

## MODERN MEDICI

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Cosimo's descendants reigned as Grand Dukes of Tuscany and Florentine leaders and patrons in an unbroken line until 1737, when Gian Gastone de' Medici died without heirs and the their dominions passed to the House of Austria.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the center of visual art had moved from Italy to France, particularly Paris with the Impressionists emerging as champions of a new way of creating and enjoying art.

A hundred years later the focus had shifted from Paris to New York. Who, then, was the 20<sup>th</sup> century Medici who helped make this shift possible and why did Abstract Expressionism replace Impressionism as the dominant movement? This brief paper will attempt to address both questions.

### *Abstract Expressionism*

In December, 1933 Franklin Roosevelt established the Public Works of Art Project which assisted 3,749 artists. In 1935 the project was extended to the Federal Art Project under the WPA. Employed were 5,500 artists, teachers, photographers, designers and researchers. Experimenting freely were such artists as Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and others.

The young artists understood that realistic pictures could not rival European paintings and rejected the form. Russian art was forced to hew to the party line and the Mexican murals of Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros failed to find followers in the States. So many young American artists turned from realism to surreal experiences.

In 1935 Ferdinand Leger observed that during the previous 50 years, artists had been trying to free themselves from old bonds, the strongest of which was realistic subject matter imposed by the Italian Renaissance.

The initial effort in their quest for artistic freedom came from the Impressionists who liberated color. Then, in the 1930's, artists were freed from form and design by the surrealist works of Arshile Gorky and Joan Miro. In the late 30's, Miro had converted from Cubism to Surrealism. Then, during World War II, Gorky produced several masterpieces and many artists regard him as the last Surrealist who served as the link between Surrealist art and American

abstraction. Some prominent art critics state that Gorky's hybrid style identified him as a transitional painter or link between European tradition and American abstraction.

The years following World War II saw the flowering of this new American abstract style and the clear rejection of realism. While New York artists adopted abstraction, few galleries or museums would show their works. A bit of history is in order.

In 1935, the Whitney became the first museum to show abstract art. Then, in 1939, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation opened the "Museum of Non-Objective Art". It was located in rented quarters at 24 East 54<sup>th</sup> Street in New York. Featured artists were Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and a few others not as well known. In 1959, the museum changed its name to the "Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum" and moved to its newly built Frank Lloyd Wright building at the corner of 89<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue.

Amazingly, it was not until 1967 that the Metropolitan Museum of Art instituted its Department of Contemporary Arts. The department was charged with the duty of collecting, preserving and exhibiting paintings, sculpture, etc. Most importantly, it was given the additional duty of presenting one-person shows of living artists. (Interestingly, the Cincinnati Art Museum, under its Director Philip R. Adams, a member of The Literary Club, declined from giving one-person shows to living artists.)

### *Peggy Guggenheim*

Peggy Guggenheim the niece of Solomon Guggenheim, opened her first gallery in London in January 1938. Called "Guggenheim Jeune" and opened with works by the poet Jean Cocteau. The gallery's curator was Marcel Duchamp who, in 1954, married Teeny Sattler, daughter of a Cincinnati eye surgeon<sup>1</sup>. Later exhibits included Kandinski, Henry Moore, and Max Ernst. While not financially successful, the gallery was one of the most important supporters of the modern art movement.

Just prior to the onset of World War II, Guggenheim moved to Paris and actively began purchasing contemporary art. In 1941, the German occupation of France drove her to return to

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<sup>1</sup> Duchamp's wife was called Teeny. Her given name was Alexina. Her father was Robert Sattler, a Cincinnati eye surgeon. Teeny was the youngest of six daughters. Her first husband was Pierre Matisse, Henri's son. Teeny married Duchamp in 1954.

her native United States and, in October 1942, she opened her new gallery in New York, called “Art of this Century.

The gallery’s interior was designed by the architect Frederick Kiesler to present paintings in a Surrealist manner. Its initial exhibit featured Peggy’s entire collection of 171 pieces and was a huge success. At the opening, Peggy wore one earring by the Surrealist artist, Yves Tanguy and another by the Abstract artist Alexander Calder.

Who was Peggy Guggenheim (whose birth name was Marguerite and was nicknamed Pegeen)? Born August 26, 1898 into an extremely wealthy Jewish family, her father was Benjamin, the fifth of Meyer Guggenheim’s seven children. Her mother was Floretta Seligman who came from a New York banking family.

Peggy’s grandfather, Meyer, owned this country’s largest copper mines. Her uncle was Solomon Guggenheim and his brother, Peggy’s father Benjamin, died as a passenger on the Titanic when she was fourteen. Story has it that Benjamin and his valet sat on the deck of the Titanic in formal evening wear drinking brandy and smoking cigars while the liner sunk.

Peggy did not go to college, working instead in support of the war effort. She later worked at a radical bookstore. At age 21, she came into her substantial inheritance and went to Paris.

After moving from Paris to London, Peggy’s gallery exhibited primarily abstract and surreal artists, such as Brancusi, Kandinsky, Magritte, and Max Ernst.

To support her artists, Guggenheim purchased at least one work from each. Her motto was, “Buy a painting a day.”

Her New York gallery, Art of the Century, was the first to exhibit Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell. To give the gallery notoriety, Peggy commissioned a mural in 1943 from Pollock which turned out to be over 20 feet high and 6 feet wide. According to Pollock’s biographer, it was painted in a single day and then delivered to Peggy’s home. She later donated the painting to the University of Iowa.

Guggenheim’s New York gallery closed in 1947 primarily because of financial losses. Prior to its closing, the gallery continued to show works by an increasing number of all-American artists.

With the ending of the war, Peggy moved to Venice where, in 1948, she exhibited her collection said to number over 171 pieces. According to reports, it shocked the populace accustomed to Renaissance art.

In 1950, she opened her Venice home to the public on three afternoons a week. In 1969 she agreed to donate her collection upon her death to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation on condition that it would remain intact in Venice.

In the early 1970s, Guggenheim, now near 75, began withdrawing from the world. She ceased collecting art; her friends were dying. In 1974 her collection was shown with great success at the Louvre.

Peggy Guggenheim died December 23, 1979 at age 86.