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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

COLLECTORS' ISSUE

PEOPLE AND THEIR PASSIONS: FROM IRIS BULBS TO FAIRGROUND RIDES, PLASTER CASTS TO MODERN ART

This page, clockwise from top left: Guggenheim supported Alexander Calder, whose *Arc of Petals* (1941) is shown here; Bacon's *Study for Chimpanzee* (1957) is a blur of movement; the collector loved artist-made jewellery; Tanguy's surreal pink earrings, a gift, were to be worn to the launch of Guggenheim Jeune in 1938. But the heiress smudged one of the freshly painted ovals, and he redid it in blue. Opposite: Guggenheim acquired the Perspex-and-chrome *Sphere* by Franco Costalonga – a Venetian, who died this year – in 1969

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AVANT-GARDE ADVENTURER

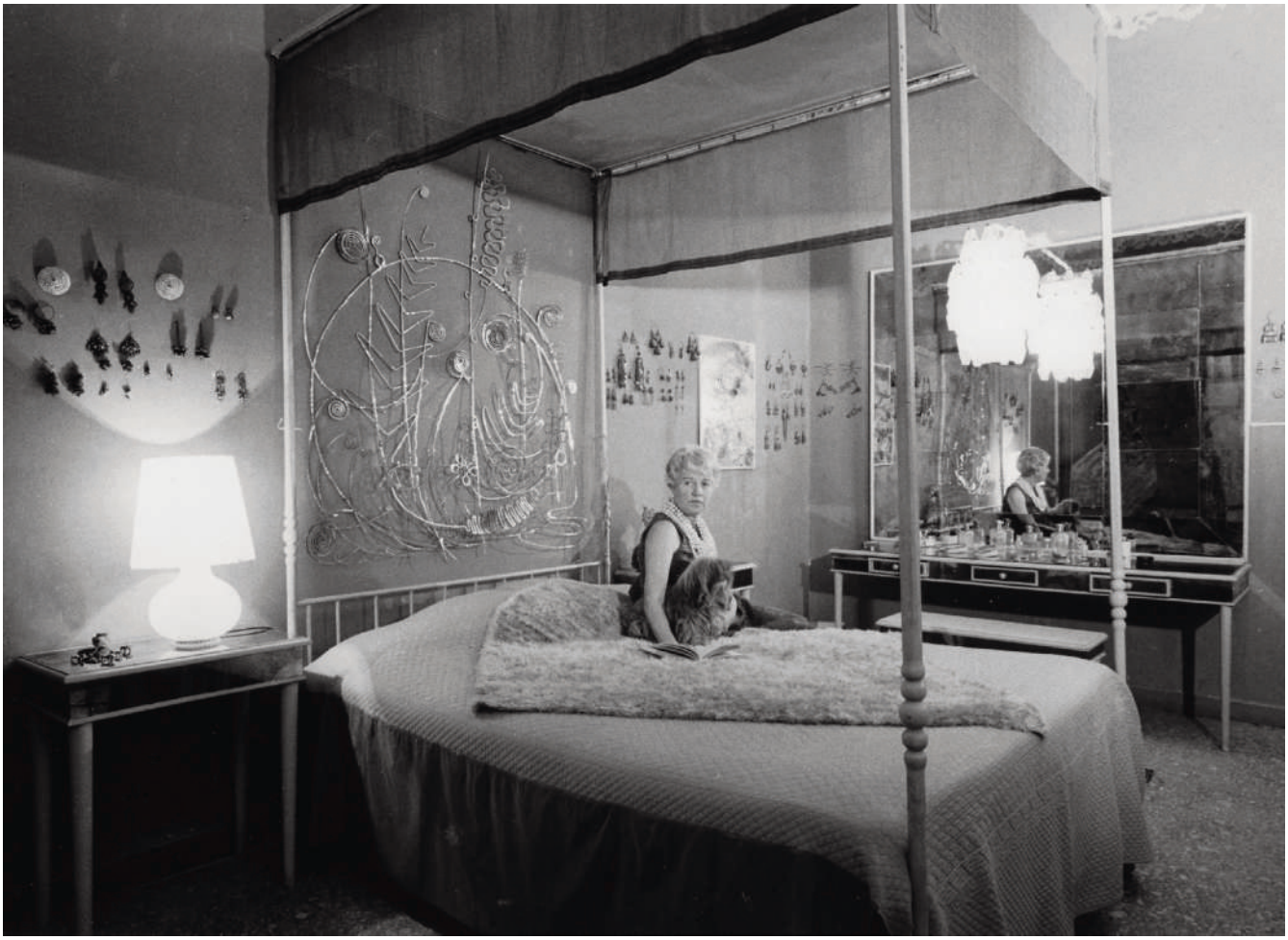
Devoted to Modernist art, Peggy Guggenheim had the money and the moxie to be fearless in her judgements. Though wartime Paris is where the heiress became a self-confessed ‘art addict’, acquiring ‘a picture a day’, it was in London and Venice – the focus of two exhibitions – that her career began and ended. But whatever European city she happened to be in, reports Ellen Mara de Wachter, the collector upheld a cavalier attitude to convention

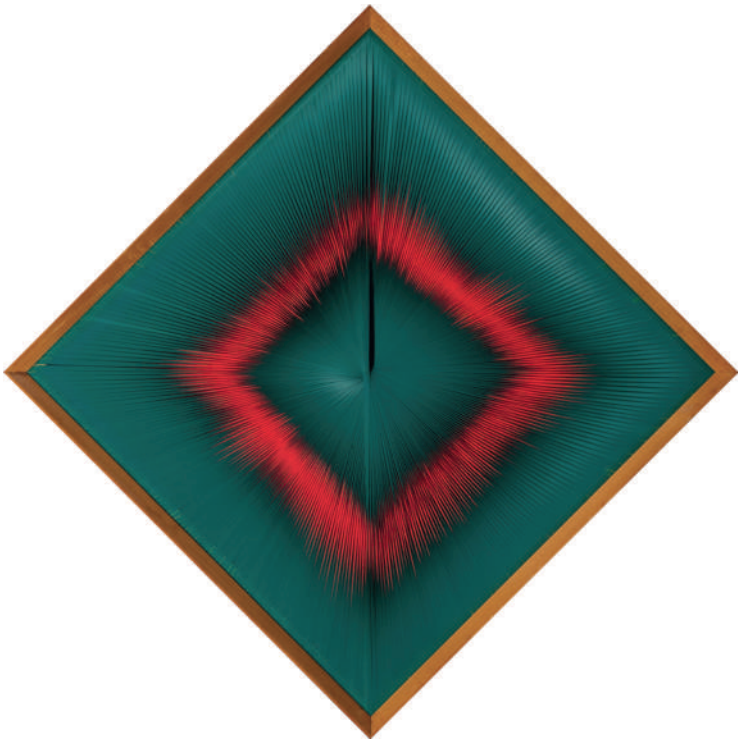
This page, clockwise from top left: invitation cards and advertisements are among Guggenheim Jeune's only surviving documents; the collector persuaded the illustrious art critic Herbert Read to advise her on founding a museum of Modern art in London; Hans (Jean) Arp's 1930 sculpture *Head with Annoying Objects* is made of movable elements; the self-taught Surrealist Tanguy commissioned Heinz Henghes to make a frame for his 1933 work *Title Unknown*. Opposite: Peggy acquired Tanguy's work some 20 years before Tate

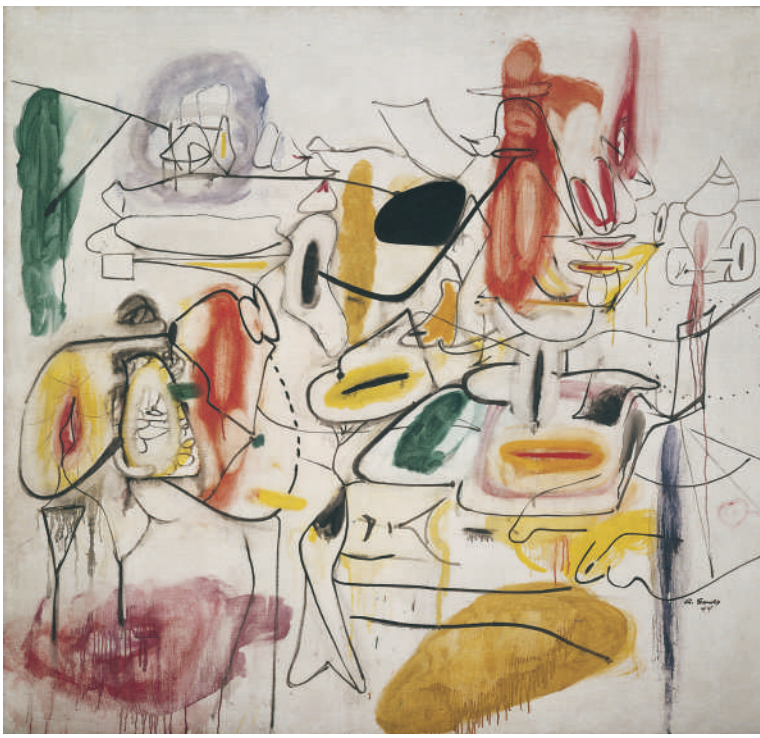
AD ON BACK COVER OF THE LONDON BULLETIN NO 4-5, JULY 1938: © ARS, NY & DACS, LONDON 2019. WITH HERBERT READ: © IMEC, FONDS MCC, DIST. RMN-GRAND PALAIS / GISELE FREUND © ARS, NY AND DACS, LONDON 2019 / YVES TANGUY, *THE SUN IN ITS JEWEL CASE*, 1937. ARP: © ARS, NY & DACS, LONDON 2019. ALL WORKS BY TANGUY: © ARS, NY & DACS, LONDON 2019

Top: travelling to the USA, Piero Dorazio met influential abstract artists and the eminent critic Clement Greenberg, whose term 'post-painterly abstraction' captures the refreshing openness and clarity of works such as the Italian's *Unitas* (1965). Above: Karole Vail recalls visiting her grandmother's home as a child and seeing 'paintings that scared me', especially those by Surrealists such as Max Ernst and Paul Delvaux, whose grappling with the unconscious deeply impressed the future director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection

DORAZIO: COLLEZIONE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM, VENEZIA © PIERO DORAZIO, SIAE 2019. CALDER: © 2019 CALDER FOUNDATION, NEW YORK/DACS, LONDON. PALAZZO LIBRARY AND BEDROOM: SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION. PHOTO ARCHIVIO CAMERAPHOTO EPOCHE. GIFT, CASSA DI RISPARMIO DI VENEZIA, 2005. GORKY: COLLEZIONE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM, VENEZIA. BIASI: COLLEZIONE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM, VENEZIA © ALBERTO BIASI, SIAE 2019







This page, clockwise from top: in New York, Guggenheim commissioned Calder to create a silver headboard for her bed. The design, incorporating fish, insects and plants, was installed in Guggenheim's palazzo, where it remains to this day; the Armenian Arshile Gorky arrived in the USA in 1920. This untitled work of 1944 shows the influence of European Surrealists who emigrated to New York during World War II; the twisted-PVC *Visual Dynamics* (1964) is the work of Alberto Biasi, a leading figure in Italian kinetic art

‘A PICTURE a day.’ Such was Peggy Guggenheim’s motto during the winter of 1939, when she began building what would become one of the most exciting collections of Modern art. With the onset of World War II, Guggenheim had left London for Paris with a plan to amass a group of works worthy of display in a museum. She’d drawn up a list of artists, with input from eminent advisors including her friend Marcel Duchamp. In Paris, Guggenheim became a self-confessed ‘art addict’, immersing herself in the avant-garde with remarkable energy. It was a golden era for Modern art – and for collectors; as Guggenheim later told her biographer, Jacqueline B. Weld: ‘There was no question of bargaining in those days because everything was so cheap.’

The resulting collection comprises masterpieces by Picasso, Dalí and Pollock; by artists who were her associates, friends and lovers. As Karole Vail, Guggenheim’s granddaughter and director of her eponymous collection in Venice, explains, she loved the social side of the art world just as much as she loved the art, although ‘she felt it was her duty to support the art of her time’.

Born in New York in 1898 into the rich dynasty, Peggy was unconventional from an early age, rebelling against the bourgeois upbringing she considered tremendously dull. While she was still at school, she shaved off her eyebrows, displaying an early predilection for avant-garde aesthetics. Vail recalls her grandmother as an iconic figure, not just in art but also in fashion and as a liberated woman. Indeed, Guggenheim is almost as famous for her love affairs with figures such as Duchamp, Samuel Beckett and Max Ernst.

In 1938, the New Yorker used funds inherited after her mother’s death to open her first gallery: Guggenheim Jeune on London’s Cork Street. Launching with an exhibition of drawings and furniture by Jean Cocteau, his first in the UK, the gallery went on to stage a dizzying 22 shows in just 18 months, including London débuts for Wassily Kandinsky and Yves Tanguy. Guggenheim Jeune was a standard-bearer for experimental exhibition-making. Inspired by Surrealism’s fascination with childhood, for instance, the gallery held a show of art by juveniles, including a 15-year-old Lucian Freud.

Eighty years on, Guggenheim’s brief but intense London years are receiving renewed attention with an exhibition at Ordovas, featuring paintings and sculptures by Tanguy and Jean (Hans) Arp, some of which were shown by Guggenheim in the 1930s. Her first encounter with Arp’s work had been fateful; as she wrote in her autobiography, on first seeing his 1933 bronze *Tête et Coquille* (‘Head and Shell’), ‘I fell so in love with it that I asked to have it in my hands. The instant I felt it I wanted to own it.’

Lacking photographs of the space, gallerist Pilar Ordovas has compiled a selection of archival documents to furnish the imagination, including floor plans, invitation cards and logbooks, along with personal effects such as a ring Tanguy carved in 1937 from rosewood found at Guggenheim’s country house in Sussex. The two had been romantically involved.

Guggenheim realised, however, that selling art was not her passion. Instead, says Ordovas, ‘she wanted to buy the works herself’. This ardent desire for collecting burned alongside Guggenheim’s project for a public museum to house her collection. Her MMMM, or ‘My Much Misunderstood Museum’, was to be London’s first institution of Modern art. She enlisted the art critic Herbert Read as its future director and he helped her draw up the blueprint. But Guggenheim’s strategic vision fell prey to the war, and in 1939 she left for Paris and two more years of stoking her addiction.

When Paris was evacuated in 1941, she refused to leave the city until her pictures had been smuggled out disguised as household goods. Equally concerned for the welfare of artists, she helped many, including her soon-to-be-husband Max Ernst, flee Europe and relocate to New York. This wartime arrival of the European avant-garde caused a ferment within the New York scene, and in 1942 Guggenheim opened The Art of This Century in Manhattan. A testing ground for the avant-garde, casting Guggenheim as, in her words, ‘the midwife to American painting’, it was the first gallery to exhibit work by Jackson Pollock. She considered her discovery of the Abstract Expressionist, whom she commissioned to paint a mural for her Manhattan home, to be her ‘greatest achievement’; he had been a carpenter at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, which Peggy referred to as ‘my uncle’s garage’ due to its characteristic spiral ramp.

In 1947 she closed The Art of This Century and relocated to Venice where, as she said, ‘at last I could achieve my dream’ of opening a permanent public museum for her collection. She chose the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni on the Grand Canal, now a place of pilgrimage for art lovers. Marking 40 years since her death in 1979, the current exhibition there, *Peggy Guggenheim: The Last Dogaressa*, features treasures from the permanent display in the palazzo – such as the first edition of Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-Valise* (‘Box in Suitcase’) made for Guggenheim in 1941 – while other works are shown in the purpose-built galleries across the courtyard. Highlights include a pair of newly restored Venice scrapbooks, and works by women artists supported by Guggenheim, such as *Ireland* (1958), a monumental canvas by Grace Hartigan. Peggy loved the painting so much that she wrote to the artist saying she had awarded it a prominent position on her living-room wall.

Throughout her Venice years, Guggenheim continued to collect, with a new emphasis on Italian Modern art. In 1948, when she was invited to exhibit her treasures at the Venice Biennale, it was the first major display of international Modern art to be held at the world-renowned festival. Guggenheim’s generosity was important in forging the city’s contemporary character as a place in which to see the best ancient and Modern art. In 1962 she was made an honorary citizen of Venice. As Vail says: ‘One of Peggy’s great achievements was to imagine for her collection a life beyond herself.’ An indefatigable supporter of artists, who said her life had been ‘all about art and love’, Peggy Guggenheim was the ultimate collector, who forged her legacy one picture at a time ■

‘Peggy Guggenheim and London’ runs at Ordovas, 25 Savile Row, London W1, until 14 Dec. For opening times, ring 020 7287 5013, or visit ordovasart.com. ‘Peggy Guggenheim: The Last Dogaressa’ runs at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 704 Dorsoduro, 30123 Venice, until 27 Jan. For opening times, ring 00 39 041 240 5411, or visit guggenheim-venice.it

This page: one of Arp’s 3D collages, *Tête – Objet à traire* (‘Head – Object to Milk’) comes complete with a protruding teat-like appendage. Opposite: Guggenheim is pictured at the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni with a mask from her collection of sculptures from the Americas

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