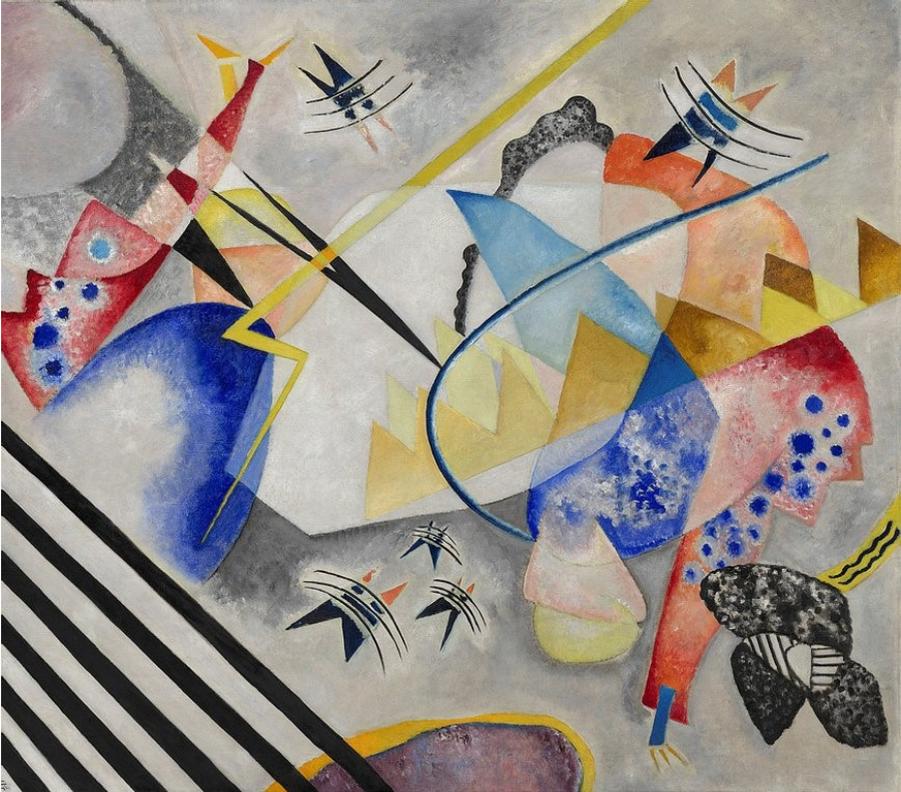


Peggy and Solomon R. Guggenheim: their collections and museums

Background notes

Barry Venning — 18 November 2020



Vasily Kandinsky, *White Center*, 1921. Oil on canvas.,119.0 × 136.0 cm, New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

The name Guggenheim is an intercontinental art world brand sporting high profile museums in New York, Venice and Bilbao, with another under construction in Abu Dhabi since 2011 and a further outpost proposed for Helsinki in 2014. In the recent past, the Guggenheim Foundation has also opened museums in Las Vegas and Berlin, and entered into a 'trilateral alliance' with the Hermitage, St. Petersburg and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. In the last decade it has trialled a series of daring fixed term projects that included (with BMW) a roving, interdisciplinary design lab that moved from Berlin to Mumbai and then New York between 2011 and 2013, plus the MAP Global Art Initiative in collaboration with UBS, between 2012 and 2018.

In an era of rampant globalisation, the Guggenheim Foundation has a truly global reach, but the foundations of its empire lay in the collecting impulses of two passionate lovers of modern art: Solomon R Guggenheim (1861-1949) and his niece, Peggy (1898-1979). In most respects, uncle and niece could not have been more different in their lives, their personalities or their approaches to collecting modern art. Solomon R Guggenheim was a wealthy mining magnate whose vast riches allowed him to acquire whatsoever he wished; Peggy's wealth was much more modest (by Guggenheim standards). Her father, Benjamin, who went down with the Titanic in 1912, left her a trust fund that provided \$22,500 per year. Whereas her uncle was sober, reserved and largely maintained the values of his class, Peggy was a bohemian (in the 1920s she lived in Montparnasse, among the cash-strapped artists she admired) and a sexually liberated woman who boasted of having had a thousand affairs, many of them with the artists and intellectuals in her circle.

There were, however, some things they had in common apart from the family name. Neither of them had any art historical training, nor did they have artistic skills of their own, unlike, for example, Katherine S. Dreier (1877-1952). Dreier, who became a close associate of Solomon R Guggenheim, was a wealthy collector, exhibition organiser and talented painter who showed with artists such as Picasso and Braque, and eventually bequeathed part of her impressive collection to the Guggenheim Foundation. Dreier collected throughout her life, which was not the case with either of the Guggenheims: Solomon R Guggenheim discovered modern art relatively late in life, in 1928, at the age of 67; Peggy built up the bulk of her collection in two short bursts, the first between 1938 and 1940 in England, and the second from 1941-46 in the USA. In those eight years, however, she bought in bulk. She resolved in 1938 to acquire "a painting a day" and, like her uncle, she bought judiciously. picking up items that didn't sell, and works for which there was, as yet, no market, just because they spoke to her.

Peggy's instincts were developed through close contacts with influential players in the world of modern art, such as Marcel Duchamp, the Surrealist Max Ernst (whom she married) and the English writer and critic, Herbert Read. As she put it "I took advice from none but the best. I listened, how I listened! That's how I finally became my own expert". Solomon R Guggenheim also took advice in his collecting, although in his case it is doubtful whether he ever "became his own expert" or developed the critical acumen displayed by

his niece. His acquisitions of modern art were guided by the German abstract artist, Hilla Rebay (1890-1967), whom he appointed as the first director of his Museum of Non-Objective Art, which opened in a former car showroom in New York in 1939 on East 54th Street.

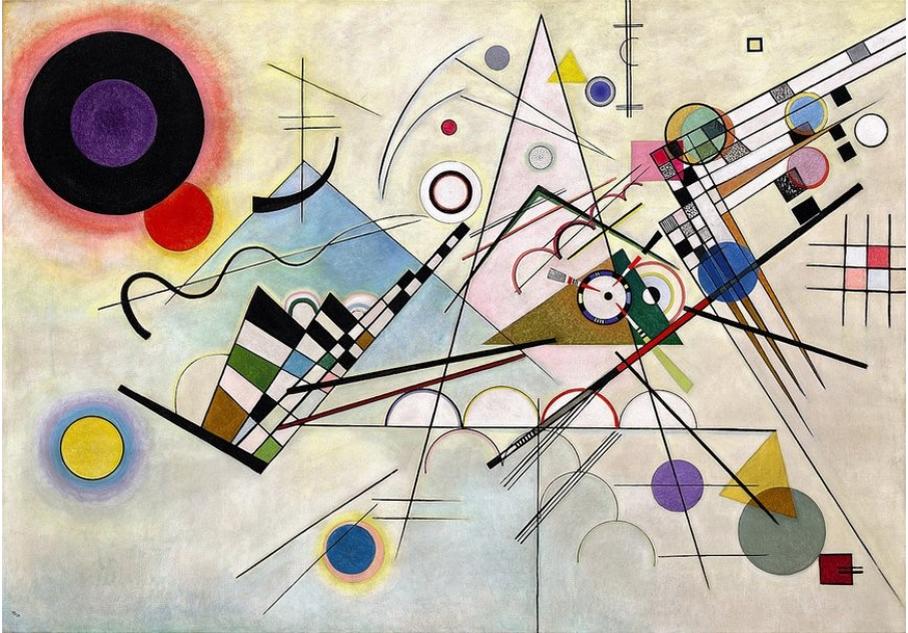


Hilla Rebay in her studio at Franton Court, Greens Farms, Connecticut, ca. 1946 (© 2017 Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York)

Baroness Hilla Rebay von Ehrenstein, to give her full name and title, was born into a minor aristocratic family in Alsace. She was a highly skilled painter who trained in Cologne, Paris and Munich, and from the outset she was drawn to the work of the avant-garde. In neutral Zurich during WW1, she met a fellow refugee from Alsace, the Dada artist Jean Arp; he introduced her to two influential books: *The Blue Rider Almanac (Der Blaue Reiter Almanac, 1911)*, edited by Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, and Kandinsky's book *On the Spiritual in Art (Über das Geistige in der Kunst, 1911)*. Kandinsky's works and ideas had a profound effect upon Rebay and, ultimately, upon Solomon R Guggenheim's collection.

Kandinsky and Rebay were both fascinated by Theosophy and esoteric religion, and she embraced his conviction that art's supreme importance lay in its spiritual power. For Kandinsky, and for Rebay, that spiritual power was most expressed through abstract (or non-objective) art. When Rebay emigrated to the USA in 1927 and began the following year to advise Solomon R Guggenheim on his acquisitions of contemporary art, her recommendations were dominated by abstract art. Rebay first convinced him to collect works by her lover and artistic collaborator, Rudolf Bauer (1889-1953), then in 1930 she,

Guggenheim and his wife Irene, travelled to Europe where they met Kandinsky and other prominent abstract artists. Guggenheim purchased Kandinsky's *Composition 8* of 1923, the first of many Kandinsky canvasses to enter the collection.



Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition 8*, 1923, oil on canvas, 140.3 x 200.7 cm.
Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York

Although her fortune was much smaller than her uncle's, Peggy Guggenheim nonetheless set out very deliberately to rival him not only as a collector of modern art, but also as a tastemaker. The rivalry and the friction between them centred partly on the person of Hilla Rebay, whom Peggy once described as "a fiend". Rebay was by all accounts, imperious, difficult, affectedly 'spiritual' and with a disdain for money that was profoundly ironic, given her dependence on the Guggenheim fortune. Peggy Guggenheim had no such disdain for money and she resolved not only to collect but also to deal in the art she loved, something that would have appalled Rebay. Her first gallery, *Guggenheim Jeune*, was in London and although it lasted less than two years and closed with sizeable debts, it made its mark on the British art world. It opened with an exhibition of Jean Cocteau, then went on to show work by Dali, Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Alexander Calder, Kandinsky, Miro and Picasso. As this roster of artists demonstrates, Peggy Guggenheim's tastes were far broader than her uncle's, for she represented (and collected) the Surrealist artists who were such an important element of the inter-war avant-garde.



Max Ernst, *The Attirement of the Bride (La Toilette de la mariée)*. 1940. Oil on canvas, 129.6 x 96.3 cm. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

Exemplary Surrealist works such as Max Ernst's *The Attiring of the Bride* of 1940, which had no truck with the spiritual and everything to do with the unconscious mind, were excluded from Solomon R Guggenheim's purchases by Hilla Rebay.

Peggy Guggenheim's second enterprise, the *Art of this Century Gallery*, comprised a startling set of exhibition rooms designed by the architect Frederick Kiesler. In the Cubist gallery, there were turquoise floors, blue canvas walls, and the art on pulleys; in the Surrealist gallery there were curving walls and amorphous wooden furniture. The gallery opened in 30, West 57th Street, Manhattan, in 1942. Rebay told Peggy that "Your gallery will be the last one for our foundation to use if ever the need should force us to use a sales gallery", predicting that it would be "propagating mediocrity, if not trash". Rebay was wrong: by the time it closed in 1947, the gallery had helped to propel modern American artists (such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Clyfford Still) into the forefront of the post-war art world.



Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery, 30 West 57th Street, New York

In 1943, Solomon R Guggenheim and Hilla Rebay entered negotiations with the great American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, to design a signature building on the corner of 89th Street and Fifth Avenue that would become a permanent home for his collection and, above all, in Rebay's words, "a temple of the spirit". Wright's radical, intensely personal design, had spaces flowing freely into one another in what Wright explained was meant as an expression of "human ideas, moods and sentiments". The museum opened in October 1959, ten years after Solomon R Guggenheim's death and six months after Frank Lloyd Wright's.



***Frank Lloyd Wright, The Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, 1071 5th Ave,
New York***

Throughout its design and construction, the museum was highly controversial but, once opened, it became exceptionally popular with the public and with other architects, for it provided a template for later 'organic' museum designs, including Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

When the *Art of this Century Gallery* closed in 1947, Peggy Guggenheim gave up the hectic world of art dealing, relocated to Venice and established her own remarkable museum in the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni on the Grand Canal. In 1976, long after the deaths of Solomon and of Hilla Rebay, Peggy entered into a rapprochement with the Guggenheim Foundation. Her collection officially became part of the Foundation's holdings on her death in 1979.

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The website of the Peggy Guggenheim Museum: <https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/>

The website of the Guggenheim Foundation: <https://www.guggenheim.org/>

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