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Exhibition at Ordovas focuses on Peggy Guggenheim's little known first gallery

Yves Tanguy, Le Ruban des excès (The Ribbon of Excess), 1932, National Galleries of Scotland. Accepted in lieu of tax and allocated to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art 1998 © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2019.

LONDON.- Peggy Guggenheim needs little introduction for her contributions to twentieth-century art. Yet her formative years as a gallerist and her London gallery, Guggenheim Jeune, that she opened at the age of forty, have been relatively overlooked. Situated in a former pawnbroker's shop at 30 Cork Street, Guggenheim Jeune operated for eighteen months between January 1938 and June 1939. While its lifespan may have been brief its influence was considerable, both on the art world at the time and on Guggenheim herself; by the time Guggenheim Jeune closed she was a self-confessed art addict. Peggy Guggenheim and London, on display from 24 September until 14 December 2019, is intended as an anniversary celebration of Guggenheim as one of the first female gallerists in London and will showcase her parallel collecting interests in Abstraction and Surrealism through a display of works by Jean (Hans) Arp and Yves Tanguy. The accompanying catalogue includes an essay from Susan Davidson, curator and art historian, with previously unpublished material that came to light as a result of research undertaken for this exhibition; copies of a number of key documents will be illustrated, including unseen floor plans of the gallery space.

"I have been wanting to organise an exhibition about Peggy Guggenheim since I established my gallery in Savile Row, just around the corner from where Peggy set up Guggenheim Jeune in 1938", says Pilar Ordovas. "No one has really paid much attention to what the London experiment meant to her as a collector and as a gallerist and, most importantly, her intention to open a 'Museum of Modern Art' in London. Marking 80 years since the brief but seminal tenure of Guggenheim's West End gallery this exhibition, which has been curated by Ordovas and Susan Davidson, tell the story of the gallery's activities through artworks by Jean (Hans) Arp and Yves Tanguy - artists that she championed and collected."

In late 1937, after the death of her mother, Guggenheim began honing the skills and expanding the knowledge required to become a gallerist and, ultimately, a venerated collector. At her friend Marcel Duchamp's suggestion Guggenheim spent several concentrated autumn days at the Paris International Exposition of 1937 where she garnered a rapid overview of avant-garde art in a broadened context.

It was around this time that she acquired her first work of art, a sculpture by Jean (Hans) Arp, Tête et coquille (circa 1933). The acquisition of this small biomorphic object would come to both signal and straddle the two courses of her subsequent collecting pattern: Abstraction and Surrealism. Arp's sculptures and works on paper featured in almost a quarter of all the exhibitions held at Guggenheim Jeune.

During the same period, Guggenheim asked a friend from the publishing world, Winifred (Wyn) Henderson, to be the gallery's chief steward. Guggenheim charged Henderson with the innumerable details necessary to set up the gallery, foremost finding a location. Writing to her friend, Emily Coleman, just before Christmas, 1937, Peggy explained, "The first day Wyn looked she found a bargain lease at half price in Cork Street for 1-1/2 years. It used to be a pawnbroker's shop with little cubby holes for private discourse. Djuna [Barnes, the author] said how much misery must have passed in here in all those years. Thinking all the misery to come may be of disappointed artists. Anyhow I am in for it now + so are they." It was Henderson who gave the new business its name. Its punning reference combined two associations—the first to Peggy as the younger (jeune) Guggenheim involved in the art world (her uncle Solomon being the elder) and the second to the name of the leading Parisian gallery of the day, Bernheim-Jeune.

Guggenheim Jeune's most meaningful commercial success occurred with one of the smallest exhibitions the gallery staged. 'Exhibition of Paintings by Yves Tanguy', 6-16 July 1938, was billed as the artist's first solo exhibition in London. On view for just eleven days, it included twenty-five paintings and five gouaches, the majority executed in the previous two years. Reviews in the national press included The Times critic describing Tanguy's technique, skill and associating the imagery with "that of moon landscape peopled with osseous and mechanical forms." Another reviewer suggested that Tanguy's painting "has something of the tenuous lyrical quality of a Whistler." The lengthiest review offered an apocalyptic—if not anticipatory— vision: "The skies are terrestrial and familiar, but exotic in quality… as colour snaps of a monotonous landscape, glimpsed in moods of mournful beauty, of a planet that may well one day be ours." Gratifying reviews translated not only into record visits but generated numerous sales. Most significantly, in an effort to ensure Tanguy's acceptance by the nation, Guggenheim offered "the only four remaining of the most important [Tanguy] works" to the Tate Gallery, who declined to accept her generosity. It was not until 1964, nearly ten years after the artist's death, that the Tate Gallery acquired their first Tanguy painting - Les Transparents, 1951. Guggenheim for her part purchased three works from the show—two paintings, Le Soleil dans son écrin and Toilette de l'air (both 1937), and a small untitled gouache (1938)—that remain in her collection today.

A number of the works in Peggy Guggenheim and London were displayed at Guggenheim Jeune, and others have never been shown in the UK until now. On loan from the National Galleries of Scotland (accepted in lieu of tax and allocated to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art) is Yves Tanguy's Le Ruban des excès (The Ribbon of Excess). Painted in 1932, this work was shown at Guggenheim Jeune as part of the first presentation of Tanguy's work to a UK audience, alongside Sans titre (Untitled), 1935, and Sans titre (Untitled), a gouache on paper executed in 1933, on loan from the Wakefield Permanent Art Collection (The Hepworth Wakefield). The painting and the 1933 gouache were both sold by Guggenheim Jeune to collectors of the day. On display for the first time in the UK are Tanguy's En le temps menaçant, 1929; Sans titre (Untitled), 1931 and Titre inconnu (Title Unknown), an oil on card laid down on panel from 1933 and mounted in a biomorphic freestanding frame designed at the requested of the artist.

Flocons aux rayons jaunes (Flakes with Yellow Rays), a painted wood relief in the artist's original painted frame was executed by Jean (Hans) Arp in 1946 and is being displayed for the first time in the UK. It was formerly in the collection of the esteemed Swiss philanthropists Dr Georg and Josi Guggenheim, distant cousins of Peggy's. Highlighted with yellow painted sides, Arp's snowflake-like forms are defined by the radiance of this near-fluorescent colour and by the shadows their volume casts on the plain white background of the work. The bronze sculpture Trois objets désagréables sur une figure (Head with Annoying Objects), was conceived in 1930 (and later cast by Susse Fondeur). The semantic ambiguity of the title echoes the formal ambivalence of the sculptures that Arp produced during this Surrealist era. Also on display will include Tête; Objet à traire (Head; Object to milk), a painted collage with gold leaf and fabric on board that was executed in 1925 and Fruit de pagode (Pagoda Fruit), a sculpture executed in cement in 1949.

Alongside artworks and archival materials the exhibition will also include a rosewood ring made by Tanguy in 1937. During the time that Guggenheim was organising Tanguy's first solo presentation they began an affair, spending a great deal of the summer and autumn of 1938 at Yew Tree Cottage, Guggenheim's home in Sussex. Perhaps as a symbol of his affection for his dealer and lover, and knowing her penchant for distinctive jewellery, Tanguy fashioned the ring out of rosewood found growing on the farmhouse's grounds. During their relationship Tanguy crafted several special gifts for Guggenheim, such as painted miniature oval earrings and a small drawing for her Dunhill cigarette case, so it is believed that this ring was indeed intended as a gift for her.

In June 1939 Guggenheim Jeune closed its doors permanently with plans to be reincarnated as London's first museum of modern art. During the course of Guggenheim Jeune's eighteen-month tenure, Guggenheim immersed herself in the capital's avant-garde circles, learning that the city lacked a museum devoted exclusively to modern art. Accordingly, she hired the illustrious British art historian and critic Herbert Read, who assembled a list of artists that functioned as a guide towards acquiring a distinguished core collection of what Guggenheim called "M.M.M.M – my much misunderstood Museum". Due to circumstances beyond her control, her plans for London were never realised. The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 came just as she had travelled to Paris to buy what was intended to be the permanent collection of her new museum; stranded in France, she was forced to postpone her museum plans. The collection originally destined for London would first be shown to the public in 1942 at Guggenheim's second gallery, Art of this Century in New York, and in 1949 it came to reside at a palazzo on the Grand Canal in Venice, where it remains today.

Guggenheim's overriding objective in opening Guggenheim Jeune was to provide foreign artists an opportunity to show their work in London, and its programme became both the foundation for all of Guggenheim's future endeavours and a catalyst for modern art in Britain.