

**Peggy Guggenheim**  
**1898-1979**  
by **L. Margaret Pomeroy**

Marguerite (Peggy) Guggenheim was born August 26, 1898 in New York City. Her father was Benjamin Guggenheim, director of the Guggenheim family's industrial mining and smelting concerns. As the daughter of Benjamin Guggenheim and Florette Seligman, Peggy was raised in one of the wealthiest and most socially influential Jewish families in New York. With the exception of a brief enrollment at Jacoby School, Peggy was home schooled, and her childhood was lonely, restricted by family concerns. Peggy's greatest childhood trauma was undoubtedly the early death of her father in the 1912 *Titanic* disaster. Influenced by her older sister not to attend college, Peggy worked for the Defense Department briefly during WWI. Later she was employed at Sunwise Turn, a radical bookstore. It was her first experience with the avant-garde and would be a turning point in her life.

When Guggenheim inherited \$450,000 in 1919, she moved to Paris. The expatriates there welcomed her into their community, and she married Laurence Vail, an American writer. While it did not turn out to be a blissful marriage, one result was that Peggy subsidized much of the talent around her. Recipients of her financial help included *The Little Review*, Berenice Abbott, Emma Goldman, Djuna Barnes, and Mina Loy. In 1928, after having two children with Vail, Guggenheim left him for British writer, John Holms. Although the two never married, Peggy always insisted he was her great love, and she was shattered by his death in 1934 during minor surgery.

In 1938 Guggenheim opened Guggenheim Jeune, a London gallery of modern art showcasing the works of Jean Cocteau and curated by Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp's knowledge of art was critical to the gallery's success considering Guggenheim's lack of that knowledge. Under Duchamp's direction the gallery featured Wassily Kandinsky, Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Constantin Brancusi, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, and Joan Miro, as well as others. It was during this time that Peggy Guggenheim began her personal art collection, buying a selection from each show. After a time, Guggenheim decided gallery sales did not justify its continuation, and she decided instead to start a museum of modern art in London. However as she traveled to Paris to begin collecting work for it, the outbreak of WWI terminated the museum idea. Guggenheim, however, did purchase selections for herself from artists such as Alberto Giacometti, Rene Magritte, and Georges Braque. Only days before the German invasion of 1941 she left Paris for New York with hundreds of works of art with which she would begin a new American gallery. Also accompanying Peggy to New York was ex-husband Vail, his wife Kay Boyle, children from his two marriages, and Max Ernst. Ernst soon became Peggy's husband, but that marriage ended when she divorced him in 1946.

Art of This Century was Guggenheim's New York gallery. It opened on Fifty-seventh Street in October of 1942 and featured surrealists and cubists, displaying new talent beside that of the founders of modern art. New artists whose work appeared were Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Hans Hoffmann, and Mark Rothko. The gallery, designed by Frederick Kiesler, with concave walls and protruding wooden arms that held the canvases, was as provocative as the art it featured. If the

gallery and its contents were not shocking enough, in 1946 Peggy Guggenheim published *Out of This Century*, the first volume of her memoirs, which candidly detailed her romantic exploits. The following year she returned to Europe, settling in Venice.

So in 1947 in a spacious palazzo on Venice's Grand Canal, Guggenheim's art collection was installed in her home, and Peggy continued to attract writers and artists. The next year, 1948, during the Venice Biennale, after years of exhibiting her collections in commercial art galleries, Guggenheim was invited to show her collection at the Greek pavilion, empty because of civil war in Greece. It was her first public recognition and accordingly, held special importance to her. She spent the rest of her life in Venice, devoting herself to her private art collection. In 1951 she opened her home as a museum and started artists' studios in her cellar. In 1960 she published the second volume of her memoirs, *Confessions of an Art Addict*. It was much less shocking than the first volume. Peggy Guggenheim died in Padua, Italy on December 23, 1979.

Over the years Guggenheim gave away much of her collection, and although her pieces from the 1930s and 1940s, bought with the counsel of Duchamp and Ernst, possessed more overall quality than her later acquisitions, the Guggenheim collection still has significant importance. In 1965 the collection traveled to the Tate Museum, and then in 1969 to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum which Guggenheim's uncle had established in New York. In 1974 that museum acquired the collection as well as the palazzo, and continues to run the Venice institution.

**Sources used:**

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