

The Stein Collection At SFMOMA— There's Definitely A There, There

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By Kellie Ell

On any given Saturday, circa the early 1900s, Gertrude Stein could be found in her Parisian flat at 27 Rue de Fleurus, busily preparing for one of her notorious evening salons. She shared the modest living space with her older brother Leo, an art critic, and, later, with her longtime partner, Alice B. Toklas.

Every nook and cranny of the living space, located in the residential neighborhood of Paris's 6th arrondissement, was occupied with stacks of books and Gertrude's personal collection of paintings by Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henri Paul Gauguin, Paul Cézanne, Juan Gris, and many other eventually famous 20th century artists.

The walls were covered and the rooms overflowed with masterpieces, a museum curator's dream.

In fact, some consider Gertrude's home the first museum of modern art. It was definitely a sanctuary for creative types, art lovers, and the literary minds of the day. Her salons were frequented by the artists themselves, along with poets, musicians, and radical thinkers.

Stein and her brothers, Leo and Michael, along with Michael's wife, Sarah Stein, were among a select group of expatriate bohemians who left the United States after visiting the World's Fair in Paris at the turn of the century. Gertrude and Leo, as they came to be known, relocated to the City of Lights in 1902, and Michael and Sarah arrived the following year. Soon after settling in, their impressive art inventory began to take shape. The family became fundamental to the early 20th century modern art movement, helping to sway bourgeois tastes, redefine contemporary style, and influence Parisian culture.

This month, it will be the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's (SFMOMA) turn to play host to the Stein collection, a grand debut that will reunite these masterworks for the first time in more than 40 years. The collection had been scattered over several continents and shared by different owners since Gertrude's death in 1946. This international touring exhibit, titled *The Stein Collection: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, celebrates the life of the Stein family and the enormous contribution they have made to art history.

The legendary art anthology was put together by SFMOMA in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Réunion des Musées in Paris, and it will run from May 21 to September 6, in the city the Stein family once called home (in addition to Oakland). It is the first and only other noteworthy exhibition displaying the greater part of the Stein Collection in a group show since the 1970 exhibition, *Four Americans in Paris: the Collections of Gertrude Stein and Her Family*, organized by The Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

“It’s really impossible to overestimate the role of this eccentric American family as patrons of visual art in early 20th century Paris,” says co-curator **Janet Bishop** of SFMOMA. “The Steins were true champions of modernism, embracing and defending new art as it was first being made and before it was met with widespread acceptance. They not only avidly collected works when the artists most needed support, but also enthusiastically opened their modest Left Bank homes to anyone wishing to see the most radical art of the day.”

Forty of Picasso’s paintings, including the once-scandalous *Boy Leading a Horse*, from his Rose Period (because of the nude portrait of a young man), and the well-known *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, will be on exhibit. Matisse is represented by 60 compositions, including the *Blue Nude*, *Woman with a Hat*, *Self-Portrait*, and *Tea*.

The thematic show is presented in chronological order, telling the family’s story, when and how they acquired each piece, and drawing on events in their lives that mirror major milestones in history. We will also learn how the uncompromising Steins started out in a position far removed from their highly respected perch as artistic visionaries today. The outré Steins were rebels, stirring up controversy and wrath with their outlandish and “vulgar” art finds, considered, back in those days, to be shocking displays of nudity, garish palettes, and abstract stylization. Even then, however, they were celebrated by some for their daring and their knack for discovering hidden gems.

Some of the groundbreaking art movements they encouraged through their collecting included impressionism and cubism, not considered “worthy” by many art critics of the time. The Steins chose art they admired and that inspired their passions, and in the process, they helped to promote the artists they collected and often befriended.

As Henry McBride, art critic for the now defunct, *New York Sun*, once said of Gertrude, “She collected geniuses rather than masterpieces. She recognized them a long way off.”

Michael and Sarah had vision, too. On a 1906 trip home, to check on their Bay Area property after the 1906 earthquake, they brought with them the first Matisse paintings ever to be seen on American soil.

Gertrude Stein was born into a well-educated German-Jewish American family outside Pittsburgh in 1874. From an early age she and her brothers were encouraged to appreciate the arts and to be free thinkers. The Stein children spent their childhoods between Europe and the Bay Area. Gertrude later attended Radcliffe College in Massachusetts, where she began writing poems and short stories, which would later be published during her stay in Paris.

Although Gertrude and her brothers didn’t always have the funds to purchase the artwork they admired, they frequently managed to pool their finances in the early years to afford to buy original art — and they had the foresight to buy the right pieces, remaining devoted art patrons throughout their lives.

“You can either buy clothes or buy pictures,” Gertrude once said. “It’s that simple. No one who is not very rich can do both.”

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