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THE ART OF CHOICE: PEGGY GUGGENHEIM

Abstract:

This study examines the intersection of personal affinities and aesthetic strategies in the collecting practice of Peggy Guggenheim. Her decisions provide a foundation for understanding the identity of the collector, the logic behind selection, and the broader meaning of the collection itself. By comparing different approaches to art and collecting, the paper explores how Guggenheim positioned herself as a mediator between artistic eras, often anticipating systems of value that would only later gain institutional recognition. As a collector and patron, she challenged the dominant patriarchal frameworks—not through overt feminist critique, but by shifting the terms of participation. Her investments in art were guided less by financial gain and more by the creation of cultural capital. Through actions that foreshadowed museum-like practices, she helped shape a new artistic landscape governed by its own historical and aesthetic logic. This mode of collecting resists categorization within either modernist paradigms or postmodern micro-narratives, and instead aligns with the layered, oscillating sensibility of metamodernism.

Keywords:

Peggy Guggenheim, collection, collectioning impulse, modern art, metamodernity

Why Do We Remember Peggy Guggenheim?

In the chapter *Abstract Expressionism: The Grand Gesture 1943–1970* of his popular overview of modern art history *What Are You Looking At?*, Will Gompertz (2016, 263) turns to the figure and legacy of Peggy Guggenheim. He introduces her with the rather contentious claim that Peggy "was a passionate woman defined by her three great loves: money, men, and modern art." I held an almost identical starting point when preparing a lecture within the framework of *American Culture Week: Heroes* at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade in 2021. Yet the focus—largely rooted in clichés and deeply embedded stereotypes, even prejudices—shifted toward a more fundamental question: why do we remember Peggy in particular? Or, more precisely: why is it her name that most often surfaces among all collectors? It is difficult to argue that the answer lies solely in the tabloid-like combination of sex, money, and (artistic) glamour. Even in popular literature at the dawn of the third millennium, the phrase "defined by" reads as diminishing, especially in the passive voice. In fact, one could argue that Peggy Guggenheim herself defined the relationship to money, to men, and most importantly, to modern art—but also to much else besides.

Most of her contemporaries were confined to one of two roles: either private collectors or institutional founders. Peggy went further, acting in hybrid ways—as collector, gallerist, patron, and activist. She established galleries and a museum; she financed artists directly through grants or indirectly through services; she bought and exhibited works in turbulent times, particularly during World War II; and she took part in shaping the contemporary art scene by anticipating emerging contexts and concepts, as well as by creating what has become the heritage corpus of what we today call modern art. Above all, she intuitively and bravely selected art that was not yet "proven," that was experimental or shocking—placing herself among the rare few who not only recognized but actively created artistic value.

Equally important: Peggy was a woman in the male-dominated world of art and the art market, at a moment when women had little access to capital, galleries, or curatorial authority. Her behavior was open, often provocative, and libertarian – destabilizing social codes in itself, and it is precisely this stereotype that Gompertz reproduces nearly a century later. Unlike Isabella Stewart Gardner, who built her collection within the norms of institutions and bourgeois ethics, or unlike her contemporaries who collected art primarily as an aesthetic or scholarly value, Peggy did more than accumulate art – she fashioned her persona as an artistic project in real time (Acker 2004, 83), and through her autobiography (Guggenheim 1980). Her approach demonstrates that collecting is an experimental form of knowledge; that the boundaries between private and public, amateur and professional, museological and affective can be productively unsettled; and that a collection can function as an epistemological machine: shaping gazes, identities, and aesthetic norms.

Peggy Guggenheim, therefore, is not merely one of the historical figures of collecting—she is a theoretical model. Yet this model resists conventional methodologies: her professional biography cannot be separated from her personal rises and falls, just as her private episodes – no matter how closely we examine them – fail to produce a unified high-resolution image. Peggy Guggenheim as a theoretical model demands interpretation in a constant oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity, naivety and knowledge, the personal (even the intimate) and the public, enthusiasm and irony, hope and melancholy, and finally, creation and heritage. Which is meta-modern in its essence.

Peggy Guggenheim as a Theoretical Challenge

The question remains open: with which concept of collecting can we compare hers – that of her contemporaries, or that of today's collectors? Undoubtedly, Peggy bridges epochs, even different philosophies of collecting: was she the last great patron, or the first global cultural entrepreneur who moved freely among markets, cities, and avant-gardes (Prokopoff 1980, 11–12)? In the period 1930–1960, a number of significant collectors and patrons were active, among them: Gertrude Stein, collector and writer, known for discovering Pablo Picasso and Cubism in Paris, equally provocative to society through her life choices; Albert C. Barnes, founder of a family foundation, collector of French modernists and African art; Katherine Dreier, founder of the *Société Anonyme* with Marcel Duchamp, collector and promoter of modern art in the United States; Duncan Phillips, founder of the *Phillips Collection* in Washington, the first museum of modern art in America; and, the aforementioned Isabella Stewart Gardner, who belonged to a generation before Guggenheim appeared on the "collecting" scene, but can still be considered relevant for comparison. Peggy Guggenheim shared with Stein and Dreier an avant-garde mission of actively promoting artists on the margins of the market, particularly Abstract Expressionism and the European avant-garde: "She was among the first to support Pollock, Rothko, and other artists who would later define American Modernism, and at a time when they had very little institutional or market recognition" (Prokopoff 1980, 33–35). With Stein she also shared intense personal and romantic relationships with artists, which significantly influenced her collection. Guggenheim connected the European and American scenes, but unlike Barnes and Dreier she was not supported by a systematic theory. It could be said that she had instinct, taste, courage, and, in the beginning, advisors: "At that time, I did not know how to distinguish things in art. Marcel [Duchamp] tried to educate me. I don't know what I would have done without him. He made a plan for my exhibitions and gave me advice. I have to thank him for my entry into the world of modern art" (Guggenheim 1980, 35). Among the above-mentioned examples there were collectors similar to Peggy, but only she so radically combined private

and public, personal and institutional, while being open to contemporary currents. Finally, the spontaneity and paradoxical nature of her actions led Guggenheim to highlight contradictions, the boundary as construct – she did not engage much (if at all) in theory, but her activity shaped canons, because "meaning arises from the structure of the collection, and not necessarily from theoretical articulation" (Pierce 1995, 193). Thus, in the end, her collection is not a sum of artworks, but a set of meaning-bearers that connect almost irreconcilable codes of reality, even symbolic ones that can be read not only from the collection but also from the working models through which it came into being (Pomian 1990, 7–10).

On the other hand, we can compare Peggy Guggenheim with contemporary collectors such as Dakis Joannou, Eli and Edythe Broad (*Broad Collection*, Los Angeles), Maja Hoffmann (*Luma Foundation*, Arles), Charles Saatchi (*Saatchi Gallery*, London), François Pinault (*Palazzo Grassi / Bourse de Commerce*, Paris), and many others (Altshuler 2005, 5–12), who are highly significant in the ecosystem of supporting, developing, and presenting contemporary art. If our focus is on motivation and role in the artistic ecosystem, we might argue that today's system is mostly based on market investment and social prestige (Thornton 2008, 155–160), but also that contemporary collectors are systemic actors in the market, founders and patrons of foundations, and even of cultural quarters and districts (Velthuis & Baia Curioni 2015, 15–20). What distinguished Peggy was her sincere and almost irrational devotion to art beyond market logic, but, on the other hand, also a lack of long-term strategy and institutional sustainability in the earlier phases of collecting.

Contemporary collecting trends base their selection on expertise, databases, market analyses, and consultations with curators and galleries (Stallabrass 2004, 130–135), while relationships with artists are often distant and institutional. Peggy Guggenheim understood artistic work as a living process, often developed in synergy with artists, best illustrated by her relationship with Jackson Pollock (Jones 1996, 231–235; Bishop 2012, 15–18). Her decisions were highly personal, even impulsive. Contemporary collections are almost immediately positioned through public foundations, cultural platforms, and museums, or globally through biennials, fairs, and digital platforms. The opposite is complete invisibility or concealment from the public eye, the so-called *Duty Free* or *Container Art* (Steyerl 2017, 20). In project-oriented and economically appealing language, the advantage of contemporary collectors lies in the professionalization of management and international visibility, while the main critique refers to the increased focus on branding, within which both artists and collectors become part of the celebrity system, with artistic content pushed into the background (Graw 2009, 156–160).

Finally, we could also turn to the semantic and epistemological potential of the collection. "New" collections are often thematically diverse, globally oriented, and sometimes without a unifying narrative, unlike Peggy Guggenheim's, which is characterized by a clear narrative of the development of modern art, as well as personal and aesthetic coherence (Pearce 1995, 26–27, 30). Continuing in the same (economic-project) spirit, one could say that Peggy Guggenheim's collection is almost

a museological narration of an era, while contemporary ones reflect flexibility, accentuate (even favor) pluralism, and flirt with the idea of postcolonial consciousness (Stokes Sims 2005, 154; Velthuis & Baia Curioni 2015, 15–17). Although we can criticize Peggy's focus on white male authors of Western art, contemporary collectors can be criticized for potential superficiality or compliance with fashion rather than vision (Thornton 2008, 20–23). In the contemporary context, her model of individualized cultural expression is almost unrepeatable in its radicalism, but at the same time represents a critical framework through which we can observe the limitations of contemporary, often market-oriented collecting (Belting 2001, 268).

The Stereotype of Reading Biographies

Many have written about Peggy Guggenheim[1] in different ways, yet her autobiography[2] – partly adapted into a documentary film[3] – remains perhaps the best testimony. Peggy is brutally honest and unburdened by taboos or clichés when speaking about herself. She is acutely aware of them, and shocks even more with an almost psychopathic detachment from her own experiences. This is not merely the distant recollection of a woman who lived a turbulent and dynamic life. Rather, it is a matter of character – not overly interested in everyday life, but intensely focused, almost ruminative, on love, intimacy, or art – which, in Peggy Guggenheim's case, are nearly identical.

The first exhibition she organized in her London gallery (*Guggenheim Jeune*) was dedicated to Jean Cocteau. The very first work shown was the drawing *Fear Gives Wings to Courage*. This became almost a motto for all of Peggy's subsequent work. In her attempt to approach her family and obtain support for an exhibition dedicated to Kandinsky in 1938, she turned to Hilla von Rebay, herself a collector and abstract artist, and at that time the director of the Guggenheim Foundation (from the following year the *Museum of Non-Objective Painting*, and from 1952 the *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, founded by Peggy's uncle). The reply she received was brutal:

1 Here are several important publications: Rudenstine, Angelica & Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. *Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.* New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation & Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1985; Weld, Jacqueline B. *Peggy: The Wayward Guggenheim.* New York: E. P. Dutton, 1986; Dortch, Virginia M. (Ed.) *Peggy Guggenheim and Her Friends*. Milan: Berenice Art Books, 1994; Gill, Anton. *Art Lover: A Biography of Peggy Guggenheim*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2002; Dearborn, Mary V. *Mistress of Modernism: The Life of Peggy Guggenheim*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004; Davidson, Susan & Rylands (Eds.) *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century*. Venice: Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 2004; Prose, Francine *Peggy Guggenheim. The Shock of the Modern.* Yale University Press, 2015.

2 Guggenheim, Peggy. *Out of This Century: The Informal Memoirs of Peggy Guggenheim.* The Dial Press, 1946 i Guggenheim, Peggy. *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*. Universe Books, 1980.

3 Documentary feature: *Peggy Guggenheim: Art Addict*, dir. Lisa Immordino Vreeland, (Submarine Entertainment), 2015.

> "Dear Mrs. Guggenheim Jeune,
> Your gallery would be the last one to which our foundation would turn if we were to acquire a historically important painting... It is extremely unpleasant to see the Guggenheim name, which today represents an ideal in art, used for commercial purposes... It is sad to see how you promote mediocrity, if not garbage. You will soon discover that non-objective art does not grow on trees so that you can make your business profitable. For that reason, the trade in true art cannot exist."

Although Peggy Guggenheim's gallery operated at a considerable loss, her answer was no less courageous:

> "Dear Baroness Rebay,
> Your letter amused me greatly... I think you have a completely wrong idea about my art gallery. For the last sixteen years I have lived and associated with artists. My motives are pure. I do not make money, I help artists.
> Yours,
> Marguerite" (Guggenheim 1980, 41).

The quality that best characterizes Peggy is always courage – even when it was not explicitly manifested, even when her interpretations might "smell" of frivolity. After her plans for opening a museum of modern art in London, her marital troubles, her intense purchases of artworks in Paris up until mere hours before the occupation, her dramatic crossing of the Atlantic[4], and her turbulent personal experiences upon arriving in the United States, she opened the *Art of This Century* gallery on October 20, 1942. The gallery combined Surrealist and abstract art in separate spaces and was the first international gallery to present European and American art together on equal terms. But it was not only this "geographical" innovation that contributed to its success. The abundance of programs—still considered progressive today—that focused on the Black community, children, marginalized artists, women, as well as a collecting impulse toward peripheral geographies and/or colonies[5], shaped both the gallery and the art-historical narrative.

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4 *"There were eleven of us – one husband, two ex-wives, one future husband, and seven children [...] The clipper voyage was very boring, except for one hour we spent in the Azores, where I bought a huge hat that the journalists wanted to photograph me with in New York"* – another example of Peggy Guggenheim's interesting storytelling and her relationship to reality. Documentary film: *Peggy Guggenheim: Art Addict*, dir. Lisa Immordino Vreeland, (Submarine Entertainment), 2015.

5 This is best illustrated by the exhibition held in Venice in 2020, which testifies to Peggy's turn during the 1950s and 1960s toward collecting works by artists from Africa, Oceania, and South America. See more details at: https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/whats-on/exhibitions/migrating-objects/ (19.06.2025).

Just a few months after opening the gallery, in January 1943, Peggy Guggenheim organized *Exhibition by 31 Women*—the first exhibition devoted exclusively to women artists, featuring participants from both sides of the Atlantic. Works were selected by Duchamp, Breton, and Ernst, together with Peggy herself. A curiosity for the Serbian art scene is that Milena Pavlović Barili was among those included. Without delving into Peggy's later private relationships with some of the selectors and artists, she laconically commented after the exhibition: *"I said it should have been 30 and not 31 women"*[6] Eighty years later, Jenna Segal recreated this exhibition at the very site where *Art of This Century* once stood.[7]

The ways in which Peggy Guggenheim collected, selected works for exhibitions in her galleries, or commented on them publicly (let us not forget, she was a public figure) often gave rise to controversial interpretations. Susan Pearce has written: "Where women have engaged in [this type of] collecting, research suggests that it has usually been related to a husband or family prestige, or unrelated to essential meaning, as in the case of Peggy Guggenheim, who seems to have collected most of her paintings as souvenirs of various artist lovers." (Pearce 1995, 2016). Although citing the *Autobiography*, it is evident that Pearce fails to grasp Peggy Guggenheim's ironically honest tone. The narrative is (mis)used in order to suggest an absence of aesthetic and intellectual autonomy, to emphasize pseudo-secondary motives, and to discredit her curatorial vision. As an illustration of a similar attitude, one might mention the exhibition *Contemporary Sculpture* that Peggy Guggenheim organized in London at the already mentioned Guggenheim Jeune gallery. In her *Autobiography* we read:

> "[The English] customs authorities did not want to accept all the works together as an art exhibition. It was up to the director of the Tate Gallery, J. B. Manson, to decide what was art. He did not confirm it, so the exhibits could only enter the country as individual pieces of bronze, marble, wood... The case ended up in court at the House of Commons. Manson lost the case, and soon after his position as director as well." (Guggenheim 1980, 42).

Peggy was almost continuously challenged, both as a woman and as a collector. The role of patroness was (cynically) taken for granted, given the intersection of her social status and artistic interests. Yet, when considering all three aspects simultaneously, she can be seen as a disruptive force within an art system fundamentally male in principle and often upheld by women as well. Peggy, with the help of her own resources and undeniable charisma, created space for a different visual and value system. Moreover, she used her personal lifestyle to participate authentically in the artistic avant-garde as part of its code and mythmaking: she

6 Film *Art Addict.*

7 The 31 Women Collection, https://www.the31women.com/home (17.06.2025)

did not merely observe, reflect on, or collect art from a distance, but generated and constituted her own persona through and within the artistic system, which is an identificatory act (Jones 2012, 15 and 23).

Finally, Peggy—following Linda Nochlin's view—can be understood as a "proto-feminist figure." Peggy herself stated this explicitly: *"I was a liberated woman long before there was a name for it."*[8] Certainly, she did not articulate a feminist position theoretically, but she embodied it in her practice. Essentially, Peggy Guggenheim's contribution should not be seen exclusively through the field of art production and collecting, nor solely through her "scandalous" private life, but also in connection to the contemporary intellectual currents reshaping the artistic field (Nochlin 1971, 22–39, 67–71).

The "Bilbao" Effect of Peggy Guggenheim?

The Bilbao effect is a question of identity. After critical acclaim and the local community's enthusiasm for the city's economic parameters, Bilbao began to awaken "after the fireworks." The question of identity remained from the moment the word gentrification was increasingly heard – to whom did the newest Guggenheim museum branch actually belong? Being the "black sheep" of her family, the question of the identity of Peggy Guggenheim's collection manifests itself in an opposite way at every stage of its creation and exhibition. The reason lies precisely in Peggy and her decisions, while perception can be decisive in evaluation. Although Peggy was a contemporary of modernist metanarratives, conventional worldviews were not particularly favorable to her. Peggy Guggenheim died with the first signs of postmodernism. Yet even a society enjoying simulacra and bricolages, relentless "critique" and (self-)reflection, intelligent and then banal irony, did not have the capacity to think about Peggy Guggenheim more sincerely.

From a historical perspective, both the novel and the museum are peers and belong to the period of the birth of the modern era (Popadić 2014, 137). Peggy claimed to be both a collector and a writer, as evidenced by the way she signed dedications in catalogues. And since heritage is not a verifiable or probable version of our past, it is a confession of faith in that past (Lowenthal 1998, 78). Following Peggy Guggenheim's path, it can be argued that she confessed faith in the present, more precisely in contemporaneity, whose future is to become heritage, and she wrote about it in a very unconventional way. The question of the relationship between contemporaneity and the past is clearly reflected in the two versions of her *Autobiography*, separated by about thirty years.

Although the previously mentioned collector Dakis Joannou flaunts his expensive yacht named *Guilty*, designed by Jeff Koons, this does not mean that his

8 Film *Art Addict*

collecting impulse lacks the same features as Peggy's – the development of personal relationships with artists, recently mostly on the beautiful island of Hydra.[9] Since her arrival in Venice, Peggy did not boast about anything, but rather built the memory potential of her collection. The first version of the *Autobiography* (1946) shocks and provokes, while the one from the last year of her life is an honest confession of a woman who lived life the way she wanted, could, and knew how. This second version has become an integral part of how we consider her collecting path, and thus an inseparable part of the interpretation of the historical-artistic canon she created.

After the end of the war and the closure of her New York gallery, Peggy moved to Venice. Long before she officially became part of the Guggenheim museum conglomerate, criticisms had turned into praise and recognition. It could be said that this was more about her collection than Peggy herself. She was first presented at the Venice Biennale in 1948 at the Greek Pavilion (Ereš 2020, 103), which was also visited by the then President of Italy, Luigi Einaudi. The following year she was permanently housed in the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. London's Tate hosted her in 1965 (Stephenson 2018), the museum of her late uncle in 1969, and Paris' Orangerie in 1975. Nevertheless, Peggy's collecting contribution is more fascinating during the period from 1930 to 1948 than after her "settling" in Venice.

If compared to Joannou, despite friendships with artists and attempts to understand creation, his approach appears institutionalized, deliberate, and structured – all the while his collecting impulse is intertwined with the *Déste* Foundation (colloquial Greek: *Look! See!*). Peggy's approach, in contrast, is almost cinematic, fictional, yet real: It oscillates between naivety and irony (generally toward the world around her, and thus toward collecting), private and public, hope (for recognition) and doubt (in her own assessments), faith in her choices (Pollock) and cynicism (*Exhibition by 31 Women*). These codes are not necessarily opposed to one another, and even linear movement between them is not obligatory. Peggy cannot be placed in a single trajectory; she is in constant, random movement. This seems to describe her collecting path. She demonstrates a utopian desire for meaning, authenticity, and emotion – yet she is liberated by the (un)awareness of the illusion that goals are fully attainable.

If we could ask both the same question – "Do you believe that the act of engagement and attempt, even if perhaps unsuccessful, has meaning in itself?" – we would very likely get different answers. Joannou's path is post-postmodern, while Peggy Guggenheim traverses into metamodernity. Relying on Elsner and Cardinal (1994, 1), Milan Popadić notes: "It is important to pay attention to one essential thing – classification precedes collecting" (*trans. aut.*) (Popadić 2021, 33). However, in the case of Peggy Guggenheim, this is not entirely true – her collecting led to classification and its continuous refinement. Thus, Peggy Guggenheim's

9 Dakis Joannu interview in Hydra, https://www.lux-mag.com/dakis-joannou-interview-in-hydra/, Lux, Responsible Culture (19.06.2025)

collecting is the process lead mostly by intuition, rather than conformity to existing classifications. It is almost a "structure of feeling" as a way in which a period or phenomenon is emotionally perceived (Williams 1977, 128–135). The sensibility of metamodernism, if such a term can even be used, balances or "travels" between two values: the coldness and detachment of postmodern irony and the sublimity and dogmatism of modernism (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010). This structure of feeling, in Peggy Guggenheim's case, is still deconstructed, unsystematized, and unclassified. But this is no longer a problem, rather a possibility for a new paradigm of collecting.

Through collecting, Peggy interprets art (of selection) and, through the interpretation of art, she also collects her own life choices. "Between the most common understanding that interpretation is any story about art, and the exclusive understanding that interpretation is a discourse about being itself, there is no classical opposition. Between these two formal poles arise, freely chosen, yet always in some way legitimate, different forms of narratives about art" (*trans. aut.*) (Bulatović 2016, 68). And one of the most legitimate stories of recognizing the value of new art, which withstands time and tastes, is undoubtedly that of Peggy Guggenheim.

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UMETNOST IZBORA: PEGI GUGENHAJM

Apstrakt:

Rad se bavi odnosom između ličnih afiniteta i estetskih izbora u kolekcionarskoj praksi Pegi Gugenhajm. Njeni potezi predstavljaju temelj za promišljanje identiteta kolekcionara, selektivnih strategija i samog koncepta zbirke. Upoređujući njene pristupe umetnosti i kolekcionisanju, analiziraju se načini na koje je uspešno delovala kao posrednica između umetničkih epoha, često prepoznajući vrednosti koje će tek kasnije dobiti institucionalno priznanje. Kao kolekcionarka i mecena, Gugenhajm narušava dominaciju patrijarhalno oblikovanih kanona – ne toliko otvorenom feminističkom kritikom, koliko suštinskim promenama u načinu delovanja. Njena ulaganja u umetnost – lična i finansijska – nisu bila vođena profitom, već stvaranjem kulturnog kapitala. Kroz modele delovanja bliske muzejskim praksama, oblikovala je novi umetnički pejzaž, utemeljen na sopstvenim istorijsko-umetničkim i estetskim principima. Taj impuls ne odgovara savremenim modernističkim ili postmodernim tumačenjima, već se uklapa u složeniju strukturu koju možemo opisati pojmom metamodernosti.

Ključne reči:

Pegi Gugenhajm, zbirka, kolekcionarski impuls, moderna umetnost, metamodernost

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