Global 30: Art (reading)

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**A Movable Feast for the Eyes**

Like the family it chronicles, “The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso and the Parisian Avant-Garde,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is fragmented and contentious, with flashes of brilliance. The exhibition, which comes to the Met by way of the Grand Palais in Paris and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, explores the closely intertwined collections of the siblings Leo, Gertrude and Michael Stein (and Michael’s wife, Sarah). It casts these wealthy American expatriates as ahead-of-the-curve art patrons, whose tastes and social networks shaped Modernism as we know it. (They introduced Matisse to Picasso. Enough said.)

But “The Steins Collect” is remarkably clear-eyed about the divisions within the family, the competing egos and shifting alliances. And it provides some refreshingly candid biographies of the individual Steins, even the one we know well from her own writing and an intimidating portrait by Picasso. It begins with Leo, the first family member to settle in Paris, around 1903. (Gertrude joined him later that year, and Sarah and Michael followed in 1904.) Like his siblings, this aspiring artist and all-around aesthete was able to live off the income from family investments, though it wasn’t enough to allow him to buy the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings he coveted. He could afford only small works by Renoir and Cézanne, even after pooling his income with Gertrude’s. So they turned to younger, less famous artists by the names of Matisse and Picasso, picking up Matisse’s marvelous Fauvist “Woman With a Hat” and the blue-period Picasso “Lady With a Fan.” It may be difficult to imagine now, but at the time paintings like these were an affront to popular taste; Leo called the Matisse “the nastiest smear of paint” and mulled over the purchase for five weeks.

Leo introduced Matisse to Sarah and Michael, who became dedicated collectors and maintained a decades-long friendship with the artist. Their son Allan cuts an impish figure in Matisse’s “Boy With a Butterfly Net,” a highlight of the exhibition. The couple also helped Matisse found an art academy, a project documented here in a room of dull and dutiful student exercises. More stimulating is the single large gallery dedicated to the Steins’ Saturday Salons, weekly open houses at Leo and Gertrude’s studio and Sarah and Michael’s residence. Artists, writers and musicians flocked to see work that was considered too avant-garde for Paris’s one contemporary museum; cynics “came to mock and remained to pray,” as Leo proudly recalled.

The main objects of their worship, Matisse and Picasso, were constantly one-upping each other. At the Met, Matisse’s celebrated “Blue Nude (Memory of Biskra)” plays the aggressor to Picasso’s glowing pink “Nude With Joined Hands,” and there are dueling paintings of a woman having her hair styled by a maid (both titled “La Coiffure” and calculated to appeal to Sarah and Michael, who owned a similar work by Henri Manguin).

Also in this room is the small Cézanne “Five Apples,” which Gertrude and Leo fought over when they split up their collection in 1914. Leo was going deaf, and could no longer take part in the salons; he was also sparring with his sister over her writing and her faith in Picasso’s new, Cubist direction. Eventually Leo moved out, and Alice B. Toklas moved in. Gertrude kept the Picassos; Leo took 16 Renoirs and the Cézanne, writing, “I’m afraid you’ll have to look upon the loss of the apples as an act of God.”

A gallery of Cubist Picassos shows that Gertrude got the better deal. Here are studies for the painting “Nude With Drapery” — inspired by African sculpture and made in 1907, the same year as

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/02/arts/design/the-steins-collect-matisse-and-picasso-at-the-met.html?pagewanted=print>

“Les Demoiselles d’Avignon” — and small masterpieces of Analytic and Synthetic Cubism, including “The Architect’s Table” of 1912 and “Still Life With Fruit, Glass and Newspaper” of 1914. At the very least, you might say that Gertrude was on the right side of art history.

But in the 1920s and especially the ’30s she was very much on the wrong one, and not just because she and Toklas remained in France during the war, where, it is thought, they were protected by the Vichy collaborator Bernard Faÿ. Her tastes, as the final set of galleries reveals, had turned to the literary Surrealism of André Masson and the cartoonish figuration of Francis Picabia (whose large canvas “The Acrobats” reads as a Picasso pastiche).

To be fair, Picasso’s prices had soared, and Gertrude could no longer afford larger works by him (except by trading older pieces from her collection that had appreciated in value, as she did to acquire a 1922 still life). And she was pouring most of her resources, and energy, into her writing career; “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas” was published in 1933, making her an international literary superstar.

Younger artists, including Pavel Tchelitchew, Francis Rose and Pierre Tal-Coat, sought her out and paid tribute in the form of portraits. These obsequious and occasionally hideous works close out the show, culminating in Rose’s “Homage to Gertrude Stein”; in this oversize tarot card of a painting, made just after Gertrude’s death, she stands on a throne with two silly-looking dogs at her feet.

“The Steins Collect” was organized by Janet C. Bishop, curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Pompidou Center’s curator of historical collections, Cécile Debray; and the Metropolitan Museum’s curator of Modern and contemporary art, Rebecca Rabinow. It has changed significantly from museum to museum; the San Francisco version emphasized the Bay Area connections of Michael and Sarah Stein, whereas the Met’s stresses the period during which all four Steins lived in Paris.

Ms. Rabinow sprinkles plenty of new research (conducted mainly at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, home to the Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers) into her labels and wall texts. Her findings have a “Midnight in Paris” effect, spiriting us into the Steins’ salons. We learn that Leo sometimes had lunch with Matisse and dinner with Picasso on the same day, and that Gertrude once confessed to feeling insulted that Matisse never asked her to pose for him. Buried within some of these charming anecdotes are important lessons for collectors. From Leo: A limited budget is an excuse to be creative. From Sarah and Michael: Treat the artists you love like family. And from Gertrude, in her own words to Ernest Hemingway: “Buy the people of your own age. There are always good new serious painters.”

“The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso and the Parisian Avant-Garde” continues through June 3 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 535-7710, metmuseum.org.