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Gertrude Stein's
Love of Art

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The Steins Collect

Cues, Clues, and Discoveries

Gertrude, Leo, and Michael and Sarah Stein were all major art collectors. The current exhibit at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, *The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, is a tribute to this Jewish-American family who promoted modern art through their passion for collecting. Their Parisian apartments were home to legendary Saturday evening salons, where artists, writers, collectors, and socialites flocked to experience modern art first hand. The exhibition and accompanying 492-page book were produced by a team of curators and specialists in conjunction with the

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Réunion des musées nationaux, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the exhibition is on view until June 3.

I was brought into this project to document the family's collection and to establish an inventory of their holdings of Western art. The Steins sent snapshots to friends in order to share news of recently acquired additions to their ever-evolving collection of modernist art. We began our research by gathering as many photographs as possible of the family's residences and then trying to identify and to locate as many works of their collection as possible. More than 468 extant archival photographs

Paul Cézanne's *Bathers*, ca. 1892. Oil on canvas, 8 11/16 x 13 in. (22 x 33 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris on deposit at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon. The use of archival photos and digital imagery helped researchers to discover a third version of this painting owned by the Steins.

proved to be an important source of documentary evidence. The photographs were assembled from individuals, libraries, universities, and museums all over the world and range in date from approximately 1904 to 1952.

With these photographs in hand, we began to analyze the various room settings of the Steins' residences in Europe and in America—from Paris and Vaucresson to the countryside of eastern France and the hills of Palo Alto, California. Because many of

these photographs were previously unknown or had been misdated, we started afresh. Each was examined and classified by similarities in architectural details and furnishings. Interior renovations such as the replacement of a cast iron stove with a fireplace or the change of a light fixture when a building was converted from gas to electrical lighting proved to be crucial clues. In some instances, the vantage points overlapped, leading us to realize that, occasionally, we had multiple, nearly panoramic views of family rooms.

Our next step was to determine when and why each photograph was taken: Which paintings were the newly acquired additions? Which works had disappeared and why? Had they been sold or loaned to an exhibition and if so, where and when? Or had the art simply been moved to another spot on a different wall for which there was no photograph? Knowing the acquisition or sale date of a single work proved immensely helpful. By correctly dating the photographs, we would be able to trace the evolution of the collection in each residence over time. My



Henri Matisse was a good friend and frequent visitor of the Stein family. Henri Matisse's *Boy with Butterfly Net*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 69 3/4 x 45 15/16 in. Minneapolis Institute of the Arts, The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund.

research on the photographs complemented my provenance research on the Steins' painting collection—each providing interlocking links that, in tandem, yielded fruitful results regarding the acquisitions of many works. Using the hundreds of images, I attempted to label each painting in any given photograph with the date it entered the Steins' collection and, whenever possible, when it was sold. Taken together, I was able to establish a dating parameter for each

view. Of course, the massive amount of information gathering was shared between a team comprised of Maxime Touillet and Hilary Floe in New York and Carrie Pilto in San Francisco, as well as the exhibition's three curators: Janet Bishop, Cécile Debray, and Rebecca Rabinow.

Aside from the classic issues of dating or re-dating of works or acquisitions in an art historian's normal duties, our direct observations of these photographs and subsequent investigations revealed much new, unexpected information both about the works themselves and their presence in the Stein collection.

Foremost, it may be surprising to learn how much we discovered simply by comparing multiple prints of the same image. The variations in exposure and cropping of duplicate images enabled us to identify artworks. In some instances, the renditions of the paintings, even in duotone, were nearly black, leaving the odd details of the frame as the only key to a painting's identification.

In two notable cases, the photographs prove that the artwork was altered after it entered the Steins' collection. The background of Matisse's still life, *Dishes and Melon*, 1906–1907, was reworked by the artist, and a sketch nude study, *Faith, the Model*, ca. 1901, was resized, cutting down the canvas to focus attention on the painted motif. In both instances the compositional changes were made after having been acquired by Michael and Sarah Stein and were most likely made by the artist himself, who was a good friend and frequent visitor. Another photograph, from ca. 1911–1914 of Michael and Sarah's apartment on rue Madame, shows a large Matisse canvas, *Interior with Aubergines*, 1911, with its painted frame, now lost, and serves as an historical record to the work's former state.

The study of these photographs proved essential for additional reasons. Works that we thought the family owned but for which we didn't have any documentary evidence were discovered. Art historians were beginning to question whether Leo and Gertrude had actually owned a mon-



A tribute to their mutual admiration—Pablo Picasso's *Gertrude Stein*, 1905–06. Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 32 in. (100 x 81.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Gertrude Stein, 1946 (47.106).

umental cubist painting by Picasso, *Three Women*, 1908. A tiny corner of it was identified in an extant photograph (dated ca. 1912–1913); it is the only known visual record of the painting in the Stein's rue de Fleurus atelier.

Moreover, works that we didn't know the family owned also appeared in photographs. For example, three vintage photographs of Sarah and Michael's apartment dating from 1906 to 1908 show a painting of bathers by Cézanne. Art historians have always assumed that the painting is one of the two Cézanne bathers owned



Henri Matisse (center) and Hans Purrmann (right) dining with Michael, Sarah, and Allan Stein in the apartment at 58 rue Madame, Paris, ca. 1908.

by Leo and Gertrude. However, thanks to modern technology, we were able to enlarge a digital image of the photograph and found that it was another painting entirely (Cézanne, *Bathers*, ca. 1892), thus increasing our understanding of the Stein family's early interest in Cézanne and the artist's role as a model of modernism for these collectors.

Although the study of photographs revealed some of our most interesting discoveries, other documents were instrumental to our work. Wills and inventories, including insurance policies, provided lists and descriptions of artworks and household items left in possession of some of the Stein family members. Copies were located in public and private archives in France and in the United States. For instance, a previously unknown version of Gertrude's will was found in California. Dated May 22, 1931, the will clearly indicated Gertrude's intention to give her portrait by Picasso

to The Metropolitan Museum of Art years earlier than previously known.

Still, numerous other insights were gained. By total happenstance, I discovered that a friend of mine had grown up in Leo and Gertrude's former apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus. Several visits to the residence proved instructive. In particular, we were able to study how the space related to the photographs in our trove, and, above all, to comprehend how all those masterpieces could have hung in a single room. Unfortunately, even our years of research couldn't help them resolve a mild family dispute as to which bedroom was which, and to conclude the unending saga of who actually occupied Gertrude's bedroom.

Another moment of revelation occurred at a museum opening reception, when an acquaintance mentioned that he had acquired a certain number of paintings from a Stein descendant in Baltimore. I followed up despite my skepticism. An unpublished inventory in the Stein papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library lent credence to the claim. After examining the paintings in question, labels on the verso proved that these works were indeed twenty-nine of the forty-four paintings Leo owned by the Czech artist Othone (Otakar) Coubine.

Despite our best efforts, some works still have not been located. Others have been identified at unexpected moments. In his memoirs, *Journey Into the Self*, Leo recalled his first acquisition, of a painting by the French artist Raoul du Gardier, depicting a woman in white walking a collie. Our last recorded reference to this work was its appearance in a photograph from 1904. It wasn't until we participated in a curatorial lecture panel held at SFMOMA the day after the exhibition opened in May 2011 that we learned of its whereabouts: a member of the audience currently had it hanging at home. The owners kindly agreed to lend the painting to the exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is now on view.

Robert McD. Parker is a contributor to the exhibition and author of "Catalogue of the Stein Collections" and "The Stein Residences in Photographs" in *The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with Yale University Press, 2011).