Peggy Guggenheim, in the passage in which she describes the uncle's museum, it emerges that a constant grey dominated the galleries in the name of good taste, and the wide silver and gold frames that enclosed the paintings were highlighting their preciousness. The background music, mainly John Sebastian Bach, was designed to intensify this

spirituality; but more importantly, paintings, hung low on the walls, illuminated by soft light, were free from the annoying interference of a recognizable theme (Guggenheim 1982).

Cubists like Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, Albert Gleizes, and Juan Gris, the Orphism of Robert Delaunay, the futurist Gino Severini, the painters who were inspired by their own imagination, such as Marc Chagall and Paul Klee, and also the geometric artists of the Dutch De Stijl and the German Bauhaus were all welcomed in this nonfigurative pantheon which represented the collection of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting.

“Frank Lloyd Wright remarked that “Solomon Guggenheim was the only American millionaire I ever met who died facing the future. All the others cuddled up to the past.” It was Hilla Rebay who turned him in the direction of the that future and in doing so, Hilla Rebay revealed it to us all.”(Paula Weideger 2001)

### **1.3.2. The birth of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection**

The 1960s and 1970s played a central role in the birth of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and in the future definition of the concept of "Global Guggenheim" and "Extended Collection" because they saw the acquisition of the collection and the Venetian Palace of Peggy Guggenheim together with the artistic heritage of Justin Thannhauser. These developments were indeed a consequence of the director's ambition Rebay, wanting to create, with the museum of Wright, an institution that could attract a wider and international audience, but they were especially the result of the direction of Thomas M. Messer, who took the James Johnson Sweeney's place.

Starting from this period the Guggenheim Museum extends its artistic heritage in every direction, choosing the policy of the growing institution consolidation. To the original nucleus of works of the European avant-garde were added works by contemporary artists (Francis Bacon, Robert Rauschenberg, David Smith), of Latin American and Eastern European artists, and impressionist collections e French post-impressionists. Thanks to the absorption of the two collections in the Foundation, after years of preliminary negotiations and temporary agreements, works of great artistic importance became part of the New York museum and the possibility of having different and decentralized offices emerged.

Thanks to the donation, in 1976, of the Thannhauser's collection,<sup>9</sup> the Guggenheim Museum became "a real treasure trove of modern art treasures" (Messer 1988): the donation included aspects of the art of the Twentieth century which were then missing from the Foundation's property; his Picasso expanded the range of the collection outside the cubist period, already well represented. At the same time, the donation of impressionist and postimpressionist art extended backward in time the chronology of the Guggenheim collection, while adding new acquisitions - works by Paul Cézanne, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Toulouse Lautrec - to the few post-impressionists works already owned.

Thomas Messer's management also took care of the transfer of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection under the patronage of the Foundation. Messer wished he could have this collection because he sensed the historical importance of this merger as well as the enthusiasm for one family reconciliation. The idea of pursuing a possible legacy of the Venetian collection was abandoned because of the rowing and fears of Peggy Guggenheim who, as she wrote to Herry F. Guggenheim, then President of the Foundation and her cousin, she feared "to be overwhelmed by his far more important Foundation " (Vail 1998, 129). Not only was she worried about being "overwhelmed" by the New York Foundation, but relations with the Guggenheim family were far from being relaxed, because of the prolonged antagonism that had opposed Peggy to Hilla Rebay, the "muse" of Uncle Solomon and first director of the Guggenheim or so-called by Peggy, the "Nazi witch".

The "courtship" by Thomas M. Messer continued but from the moment that hopes to achieve the merger of the two collections became every day more and more distant, an attempt was made to pursue an intermediate project: exhibiting a selection of works by Peggy Guggenheim collection at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In fact, this exhibition would have constituted a goal in itself, interesting not only because it would have, in a sense, brought the family together, but it would have brought Peggy Guggenheim and her works back to New York after long years of absence. The show seemed to be taking place as Peggy was formally committed for January 1968, but the project underwent a sudden arrest due to the tragic death of her daughter Pegeen Vail. During the period of depression that followed the disappearance of her daughter, it was difficult to deal with Peggy on the organization of the exhibition but, finally, on the 15th

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<sup>9</sup> For a better understanding of this collection see V. Endicott Barnett (1978).

January 1969 the Guggenheim museum opened its doors to Peggy's Collection.

The biggest impact of this Peggy's visit to New York was her decision, by mutual agreement with her cousin Herry, to leave her collection to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. For years Peggy was worried about finding a way to secure a future for the museum she had created, and although she had been courted by many institutions (including the Tate Gallery in London) none of these had guaranteed her to be able to take responsibility for the collection without his own financing. Having no other alternatives, she signed the contract which summarized the conditions for the legal transfer of the Peggy Guggenheim collection to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, although she was still uncertain and hesitant about details, procedures, and agreements.

As agreed, Peggy's collection would remain in Venice, in the Venier dei Leoni palace, and would bear the name of Peggy Guggenheim Collection, but would have been owned by the New York Foundation that would have administrated it, providing that nothing had changed and that no work was removed. It was Peggy who insisted that what she had left at the museum Guggenheim could never be sold because she conceived her collection as a whole that was to be exhibited in this way. Peggy was happy to have ensured the permanence of the collection in Venice also for the future. She would not have liked her paintings to be exhibited in the New York museum she never liked and with whom there was an ancient rivalry.

Towards the end of the seventies, when her life was coming to an end and her physical conditions were getting worse, Peggy kept on to worry about the future of her collection and her goods, and she often asked clarifications on the provisions that would concern the palace and was happy when she learned that her home would be transformed into an exhibition space. In 1976 an agreement was signed with the foundation of her uncle who assured the permanence in Venice of all her donation, disposing that none of the donated works could be alienated: a provision strengthened by the registration of the collection under Italian law. The same agreement imposed the responsibility of keeping the palace and collection in the same spirit of service the audience that the founder had always been committed to pursuing during the course of her life.

With Peggy's death in 1979, the Venetian collection entered the New York Foundation and

the Museum of Peggy Guggenheim ceased to exist as such, becoming home of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Venice Foundation e reborn as Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

## **Chapter 2: Peggy Guggenheim's life and identity**

A mole of material has been written on the eclectic and eccentric character of Peggy Guggenheim: biographies, anecdotes, uncomfortable rumors, psychological analysis. With the passing of decades, through new research and insights, the figure of this rich heiress took on sharper contours and subtle facets that have helped to enrich her story, explaining her role and her influence in the art world of the last century.

Peggy, in fact, was a witness of the artistic innovation of the twentieth century - especially of Surrealism first and of Abstract Expressionism later - which went hand in hand with the evolution of her personality: the spread of such movements in the heart of continental Europe, the growth in England, the landing in the U.S., the impact in Italy (Carandente 1989, 18).

The critical comparison I am going to develop has, as a first and constant point of comparison, her autobiography. It will help to self-comment her life, react to rumors, and put order among her experiences. This work gave new impetus to new essays written on her character, in the light of the alleged truth confession<sup>10</sup>. The main purpose of this chapter is not to recreate a chronology of events. Given the critical analysis of the character, the goal is to draw a parallel between what Peggy reveals in *Out of This Century* and what was written by others about her. The attempt is to understand and study the discrepancies and the different points of view, that can push those who have had to deal with her memories and descriptions to prefer certain behaviors over others. A homogenous portrait, as you can well imagine, it will not be the last result: everyone gave an interpretation conditioned by the period and the role played in Guggenheim's existence.

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<sup>10</sup> "The first fifty years of her life, she lived them under the banner of an instability, of a frenzy of which her loving-erotic adventures, ended up in tabloid and pink press, and publicly admitted by her, indeed admitted when she romanticized her life, they are only a face, the one that shocked her family and a certain part of the high society." (Prandin 2002, 54).

Different turning points can be defined in this biographical chapter, all just different facets of the long and full life of Peggy. The way the collection evolves is permanently linked to the personalities that guided the collector, a woman that found herself alone in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and decided to invest in art. This chapter is divided into periods of varying lengths of time, which help to share the life of Peggy in the main phases that saw her involved in the art world.

Beyond the writing, hers or others', which are the main object of study of this chapter, another important witness, almost living, is her collection. The works contained in her beloved Venetian residence have an intensity and a peculiarity well above their quantitative value, and, precisely for this reason, should not be considered in their own right, but as part of a whole, of which the refined environment of Palazzo Venier dei Leoni is the charming setting. All these invaluable properties sum up a profile of the history of twentieth-century: from French to Dutch Neo Cubism, Russian Constructivism to the Italian Futurism, Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism<sup>11</sup>. Peggy gathered her treasures in the years before and after World War II, building a bridge between the U.S. and Europe.

The logical thread running through all the sections of this work, as will emerge later in the dissertation, is the evolution of her commitment to art. It opens a window of constant reflection on this passion, first limited to worldliness and materials excesses, then transformed, in the bohemian Paris, in activism in the artistic life. The maturity of her career saw her as a patron and supporter of numerous artists (she provided psychological support, economical one, space to exhibit, work and study), as to be considered by many a muse<sup>12</sup>. Peggy then decided "to serve the future instead of recording the past" (Davidson and Rylands 2004, 26) giving confidence to unknown artists and sometimes inexperienced, sometimes even without a solid academic foundation, and became "with a strong

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<sup>11</sup> "The Guggenheim is one of the mythical figures of the twentieth century, a protagonist perhaps unintentional but effective of the art of the twentieth century, as now she is recognized by historians. The most extraordinary event connected with her name is this: with her, a private collection of paintings, sculptures and graphics of acclaimed masters of the twentieth century, between the old continent and America, has ended up as a splendid showcase, if not the symbolic space, of an entire epoch of aesthetic revolutions, namely that of the historical avant-garde of the twentieth century "(Prandin 2002, 41).

<sup>12</sup> "Peggy Guggenheim said it was her duty to protect the art of her time. In this vocation and to the creation of the museum in Venice, which still bears her name, Peggy devoted much of her life "(Rylands 2007, 9).

awareness of the historical significance, [...] an outstanding patron of the arts of the twentieth century” (Barr 1998, 9).

### **2.1.1. 1898-1928 Childhood and youth**

Marguerite Guggenheim, Peggy's real name, was born on August 26, 1898, in New York, by the union of Florette Seligman and Benjamin Guggenheim. Since that day, eighty-one long years mark the course of an intense life, marked by passions, excesses, twists, turns, and contradictions to which the world of contemporary art can only be debtor<sup>13</sup>. The precious and sometimes uncomfortable memories of this amazing life are gathered in her famous official autobiography, *Out of This Century*. First of all, it is the testimony of a woman who has fully lived every possibility offered, which has transformed her future in a fascinating adventure, with courage but also with all the weaknesses and frailties that a human carries within himself.

Tenaciously pursuing her objectives, the evolution of her personality led her to devote herself to a cause that would become a reason for existence. In her autobiography, as was the life of every day, she proved to be sincere and open-minded to the point that, in 1946 - when the first edition was released - it was cut short by contemporary critics and aroused the indignation of her family. Critics accused her of lack of narrative skill, but her experience is told with amazing clarity and directness, coming, as always, out of the scheme, so rigid and tight for a free and dynamic character like she was.

Her confessions begin with her early childhood memories, that were not so happy, albeit "golden"<sup>14</sup>. Benjamin Guggenheim came from a large family, at the head of which was Meyer Guggenheim, of Swiss origin, immigrated to the US in the fifties of the nineteenth century. The financial situation he enjoyed was very prosperous thanks to a profitable business around mining activities and processing of silver, copper and steel. Not less prestigious was the nucleus of origin of the mother, whose head was successfully dedicated to banking activity, although initially he had made his fortune in the U.S.

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<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps not enough to say that the art world owns her only the collection, implying just a legacy-type material; since Peggy encouraged artists, currents, philosophies and lifestyles and artistic ideologies.

<sup>14</sup> As she calls it, using an adjective that implies material wealth at her disposal, but in a cold, sterile environment in feelings.

through the maintenance of roofs, and then thanks to the tailor, sewing uniforms of the Union army during the Civil War.

"My childhood was very unhappy: not I hold any good memories, and if I think about it, I see it as a long, endless agony. When I was very young, I had no friends, and I did not go to school until I was fifteen years old; before that I studied at home with private tutors " (Guggenheim 1983, 20). The mother's figure is defined by her absence since Florette, engaged in the frivolous life of the upper class, often left the baby in the clumsy and disinterested care of young nannies. To this, we must also add the fragile health of Peggy, who gave her no certain way to enjoy childhood<sup>15</sup>. In 1912 her father died in the famous sinking of the Titanic. The despair over the loss of a parent, even more, reinforced the relationship that Peggy had with the two sisters, in particular with Benita, the eldest. Seven years after the tragic death of the parent, Peggy came into possession of his inheritance, even if part of the capital of which boasted the family had been squandered in Paris by Benjamin in recent years.

Always active and willing, twenty years after she began working at her cousin's Harold Loeb avant-garde Manhattan bookshop, the Sunwise Turn - which will be a place of meetings with intellectuals from artistic circles – she met the man who would become her husband, Laurence Vail. He was a Dada sculptor, author of *collages*, and writer who will introduce Peggy to the bohemian world and artistic environment of the European avant-garde. It is in this same bookshop that she held for the first time in her hands a modern painting: during a meeting with the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, she could admire a work by Georgia O'Keeffe.

At the age of 21 Peggy went to Europe, already a popular destination during the many summer trips with her family. With ease and naturalness, she entered the stimulating atmosphere of the Twenties. She soon became interested in and she found herself weaving relationships and expanding knowledge with the greatest artists of the time. The reality unfolded to a new, revolutionary and unconventional one. It is in Paris that she started her artistic education. Pushed by a voracious curiosity for the bohemian life, she started

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<sup>15</sup> "... I sat in a large Louis XV table with glass top and I was embarked on by a young lady whose sole duty, then, was to make sure I ate. I had never appetite. When the tears were not enough, then I protested vomiting, and so ended the meal "(Guggenheim 1982, 19).

reading Berenson's art criticism books, getting passionate about Renaissance and started traveling around Europe to visit these see the masterpieces. If this period was not supposed to last forever, the enthusiasm for the modern and avant-garde captured the young Guggenheim, who was living near the revolutionary artists of this period. She became acquainted with Tristan Tzara, Man Ray, Jean Cocteau, Marcel Duchamp, Joan Miró, Berenice Abbott, Giorgio De Chirico, André Masson, Francis Picabia, and Picasso, just to name a few of her new friends.

In 1922, she married Laurence Vail. Laurence Vail was born in Paris in 1891 from American parents<sup>16</sup>. For reasons of study, he had the opportunity to move to France, with a period in England, where he attended the University of Oxford to study English literature. He soon returned to Paris, in what was considered the cultural European city par excellence. The growing awareness of the profound transformations that marked the nineteenth century, starting with the Industrial Revolution, gave birth to progressive improvements in trade, transport, communications and construction, spreading greater prosperity and a lifestyle sometimes above lines. Furthermore, the centrality of Paris was largely due to the impressive Universal Exhibitions of 1889 and 1900, to which of course followed the blossoming of new artistic phenomena. In this dynamic and vibrant environment, Laurence started dedicating himself to the writing of dramas and essays, to the translation of books, to painting and sculptures, soon starting to work on his favorite activity: *collage*. Soon the eccentric character and his unusual lifestyle, became the protagonists of the intense artistic, intellectual and social life of the twenties. He was considered the king of bohemians, hanging out with the writers and artists who crowded the cafes of Montparnasse<sup>17</sup>, including Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, that indelibly influenced his experiences and his youth contacts.

He was immediately attracted by the perspicacity of the future wife<sup>18</sup>, in which he saw a

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<sup>16</sup> His father, Eugene Vail, was also a painter, known for its views of the Brittany region and of Venice, the city where the young Laurence accompanies him staying there for several years.

<sup>17</sup> Curious and famous, in this regard, is the story that, arguing with the owner of the famous "Café de la Rotonde" (frequented by Montparnasse intellectuals), Laurence began to hang out in other places, particularly the "Dome," which for solidarity and allegiance to the same Laurence, began to be crowded with all the artists that before used to gather in the previous cafe. Even on this fact, however, there are several versions, some of which diminish this influence of Vail.

<sup>18</sup> In *Here goes!* we know that Laurence admired the modernity of his wife: "Pidgeon never minded, she never objected when I asked Mary down for a weekend. It made Pidgeon feel she was being broadminded and modern ". The woman referred to by the name of Mary is Mary Reynolds, his former love, which was then invited to spend

young woman to whom teach art, literature and life. Laurence, who was then twenty-eight years old, had been enchanted with her "beautiful hair, flecked with gold waving in the wind" (Guggenheim 1982, 37). Most of all, he was attracted by her free and without rules kind of life, regardless of the opinion of the people, as well as her educated and seductive personality. The infatuation was fuelled also by the uncontrollable desire of the young women to discover new things, by her undying love for Europe, by the rising interest in art and the brilliant world of bohemia, previously unknown. Initially, though, as we know by Peggy's autobiography, her primary objective was not marriage, nor she called the love of the feeling she had for the fascinating artist<sup>19</sup>. In her usual style, pure and natural, Peggy, in a paradoxical candidate way, informs the reader of her sinful intentions, using the verb "to use", as if her new companion was a tool for a specific purpose, limited to the experience of a simple adventure.

Paolo Barozzi added:

"No one frowned on her marriage to Laurence and everyone thought it would be a disaster. Peggy of course, she always did what was forbidden to her to do and she hated the idea of becoming the wife of a middle-class and wealthy New York Jewish, decided to get married even if her mother did not want" (Barozzi 2001, 29).

The first year of marriage was relatively calm: the couple never got bored, busy between trips<sup>20</sup> and extravagant evenings marked by rowdy drunkenness and promiscuity in the sophisticated Parisian environment. But soon the union began to crack. The marriage did not bring them many joys and was not even improved by the birth of two children, Sindbad (1923-1986) and Pegeen (1926-1967). Although the union lasted for six years, a peaceful and civilized relationship between the two developed only much later, when they were adults.

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the weekend at the home of Vail in Pramouquier. The fact that Peggy (here hidden under the pseudonym Pidgeon) accept without objection, gave her an open and progressive mind.

<sup>19</sup> "At that time I was pretty worried about being a virgin: I was twenty years and was burdensome my virginity. [...] immediately it came to mind that I could use for this purpose Laurence "(Guggenheim 1982, 39-40).

<sup>20</sup> It 'important to remember that one of the many travels of the couple will take them to Venice, of which Peggy fell deeply in love, thanks to the experience of Laurence, able to take her walk between the inner lanes (and not only through the boats, as in previous visits to the lagoon city).

"[It was] a kind of satire of our lives together and although it was extremely funny, I was offended by different things he said about me"(Guggenheim 1982, 82). So Peggy Guggenheim judges the work of her husband, *Murder! Murder!*<sup>21</sup>, a novel written in the last years of marriage that describes the stormy cohabitation between the two<sup>22</sup>. Ample space to this period is also given in *Out of This Century*, where three chapters focus on the topic: "Virginity", "Marriage", "End of my life with Laurence Vail "<sup>23</sup>, preceded and followed by numerous references to their relationship lasted, albeit in different ways and fluctuating, for life.

It is just valid the argument that the novelty faded enthusiasm, and while on the one hand, Laurence was revealed in all his aggressive character, Peggy began to turn her boredom into provocation and superficiality. The scenes began to be on the agenda and there were also episodes in which they had to work with law enforcement. From the stories of Peggy, the violence is unjustifiable: the companion during the scenes used to throw objects from the window or smash valuable items, often soiled his wife's hair with jam or beat her on the street to humiliate her publicly. She left testimony that once he tried to drown her forcing her under hot water in the tub with brutal force.

It is natural to wonder what triggered an uncontrollable rage as well. For starters, Laurence had always envied Peggy's wealth. He was not rich and during his reckless youth continued to be maintained by savings sent to him by his mother, just over a hundred francs a month. Often, he was the dominant figure in the marriage relationship: the woman was considered to be the weaker sex. Peggy, however, took revenge by holding the reins of the financial situation, reminding him at every opportunity that it was she who owned the resources that allowed them a wealthy life. As Paolo Barozzi explained,

"[...] being rich Peggy had some superiority on Laurence, who instead spent full hands on her money. Eventually Peggy rebuked him saying that the money was

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<sup>21</sup> Although dedicated to his second wife Kay Boyle, she does not appear among the stereotyped characters described by Laurence, instead, in a kind of revenge, he focuses on the character of Peggy.

<sup>22</sup> It was also defined by Karol Vail "a funny and hurtful satire" (Vail 2001, 56): combination made up of a positive term (fun) and a negative (offensive) that well depicts the grotesque humor of the opera.

<sup>23</sup> This way of naming the chapters is not exclusive of the period of coexistence with Laurence Vail, being the main method of subdivision autobiography. Peggy, in fact, uses the beginnings and ends of her love affairs as a point of reference for the turns in his life. ("My Life with John Holms," "My Life with Garman," "My Life with Max Ernst", "End of my life with Max Ernst").

hers and that everything had a limit. Laurence told her that the only thing she had was money, and that she should be grateful for having been introduced in an environment which, without his help, she would never have belonged to" (Barozzi 2001, 31).

The daily hysteria is well described in *Murder! Murder!*<sup>24</sup>, whose title already gives a clear idea of the resentment with which the book was laid out, in which the author does not spare anything negative to his favorite scapegoat<sup>25</sup>. What emerges above all is the neurotic obsession of Peggy in wanting to count the most meager spending, every last penny, checking not to be fooled. It is denounced her fixation to the spare change left, that made people think about obsessive stinginess, but that could also be associated with an innate love for accounting, having in her blood the sense of the value of money. The novel is not written in the form of official confessions of Laurence, but as a story of a fictional character. Through pseudonyms, as well as stereotypes, it is easy to understand the reference to real people<sup>26</sup>.

Mrs. Guggenheim, voluntarily, often attempted to publicly ridicule Laurence, because this could be a way to denounce the male domination and to belittle his artistic talent. It was an attitude index of dissatisfaction and intimate suffering, perhaps because of the desperate search for confirmation of the fact of being loved; Peggy reacted to the soul disorders, activating a vicious circle, a mechanism that was confronting so much anger with as much indifference and annoyance that the cycle began again causing more violence.

Motivated by the boredom of marriage, Peggy tried to start an activity to commit to one of the first commercial-artistic projects undertaken, a prelude of what would be her great vocation, was the collaboration with Mina Loy, a charismatic female character of her times. The partnership, which provided for the distribution and sale of artistic creations of the latter, however, did not have the desired outcome and agreements tore. The evidence in the biographies of the two women are similar, but with different weights concerning the respective faults. That argument triggers now a focus on the role of women in the art world in that period, tracing similarities and differences between the two protagonists.

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<sup>24</sup> Although written during the years of marriage, it is to remember that it was published only in 1932. The novel is inspired by *The songs of Maldoror*, Lautréamont (1868) anticipating years in advance surrealist poetry, with depraved and extravagant themes of fantasy.

<sup>25</sup> Not for nothing *Murder! Murder!* is the longest published text by Laurence Vail.

<sup>26</sup> In *Here Goes*, memories of Laurence, Peggy hides behind the character of Pidgeon Peggenheim, whose name suggests a direct relationship with his wife.

Mina Lowy (later turned into Loy) was an emblematic character: poet, painter, art agent, stylist, and designer of decorative items. She was born in London in 1882 and died in 1966 in the United States. Of sixteen years older than Peggy, many of them were common knowledge, such as those with Cocteau, Marcel Duchamp, Picasso, Bernhard Berenson. Their lives were also in certain aspects associated.

She decided to go and study art in Monaco early in 1899. Here, Mina Loy found a fresh start in life, rather than to art education. Far from home, poorly supervised by the couple that her father had put next to her, she tasted total freedom and immersed herself in the artistic and cosmopolitan city. Eccentric among eccentrics, Mina was recognized for the clay pipe between her lips and the always extravagant outfits<sup>27</sup>. She soon became a symbol of modernity and emancipation, a revolutionary encounter between the present and future. Paris naturally followed Monaco, home to Peggy's youth too, where she dived into the *vie de bohème* of the international artists who populated the Latin Quarter (Burke 1997).

To rebuild her collaboration with Peggy Guggenheim, however, we must wait until 1925, when they undertook a deal that lasted until 1928. The discrepancies between the versions of the two women, in some ways, are not so obvious, but it is interesting to note that the same facts, especially when it comes to mistakes and merits, are told by two different points of view, giving different importance to the events taken into account. Peggy rented a shop located in a trendy street (rue de Colisée) in Paris and was prepared to sell the famous lamps of Loy.

In *Out of This Century*, Peggy does not hesitate to emphasize that the shop had been bought with her money, the same for the studio where the British partner was working. It was with this activity that Mrs. Guggenheim found out she had a talent for business, but on the other hand, as reported by Karol Vail in *Peggy Guggenheim, a celebration*, for Mina it was a stressful and suffocating experience.

In *Out of This Century*, one cannot but feel a tinge of envy toward the multifaceted abilities of Mina: "Mina Loy was not content to do act a poet and painter, but she was always inventing something new, hoping to make her own luck" (Guggenheim 1982, 74). In the

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<sup>27</sup> Picture that immediately recalls the photographs of Peggy, immortalized by Man Ray, with exotic and flashy clothes, eccentric hairstyle and lit cigarette in hand.

expression "not content" is contained a veiled criticism dictated by jealousy, as if the young artist was dissatisfied with any of her abilities and was always trying some innovation, with the "hope", and therefore not in the certainty of finding success. However, many people, including the writer Anton Gill, swear that Peggy genuinely admired Mina, even in her sometimes-cynical attitudes.

It was Peggy who, covering the financial side, allowed her to translate her dreams into reality, to devote herself to poetry thanks to the profit from the sale of her inventions.

She does not give so much weight to the matter and this could impress especially since through this first experience Peggy realized her acumen in the trade. Later the store increasingly took a wrong turn and the boredom after the excitement of the novelty started to develop. Peggy had relegated the experience to the background, forgetting it in her memoirs, even without mentioning how the deal ended.

"The end of the company was more of a relief" (Gill 2001, 137) we can read in the book by Anton Gill. Her authoritarian character brought her to live uncomfortably with partners, especially if, as in this case, were endowed with talent and charm. The name of Mina Loy will no longer appear in her confessions.

This, like other degenerated working relationships, portrays us the Guggenheim as a woman who was imposing herself with decision, often claiming to control and manage all matters, despite her determination and inexhaustible magnetic ability to attract talented people. With the idea that the availability of money could give, she revealed harsh traits, intransigency, and inability to accept compromises.

Although without a profitable continuation, this relationship was defined by Anton Gill, relating it to those taken in the Twenties by Peggy, as "the one that had the greatest impact [...], as involved in the realization of a project" (Gill 2001, 137). We do not have to forget the symbolic importance of this business started by two women in a historical context that still privileged men, a first clue of the revolutionary adventure that Peggy Guggenheim's life represents.

### 2.1.2. 1928-1941 Freedom, independence and the first steps in the art world

The second phase of Peggy Guggenheim's life represents a fundamental step in the creation of both her collection and of her identity as a patroness of the art. Moving from London to Paris, fighting against the difficulties brought by the Second World War, the first chapter towards the Peggy Guggenheim Collection is written. Her artistic education started during her relationship with her husband Laurence Vail, continues and evolves.

This second phase of Peggy Guggenheim's story opens with the birth of what has been called the love of her life: the intellectual Englishman John Holms. Although her marriage to Laurence Vail was foundered sometime before, it was the fatal encounter with the English writer to give her the strength to turn the page.

She saw right away in him a teacher, a guide<sup>28</sup>, a source of knowledge. The literary, historical and artistic preparation of Holms was a key element to interest Peggy in contemporary culture. The dynamism of the collector well matched with the sparkling personality of the companion. The basic experience and knowledge in the arts of Peggy came increasingly to consolidate because ranging from land to land with him, the collector had the opportunity to visit many museums and deepen the study of the cultures of various corners of Europe.

There are also those, in contrast, who criticized their lifestyle, radically different from what Holms led before the fatal encounter and Peggy's impact on the English writer. First, the money of his partner seemed to distract him from his main passion, literature, which was also, before that time, a *conditio sine qua non*, because it gave him a living. Writing was his profession, the means to realize and earn a salary. But for the financial possibilities brought by the love affair with Peggy, he missed the creative stimulus.

Despite the criticism of the people, there is no denying that Peggy, standing next to Holms, lived a magical time of her life. No doubt heartedness and peace of mind were not the main components of her existence, but in those years even in her autobiography only positive feelings emerge she was visibly realized, in love with her partner and life.

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<sup>28</sup> "He was holding me in the palm of the hand and from the moment I belonged to him until the day of his death, he drove my every move, my every thought" (Guggenheim 1982, 103).

"When I met John the first time, not only I ignored all human motivations, but, even worse, I completely ignored me. I lived in a repressed world, unconscious, and in five years he taught me what life was, interpreted my dreams, analyzed me and made me realize that I was good and bad at the same time, helping me to overcome my bad self " (Guggenheim 1982, 104), "[John] never wanted me to leave him and was so miserable without me, as I was without him"(Guggenheim 1982, 122) "[...] I knew that I would never be happier" (Guggenheim 1982, 141), "[...] during the five years I spent with him, I learned everything I know today"(Guggenheim 1982, 103).

In 1934, at the age of thirty-seven, Holms died of a heart attack during a small operation on the wrist because of the high alcohol content still present in his blood from the previous evening, which wreaked complications since injection of anesthesia. For the young heiress this was a blow: she had to wait for months before being able to go back to her everyday life.

A remedy to her depressive state was crucial to what turned out to be her only true aspiration: in 1937, Peggy Waldman, a dear friend, wrote her a letter encouraging her to engage in any activity that could excite and distract her from the pain and then give her satisfaction: "I wish you'd do some serious work — the art gallery, book agency — anything that would be engrossing yet impersonal — if you were doing something helpful for good painters and writers, or better still, a novel yourself."(Guggenheim 1979, 159).

In fact, although she was building a new life, alongside a new lover, she was filled with guilt and, like any experience, though at first proved exciting and thrilling, this effect lasted all too little and boredom took over quickly. "At first the relationship was happy. Life at the cottage was cultured and stimulating "(Gill 2001, 183), but she soon realized that "nearly forty, she was to live in the English countryside with nothing to do and no one to turn to except herself"(Gill 2001, 189). With the passing of the seasons, as her career as a collector was flourishing, however, the harmony with the recent companion Garman Douglas was splintering. He was getting always more engaged in politics, supporting the principles of communism and making of it real rules of life. Soon he sacrificed his conjugal life for the job at the party, in which he found a new lover, a young employee.

Peggy was bored, she started feeling the need for a purpose realizing that her only identity for the past fifteen years has been a wife and a lover. Listening to her friend's suggestion, Peggy decided to dedicate her energy to a new project: opening an art gallery. Admitting that running a publishing house would have been too expensive, she dedicated even more completely to the idea of starting her own business in London: on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 1938 "Guggenheim Jeune"<sup>29</sup> opened its doors to the public.

Peggy started caring about that mission to defend and promote the art of her time, which will mark her career as well as the Post-war history.

The name of the gallery jokingly alluded to the uncle collector and the Parisian Fénéon's gallery "Bernheim Jeune" now closed. In one of her infamous letters, Hilla Rebay protested vigorously against "Miss Guggenheim-Jeune"(Guggenheim 1982, 171) for what she considered a parasite gesture, thus setting the acrimonious tone of their future relationships:

"Thanks to the vision of a great man [Solomon Guggenheim], since a long time dedicated to collect and preserve the true art, through my work and my experience, the Guggenheim name has become an artistic ideal, and it is in bad taste to use it and dirt it, together with the work and fame, for profit [...]" (Guggenheim 1982, 183).

Peggy replied to the Baroness: "My motives are pure, and as I do not belong to the first but the third generation of Guggenheims, I do not seek to make money but to help artists."(Gill 2001, 195-197). She had a mission: to defend and promote the art of her time, which will mark her career as well as the Post-war history.

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<sup>29</sup> Katie Campbell recently reconstructed the gallery's history for her master's thesis, entitled "From Gallery to Museum: A New Perspective on the Guggenheim Jeune Gallery and the Planned Museum of Modern Art in London, 1938–1939" (MA thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 2017). Nonetheless, due to a lack of documentation, the gallery's financials remain unknown, with the exception of some acquisitions Guggenheim herself made. Except for a scrapbook with several catalogues and invitations to the Guggenheim Jeune's exhibitions, Guggenheim did not save any other documents related to her first commercial gallery. The correspondence for those years is also very scarce. In addition to examining the history of the gallery, the second chapter of Campbell's thesis demonstrates that Guggenheim Jeune and Guggenheim and Read's proposed modern art museum in London were pivotal in challenging the conservative commercial and institutional art scene of the British capital. No doubt, Guggenheim's ventures were most at odds with the Tate Gallery. Not only was the idea of a contemporary art museum a riposte to the more conservative Tate, but its director, J. B. Manson, was at the heart of a scandal that broke in the spring-summer of 1938 regarding works by Constantin Brancusi and other artists, which brought Guggenheim Jeune to the media's attention. (Ensabella 2019, 22).

“She was willing to consider anything and everything art – and willing to support unestablished artists” (Guggenheim 1979, 220.). Peggy was risking every day, planning provocative exhibitions that challenged the British public, with new and radical artworks. Emerging as a protector of modern art she defended her artists against the London art institutions, more accepted and appreciated in their taste. The first show of Guggenheim Jeune was dedicated to Jean Cocteau’s drawings for his play *Les Chevaliers de la table ronde* (The Knights of the round table). The English customs department confiscated one of these drawings, showing pubic hair, classifying it as vulgar and inappropriate for an art show. Peggy Guggenheim responded to this accusation buying the drawing for herself, assuring the officers that she would have kept it in a private space, out of the visibility of the public. She finally hung it up in her office, kept open for the visitors during the night of the vernissage.

Another example of Peggy’s role as savior of modern art is the fourth exhibition organized at the gallery: a sculpture show celebrating works by Alexander Calder, Constantin Brancusi, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Antoine Pevsner, Jean Art, and Henri Laurens. The sculptures were blocked, once again, by the customs department, that could not accept the label “sculpture” for these simple quantities of materials like marble, bronze and wood. The official arbitrator who, in these cases, was entrusted with the last word on this matter, was James Bolivar Manson the then director of the main institution of modern art in London: the Tate Gallery. Peggy decided to appeal to the house of Commons’ last judgment. The case was reviewed, the decision amended, the show a success and, from that moment on, any abstract sculpture considered such by its creator, could cross the customs of the United Kingdom. Peggy was risking a lot in this mission – money, credibility, self-confidence – by finding herself fighting daily with an audience of narrow views, who tended not to welcome this extravagant American.

This first stage in the rebel heiress’ career requires a context for these two rooms on the second floor at 30 Cork Street, which helped put the Guggenheim Jeune project into a life-long mission. Peggy had in fact thrown herself headlong into this new adventure without having any well-defined knowledge of modern art, thus leaning on expert advisors and friends whom she did not hesitate to follow the advice. Guggenheim Jeune followed the mold of a Parisian gallery, imposing on the scene of the Mayfair district a concept of

modern art rooted in French innovations.

It is also easy to doubt the role, at this stage of her life, of the Guggenheim as a merchant: unprepared and unfailing to the market, she had surrounded herself with artists, critics and art historians, whose advice seemed more suited to the ears of a collector compared to those of a new gallerist convinced to profit from her business. The programming of the gallery did not follow a precise trend, emphasizing what will be the strong personality of Peggy, often driven by pure personal taste and instinct.

Cork Street was in fact becoming the benchmark of the London avant-garde. In 1938 the London Gallery opened its doors, directed by E.L.T Mesens, with the support of the artist Roland Penrose, destined to become the main platform for spreading surrealism beyond the English Channel. A few more doors away, in the same street, resided also the Mayor Gallery, another reference point for Parisian art in London. Cork Street was a real innovative center in the late 1930s, during which these galleries teamed up to impose on the country's artistic scene the shocking novelties of surrealism and abstraction.

As introduced in the previous paragraph, Peggy's approach is very similar to that of a collector and patron, driven by the growing passion for art and the newfound purpose to dedicate her life to it. She admits: " But gradually I bought one work of art from every show I gave, so as not to disappoint the artists if I were unsuccessful in selling anything. In those days, as I had no idea how to sell and had never bought pictures, this seemed to be the best solution and the least I could do to please the artists." (Guggenheim 1979, 166).

The first work of art purchased by Peggy Guggenheim was a sculpture by Arp: *Tete et coquille*, followed by fifteen works bought following exhibitions of her gallery. The Guggenheim collection had officially started.

Under the guidance of Marcel Duchamp, the Peggy circle widened to involve the main personalities of that era. Following Duchamp's suggestion, in 1939 Peggy organized in her gallery the first solo show of Kandinsky in England, exposing thirty works dated between 1909 and 1937 and publishing a catalogue with a preface by André Breton. Another highlight of the collection was dedicated to the then-emerging artist Yves Tanguy. Among many adventures, it was like this that Peggy became closer to the art world, and thanks to

her friends and to her watchful interest, combined with her innate business acumen and her lively curiosity, she began to learn more and more on the European avant-garde.

Duchamp was her mentor in this path of knowledge, artist and consultant at the same time. Peggy underlines his importance in this first artistic step of her career: "I don't know what I would have done without him. He had to educate me completely. I could not distinguish one modern work of art from another, but he taught me the difference between Surrealism, Cubism and abstract art." (Guggenheim 1960, 67). "Then he introduced me to all the artists. They all adored him, and I was well received wherever I went. He planned shows for me and gave me lots of advice. I have him to thank for my introduction to the modern art world."<sup>30</sup> With honesty the Guggenheim tells about her ignorance, thanking Duchamp for this first, fundamental introduction to both art and artists.

During this fundamental 1937, Peggy met another man that strongly influenced her vision of the contemporary culture and art: "I was obsessed for more than a year by that strange creature whose name is Samuel Beckett"(Guggenheim 1982, 175): so Peggy debut in her autobiography to tell the beginning of the fluctuating and troubled relationship with the artist.

Beckett had a strong influence not only on the love life of Peggy but also on her artistic choices. Through her studies and her travels, Peggy was more experienced in the art of past centuries<sup>31</sup>, but with her lively social life, she got involved in the events of the latest currents that she came to appreciate. Samuel Beckett helped her on her way: telling her that her efforts had to focus in the art of their time because it would have been like following the developments of a living creature, that would have never disappointed for its essence of being *in fieri*. Her Irish lover stimulated her not to close her horizons with the analysis of the past and advised her to become passionate about living painters and sculptors, who would later enjoy fame and success thanks to the commitment and insights of Peggy.

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<sup>30</sup> Duchamp's role as art adviser in promoting the avant-garde in the interwar years was decisive and deserves more investigation, as has been noted with regard to Guggenheim's collecting.

<sup>31</sup> "In spite of the fact that I was opening a modern art gallery in London I much preferred old masters." (Dearborn 2004, 130). With this quote, we can understand how Peggy did not know neither appreciate modern art at the beginning of her career, as her only approach to art had been through Berenson's books.

With the opening of the London gallery, the exhibitions concerned young artists, although Peggy, in sustaining them, faced several difficulties. Modern art was not so expensive, but it was not easy to sell either and inspired less confidence than ancient art, which instead promised a safe investment. The first year the gallery lost a significant number of pounds. Peggy could afford it, and to conceal some failures, it was she who bought the paintings, using a fancy name, as I said before. She was also driven by a desire for revenge against the harsh reproaches contained in the letter by Baroness Rebay (mentioned earlier), which had accused Peggy to use her last name for haggling art without really knowing its value. Deeply offended, Peggy considered the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation as an enemy and she wanted to show her ambitious projects being worth it and not to be less than the famous uncle's.

Tireless in her goal, she did not change her policy and she got even more committed to supporting the world of young intellectuals and brilliant experimenters who saw in the dream and the unconscious the way to represent the invisible, a higher reality, a "sur-reality". Peggy felt reflected in this rebellion to the rules and conventions and strove to become the quintessential muse of Surrealism.

Peggy was immediately struck by the theorists and the adherents to this artistic current, recognizing herself in their offbeat spirit and in their fantastic imagination who wanted to change the perception of the world through thoughts and feelings repressed by consciousness, like the unconscious, the absurd, dreams, and lust. It was not easy, because at the time the young collector was involved in the internal conflict within the Surrealists when Paul Eluard stole from André Breton - till then the undisputed head of the movement - a good half of his followers. Peggy witnessed all stages of this movement in the continuous transformation from the birth in Europe and New York and documented in her private collection the different currents of this avant-garde.

To follow more closely the artistic world and to continue to buy works, her trips to Paris were numerous even during the opening of the gallery in London. It is in Paris that Peggy could be present to two of the most modern and revolutionary exhibitions of those years. In 1937 she visited the *Exposition Internationale des arts et des techniques dans la vie moderne* (International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life), taking place at Trocadéro from May 25 to November 25 (Herbert 1937, 105). The Exposition showed the

accomplishments of modernity. *Les Maîtres de l'art indépendant* (Masters of Independent Art) and *Origines et développement de l'art international indépendant* (Origins and Development of International Independent Art) — presented at the Petit Palais and the Jeu de Paume – are the two collateral exhibition that took place during the exposition, focusing on modern art. These two exhibitions were deeply focused on French art, portraying few surreal and abstract artworks. Mode modern works were admired by Peggy during the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* (International Surrealist Exhibition) opened in Paris at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1938.<sup>32</sup>

After 18 months of activity, Guggenheim Jeune closed its doors. The contribution to the history of the "Guggenheim Jeune" cannot be reduced to financial support, due both to the arrangement of the exhibition space to the paintings' purchases. Peggy, in fact, had the ability to magnetically bring together around herself the most active and operational figures of avant-garde and the courage of not ordinary decisions. It could be said that the young heiress tried to get to know better the artistic currents and chose the ones that will change, if not overturn, the conception of the art<sup>33</sup>.

It seems important to quote John Carandente<sup>34</sup>, referring to the gallery "Guggenheim Jeune":

"During the preliminary stages, including economic, of that unusual organism, dedicated to the promotion of modern art, Peggy began to know the anxiety and the thirst of the collector, the first symptoms of a passion to collect works of art regardless of any kind of trouble, that would not be extinguished "(Carandente 1989).

This revolutionary gallery was the first act of a collector that was making her path towards modern art, eager to learn and put together a unique collection: based on both Surrealism and Abstraction, but definitely shaped by a personal and provocative taste, typical of Peggy.

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<sup>32</sup> For further information on these exhibitions: Kachur (2003) and Wood (2007).

<sup>33</sup> She had already shown interest in the new movements during one of her trips to Paris, when, instead of turning to a classic fashionable portrait painter, in Paris, chose the young revolutionary photographer Man Ray, initiating an ideal route through a new generation of artists. They belonged to a world just bloomed, which overturned the aesthetic of *Art Deco*, Late Cubism and the whole School of Paris, preferring an irreverent and creative dream, the analysis of the images and the border between dreams and reality.

<sup>34</sup> Carandente was an intellectual, historian, critic prominent in the Italian and international scene, great friend of Peggy Guggenheim.

Had it not been for the War, London would probably now host one of the richest and most precious museums of modern art<sup>35</sup>. Since 1939, aware of her professional and personal development, Peggy conceived the idea to transform her simple London-based collection into a veritable museum of modern art and planned to entitle its direction to Herbert Read<sup>36</sup>. For months she was busy looking for paintings that could make her collection appealing, and her rule to “buy a picture a day” (Guggenheim 1946, 209) became famous. Her program was based on historical principles and completeness: she wanted to create an exhaustive portrait of the art of her times. To this end, Read, with the review of Marcel Duchamp and her friend Nelly van Doesburg – the widow of Theo van Doesburg -, drew up a list, unfortunately lost, of<sup>37</sup> required artists to be included in the collection. The project draft had a solid foundation, Peggy’s determination was strong, and her advisors prepared; unfortunately, the story blocked her way and changed her plans.

The Second World War was approaching, and modern art was considered ‘degenerated’ by the Nazi regime. *Die Ausstellung Entartete Kunst* was organized in Munich between July 19 and November 30, 1937 to forbid this art, corrupted and insane. Still, Peggy did not show panic till the last moment and continued pursuing her goal, regardless of the dangers<sup>38</sup> with the hope that the events would take a positive turn<sup>39</sup>.

She spent months in Paris visiting studios and trying to buy artworks from the frightened and desperate artists,

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<sup>35</sup> “If I was losing that money I might as well lose a lot more, and do something worthwhile” (Guggenheim 1946, 226. This shows us how she believed in the importance of showing art to the public rather than buying it for herself.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Herbert Read was born in Kirkbymoorside in 1893 and died there in 1968. He was a poet and literary critic. His expertise from philosophy to art history, from psychology to politics, both as a scholar and activist, were immense.

<sup>37</sup> Among the most famous artists purchased, it is worth remembering Francis Picabia, Georges Braque, Salvador Dali, Pier Mondrian, Constantin Brancusi, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Antoine Pevsner, Kurt Schwitters and Raymond Duchamp-Villon.

<sup>38</sup> “Peggy, in fact, did not give up. She moved with her collection already acquired in Paris, continued to increase it furiously, buying a work a day. She obtained from Brancusi the sculpture *Maiestra* Long-she bargained to have one that had dreamed of owning *L’Oiseau dans l’espace*. He ended up giving up, after arguing because of the price, while the Germans were coming to Paris. She just had time to take it away at the last minute. She reported that Brancusi in handing the work was crying, but she never understood the reason for that emotion and strongly doubted that it was caused by the artist's sorrow at parting from a work that had been particularly dear. She was never, for that matter, rhetoric, nor prone to sentimentality” (Carandente 1989, 17). This description provides an intense portrait of Peggy at the time of the advent of the conflict.

<sup>39</sup> Best known is the episode that, on the day that Hitler invaded Norway, Peggy bought the painting *Men in the City* by Léger, shocking the artist for her indifference to the news.

“All winter I went to artists’ studios and to art-dealers to see what I could buy. Everyone knew that I was in the market for anything that I could lay my hands on. They chased after me and came to my house with pictures. They even brought them to me in bed, in the morning before I was up.” Guggenheim 1946, 244).

She bought the nucleus of her collection for less than \$40,000, still wishing for the possibility to expose her collection. She just cared about her collection, not realizing the danger that was approaching.

Even the American-born Jews, like Peggy, could not rely much on their passport to feel free from any punitive measures: the Vichy government, in these cases, was trying to get rid of them through the expulsion, but there was also a maximum limit of hospitality from other foreign countries. Among those who sought refuge, there were also artists and writers, who, looking for a way out, poured into the city of Marseille, France's largest port, amongst the best escape solutions.

She started to fear for her future at the last moment when her friends have vanished, and she soon felt a sense of abandonment and emptiness. The escape was designed in a hurry, with the faithful friend Nelly van Doesburg, along with millions of other fugitives. For summer, the two women decided to settle down in a house on Lake Annecy. Under continuous German threat, though, Laurence rebuked their unconsciousness, suggesting that they should all go back to the U.S., also pushed by the relentless stresses (started more than a year before), of the American consul.

After the severe military defeat, when the Nazis entered Paris, the country was divided. The first to pay the price was the Jews, deprived of citizenship and then delivered directly to the Nazis for extermination. With the arrival of the German army in the French territory, the French Jews were marginalized and excluded from all public commitments, political and military, from teaching and radio, cinemas, theatres and the press. Foreign Jews risked arrest and deportation to concentration camps.

In that period Peggy underwent an inner transformation. To better move in that network of secret agreements, she got in touch with the Clandestine Liberation Committee. This

organization was founded around the forties as an association, without any official cover, parties and opposition movements against fascism and German occupation. In 1940, the Committee was placed in Marseille with Varian Fry<sup>40</sup> at its head.

During this period he tried to arrange the boarding for safer shores, the United States, for more than two thousand prominent figures in the culture and art field of Jewish origin, including professors, writers, and artists<sup>41</sup>, that prolonging their stay in the French territory would have been victims of the Nazi deportation.

Fry and Peggy, from what we read in both *Out of This Century* and in many biographies of the woman, collaborated and Mrs. Guggenheim financed several departures, including that of Breton. She proved involvement in the life of the Committee so that Fry was impressed. During her stay in this country on the French Riviera, Peggy received requests for help several times, especially for artists and people aware of her wealth and determination. In particular, the wife of Tanguy telegraphed asking the financing of a group of people, including André Breton and Max Ernst, whose names were enough to mobilize the heiress. At the same time Peggy was committed to helping Victor Brauner, hunted as a Jew, who was hiding in the mountains leading a precarious life as a shepherd. So it was that Peggy soon found herself involved in rescue attempts, escapes, protections, and no source exists as evidence of refusal. Although it was considered a brash, spoiled woman, lover of worldly and unrestrained life, she proved herself generous and unselfish. She did not hesitate to use her money to facilitate the travel of others, thinking only ahead of herself.

Mrs. Guggenheim's main concern always remained her collection, so much that she still went to Grenoble, wanting to expose where Nelly knew the director of the city museum, André Farcy. It was very risky at the time to expose these artworks and the project did not go ahead because Farcy was in a precarious situation and, after a while, because of his love for modern degenerated art, he ended up in Compiègne concentration camp. After these events, the collection was safely shipped to the U.S., hidden among household goods.

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<sup>40</sup> Full name: Mackey Varian Fry, born in New York on 15 October 1907 and died in Redding, California, in 1967.

<sup>41</sup> Among those who were saved by Varian Fry's mission: Hannah Arendt, André Breton and his family, Marc Chagall, Lion Feuchtwanger, Wifredo Lam, Jacques Lipchitz, André Masson, Jacques Schiffrin, Franz Werfel.

Karol Vail describes in a few lines, including the name of Peggy, the year 1940 in France:

"The situation for refugees in France, including artists, intellectuals and political activists, it is difficult and dangerous. The emergency Rescue Committee - the Committee for help formed under the auspices of the American Federation of Labor, the Museum of Modern Art and other groups is managed by the American Varian Fry, who came to France to procure passports and visas for the United States for refugees. Among the latter there are several members of the Surrealist movement with their families. Fry and his employees occupy, when they are not engaged in their headquarters in Marseille, a villa in ruins called Bel-Air, where also Breton with his family found refuge. Breton's and Ernst's expatriations were partially founded by Peggy" (Vail and Rylands 2001, 46).

### **2.1.3. 1941-1948 Return to America**

In 1941, frightened from the rapid advancement of the Nazi army, Peggy decided to escape with her loved ones and her collection and set sail for the U.S., her homeland. Despite being forced to a long and difficult journey, despite all her attentions were concentrated on her new love affair with Max Ernst, art had become her reason for living, and she continued her mission in this country, extremely changed during those forty years.

Peggy, therefore, immediately began to look for a place where to create that modern art support project that she cared so much about, and in the meantime continued to purchase works of art.

She found the American art scene beyond when it came to modern art, European Avant-garde started to be accepted but it was mostly kept in private collections, closed to the public. Peggy Guggenheim had in mind a revolutionary project to educate the public to accept the novelties.

After less than a year after her arrival in New York, Peggy opened in 1942 the gallery "Art of This Century". The collector was indeed dissatisfied because of her dream failure of a museum in London and was now eager to give a fixed and dignified place to her paintings and her sculptures so much that she wanted to transform her desires into real artistic projects on a national scale. During the vernissage – October 10, 1942 – she wore two

earrings, both to be considered artworks, one per ear. Wearing two earrings, from the European Yves Tanguy, and one from the American Alexander Calder, she wanted to appear open and neutral towards both continents, wishing for her gallery to represent these two worlds.

The gallery was built by the Austrian-Romanian origins architect Frederick Kiesler and was structured in very specific innovative exhibition spaces, which made it soon one of the most stimulating contemporary art venues of New York (Davidson and Rylands 2004, 15-24). The structure was made of curved walls, sculptural chairs, paintings hanging in the air or attached as cloths swivel stand, musical accompaniments and interactions. They were elements that gave a new experimental perspective and the building itself was a milestone in the history of museology. Peggy was proud to expose her most admired pieces of cubist art, surrealism, abstract, whose catalogue was written by André Breton with a cover designed by Max Ernst.

It is this catalogue that gave the name to the gallery, as a message of hope in these difficult times (Guggenheim 1979, 274). The first pages were dedicated to three epigraphs, fundamental to show the strong political and social engagement of Peggy Guggenheim. Herself on exile because of her religion, she wanted to be a reference for all the artists that had to flee Europe because of the war. The first and the last epigraphs were written by Read. In the first one art is defined as a traveling concept, dynamic and in perennial evolution, underling the experimental identity of this gallery. The second one is a partial translation of Hitler's speech at the opening of the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung – the Great German Art exhibition- that, in 1937, opposed to the degenerate modern one. Last, Read explains how the real 'great' art is the free one, the art of Art of This Century Gallery (Allmer, 2019). The gallery had a mission: to be a meeting and discussion point of the cultural society of New York, but also a refugee.

The Forties are considered a golden era for international art, thanks to Peggy's intuition and the creative talent of the artists she decided to support. The collector thus gave new impetus to the art scene and stood out, as she had done in Europe, for her magnetic force to gather around her artists and prominent intellectuals, which triggered lively debates and tried to profile and identity for American art.

Just arrived in her native New York, her home became, thanks to her love story with Ernst, a real coterie of artists, where even those who were part of the younger generations were welcomed, never undervalued by Peggy. One of her closest friends and associates was André Breton. This eclectic man was the leader of the surrealist movement and, like Peggy, gathered around him, artists and theorists. The collector met him in France, before the outbreak of war, and admired him immediately for his work as a writer and poet.

Peggy was constantly fascinated by the intellectuals of her time and she never gave up their company from which she drew her continuous knowledge. During the American period, however, Peggy began to tire of Surrealism that much had conquered her throughout her youth. This loss of interest is perfectly matching the fickle nature of the collector, who so fast got thrilled about the news until she got tired of them. Her constant search of stimuli and changes has perhaps made her the person who made history: a woman who did not yield to conventions and traditions.

In a new environment like New York, after experiences that marked her life, including deaths, disappointments, and war, her relationship with the Surrealists was cooling. And the first signal was the crack of her relationship with Breton. Peggy no longer recognized herself in the group who she had supported for a long time and wanted to drive elsewhere her energies.

Only a few months after the triumphant opening of her new gallery, Peggy was then separated from the European artists that she loved so much. She felt disappointed and saddened, looking for new interests and new forms of art, which quickly met, thanks to American artists. She was also forced to find a new guide, who she found in James Johnson Sweeney, the future director of the department of painting and sculpture of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

As she had done in Europe, even in her native land she wanted to help especially emerging artists, still unknown to the great mass and in need of financial support and trust. She constantly organized exhibitions of painters such as Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, Mark Rothko, David Hare, Janet Sobel, Clyfford Still. Between these, Peggy focused especially on Jackson Pollock, to which she devoted herself for the entire duration of her stay in the U.S.

Jackson Pollock is considered the most striking example of Peggy Guggenheim's talent as a patron. At the time of their meeting Pollock was in his late twenties, he came from studies at the Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles (from which he had been expelled because of the publication of a satirical newspaper) and had classes taught by Thomas Hart Benton<sup>42</sup> at the Art Students' League. In 1938 he suffered a severe depressive crisis that erupted in the early symptoms of alcoholism, and because of this problem he lost his job for the Federal Art Project. The meeting with Peggy seemed to give him a second chance. To encourage him, there was always Lee Krasner, his wife and young painter, with whom he exhibited in 1939 at the New York McMillan Gallery.

Peggy was so immediately fascinated by his paintings, casual and primitive, to immediately commission him a work for her home in New York. The following year Peggy introduced him to the surrealist collective of her gallery and soon organized his first solo offering him a contract (1943-1947), which allowed him to solve his economic problems.

It was in a wooden refugee in Long Island that Pollock created some of his most estimable paintings, spreading large canvases on the floor of his laboratory built by himself and focusing fully on the technique of *dripping*. He refined through intensive work his famous spontaneous painting with which he poured the paint directly on the canvas. It was therefore considered the inventor of this technique, which is considered one of the basics of the *action painting* movement, appreciated and admired by Peggy herself, who once again had the right intuition, giving confidence and allowing freedom of expression to her protégé. Peggy, in fact, writes in her memoirs: "I supported it [Abstract Expressionism] and I do not regret it: it produced Pollock, or rather, it was the same Pollock to produce this movement and that's enough to justify my efforts"(Guggenheim 1982, 371), adding later: "It certainly was the most important and interesting period of my life from 1934 onwards, and definitely my most authoritative conquest"(Guggenheim 1982, 355).

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<sup>42</sup> Benton was a regionalist painter known for his expressive realism that influenced the artistic development of Pollock. The latter posed for some compositions with people by Benton, during which the teacher encouraged him to pursue a career as an artist. Pollock moved away from Benton's realism only in the thirties, because of the passion and the study of Mexican *murals*, including those of Jose Orozco and Diego Rivera, as well as the contacts with the Native American art, which he was able to admire during his many travels in the West.

Pollock's art became more and more detached from the figurative and went against the tradition of using the brush and easel, deciding to use the only artistic gesture, making art not just through the hands use but also through the entire body movement.

Peggy and her friend and assistant Howard Putzel offered support and encouragement to the rising avant-garde and played a key role in the development of artistic movements at the international level. Although the collector recognized that that place was her first home and although stimulated by new artistic currents, the American period lasted less than ten years. Probably the United States reminded her of the sad childhood, and she also found the environment and social life not compatible with her personality<sup>43</sup>. "In fact, America was no longer home for her," Ivo Prandin writes, "she had lived too much in Europe to still feel at home in New York, good for business, but not to live there "(Prandin 2002, 57).

American Art at the time of her arrival, was claiming its own identity. And for this purpose, many argue that it was Peggy to make Americans discover about American art. At the end of the conflict Peggy decided to return to Europe and in particular to Venice, her favorite city. The seven years in New York have been defined as the second phase of her collection, or the American stage before the third step, corresponding to the Venetian period, where, however, the works did not increase so visibly as they did during the other two stages.

#### **2.1.4. 1948-1979 Thirty years in Venice**

“There is no normal life in Venice. Here everything and everyone floats. Not only gondolas, launches, barges, vaporetos and punts but also buildings and the people float. One floats in and out of restaurants, shops, cinemas, theatres, museums, churches, and hotels. One floats luxuriously with such a sense of freedom, never tormented by traffic or even disturbed by the sound of a horn. It is this floatingness

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<sup>43</sup> His American adventure, in fact, did not begin in the best way: "It was very strange to arrive in New York on July 14, after an absence of fourteen years, and feeling stalked by an agent: Max was dragged away and thrown in jail and I spent three days waiting to be summoned for questioning. I almost went crazy, because I feared that they would send him to Europe "(Guggenheim 1982, 255).

With regard to the various museums she harshly judged art exhibitions: "[...] many works were in the basement, according to the custom of the Modern Art Museum" (Guggenheim 1982, 259) with respect to the Solomon "[...] uncle museum was a wonderful palace, but completely ruined by the atrocious accommodation [...]. Finally, the Gallatin Collection in the building of the University of New York "[...] was really a boring place" (Guggenheim 1982, 259).

which is the essential quality of Venice. As the tide rises and recedes twice a day, one has the impression of the entire city being in perpetual motion. The buildings seem to rise and sink with the tide. Sometimes Venice partly disappears under the sea for a few hours. In very high tides it can be submerged a whole metre. But this does not greatly alter its character. It merely makes one even more conscious of how much it is a city sprung from the sea and living in it.” (Guggenheim 1963).

With the end of the conflict Peggy decided to return to Europe. Leaving New York to settle in Venice was an old dream she had never forgotten about.

The opportunity presented itself in 1948, when she was invited to exhibit her collection at the Venice Biennale – June 6 to September 30, 1948-<sup>44</sup>: the works of artists such as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko were exhibited for the first time in Europe. The exhibition was staged with great pride by Mrs. Guggenheim and Carlo Scarpa in the Greek pavilion<sup>45</sup>, along with Cubist, abstract and surrealist works, that communicated vitality and modernity more than any other participating country (Donaggio 1988, 26-32). She organized the pavilion in this way: on the right-side abstraction and on the left one Surrealism. A mi of the two in the center and two small rooms for the new American art.

Vittorio Carrain expressed what Peggy’s pavilion: “[...] was like opening a bottle of Champagne. It was the explosion of modern art after the Nazis had tried to kill it”(Dortch 1994, 150). Peggy exhibited the works with a temporary permit that, once the Biennale closed, she hoped to turn into permanent. But the law was severe and required high fees for permanent imports.

She bought Palazzo Venier dei Leoni on the Grand Canal in 1948, with its large garden, a long gallery, excellent to host her paintings, and an enviable sunny terrace. While gratified only by art, her patron activities were dying. Nevertheless, she supported painters like Santomaso, Bacci, Tancredi, and Vedova. She could not feel that same interest that had motivated her in the U.S. and she used to say those new modern artists’ works were just a copy of the past (Barozzi 2001, 148-152).

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<sup>44</sup> The XXIV Biennale was one of the most important, so much to be compared to the 1895. It was Pallucchini, general secretary of the Biennale, to invite Peggy to expose exposure, at the urging of Santomaso and perhaps even of Elio Zorzi.

<sup>45</sup> Greece, in fact, did not attend because of the entry into the war.

That world she met with the French surrealists seemed to have turned off, consumed, increasingly sensitive to market forces rather than to those of genius and creativity. She continued to cultivate relations with the most eminent art critics. She became friends with Rodolfo Pallucchini and Umbro Apollonio<sup>46</sup>. Peggy writes of both: "As Pallucchini, Apollonius did not know anything about modern art. Italy had never heard of surrealists, Brancusi, Arp, Giacometti, Pevsner and Malevich "(Guggenheim 1982, 337). And indeed, Italy was not ready to welcome Peggy's revolutionary art<sup>47</sup>. After the success of the Biennale<sup>48</sup>, the Guggenheim received many proposals to exhibit her valuable pieces of art and was willing to accept such offers, at least until she opened her palace to the public in 1949. This last decision was the cause of the dispute with Pallucchini, who accused her of not being generous enough to the city of Venice, wanting to lock up the art within the confines of her home.

Nevertheless, they continued several artistic collaborations as well as a few shows, such as the exhibition of sculptures, in 1949, set in Peggy's garden<sup>49</sup> curated by Giuseppe

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<sup>46</sup> "I do not know why but while he [intended to Apollonius] was speaking I felt that it was the first time in his life he was doing a job to his liking and the fact that I'd realized that struck him so much that we became immediately friends "(Guggenheim 1982, 337). Apollonius, perhaps even more than Pallucchini, was deeply confident in contemporary art and perhaps that started the friendship with Peggy. During the fifties and sixties helped and presented to the various Biennials (and not only) young artists, such as, to name a few, Luigi Spacal, Achille Perilli, Luigi Montanarini and Arnaldo Pomodoro. Moreover, in 1949 Apollonius assumed the direction of the Biennale Archives, and his work brought concrete improvements to the library.

<sup>47</sup> It was also thanks to Pallucchini and Apollonius that to Peggy was given the opportunity to be known. At the suggestion of Santomaso, the painter, Pallucchini, the general secretary of the Biennale, decided to give the Greek pavilion to the American heiress. Although he was initially doubtful (he was a historian of Renaissance art), he was still a person willing to receive guidance and advice. Peggy initially wrote of being awed by his manner, typical of an "Episcopal priest" (Guggenheim 1982, 338), but soon they were bound by a feeling of friendship and mutual esteem. Apollonius, albeit occupied at a less prominent role in the organization of the Biennale, encouraged the exhibition of Peggy's collection, seeing it as a symbol of international innovation needed in the post-war period.

<sup>48</sup> To make the twenty-fourth Biennale extraordinary was above all the revisiting of the avant-garde, thanks to the commitment of the foreign pavilions. Sensitive interpreter of these requirements was Rodolfo Pallucchini, who organized the first five Biennials post-war (1948-1956). This period of time allowed him to reconstruct a fairly complete picture of the European avant-gardes (from which, however, still remained excluded Dadaism), and also create a bridge between the public and the contemporary art in Italy. The two most attractive facts were the retrospective with nineteen paintings by Pablo Picasso (first appearance at the Biennale at the age of sixty-seven) presented by Guttuso, and the Peggy Guggenheim collection (136 works by 67 artists) presented by Giulio Carlo Argan, thanks to which it entered into the heart of the debate on contemporary art and also were presented extremist tendencies.

<sup>49</sup> For the occasion were exposed valuable pieces of Brancusi, Arp, Calder, Giacometti, Lipchitz, Moore, Pevsner, Hare and the famous statue of Marino Marini, *The angel of the city*, which attracted many visitors, announcing the event's success, despite the shock for some works defined too modern.

Marchiori, who wrote the introduction to the catalogue; and Pollock's first solo, in 1950 at the Napoleonic Wing of the Museo Correr, curated by the association "The Three Hands".

The exhibition at the Biennale of Peggy's collection had disarmed most visitors, both for its modernity and for the proof of superiority, for its innovative spirit at least, of American art. In the past decades, the primacy of art par excellence was attributed to the French one. With Abstract Expressionism, however, Peggy and Italy showed the Old Continent a new way to surprise and to conceive the artistic gesture and the color. Pollock was the founder of this vigorous and explosive generation, and, although it had already happened the handover with the patronage of Betty Parsons – another fundamental dealer in the New York art scene of those years -, Mrs. Guggenheim was still convinced of her ability to have brought Pollock to success. At the Biennale Peggy exposed just three artworks by him, and this is in part why she felt compelled to organize some other event to highlight the phenomenon of the father of *action painting*.

At that time, the art scene in the city of Venice had divergent currents of thought. The focal point of the split was based on the question of whether art should be the bearer of a political and social message or it should be limited to its purely aesthetic sphere, self-referential (Pallucchini 1950, 15)<sup>50</sup>. Venice was a conservative city and, as the entire country, was not ready for such an intense revolution in the arts. Certainly, the number of visitors was surprising, given the strategic location that forced those wishing to reach the Museo Correr to cross the exhibition. Pollock's artworks, though, were ignored by the press and, in a few lines about them, were interpreted as rude and degenerate.

The relationships that Peggy established during the Venetian years were not always happy. Starting from misunderstandings with the inhabitants of the city. Barozzi writes: "The Venetians disappointed her for their liabilities, for their lack of interest for the Guggenheim collection, but also for the artistic initiatives of the city, for the Biennale and even worse for the problems inherent the city, first of all water "(Barozzi 2001, 27). This

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<sup>50</sup> As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the artistic debate that finds space after the second World War in the Venice area is enlivened by a large group of critics including Giuseppe Marchiori, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Umbro Apollonio, Morucchio Berto, Giuseppe Mazzariol, which made memorable thanks to their commitment and to their research, the Biennials at the turn of the fifties.

initial disappointment kept changing and with time it became peaceful coexistence. Far from the old friends, Peggy tried to establish relations with Italian artists.

Despite the relationship with the inhabitants of Venice was not easy, Peggy was proclaimed an honorary citizen of Venice in 1962. The ceremony, held in the Town Hall, was surprisingly crowded and Count Zorzi, Peggy's close friend, delivered a wonderful speech for her. For the collector this was a great joy: she finally saw reciprocated the love she felt for her adopted home and felt recognized as a true citizen.

Between 1964 and 1975 the collection began to travel abroad: at the Tate Modern in London (1964), Stockholm (1966), New York (1969), Paris (1974) and Turin (1975). When, in 1960, it returned for a short trip to New York, Peggy provides a meaningful picture of the U.S. in the sixties:

"In the twelve years that I had been far everything had changed. I was stunned: the entire artistic movement had become a huge economic enterprise. Only a few people had genuine interest in the paintings; the rest bought them for snobbery or to avoid taxes [...]. Some bought just for investment to place the paintings in a storage, without even looking at them and calling to their gallery every day to know the latest listing, as if they were shares to sell in the most profitable time "(Guggenheim 1982, 370).

In these lines, Peggy reveals a side of her character that, while preserving the innate stingy side and the obsessive dedication to accounting, demonstrates a sincere love for art, beyond any financial and economic calculation. Her passion for artistic creation was an escape from that aspect of her personality so attached to money.

In 1966 a tragic bereavement disrupted her life: the death of her daughter Pegeen, who, despite the disagreements and diversity of character, had always been close to her mother.

The first painful loss Peggy suffered during her life was her father's, who died in the sinking of the Titanic, when she was only fourteen. Unfortunately, the losses of loved ones, over the years, were many more. Much was the pain she had to live with and that somehow had to be managed, which shaped Peggy's personality. Among other losses, some even more devastating - precocious and unexpected -: the one of her favorite sister Benita, the

great love of her life John Holms, her mother, the last companion Raoul Gregorich, tragically passed away in a car accident during the Fifties. Last comes the most tragic one, the mysterious death of Pegeen (probably suicidal), that marked her till the end of her life. All these episodes are essential pieces of her biography and a key point in the understanding of her way of being and thinking.

Peggy changed radically: her vitality went out, and her loneliness deepened. On the way back to the U.S., aware of the advancing age, Peggy took important decisions related to the future: to give her building and collection to the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, created by her uncle in 1937. The one immutable condition was that the collection, which would continue to bear Peggy's name, could not be completely moved out of its places (except for extraordinary events such as the disappearance of Venice) and that no work would be moved. Peggy was satisfied to guarantee permanent residence to her work in her city of dreams.

She died on December 23, 1979, in the hospital in Camposampiero, on the land that she had begun to hate, as a voluntary prisoner of the floating Venice, magically suspended.

It is here, in fact, that she is resting in a corner of the garden of her palace, where the ashes are buried beside the grave of her beloved dogs. Her burial did not mean that Peggy belonged now forever to Venice. On the contrary, as Giovanni Carandente wrote: "It was as if Peggy's heart had finally dissolved and, after so many carnal loves, it would restore one and only one, the indomitable love for the city that gave her not only calm to her spirit but also joy from the first to the last day she lived there"(Carandente 1989, 18-19).

### **2.2.1. Peggy Guggenheim's identity<sup>51</sup>**

Following the precedent section focused on the biography and on the long and extraordinary life of Peggy Guggenheim, it seems necessary to integrate these events within the historical context from which they followed.

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<sup>51</sup> This section of the second chapter is the result of countless critical texts of Peggy Guggenheim's life and her role in art. The resulting personal reflection aims to further explain the biography of the protagonist of this research.

Another importance source for this section is Rotwain, 2018.

Clement Greenberg, in his critique of the American collector, describes her as a "modern object", who acted in very specific circumstances, which are not to be diminished. Peggy Guggenheim's character, this woman's identity being such, must first be analyzed (Greenberg 1946).

Her life and choices clash deeply with the ideals of the society from which Peggy came, the high society of Jewish immigrants of Germanic origins of the last century. As her life unfolds, Peggy seems to break all the unwritten rules of this world, throwing herself provocatively into the bohemia of the 1930s. Peggy's autobiography, which will be later examined, is in fact a document, though witty and not of scientific value, of the society of those years, with its limitations and traditions.

This section follows the biography of Peggy, a long chapter but necessary for understanding the development of the collection and modern European and U.S. art. In fact, in this case, private and public life are not distinguished, the loves and vicissitudes of the person Peggy, are one together and explain each other through the passages of the public and artistic life of the Guggenheim.

The artistic identity of Peggy is at the center of the last section of this chapter, analyzing her role and importance in the art world as a gatekeeper and pioneer of modern art. Not only a great collector and patroness of artists, but she also opened the doors to American art following the rule "of serving the future instead of recording the past" (Davidson and Rylands 2004, 26).

### **2.2.2. Reflections and Criticisms from Out of This Century**

"She promised (or threatened) to write a book so honest that Laurence would never forgive her."(Prose 2015, 6)

With this quote begins the section dedicated to Peggy Guggenheim's autobiography, a fundamental source of this research. Complex, it represents a document of the history of the twentieth century: a portrait of the New York Jewish elite, of the circle of bohemian Parisians, but also of what it meant to be a woman, American, Jewish, who lived between two continents, animated by the desire to put together an unforgettable collection of modern art.

There are three different versions of this text. *Out of This Century*, released in 1946, a few months after the end of the war, was a scandal. Peggy Guggenheim is honest and uninhibited and frank in underlining her entry into the Parisian bohemian's circle, characterized by free love and great importance is given to sexuality. This aspect of Guggenheim's life will be further disrupted in the subsequent section. What is interesting is the reaction of the critics, who came to define this autobiography as a pornography text, where the values traditionally associated with the woman have disappeared, in the lustful and amoral life of this rule-breaker. Peggy Guggenheim dared to abandon the graceful, sweet and maternal behaviors of the Jewish woman of the rich Manhattan society in which she had grown up, to indulge in sin. Still, much of this criticism points to the fact that Peggy Guggenheim was a woman, according to a gender critique that appears shaped by the traditionalist closure of the society at the time. Passionate statements of sexual desire, of illicit loves, shocked the critics criticized, but they would have accepted the same claims if coming out of a man's pen. The gender and fragility of Peggy Guggenheim's being a woman will be addressed later.

"I seem to have written the first book as an uninhibited woman and the second one as a lady who was trying to establish her place in the history of modern art."(Guggenheim 1960, 271). So Peggy Guggenheim comments on the difference between the first autobiography, and the shortened and cleaned version of 1960. Halved, this text gives greater importance to Peggy's collection and her role in art, while her private life is limited to her more modest and traditional aspects. Great importance is given to the Venetian phase of her life.

In 1979, for the last time, Peggy Guggenheim decides to revisit her memories and to review the two previous versions of her autobiography, deciding to unify them into a single and final manuscript, what we can all read to this day of her life. The third edition was published only two months before her death, and Peggy opens in a final spiritual testament. There are no pseudonyms or facts that are not told with total freedom and uninhibited reality. The collector does not hide, she has now carved out her role and her place in the history of European and American evolution of modern art, and love, sexuality, violence, desire, tireless will but also suffering find their place. Peggy Guggenheim will comment: 'I have no regrets,' she once said. 'A lot of it was a lot of fun. Painful, too, but love is always

painful anyhow.<sup>52</sup>

This chapter has been integrated, in the part considered more relevant to the construction of the collection and her artistic role, Peggy Guggenheim's biography, through often conflicting sources of biographers, friends and family. Now follows a section concerning two insights into Peggy Guggenheim's identity, which profoundly influenced her way of acting and her life.

### **2.2.3. Gender: Peggy Guggenheim as a woman (Rotwain 2018)**

Biographies and documents commenting on Peggy Guggenheim's autobiography, refer very negatively to her life choices. The very fact of Peggy's gender, her being a woman and therefore acting as such in the first half of the 20th-century society, is not often taken into account. Stereotypes, easy criticisms and risky psychological analyses stop at the superficiality of the facts, merely defining this life dedicated to art as a mere desire to break the rules and to provoke by attracting attention.

Peggy's insecurity, her appearance that does not fit perfectly within the beauty canons of the time, her strong feelings and passions, are perpetually emphasized in the light of a negative interpretation. There is talk of an 'issue', trying to classify this extravagant unacceptable behavior within events such as the untimely death of her father, the lack of a heritage up to the Guggenheim's name, ugliness, abandonment, and the perennial desire to be loved. While trauma and hard life experiences certainly identify her, it seems to limit not to go further in understanding what it meant to be a woman who rejected the traditional canons of her society, standing up as a symbol of modern art by fighting in a highly masculine context.

The limit of these sources lies in not considering the fragility of being a woman, but rather in being a victim of the system. At the same time, these sources do not consider the greater difficulty that Guggenheim undertook in her artistic career and, as a result, do not recognize her deserved success. While certainly the importance of the Collection in question and Peggy's role in the modern art of two continents is now established, a little

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<sup>52</sup> "Peggy Guggenheim, Art Collector, Dies," December 23, 1979, William A. Bradley Literary Agency, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, TX.

reflection is documented on gender and the importance of the sexual component.

Criticism comes from men but also from women, who do not see in the feelings and passions of Peggy and the humanity of her character, who honestly tells her private life, not seeming interested in a text that encloses within simple story stages that led to the formation of the collection. The feelings and limitations that are negatively emphasized seem to come from a strongly ethical critique of Peggy's non-conventional customs, which should no longer shock a more moderate open-minded audience. Peggy Guggenheim's feminism, which cannot be scientifically discussed, as a non-historically relevant element, is defined in this life as pure femininity and the will to make history.

The Guggenheim is criticized in her deepest feelings, in her not being a mother and, above all, for having assumed behaviors and interests associated with men. Yet, this too severe judgment seems to come exactly from supporters of the upper-middle-class ideology of the New York Jewish elite, from which Peggy came, and which she tried to escape during her entire life.

Coming into the dynamic and eventful atmosphere of Paris, Peggy Guggenheim meets the avant-garde environment, characterized above all by the bohemian. Easily inserted into this circle of artists, writers, and poets, morality, or antimoral, bohemian becomes Peggy's new rule of life. In a milieu characterized by the celebration of sexuality and total freedom, it should not be forgotten that at the center of this unregulated custom was still the man. The Guggenheim soon integrated into this circle, which represents for her the opposite of her youth in the U.S. longed for, made up of rules, restrictions and traditions. This new world is identified as an apparently simple loophole from her past, yet such absolute freedom, for a woman, nevertheless remains pure appearance (Stansell 2009).

If the woman, on the one hand, is willing to do anything to get rid of the innate label of wife and mother, anchored to one or more male figures on which she depends for life, the search for the alternative leads her to impose herself on a scene where her role seems to remain still powerless. Creative activity and private life seem to entangle, and the woman, who enjoys this freedom of free love, is inadvertently chained a second time. If sexual freedom becomes a condition where women cannot impose themselves in this universe and

be referred to as artists, it seems that an imposed rule, certainly more traditional, has been replaced by a new one.

The new concept of womanhood is to deny everything that is considered peculiar to the fragility of this gender, such as the excessive sentimentality and sacrifice of one's own person for the benefit of husbands and children. Everything seems revolted concerning conventional society, except that at the top of the pyramid the man remains perpetually dictating the law.

Obviously, the lightness of the approach to the extreme, to carnal desire and more unconventional practices have negative consequences. Peggy Guggenheim in the account of her relationship with her first husband Laurence Vail, the king of the bohemian recounts in detail the continuous violence and humiliation suffered by the latter on several occasions. Her tone of voice is detached, yet she is telling of psychological and physical abuse against her as if it was part of the banal routine of married life. Again, both men and women biographers rarely attack at Vail, justifying his aggressiveness through the provocative behavior of his consort.

"Because of my money I enjoyed a certain superiority over [Vail] and I used it in a dreadful way, by telling him it was mine and he couldn't have it to dispose of freely." Vail fought to reassert his power. To make her feel insignificant, he told her she was allowed in bohemia only because she was wealthy and that it was her responsibility to give her money to people with real artistic talent, which he told her she lacked.(Guggenheim 1979, 45-46).

Having lived at the center of this world, we should therefore not be surprised by the honesty with which Peggy's loves and adventures are narrated by herself, sexuality being lived in such a natural way and without giving it any weight in a world where betrayal and polygamy appear as normal forms of love. Peggy lived the bohemian, and the lightness of her autobiography is partly the result of these years.

A second movement within which Peggy Guggenheim is involved is Surrealism,

also strongly connoted for rebellion to the conventions of the society of the time.<sup>53</sup>

In a conception of reality that sees life as an erotic dream, sexuality is made art, elevating itself to performance. The sexual act becomes an artistic project, libido a pure feeling as it does not depend on the logic of reason and, as such, liberating. The irrationality of passion comes from the unconscious, the world favored by the surrealists. The role of the women, accepted in the circle of surrealists, once again is passive, muses to the desires of man.<sup>54</sup> The woman finds herself oppressed in any case, a body on which the desire of the man is projected. The desire that must necessarily be filled through imaginative and free sexual practice.

Peggy Guggenheim in her autobiography tells about her brief relationship with the painter, art historian and gallery owner Roland Penrose.

"When he slept with women he tied up their wrists with anything that was handy [...] he brought out a pair of ivory bracelets from the Sudan... [that] were attached with a chain and [Penrose] had a key to lock them. It was extremely uncomfortable to spend the night this way, but if you turned it off with [Penrose] it was the only way."(Guggenheim 1979, 221)

Once again her life turns into a fairy tale, into a dream, into acting. The relationship becomes the realization of Penrose's fantasies, in which Peggy becomes a simple puppet, ready to please the deepest desires of the lover. This surrealist love is lived in a far-fetched atmosphere as if it were a hallucination or a game. Peggy Guggenheim does not denounce violence or the humiliating imposition of authority towards her but fits the role that has been carved out of the artist's mind for her.

The limit between art – artist, and love for art – love for the artist no longer exists, the contours of the life of the individual and his work become one. The final step into adhering to a bohemian and surrealist life of the Guggenheim is perhaps represented by the two marriages with Vail and Ernst: the love for the two artists and the interest in their creation

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<sup>53</sup> Within the sources that led to these reflections, important remains: Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, New10 and the Avant-Garde, New* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1990), 29.

<sup>54</sup> For this section on women in surrealism see Rudolf Kuenzli people, "Surrealism and Misogyny, New York," introduction to *Surrealism and Women*, and. Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli people, and Gwen Raaberg, *New10, 4th and.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), 17, 18, 20.

are not distinguished and Peggy, through marriage, feels accepted within the circle of the avant-garde.

It should not be forgotten that the power game exercised towards the woman, rich and romantic, in search of a project to become autonomous from her family origins, is sometimes overturned, and Peggy also becomes light and superficial in chaining passenger loves dictated by interest. Critics lean heavily on this component, easily criticizing the collector for her relationship with Brancusi, carried on to obtain his sculpture *Bird in Space*. Peggy is harshly condemned by critics as a wealthy heiress, a man-eater ready to flirt to obtain a work of art that would enrich her precious collection. This lack of depth in loving relationships, the inappropriate carnal desire and, on the other hand, the lack of affection in the role of unsuitable mother of her two children, seem to be the most remembered points of Peggy's autobiography. The context and importance of her mission are easily forgotten when compared to having broken the rules of her world and having embodied new, risky and provocative ones – created by men and destined for men.

As mentioned above, we cannot speak of feminism in this context but of simple honesty in approaching Peggy's life as a woman of her time, without wearing the heavy glasses of the traditionalist masculinism of the last century, which condemns her to an immoral and perverse figure.

Greenberg defines Peggy Guggenheim as a victim of her time, woman, Jew – of the religious identity of the collector will be discussed in the following section – , rich and skilled in business (Greenberg 1946). Responding to criticism, Peggy did not complain about the injustices she suffered or locking herself in this role sewn on by the famous art critic but carries on with value her honorable contribution to the European and American avant-garde of the 20th century. The tendency to minimize the importance of Peggy Guggenheim underlining how for her entire life she depended on men counselors and friends is dispelled by the demonstration that she, once alone and left autonomous in acting of her own volition, created what art history still celebrates her for today.

#### 2.2.4. Religion: Peggy Guggenheim as Jew<sup>55</sup>

"I come from two of the best Jewish families. One of my grandfathers was born in a stable like Jesus Christ or, rather, over a stable in Bavaria, and my other grandfather was a peddler... My stable-born grandfather, Mr. Seligman, came to America in steerage... Later he became a renowned banker and president of Temple Emanu-El."  
(Guggenheim, 1946, 1)

Peggy Guggenheim begins her autobiography in this way, jokingly introducing her Jewish identity into the wealthy Manhattan of the late 19th century. Her religion is also necessary for understanding Peggy's artistic life, and her ways and choices of collecting.

Accompanied throughout her life by this identity, it is important to understand what was intrinsically related to belonging to the Jewish elite of Germanic origin of New York. In addition to religious faith, a behavioral code and a strict moral govern the Guggenheim's youth, which is driven by a desire to move away from her past primarily to avoid a future that had already been written for her. Peggy Guggenheim will never deny her religious identity although, as Clement Greenberg defined in his 1946 critique of the collector's autobiography, hers was a 'complicated Jewishness'.

The interpretation of Peggy Guggenheim's life and collection passes through an often-anti-Semitic criticism, common at the time, giving this identity a paradoxically greater weight than that admitted by the protagonist herself. For the Guggenheim, her Jewish identity controls her and imprisons her in the dictates of conventions. Her rebellion against that birth status is not a denial of her former upbringing but a choice to change her own life and rules.

While Peggy Guggenheim had grown up in well-being and security assured by her family, the respectability and good manners provided to her certainly did not go along with the bohemian and the freedom of the avant-garde to which Peggy aspired. The desire to break with her past to throw herself headlong into the new Parisian life contrasts with her identity as a Jew and yet, throughout her life, the surname Guggenheim preceded her, influencing the approach towards her.

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<sup>55</sup> Sources important for the reflection of this section are: Rotwein (2018) and Fields (2013).

Anti-Semitic criticism accompanies Peggy Guggenheim in her life but also in fictional literature, where often, referring to her, the characteristics and epithets targeted stereotyped to the Jewish lineage were referred to her. Malignantly defined ugly, perpetually emphasizing her prominent nose, but also her eccentricity and her difficult relationship with her economic comfort, she was criticized for her greed and avarice. As already pointed out in the biographical section, her husband Laurence himself strongly criticized not only the Guggenheim family but also Peggy, humiliating her with anti-Semitic critics.

Yet the Paris of the 1920s was an important center of Jewish immigration, and it is at this time that the first Jewish artists began to play a recognized role and get notoriety in the Western art world. Certainly, the provenance of these artists differed from the comfortable condition and context in which the Guggenheim had grown. They were often artists of East-European origin who were prevented from performing their art in the land of origin. Many Jews were famous art collectors: for example, we name the Wildensteins, the Bernheims and the de Camondos.

As introduced in the first chapter of this thesis, Jewish women were often the architects of the advancement towards modern culture, through their artistic activities (Freedman 1999). It now seems important to name once again a great American and Jewish collector, proclaimed the queen of the Parisian bohemian: Gertrude Stein (Gopnik 2013). She too was considered like Peggy Guggenheim a wealthy Jewish snob who, thanks to her money, could feel masterful and protected. Yet Stein appears to have been able to impose herself within the circle of the Parisian avant-garde and Paris itself as patron of the arts and an important figure of reference for artists and critics. There was no criticism of her choice to support a risky and degenerate art, nor attempts to diminish her historical importance. Her homosexual identity may have shielded her against the attacks of the male-dominated society discussed earlier.

The insecurity and difficulty of this religious identity became more pronounced as the Second World War came, yet, in Peggy's autobiography, the salvation of the collection that she was putting together was considered more important than her own. Peggy Guggenheim, as told above, did not stay in Paris defying her fate until the end, seeing in the advent of the war an opportunity to put together her collection quickly and without a great economic expense. Almost naive in ignoring her danger as a Jew, not to mention the

fact that she was putting together a collection labeled by the Nazi regime as degenerate, Peggy seemed not to realize the danger. In her autobiography only one chapter is dedicated to the war period: "My life during the War". It is important to note that the Guggenheim alluded to war only at the moments when it came to affect her collection, until the final decision of the expedition to the U.S. Yet, as could be read in the previous section of the chapter, Peggy did not forget the idea of a museum, even going so far as to jeopardize the director of the Museum of Grenoble, Pierre Andry-Farcy.

Peggy's American nationality will save her and many others in this dangerous time spent between Paris and the south of France, before the repatriation through Portugal. Favored not only by her economic possibilities but also by her passport, Guggenheim assumed the role of savior of works of art and artists. Critics disagree in addressing the balance of Peggy Guggenheim's activities during the war. Many denounce her for not having thought or given any weight to the ugliness of the war, taking advantage of the much lower market price for revolutionary artworks to rob artists for an amount of money that in other times would have been considered ridiculous (Dortch 1994). American snobbish character, she would not have been as affected by the war like so many other Jews because she was protected from her privileged condition.

However, some critics see the Guggenheim collection as a blessing as these degenerate works could now be part of the long list of avant-garde works that disappeared or were destroyed during the conflict<sup>56</sup>. The Nazis seized works from important collections of Parisian Jews, which were later lost. If certainly some profit was made in these purchases, it should not be forgotten that it is thanks to the audacity and firmness of the collector that we can still observe her masterpieces in the Venetian palace that encloses the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation.

It is not easy to understand the Guggenheim's decision concerning the narrowness of information devoted to the war. Of course, it must be noted that the first of the three versions of her autobiography was published only six months after the end of the war, when Peggy had returned to the U.S., having helped saving many artists from her circle of friends. But, surely, for Peggy, her memoirs were a celebration of her career and success,

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<sup>56</sup> This section is based on a visit to the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris and the exhibition "*Le Marché de l'art sous l'occupation*": <http://expo-marche-art.memorialdelashoah.org/>

as well as a statement of her belonging to this rebellious generation of the avant-garde. The war is therefore seen as an impediment to her dream of opening a museum in Europe to exhibit her works and, as such, is not functional for the purpose of *Out of this Century*. In conclusion, as stated above, Peggy's collection remains her priority, together with her desire for freedom. That Jewish identity defined by Clement Greenberg as difficult to manage and not compatible with these life choices is not incompatible with the decisions to abandon her past in Peggy's eyes. Being a Guggenheim will remain a fundamental fact in the succession of her, albeit rebellious, life.<sup>57</sup>

#### **2.2.5. Peggy Guggenheim's artistic identity: her role in the evolution of modern art<sup>58</sup>**

"I do not seek to make money but to help artists."(Gill 2001, 197)

This is how Peggy Guggenheim defines her mission in the art world. This section aims to portray Peggy Guggenheim as a constructor of history through her action in the modern art world of the past century. If through the biography and the state of the art of this research the importance of the Guggenheim's collection has already been stated, scholars have often forgotten to mention the role of Peggy Guggenheim as an art dealer and tastemaker with her two galleries projects. Guggenheim Jeune and Art of the Century are not only the playground of a wealthy American collector but symbols of a new art market.

The role of Peggy Guggenheim as an educator and bridge between the European avant-gardes and the American abstract Expression is easily forgotten in the history of art, and this section proceeds to an analysis of the challenging experiences of the two Guggenheim's galleries. Placing Peggy Guggenheim as a fundamental agent in Pierre Bourdieu's *Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu 1993) means recognizing the role of Peggy as a gatekeeper for the American post-war art scene.

Pierre Bourdieu stated that the art market and scene are very unusual, as the symbolic capital comes first, rather than the economical capital, while analyzing artworks. In the *Field of Cultural Production* the avant-garde is considered an object of study following these rules. The recognition of an artwork and the consequent importance and

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<sup>57</sup> In this regard, Peggy Guggenheim's donations to the Tel Aviv museum, as well as the final decision to leave her collection to the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, are important to remember.

<sup>58</sup> Important source for this last section of the second chapter is Berry (1995).

fame of an artist do not automatically mean the following increase of its value, but a symbolic prestige, once the greatness of the artist is accepted by the art world (Bourdieu 1993).

The dealer's role is fundamental as he-she is the first one to advertise an artist. While the commercial dealer does not take the risk of investing in unknown artists, the arbiter of taste creates the tendency instead of following it. This mission is extremely risky, but we can affirm that – in this particular case – it is through Peggy Guggenheim's acceptance of the risk, at the end of the '40s that Abstract Expression became celebrated and entered museums spaces. If we are certain that Peggy Guggenheim relied on important friends and experts already introduced in this artistic world she was getting into, it is thanks to Art of This Century that American art was recognized in New York's art galleries scene.

Peggy Guggenheim not only introduced new artists to the American public, but she did it in her own way, renewing the gallery space and the dealer's tactics. We must not forget, once again, how difficult her position was, being a woman in a domain surrounded by men. In the first chapter of this thesis we already contextualized the importance of women in the birth of modern art in the U.S., but we now approach the male-dominated business world of galleries. Peggy Guggenheim is a creature of the bohemia, a daughter of a rebellion era that let her be what she wanted, a liberated woman. Still, Dearborn describes the shift to dealing as a shocking challenge in Peggy's career:

“It was one thing to collect and another thing entirely to deal art....Guggenheim women were not supposed to go to work, and the art-dealing world was rough and tumble, sometimes not entirely reputable. No doubt Peggy enjoyed upsetting these assumptions; her bohemian existence had been hard-won, and she loved to tweak her elders with it when she could.” (Dearborn 2004, 122).

Peggy Guggenheim has been a pioneer in discovering these artists and giving them a place to exhibit, creating a critical discourse around them and American art. We cannot forget that she acted in a moment, after the end of the Second World War that was slowly opening to experimentation and innovation. With the arrival of the Surrealists escaping Europe, the art world started to change and the focus shifted from the occupied Paris to the free New York. Peggy took risks on these artists to the extent of her, she consulted brilliant

advisors and had the financial stability to start a new and revolutionary project. At the beginning of the Forties few were places to discuss and see modern art and Art of This Century became the center where everything was happening. “Her gallery was the foundation, it’s where it all started to happen” says Lee Krasner, artist and Pollock’s wife (Rudenstine 1985, 799).

Even the scenography of the gallery helped in this educational mission towards the discovery of young American artists. All the conventions of the gallery space were pushed to their limit through Kiesler’s amazing job. Art was the protagonist of this space, and only in the Daylight Gallery, Peggy was selling art from these new artists. The rest of the galleries were showing Peggy’s collection, which was increasing thanks to the new purchases of these years. Making modern art affordable and democratic and putting it in comparison with the European acclaimed avant-gardes was giving these new artists legitimization for the first time.

Art of This Century became a center of discussion and research on Abstract Expressionism and creativity in New York. This artistic movement started to be accepted and, following Bourdieu’s agents in its recognition process (Bourdieu 1993), critics<sup>59</sup> started to talk about it, curators were attracted by the novelty and museums a few years later started buying these artworks. Peggy Guggenheim left her hometown when all this was happening, and she was not present anymore when the American artists she fought for began to be famous and recognized. Maybe this is one of the reasons why she is usually forgotten. Philip Rylands claims, "If Peggy had not existed it would have been necessary to invent her." (Bigatti and Maroni 2002, 21).

By 1948 Peggy Guggenheim was already in Venice, shocking a new public with her extravagant and revolutionary art.

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<sup>59</sup> Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg are the famous critics who legitimized Abstract Expressionism.

### **Chapter 3: Identity of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and heritage of Peggy Guggenheim**

This third and final chapter focuses on the identity of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and the legacy left by Peggy Guggenheim.

The collection is housed in the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. Palazzo Venier dei Leoni was purchased in 1949 as a new home for the Guggenheim, as well as a place dedicated to the exhibition of her collection. This Palace – known in Venice as the unfinished Palace – is in fact characterized by a flat ground and a large garden that overlooks the opposite side of the grand canal. Its construction began in 1735, as asked by Gerolamo Venier in his testament and designed by Lorenzo Boschetti. This palace, which was supposed to take colossal forms, as shown by the model on display at the Correr Museum, was never finished and was abandoned by the Venier family at the fall of the Republic of Venice. The Palace will live a new life in the 20th century, and it is fascinating to note that this rebirth to its splendor took place thanks to three women, who followed themselves as the owners of the latter. The legendary and extravagant Marchesa Luisa Casati Stampa - remembered by Venetians with her walking leopard in St. Mark's Square – will bring the palace back to life with glitzy parties starting in 1920. In 1936, the English Viscountess Doris Castlerosse took possession of the contract.

The Peggy Guggenheim collection, after being exhibited at the 1948 Biennale, officially established its home here in 1951. The first section of the chapter aims to understand the choices that led Palazzo Venier dei Leoni to open to the public in the form of a house – museum, where the character of his late owner still seems to be present. The decisions taken by the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation have taken into account the profoundly different nature of this arm of the foundation in Italian territory compared to the Frank Lloyd Wright's headquarters.

The strong identity of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection is also proven – in this more qualitative section of the research – by three interviews – among the annexes of this thesis – to some women currently working in Venice. This research, as already introduced,

stems from my personal experience as an intern for three months in the education department of the PGC (Peggy Guggenheim Collection). This experience has not only piqued my interest in the complicated and still much-discussed figure of Peggy Guggenheim, giving rise to this research. Besides, these three months have marked the meaning of this research through the opportunity provided to me to be able to discuss directly with the staff of the museum, most of it composed by women, about the special feeling of intimacy and closeness to Peggy that you feel inside the walls of Palazzo Venier.

The final section of the chapter, through the analysis of two exhibitions held in autumn 2019 and interviews with Louise Chignac and Grazina Subelyte, aims to shed light on two lesser-known periods of Peggy Guggenheim's life, Guggenheim Jeune in London and the last thirty years of life the other. Peggy Guggenheim's legacy is certainly present in her home, but she still fascinates and influences experts and art lovers to this day.

### **3.1.1. House museum or museum-house?<sup>60</sup>**

Peggy Guggenheim had a shrewd intuition when she decided in 1969 to donate her collection and palace to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. In this way she entrusted her wealth to an organizational structure that could guarantee continuity, financial resources and professionalism. Thanks to this decision, today this museum is part of one of the most dynamic and extensive museum organizations in the world.

Upon her death, the Guggenheim Foundation, taking responsibility and administration of the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni and the collection, made a series of concrete structural improvements and consolidations to secure the future of the museum, as was promised to Peggy at the time of her donation. At the beginning of the eighties the main concern of the Guggenheim Museum in Venice was to turn Palazzo Venier dei Leoni and its collection from house-museum into a cultural institution. In this regard, initially, there was a debate, within the Foundation, whether to maintain the original form of house-museum or create a real museum and, since Peggy had left no condition on the future identity of the museum – except for the interdiction to dismember the collection -, the Foundation decided to create a

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<sup>60</sup> The writing and research process of the following chapter and those relating to the exhibition activity of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection was possible thanks to the information and data provided by interviews that I could do during my three months permanence at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, since there is no bibliography to refer to.

museum-house, that recalls the original set-up.

Even if the Foundation wanted to maintain and reuse the spaces of the house, by adapting them to exhibition halls, this would not have been possible anyway since the house was only partially suitable to host an audience. As early as 1951, when Peggy opened her house to the public, the museum was reduced only to the corridors, the entrance, the basement (although barely used due to the humidity), and to the Barchessa. The only room of her private apartments which was part of the exhibition spaces was the dining room. Her private rooms, those exposed to the Grand Canal, were instead all closed to the public and did not contain masterpieces.

While respecting the constraint of not dismembering the collection, the rooms were not in a position to accommodate the general public: the lighting was inadequate, the alarm system was weak and the vision of the works of art had to be structurally improved. The entire restoration of the building, therefore, included the installation of the most advanced air conditioning and safety systems, as well as the arrangement of lighting and installation. The spaces were restructured: while maintaining domestic dimensions, they are now adequate to enhance the works of art. The renovation project continued in 1988 when the Guggenheim Museum had the opportunity to rent the adjacent building: this allowed in 1993 the opening of a new wing of the museum including new spaces used for the temporary exhibition and another wing of the garden.

The expansion of the museum, still in place today, is the necessary response to the ever-increasing number of visitors: in the last ten years this number has doubled, making the Peggy Guggenheim Collection the most visited private museum in Italy. The expansion of the museum, doubled in size since 1980, did not destroy that intimacy and close connection with the itinerary and the lively personality of Peggy Guggenheim, which remains the center of the inspiration of the museum. Valuing Peggy's historical presence and life inside the museum is one of the development strategies implemented by the management of the Foundation. What urges the curiosity and interest of the public is precisely the tie of the extraordinary collection to the person of Peggy Guggenheim.

The identity of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection can be understood in two different ways: as the autonomous result of its creator, who has dedicated thirty years of

her extraordinary life to increase and give it vitality, in which aspects of contemporary art including Cubism, Abstractism, and Surrealism, supplemented by post-war painting in America and Europe, emerge as the dominant movements. The other way of understanding the collection is as part of the continuous and unfinished development of the Collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, to which Peggy Guggenheim's works now belong. Viewed in this light, Peggy's collection offers new potential to her uncle's collection. The Peggy Guggenheim collection, although well integrated into the structure of the Guggenheim Foundation, is still an autonomous identity. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the collection is located in Peggy's Venetian house but even more so to the fact that, like the Tannhauser Collection, and unlike the other works of the New York Museum, was formed by a single collector and transferred globally to the Guggenheim Foundation.

The Venetian collection, which we can refer to as the Italian branch of the Guggenheim Foundation, legally belongs to the Foundation and the relationship between the parties is defined by the current legal structure, according to which the two museums constitute two operational departments of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, forming together, albeit in different places, a single collection. The Venice Museum depends on New York and all short-term and long-term strategies regarding loans, cultural planning and economic management and all the decisions are taken by the director of the Foundation with the approval of the curators. The management of the Italian museum is instead entrusted to a replacement of the New York director (the Deputy Director) who directs a series of departments within the museum and coordinates the exhibition program, previously approved by the director. Starting in 1985, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, taking advantage of the possibility of having two high-quality collections complementing it, began to develop projects intended to move between the two locations – New York and Venice – through a joint exhibition - offer, creating a qualitative concentration that few art museums in the world can match.

### **3.1.2. The permanent collection**

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, therefore, houses the collection of paintings and sculptures that the famous American collector managed to create between 1910 and 1960, to create a museum collection. Although the collection is quantitatively contained (about

326 works), it is exceptional on a quality point of view because it documents the main historical avant-gardes (Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Abstractism, Surrealism and Russian Constructivism) and numerous aspects of post-war art in the U.S. and Europe.<sup>61</sup>

The donation, in fact, did not include just first-rate testimonies of 20th-century art, but only about 150 works represented true masterpieces and were significant of the twentieth century. The rest included works of African and Oceanic art and some totally incongruous works. Peggy Guggenheim herself, at the time she opened her home to the public, used to exhibit those works that she considered real masterpieces. Similarly, today we find in the halls, which once served as Peggy's private rooms, those works that significantly document Cubism, Italian Futurism, Surrealism, Abstract Art, and the other main movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, it is Peggy's very specific and unique taste to be the protagonist, her specific way of mixing Surrealism and Abstraction.

The same order of the museum path, inside the palace, wants to respect the set-up that Peggy made even if today the physical placement of the works takes advantage of larger spaces. Peggy in fact grouped the works according to the movements, also following a chronological arrangement (Cubism, Abstract, Metaphysics and then Surrealism, American Expressionism and European Post-War Art). Peggy's former home thus serves as a historical showcase of the different artistic poetics of the 20th century, each placed in one of the eight exhibition halls.

The museum's path includes part of the furniture that belonged to Peggy and photographs, taken from the famous collector's private albums, which show her in the different rooms of the Palazzo. The inclusion of these objects, linked to her private life, contributes to enhancing Peggy's historical presence inside this house and attempts to recreate "lived" environments. In fact, as you move between the paintings and sculptures of the Guggenheim house, you can breathe a peculiar air, different from that of a simple museum. This makes the visit, along with the atmosphere that has been recreated, turn out to be more like a walk through a wonderful mansion and a private garden, rather than a forced path through the halls of a museum, often overflowing with works.

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<sup>61</sup> The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation financed before Peggy's death the creation of a scientific catalogue of the collection. Published in 1985, it remains the work of fundamental research and consultation on the collection: the Rudenstine Catalogue.

The exhibition does not grant educational equipment for the works on display and this responds to a choice of the director/curator who prefers to leave room for the work-collector bond giving priority to visual enjoyment instead of didactic. This orientation also wants to be interpretive of Peggy's proposal and her exhibition activity: Peggy, in fact, put numbers next to the works and then the viewer, if she-he wanted to know the title, the artist and the date of composition of the work, had to buy and consult the catalog that Peggy had made and was selling. Even today the role of explaining the works is guaranteed through the sale of catalogs, audio guides, guided tours that, according to the American museum concept, are not only sources of income, but are mainly means to ensure the educational purpose of the museum.

Since becoming head of the collection in 1980, Philip Rylands' museum policy has been that of respecting the original appearance of the collection, while enriching it with works by contemporary artists. Important is the storage of a selection of the famous Gianni Mattioli Collection<sup>62</sup>, which took place in 1997, including 26 masterpieces of the main exponents of the Italian Futurism - Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, Carlo Carrà - and some works by Giorgio Morandi from his early days. The most contemporary artworks that are part of the collection are due to the Shulhof's donation in 2012 of around 80 works of European and American post-war art. The walk through the museum ends in the garden, which houses the Nasher Sculpture Garden which includes modern sculptures from the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and works from Raymond and Patsy Nash's collection (Dallas, Texas).

The current director of the PGC is Karole Vail, granddaughter of Peggy Guggenheim: the museum now directed, once again, by a woman member of the family.

### **3.1.3. The temporary exhibitions**

In addition to the exhibition of the permanent collection, the museum is also engaged in a wider exhibition program. This shows that the Venetian collection is not only a blocked historical reality but a vital reality in continuous evolution. New works have come over the years thanks to new purchases and donations. In most cases the acquisitions took place at

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<sup>62</sup> Born in Milan, Gianni Mattioli (1903-1977) has created since 1920 a collection of Futurist painting and sculpture that included the greatest artistic exponents of this movement.

the same time as the temporary exhibitions and involved significant gaps in the collection. The general criterion in the policy of acquisitions is in fact to choose works that complement the permanent collection and that, together with Peggy's masterpieces, better information of the taste of the era (works by artists that Peggy had known or artists she had not known directly and wanted to buy works of).

The temporary exhibition activity, made possible satisfactorily only since 1993 with the opening of the new exhibition spaces, is generally the deputy place for the critical reflection over artists, themes and movements of the permanent collection. Usually the temporary exhibitions are consistent with the collection because they are built around an author, work or an artistic current preserved there or to deepen particular aspects of the same permanent collection.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation usually organizes traveling exhibitions, which are shown in the different museum venues that the Foundation owns and manages. It happens, for example, that an exhibition, organized by the Solomon Guggenheim in New York, then moves to the museum in Bilbao. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, in this regard, deviates from the global program of the Foundation because the exhibitions created in Venice are created exclusively for this museum and at the same time it does not host the exhibitions made in the other venues. Only on very few occasions, there have been cases of synergy and harmony that have led, even in Venice, to exhibitions made in another Guggenheim.

The incompatibility between the Venetian museum and the other Guggenheim venues lies in the presence of more historical background in the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. As already introduced earlier in this chapter, the strong personality of Peggy Guggenheim left her sign in her museum, and its scenography helps the visitors to have the impression of an immortal Peggy Guggenheim. I decided to include among the annexes of this research interviews of three women currently working at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. These personal interviews record the importance of being a woman now and working in this magic space in Venice.

### **3.2.1. Heritage of Peggy Guggenheim**

The conclusive chapter of this thesis aims to enquire the heritage left by Peggy Guggenheim. Not only did she strongly influenced the art world of her era, we remain in debt to her for her collection and her role as art savior from the sinking of the Second World War. I had the occasion to visit two exhibitions that took place during 2019 on Peggy and her life. In London, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, I interviewed the gallery manager of Ordovas London, about their exhibition: *Peggy in London*. In Venice, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, I long discussed with the assistant curator Grazina Subelyte on the exhibition *L'Ultima Dogaressa* and on the relation of Peggy with women artists of her century. This final section is the product of these two interesting debates.

### **3.2.2. Peggy in London**

The Ordovas gallery hosted an exhibition in autumn 2019 illustrating Peggy Guggenheim's work as a gallery owner in London in the late 1930s. Louise Chignac, manager of the London gallery, discussed with me about some aspects concerning the exhibition.

The interview began with a commentary on a sentence, uttered by the founder and director of the gallery, Pilar Ordovas, in issue 4 of *The Catalogue*, a journal for contemporary art. "I think that the experiment of Guggenheim Jeune laid the foundations for everything that happened afterward and what defined Peggy Guggenheim and her collecting later on".

The desire to put this exhibition in place is not commercial, but of a historical one: located in the beautiful London borough of Mayfair, Ordovas would be just around the corner from the famous Cork Street, where for eighteen months Peggy Guggenheim organized cutting-edge exhibitions in her gallery. As discussed earlier in this research, Peggy's work as a gallery and dealer is not given the due weight compared to the attention of critics who focused on her grandiose Venetian collection. Peggy Guggenheim's businesswoman skills have often been doubted, pointing out that in reality the main choices in her artistic career were always taken by her loyal friends and advisors. If, through the section of the previous chapter on Peggy's artistic identity, this myth has been debunked and Art of This Century and its contribution to the rise of Abstract Expressionism has been properly given the correct weight, very little is known about the

first experiment. Pilar Ordovas sees in Guggenheim Jeune the beginning of Peggy Guggenheim's career, her approach to contemporary art and the introduction to her life as an art addict.

There are not many sources concerning the exhibitions held at 30 Cork Street, it was in fact necessary, in order to organize this exhibition, to contact private collectors and to dig into almost non-existent archives. In this neighborhood that was the beginning of everything, modern art first arrived in the late 1930s and bringing this story to light seems like the necessary introduction to dealing with Peggy Guggenheim's difficult artistic identity.

As for the artworks on display, the two artists represented are Yves Tanguy and Jean/Hans Arp, who were chosen for their strong symbolic character. On display are works that were sold during shows dedicated to these artists, such as Tanguy's *En le temps menaçant* (In menacing times) 1929, *Sans titre* (untitled) 1931 and *Titre Inconnu* (Title unknown) 1933. Also exhibited for the first time is Jean (Hans) Arp's 1946 *Flocons aux rayons jaunes* (Flakes with Yellow Rays). These two artists have a strong representative value withing the interest of Peggy Guggenheim in those years, focused on surrealism and abstraction. Peggy's first work was Arp's sculpture, while Tanguy's show was a major success for the gallery. Two rings, carved by Tanguy in 1937 in the wood of Peggy's house in Sussex, were also to symbolize their, albeit temporary, emotional bond. Invitations, catalogues, posters and plants from the gallery are also on display in an attempt to recreate the context in which Peggy operated in the late 1930s.

This exhibition represents the important attempt to rediscover in the first city that welcomed the artistic projects of Peggy Guggenheim, unknown to most, the adventure of the Guggenheim Jeune and the important legacy of this colorful character, which influenced the advent of modern art and its access beyond the English Channel.

### **3.2.3. L'Ultima Dogaressa<sup>63</sup>**

Palazzo Venier dei Leoni is one of the most visited tourist sites in Venice because of its universally well-known masterpieces, collected from the London period, to the famous works of Jackson Pollock, a prominent exponent of American abstract expressionism.

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<sup>63</sup> <https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/it/mostre-eventi/mostre/peggy-guggenheim-ultima-dogaressa/>

What happened to the collection from the demarcation line of the fundamental 1948 Biennale is unknown to the general public. Peggy spent the last 30 years of her life in Venice, a serene and happy period, during which she finally found accommodation for her works. The exhibition the Last Dogaressa<sup>64</sup> focuses on Peggy's often forgotten Venetian period.

In 1962 Peggy received honorary citizenship from the city of Venice and was acclaimed, following the tradition of the Venetian Dogi, the Last Dogaressa. This exhibition, housed in the new wing of the palace, purchased to host temporary exhibitions, shows the public Peggy's artistic action from 1948 onwards.

The various rooms of the exhibition are occupied first by the works of sculpture that were exhibited in the first exhibition held at the Palace, the exhibition of contemporary sculpture. This is followed by the Italian artists of which Peggy became a patron: Vedova, Bacci and Tancredi, known in the Venetian field – famous for these meetings remains the name of The Caffè Angelo, no longer existing, where the artistic encounters were held and where Peggy was soon introduced. The Fifties and Sixties were instead devoted to collecting English art, then moving, a decade later to Op and Kinetic Art. The last room of the exhibition houses works of the Cobra movement.

The curatorial choice of this exhibition, explains Grazina Subelyte, was dictated by conventional and experimental reasons, wanting to show visitors the most unpublished component of Peggy's collection, which did not focus only on the avant-garde and American art of the first post-war period. The art on display in the exhibition also aims to show works by female artists who were supported by Peggy, through exhibitions and acquisitions.

Speaking of this last, the conversation moved on to the women who were part of Peggy's life. She, strongly criticized for her adherence to the movement and the morality of the bohemian, is not remembered at all for good relations with women, friends or artists. Still, many were the "women of Peggy Guggenheim".

First, from the London period of Guggenheim Jeune Peggy made the decision to exhibit

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<sup>64</sup> So she was called, after becoming Venetian in effect in 1962, with honorary citizenship.

and support some women: to cite an example, the show dedicated to Rita Kernn-Larsen that took place between May 31 and June 18, 1938, was the first surrealist exhibition organized by Peggy in her Gallery in Cork Street.

Later, during the years of Art of This Century, we already had the opportunity to discuss the importance of the gallery to the modern American scene, which was not given great importance by other New York art institutions. Peggy Guggenheim organized two all-female dedicated exhibitions: Exhibition by 31 Women from January 5 to February 6, 1943, and The Women, from June 12 to July 7, 1945.

The first of the two exhibitions included women under the age of 30 – except for Djuna Barnes – of 16 different nationalities. Interesting is the press release on the exhibition, which states “Here then also is testimony to the fact that the creative ability of women is by no means restricted to the decorative vein as could be deduced from the history of art by women through the ages”<sup>65</sup>. The two exhibitions were a shocking representation of the quality of women's artworks, to which the reticent critic was not accustomed. In addition to these collective exhibitions, 12 Art of This Century exhibitions were dedicated to women, a third of the entire program. Names such as Irene R. Pereira, Frida Kahlo, Kay Sage, Leonora Carrington and Leonor Fini are remembered. Many of these women's works were exhibited in Venice during the period of this temporary exhibition last autumn.

Finally, the discussion with the exhibition's assistant curator ended on the theme of Peggy's myth and legacy, as well as her dubious role as a feminist. Grazina Subelyte first pointed out that only once freed from the ties of the avant-garde and her various advisers, Peggy was able to blossom in her role not only as a collector, as she is often only remembered, but also as a successful gallerist. Yet the term feminist itself does not appear appropriate for defining Peggy's personality, at least not with the characteristics that such a word still has today. Peggy Guggenheim states in her autobiography that she was a free woman before such a concept was even created. Peggy was a woman, lover of art but first of all a woman, with the weaknesses and feelings that this includes.

The Guggenheim's legacy is still strongly present in the palace that houses his

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<sup>65</sup> Press release, "Art by 31 Women at 'Art of This Century.'" American art exhibition catalogue collection, 1820–1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel N-429, frame 0171.

collection, but it is also permanently taken into account in the curatorial choices of the museum. The myth of Peggy is an energy that animates the entire team, mostly female, of the Foundation, but that is also transmitted to the public, who every day lingers to visit the living spaces of Peggy. A free, strong, sentimental woman and above all animated by her love for her collection, art, and artists, Peggy was one of the undisputed protagonists of the art world and of its revolution of the last century, marking an era.

## Conclusion

Marguerite Guggenheim was an enigmatic woman who tried for her entire life to find the pieces of her soul through the artworks of her collection. By doing so, she made us aware of an artistic era shaped by her shameless personality.

She was one of the mythical characters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the main protagonists, maybe unconscious of her impact on the art of the past century. The most extraordinary aspect related to her name is that, with Peggy Guggenheim, a unique private collection of paintings, sculptures, and collages of acclaimed masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, between the old and the new continent, became part of the emblematic space of an entire époque of esthetic revolutions, the years of the historical avant-gardes.

Identified as nothing less than “patroness”, she was undoubtedly the one of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century art. A baroque word, yet suitable for a collector that picked up artworks for her own pleasure, helped artists and funded a museum open to the public.

The paintings she bought became part of her everyday life and nothing could have separated the art she loved from the artists that were making it alive. There have been several definitions applied to Peggy: some of the most common are “the eccentric millionaire”, “Venetian lioness”, “last Dogaressa”, “legendary Peggy”, “the men eater” and “the last intellectual nomad between the two worlds”.

She never wanted to renounce to her strong thirst for freedom and never succeeded in making order among her passions and feelings. Her way of collecting was related to her being a nomad, her seductive weapons and her brave initiatives in the artistic field, feeling an immense responsibility towards the art and its creators. She certainly had the contacts, the means and the supports to build all she did.

All these elements have been necessary: courage and intuition, generosity and humility, money and time, historical sense and esthetic qualities. She never escaped from shocking experiences and for anything and anyone she restrained her need of innovation, rebellion and curiosity that made her find herself piece by piece, in the same artworks she was

collecting. She confessed of having always stayed on the surface of a life that did not grant her that missing key to reach happiness: love. She slowly became a walking legend: flattered wooed and feared, anchored to the Serenissima by a sort of magic bond. In the silence of Venice, Peggy regret not to be a great writer as a lot of her friends, but it is in Venice that she spent hours and hours writing her memories, those that exploded in a scandal and that tell about a brave, stubborn, rebel woman, deeply lonely. She was a woman that succeeded in realizing her dream: leaving a unique and enviable heritage to Venice.

She often lived above her possibilities and was not, as was usually considered, the rich heiress of the Guggenheims. Surely not poor, but money was never enough and to acquire the masterpieces of her collection she made several sacrifices. She suffered the lack of a never-ending quantity of money and, as she said, she was afflicted by a neurotic syndrome of being a “poor Guggenheim”. She was a capricious hunter, practical and impulsive, against any kind of prejudice, using her cunning to revenge the past offenses, demonstrating her family to be a “real” Guggenheim too, putting together a magnificent collection of high artistic quality, to the point of exceeding the American collection, created by limitless means.

The feeling and passion to defend art never extinguish. There were four geographical cardinal points of her life: New York, Paris, London and Venice. Several have been the reference, fundamental people of her life, but just one became her mentor, Marcel Duchamp, who introduced her and walked her to the absolute success, toward an immortal fate.

“Art of this Century”, her legendary museum-gallery, remains a unique and one-time experiment in modern art history. Nothing similar was ever seen before, it soon became the most vibrant and alive center of the American avant-garde. It could be interpreted as a fragment of history, a summary of the events that happened in New York between 1942 and 1947: strong was the influence Peggy had on those events. She was the patroness of the Americans, that have a special gratitude debt towards her. She was unforgettable patroness for the Europeans and memorable creator of a bridge that connected the European art, both surrealist and abstract, to the new generation of American artists.

She was encouraged to put her collection together by Read and Duchamp, and the fact of having collected cubist art, abstract and surrealist with the same determination remains a peculiarity, probably the most extraordinary of her collection. This aspect provides in fact a sense of accomplishment and originality that makes this collection unique among the ones of her time. She certainly could be surrounded by well-informed advisors, blessed by a privileged point of view. Marcel Duchamp, Herbert Read, Nelly Van Doesburg, Putzel: they have all been good friends and formidable guides.

In Venice she loved the city of the literary myth, and maybe for this reason she was always disappointed by the Venetians of that time. She adored going out on a *gondola* and walking around the narrow streets with her dogs, but she was never understood by the locals that, uninterested in modern art, never realized the importance of her magic reign, and kept on considering her as a rich eccentric American. Still, she was a unique and almost fantastically fairy character for the city.

This research is not a celebration for Peggy Guggenheim. On the contrary her story is inserted in a more complicated context which aims to clarify her role in the arts. If – as shown in the first chapter of this thesis – she was not the first neither the only woman that craved freedom and autonomy, her empowerment in the society of her era is possible thanks to her role in the development of modern art. The Guggenheims were already famous patrons of the art, but what she tried to do was a revolution.

We cannot forget about all the existing literature that studies her biography, but the lack of completeness in it is what this research started from. Of course the lovers and sufferance of Peggy Guggenheim's life are fundamentals to the collector she became, but her identity as an American woman and Jewish made her a victim of her time, making it necessary to struggle to avoid the critics of the society she was part of.

Some chapters of her life are still in the shadows and her role as a dealer, both in London and New York, are few of them. A real businesswoman, more than just a collector and patroness of the art and its artists, she changed the course of the history of American art. Her life is deeply connected to her collection's identity as to the identity of Palazzo Venier dei Leoni.

The last title of her biography is *Out of This Century*: at the end of her life Peggy Guggenheim was ready to discuss the story and her path inside it. Her heritage is still strong, influencing great women of *this* century.

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## **Annex A: Interviews**

### **Interview to Ophélie Rodier, Intern Coordinator**

#### **1. Role at the PGC? How did you get here?**

At the PGC, I am the coordinator of the interns. I started as an intern nine months ago. At the end of my four-month internship, I was called back by the Education Department for the role I now hold.

#### **2. A special aspect of Peggy's collection or her personality that impressed you? My thesis in fact hypothesizes the peculiarity of the construction of this collection. I would like to know what, in your opinion, made it so special?**

Most of the works were bought at a time of great political instability in Europe, that is, at the beginning of the Second World War. At this critical moment, it amazes me that Peggy Guggenheim, American and Jewish, was able to buy more than 150 works, one a day as she writes in her memoirs, and bring them to the United States. It has saved so many works from their destruction! She was also very important in supporting artists: both to go to America (Max Ernst, André Breton etc.), and to escape the Nazi threat (Victor Brauner). For this main reason, Peggy's collection is, in my opinion, special and unique.

#### **3. An anecdote of Peggy's life or related to the collection that you find unique and representative?**

The Louvre's anecdote is interesting. She asked the museum if it could protect her works during the conflict. The Louvre refused because they were too modern and, of course, already had difficulties in saving its own masterpieces. This translates her determination to save her collection but also reflects the lack of interest in the artworks of contemporary artists at the time. She, on the other hand, had already recognized the importance of these works as

a testimony! It is representative of a collection built on the always underlying idea of supporting artists and contemporary creation.

**4. Peggy, a "feminist" ahead of time?**

Peggy has supported many women artists (Leonor Fini, Leonora Carrington etc.). A very important date is that of the exhibition "31 women" organized in 1943 in her gallery Art of this Century. Unfortunately, there are few female works preserved in the PGC collection!

**5. Living in this palace many hours of your life, do you still feel this strong female presence in these walls?**

A majority of the staff is female, including our director, Karole Vail, granddaughter of Peggy Guggenheim. I'd say that the female presence is omnipresent in the PGC!

**6. Favorite work in the collection? Why?**

My favorite work is *The Empire of Light* painted by Magritte in 1953-54. I like the subject and the size of the painting very much. As you look at the work, you feel the same feeling that you have when you find yourself in the dark: your eyes get used to it and the objects appear. This is a work in perpetual creation!

**7. How do you plan to renew and continue the project of this museum? Innovation or tradition?**

This year is very important for the PGC. We celebrate the opening of the collection to the public, 1949, and the anniversary of the death of Peggy Guggenheim, 1979. Therefore, the education department gave us the material to reflect about her presence within the collection. For example, we've changed the presentations to the audience that are now made by reading Peggy's autobiography. In my opinion, there must be tradition and innovation. Today, the challenge of the museum is to reread and be inspired by the uniqueness of this collection created to the image of an Avant-guard collector.

**8. Do you think there is still a heritage linked to Peggy in the world of contemporary art, speaking above all about the female universe?**

In my opinion, the heritage left by Peggy but also by other collectors of her time is to support contemporary art, art in creation and its artists. Speaking of the female universe, I would say that Peggy is a person admired by current women who today have much more chance to create their own collection (for example, Patrizia Sandretto).

**9. How do you justify Peggy's strong desire for independence from the fact that she has always been associated with men throughout her career, in some cases lovers of whom she has shown herself we could say succubae?**

It's not so paradoxical. Attending men, she felt independent. Flanking with men, she did not mean to be addicted to them, she always made the final decision to buy a work.

## **Interview to Patrizia Martignon, Visitor services department**

### **1. Role at the PGC? How did you get here?**

I'm Patrizia Martignon and I'm in charge of the Visitor Services department. I deal with the reception of visitors in all its aspects: from the issuance of the ticket (which interns and colleagues deal with), to Membership (registrations, renewals and various activities), I manage and organize guided tours for individuals and groups and much more. I arrived at the museum as a maternity replacement for a girl who worked at the shop.

### **2. A special aspect of Peggy's collection or her personality that impressed you? My thesis in fact hypothesizes the peculiarity of the construction of this collection. I would like to know what, in your opinion, made it so special?**

From my first day I was fascinated by the place, from the sculpture garden to the rooms that house the Collection that remind of the house where Peggy lived. What I think made and makes the Collection special, is the passion with which Peggy chose her works and the love she spent to protect them and always have them with her. I was also struck by her generosity and sensitivity in helping young artists to emerge by giving them the opportunity to express their art.

### **3. An anecdote of Peggy's life or related to the collection that you find unique and representative?**

How she struggled to protect her works and friends from racial persecution by fleeing to America and then her return to Venice in her first exhibition at the Art Biennale of '48.

### **4. Peggy, a "feminist" ahead of time?**

Absolutely yes!

### **5. Living in this palace many hours of your life, do you still feel this strong female presence in these walls?**

Her presence is alive more than ever.

**6. Favorite work within the collection? Why?**

"Bird in Space" and "Măiastră" by Constantin Brancusi. I am fascinated by the shapes and the material.

**7. How do you plan to renew and continue the project of this museum? Innovation or tradition?**

The museum is constantly being renovated and the projects are always linked to the figure of Peggy. As far as my department is concerned, we follow the decisions and content that are developed by the different departments.

## **Interview to Federica Gastaldello, Education Department**

### **1. Role at the PGC? How did you get here?**

Federica Gastaldello. Education Department. Specifically, I deal with the internship part, family programs and accessibility. I did an internship in 2014 and then I continued to work in the museum on various projects and various tasks until in August 2018 they made me a permanent contract.

### **2. A special aspect of Peggy's collection or her own personality that impressed you? My thesis in fact hypothesizes the peculiarity of the construction of this collection. I would like to know what, in your opinion, made it so special?**

I do not want to sound trivial but what makes it so special and unique is its being a compendium of the avant-garde. Few movements have been excluded and the same can be said of the most significant artists. This is surely due to her fine intelligence and that of her collaborators and friends. The other interesting aspect the collection evolves with Peggy herself and you can well see it in the purchase of works by Venetian artists in recent years.

### **3. An anecdote of Peggy's life or related to the collection that you find unique and representative?**

I would certainly say the story of Jackson Pollock's Murales painted for Peggy's 1943 New York apartment that is now at the University of Iowa Museum of Art, but which returned to Venice, after a long cleanup work by the Getty Conservation Institute in 2015. The work was donated before the arrival of the collector in Venice and entered the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni only after his death in 2015. It is an emblematic work of Peggy's Collection and above all of her way of supporting artists.

### **4. Peggy, a "feminist" ahead of time?**

Peggy definitely feminist but I wouldn't say before time. She lived in an era that, although with difficulty, welcomed and had to interface with women like her. Just think of Coco Chanel, Helen Clay Frick, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and many other contemporary of Peggy. I would say a feminist of her time

**5. Living in this palace many hours of your life, do you still feel this strong female presence in these walls?**

Working here I definitely feel the strong presence of a story to tell, but it is not just a female story from my point of view. Everything that surrounds us is in fact full of a history that must be told and that creates a unique atmosphere in the museum and among colleagues.

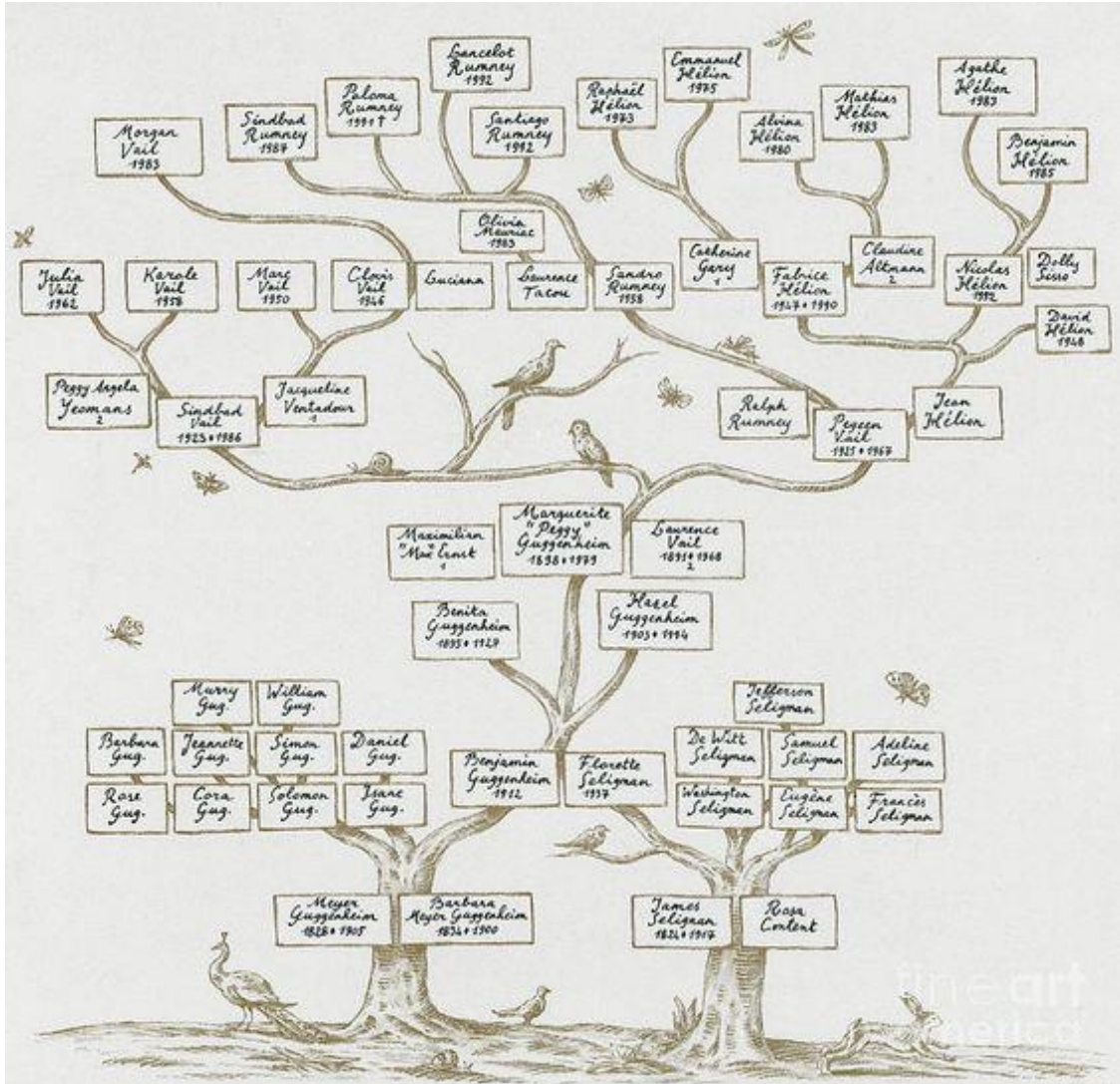
**6. Favorite work within the collection? Why?**

I'd say Tancredi's works. My vision has changed a lot since I did the internship, and this is due to the in-depth study of the collection made in these years. I like the artist's light touch and his way of portraying Venice and its suspended atmosphere.

**7. How do you plan to renew and continue the project of this museum? Innovation or tradition?**

I think the two are inextricably linked, especially in the case of a collection like ours linked to Peggy and her story. From my point of view, you should always keep in mind the tradition and history of the museum to innovate and try to engage an increasingly large audience and to educate it in art. In the case of our department we are working very hard to reach the audience of teenagers, but also of people who have different histories and experiences such as migrants, elderly people and ect.

Annex B: Gallery of images



Guggenheim Family Tree, retrieved from <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/1-guggenheim-family-tree-science-source.html?product=canvas-print>



Peggy Guggenheim at the entrance to Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, Venice, 1967. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogaresa (2019).



Peggy Guggenheim, photographed by Man Ray, Paris 1924 -1925. PGC Archive.



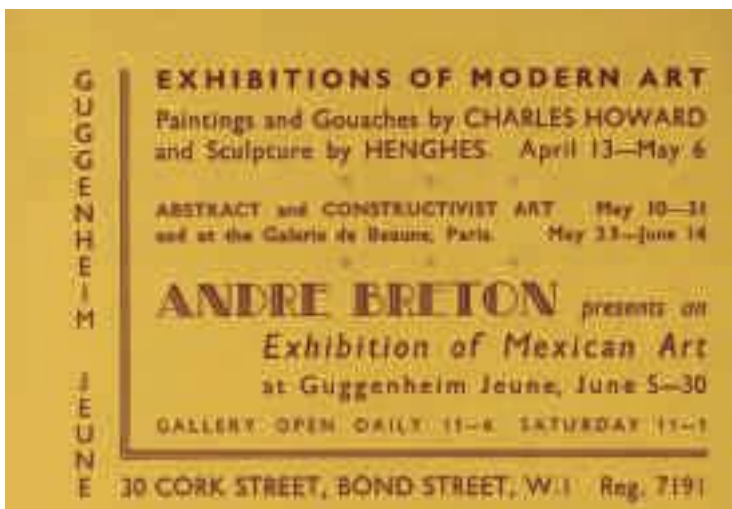
Peggy Guggenheim, Laurence Vail and their two children from © 2017 IAM by MADE Artis Communication. Retrieved from <https://madeartiscomunicat.wixsite.com/iam-contemporaryart/single-post/2017/08/06/LINCREDIBILE-VITA-E-COLLEZIONE-DI-PEGGY-GUGGENHEIM>



Herbert Read and Peggy Guggenheim, London, 1939. On wall behind them: Yves Tanguy, *Le Soleil dans son écriin* (The Sun in Its Jewel Case), 1937, detail. Photo: Gisèle Freund. Retrieved from *L'Ultima Dogaressa* (2019).



Exhibition announcement, Paintings, Water-Colour Drawings and Gouaches by Wassily Kandinsky, Guggenheim Jeune, London, 1938. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogaressa (2019).



Exhibition advertisement, Exhibitions of Modern Art and Exhibition of Mexican Art, from London Bulletin, no. 15 (April 1939), p. 1. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogaressa (2019).



Peggy Guggenheim in the apartment of Kay Sage, Paris, ca. 1940. Left to right: Robert Delaunay, *Fenêtres ouvertes simultanément 1ère partie, 3e motif* (Windows Open Simultaneously 1st Part, 3rd Motif), 1912 (detail), and Constantin Brancusi, *Maiistra*, ca. 1912. Photo: Rogi André. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogressa (2019).



Peggy Guggenheim in the Surrealist Gallery, Art of This Century, New York, ca. 1942. Left to right: René Magritte, *La Voix des airs* (Voice of Space), 1931; Leonor Fini, *The Shepherdess of the Sphinxes*, 1941; Leonora Carrington, *The Horses of Lord Candlestick*, 1938, private collection; and Joan Miró, *Femme assise II* (Seated Woman II), February 27, 1939. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogressa (2019).



The Surrealist Gallery, Art of This Century, New York, 1942. On the walls, left to right: Max Ernst, *Le Baiser* (The Kiss), 1927; *La Toilette de la mariée* (Attirement of the Bride), 1940; *La Forêt* (The Forest), 1927 – 28; *The Antipope*, 1941 – 42; on correalist furniture, left: Alberto Giacometti, *Femme égorgée* (Woman with Her Throat Cut), 1932 (cast 1940); and *Femme qui marche* (Woman Walking), 1936. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogressa (2019).



The Surrealist Gallery, Art of This Century, New York, 1942. On the walls, left: Max Ernst, *The Antipope*, 1941 – 42; and *The Entire City*, 1936 – 37; center: Paul Delvaux, *L'Aurore (The Break of Day)*, July 1937; right: Pablo Picasso, *L'Atelier (The Studio)*, 1928; and Giorgio de Chirico, *La Tour rouge (The Red Tower)*, 1913; on correalist furniture, left: Alberto Giacometti, *Femme égorgée (Woman with Her Throat Cut)*, 1932 (cast 1940). Photo: Berenice Abbott. Retrieved from *L'Ultima Dogaressa* (2019).



Artists in Peggy Guggenheim's town house, Beekman Place, New York, fall 1942. Left to right, standing: Jimmy Ernst, Peggy Guggenheim, John Ferren, Marcel Duchamp, and Piet Mondrian; seated: Max Ernst, Amédée Ozenfant, André Breton, Fernand Léger, and Berenice Abbott; on floor: Stanley William Hayter, Leonora Carrington, Frederick Kiesler, and Kurt Seligmann. Photo: Herman Landshoff. Retrieved from *L'Ultima Dogressa* (2019).



Peggy Guggenheim and Jackson Pollock in front of his Mural, 1943, which was installed in the entrance hall of Guggenheim's house at 155 East 61st Street, New York, ca. 1946. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogarressa (2019).



Installation view, the collection of Peggy Guggenheim displayed in the Greek Pavilion, Venice Biennale, June 6–September 30, 1948. Center, on back wall: Jackson Pollock, *Circumcision*, January 1946. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogaresa (2019).



Installation view, the entrance to the Greek Pavilion where the collection of Peggy Guggenheim was displayed, Venice Biennale, June 6–September 30, 1948. The display presented abstract works at left and figurative works at right, and Antoine Pevsner, *Surface développable* (Developable Surface), 1941, at center. Retrieved from L'Ultima Dogaresa (2019).



Carlo Scarpa and Peggy Guggenheim in the Greek Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, June 6–September 30, 1948. Behind them, left to right: Joan Miró, *Femme assise II (Seated Woman II)*, February 27, 1939; and Pablo Picasso, *La Baignade (On the Beach)*, February 12, 1937



Peggy Guggenheim on the Grand Canal terrace of Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, Venice, early 1950s. Photo: Roloff Beny



Peggy Guggenheim in the library of Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, Venice, 1960s



The garden of Palazzo Venier dei Leoni with the barchessa in the background, Venice, 1967. In the foreground, Fritz Koenig, Chariot (Biga), 1957. Photo: Gianni Berengo Gardin




CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN Entrance Gates to the Palazzo, 1961 Iron and colored glass, two parts, 277 × 90 cm; 277 × 91.2 cm Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice 76.2553 PG 203



Peggy Guggenheim in the dining room of Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, Venice, 1960s. On the walls, left to right: Jean Metzinger, *Au Vélodrome* (At the Velodrome), 1912; and Gino Severini, *Mare=Ballerina* (Sea=Dancer), January 1914



Peggy Guggenheim in her bedroom at Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, Venice, 1960s. Left to right: Francis Bacon, *Study for Chimpanzee*, March 1957; and Alexander Calder, *Silver Bedhead*, Winter 1946, detail. Photo: Roloff Beny

  
**IL CONSIGLIO COMUNALE DI VENEZIA**  
 CODIFICAZIONE  
**CITTADINANZA ONORARIA**  
 di  
**PEGGY GUGGENHEIM**  
 CON LA SEGUENTE MOTIVAZIONE:

LA SIGNORE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM APPARTIENE AD UNA DELLE PIÙ ILLUSTRI FAMIGLIE DEGLI STATI UNITI ED È DIPLOMATA, TRA L'ALTRO, DI SOLOGNO R. GUGGENHEIM, CHE HA FATTO COSTRUIRE A NEW YORK, SUL PROGETTO DI WRIGHT, IL FAMOSO CAUSEO D'ARTE MODERNA CHE TUTTO INTERESSE SOSPICIA DEGLI CORRENTI ARTISTI DI TUTTO IL MONDO. LA SIGNORE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM HA INIZIATO NEL 1938 A RACCOLGERE LE PIÙ IMPORTANTI OPERE DI PITTURA E SCULTURA CHE DOCUMENTANO GLI INIZI E GLI SVILUPPI DEL MOVIMENTO SURREALISTA E DI QUELLO ASTRATTO E DELL'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA.

SEMPLICE MA ONTOLOGICA RIGOROSA IN PARCOLE CITTÀ D'EUROPA E D'AMERICA, LA COLLEZIONISTA, CON GRANDE NOVEZZA E DEDICAZIONE, E RIGOROSA PROGRISSA DEL VOLGERE D'UNA DECINA D'ANNI ALGIDE DELLE PIÙ SIGNIFICATIVE E PREZIOSE OPERE D'ARTE DEL NOSTRO TEMPO. LA COLLEZIONE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM È OGGI DIVISA IN PIÙ DI TRECENTI CAUSE D'ARTE MODERNA D'EUROPA E D'AMERICA PER LA PARTE SCIENTIFICAMENTE DELLA COLLEZIONE E PER LA PARTE DELLA SUA DOCUMENTAZIONE. A QUESTO RISULTATO LA SIGNORE GUGGENHEIM È Pervenuta DOPO SOLO ATTRAVERSO ALCUNI FORTUNATI ACQUISTI, CON ALCHE PAVORE CON LAICITÀ, COLLEZIONE SUGLI INDIRIZZI PIÙ ATTUALI, ALCUNI GIOVANI ARTISTI DI SUGGERIMENTO IMMEDIATAMENTE RICONOSCIUTI.

LA SIGNORE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM PRESENTA PER LA PRIMA VOLTA LA SUA COLLEZIONE IN ITALIA ALLA MAGGIORAZIONE DELLA BIENNALE DEL 1948, IN UN PALAZZO ALLESTITO DAL PRO. CARLO SCARPA. LA COLLEZIONE, CHE NEL 1948 COSTAVA CINQUANTADUE OPERE, È SUBITO IN QUESTI ANNI CON IL GUSTO E LA SICUREZZA DI SCELTA DI CHI SI È FORGIATO CON IL TEMPO UNA PERSONALE VISIONE DELL'ARTE D'OGGI ED OGGI LE OPERE CHE DE PAVORE SONO OLTRE DIECECI. DOPO ALCHE APPROPRIE ESPOSIZIONI DELLA COLLEZIONE IN ITALIA E ALL'ESTERO, PEGGY GUGGENHEIM VOLLE CHE LE SUE OPERE RAGGIUNGESSERO LA VENEZIA, CITTÀ CHE LA COLLEZIONISTA CONSIDERA SUBITO COME SUA SECONDA PATRIA, E A TALE SCOPO ACQUISTO NEL 1951 IL PALAZZO VERDE DEI LEON SUL CANAL GRANDE, IL SUO PALAZZO VENEZIA IN, CON DOBLE GUSTO, COSTITUENDO UNO SPAZIO AI VISITATORI COME UN QUASISI ALTRO CAUSEO DELLA CITTÀ. E IN QUESTI ANNI HA COSTRUITO UNA DELLE PIÙ IMPORTANTI ATTIVITÀ DI VENEZIA PER L'ACQUISTO D'ARTE MODERNA. IL PALAZZO, COME SPESSE VOLTE HA DICHIARATO LA SIGNORE GUGGENHEIM, È INTENDIMENTO ORGANIZZATO CON UN PENSIERO, DOVE FIGURANO LA RACCOLTA D'ARTE MODERNA DEL COMUNE DI VENEZIA.

INMOLTE L'ESISTE DEL 1951 VERDE ESPOSTI A OT PENSIERO UNA SEZIONE DELLA RACCOLTA PEGGY GUGGENHEIM, RAPPRESENTANTE LE CORRENTI ARTISTICHE PIÙ VIVE DELLA PITTURA MODERNA CONTEMPORANEA ED UN GRUPPO DI GIOVANI PITTORI MODERNI INTRINSECI DELLA COLLEZIONISTA. TRA QUESTI APPARTENONO ALCUNI ARTISTI DIVERSI IN SEGUITO OGGI DOPO SOLO IN AMERICA MA ANCHE IN EUROPA, COME WILLIAM BAZZOTTI, CARL ROTHKO E JACKSON POLLOCK, E PER QUEST'ALTRO LA SIGNORE GUGGENHEIM PREPARO SUBITO DOPO UNA VOLTA MOSTRA IN ALCHE SALE DELL'UNA POPOLAZIONE CHE COSTITUISCE IL GRANDE LANCIO EUROPEO DEL PITTORE, RICONOSCIUTO PER COME UNO DEI MIGLIORI ARTISTI DEL NOSTRO TEMPO.

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM SI RESE BENEDICENTE ANCHE PER OVER SOSTENUTO E LANCIO, COME AVEVA FATTO PER GIOVANI ARTISTI AMERICANI, ALCHE PITTORI VENEZIANI, TRA CHI SONO DA RICORDARE EDUARDO BIANCHI E TADDEO PIRELLI, DEI QUALI UNO È IL DOPO COMUNE TALENTO E OMBRE IL SUO APPoggio ESSI FURONO CONOSCIUTI ED APPREZZATI IN UN VASTO CIRCOLO INTERNAZIONALE.

CON IL TEMPO LA CASA DELLA SIGNORE GUGGENHEIM È DIVENTATA UNO DEI CENTRI ARTISTICI PIÙ IMPORTANTI PER LA CITTÀ DI VENEZIA, OGGI D'OBBLIGO DEI MIGLIORI ESPOSITORI DELL'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA CHE PAVOREGO PER LA NOSTRA CITTÀ E OMBRE DELLE CONFERENZE ARTISTICHE PRODUCE DAL COMUNE E DELLA BIENNALE.

IN QUESTI ANNI PEGGY GUGGENHEIM HA ESSEDO CITTADINA AMERICANA E DIVENTATA ALTRETTANTO CITTADINA VENEZIANA PER IL AMORE CHE HA DIMOSTRATO VERSO LA NOSTRA CITTÀ, SENSIBILE AI SUOI PROBLEMI ARTISTICI E ALLE OMBRE DELLA SUA CIVILTÀ. LA SUA FAMOSA COLLEZIONE SI È INCONTRATA IN UNO DEI PIÙ ORIGINALI PALAZZI SUL CANAL GRANDE, DI FRONTA A OT CORNER DEL SENSIVO E VICINO A PALAZZO D'ARTE DI PIETRO LOMBARDI, E LE, IN QUEL POSTO PRECISO HA ACQUISTATO IN PARTICOLARE SOSPICITO TRA LE VECCHIE PINTURE DI VENEZIA, ED IN DATO IN UNO APPORTO ALLA NOSTRA CITTÀ DEL CORPO DELL'ARTE.

VENEZIA, 5 FEBBRAIO 1962

IL SEGRETARIO GENERALE

*G. Saccani*

IL SINDACO

*G. Jacomini*

The document certifies the honorary citizenship conferred to Peggy Guggenheim. PGC Archive: BN000090



Peggy Guggenheim in her garden. PGC Archive: BN000145.



Installation shot of Peggy Guggenheim and London at Ordovas, London, 2019. Photo: Camilla Mongini