

Peggy

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For information contact
C&M Online Media Inc.
3905 Meadow Field Lane
Raleigh, NC 27606
Tel: (919) 233-8164
Fax: (919) 233-8578
e-mail: boson@cmonline.com
URL: <http://www.bosonbooks.com/boson/>

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PEGGY

by

John Phillips



Peggy

My memories of Venice merge with memories of Peggy Guggenheim.

Returning to Venice in 1958 I had decided to call on Peggy with the idea to interview her for the periodical *Americans Abroad*. An immediate rapport was established which resulted in a lasting friendship and during the years that followed until Peggy's death I enjoyed countless sejours in her surrealist palazzo. Peggy played a happy role in my life in Italy. I miss her.

A singular friendship, considering my lack of appreciation of Modern Art. Curiously, this was what may have appealed to Peggy, who inscribed for me a copy of her memoirs: "To John Phillips who likes me although he doesn't care for my Collection." Luxuriating in her image of famous art patron and collector, perhaps it was refreshing to have a friend who did not take her too seriously. I have always felt a deep rooted sense of humbug, of the "Emperor's New Clothes" in much of what is labeled Modern Art. Peggy was, of course, entirely committed to her Collection, clearly an outlet for her colossal egoism and desire for fame. How she delighted in turning over the pages of scrapbooks about herself filled with clippings from the international press!

A MONSTRE SACRÉ

Perhaps the cozy intimacy that we shared stemmed in part from the fact that we were both expatriate Americans with a taste for Henry James. Also, we were both from New York City, both having rejected an American milieu in search of a "Romantic Europe," nostalgic for the world of Henry James, incidentally Peggy's favorite author. A much-used edition of James's complete works figured prominently in the bookshelves in the large salon facing the Grand Canal. She had acquired the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni after the Second World War, a brilliant stroke. Now in her splendid gondola, wafted by her handsome gondolier, Peggy lived her dream, gliding on the canals, in the place in the world that most suited her. And in Venice, thanks to her single-minded determination, the Peggy Guggenheim Legend flourished.

The Collection had been started in the 30s in France when she asked experts, who were also friends, Marcel Duchamp and Kenneth Clarke, to prepare lists of masterpieces of non-representative 20th Century Art. With the outbreak of the Second World War she was able to make exceptional purchases at bargain prices. A shrewd purchaser, not for nothing a Guggenheim, with a relatively small budget but great determination, she continued to build the Collection. With the German conquest of France she returned to New York City where she opened a spectacular gallery featuring European surrealists who had escaped to America as well as unknown Americans. Then followed her

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marriage to Max Ernst whom she had rescued from Europe and her discovery of Jackson Pollock—a surrealist lifestyle!

In a basement gallery of the palazzo, surrounded by Pollocks that I found impossible to digest or admire, I implored Peggy's help. Her reply, quite simply: "You must feel!" The response must be on a non-intellectual level. But, the fact is that I felt nothing, except a sense of an expression of chaos and of the breakdown of the aesthetic values that I associated with the idea of ART. Similarly in Peggy's bedroom, confronted by a work of Bacon, the colors resembling raw meat, my reaction was of physical repulsion, a desecration of the famous view facing the Grand Canal.

The only other picture in the bedroom was Lenbach's portrait of Peggy as a child, of the Edwardian heiress school, the American Princess. These two works, the Lenbach and the Bacon, are in fact, the key to the personage that was Peggy Guggenheim. I am not qualified to explore the Bacon aspect of Peggy's personage. But I do know quite well the côté Lenbach, which led to much high comedy, especially when I introduced her to Violet Trefusis. A remarkable friendship evolved.

The Peggy whom I encountered in 1958 had jet black hair and something of the tigress look about her. Before long and quite suddenly there was a different Peggy, an overnight transition. Now white hair, a matriarchal air, and often a slightly melancholy gaze. Her golden years had vanished.

A feature of Peggy's character was her curiosity about her friends' intimate lives. Upon arrival in Venice, seated in her gondola which had come to collect me at the Stazione Terminus, I would be bombarded by queries about my love life in a flat monotonous insistent voice. To my own surprise I was not elusive as I might well have been, but somehow seemed compelled to reply. This was a part of the intimacy which friendship with Peggy involved.

Soon I slipped into the rhythm of the palazzo and here the interest concentrated on the museum, which was open to the public during half the year, three afternoons a week. As I have always been a siesta addict, I had to carefully lock myself in my room during museum hours, emerging self-consciously to the stare of visitors.

Catalogues of the Collection were on sale and Peggy usually installed herself with a pile at the entrance. Her maid was seated in another part of the palazzo with additional catalogues. Peggy seemed absolutely riveted by the business of selling the catalogues and she counted the lira notes with glee upon closure, as if this were her only source of income. Conversations took place over Bloody Marys to discuss whether by increasing the price by Lira 500, the balance between sales and profits would be augmented or

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reduced—that is, would the higher price discourage sales and offset profits. Peggy concentrated on such matters; her great vice, frequent to millionaires, alas increasing with age to a disastrous extent, was this miserly trait.

Innumerable anecdotes might illustrate the above. One of the most amusing concerns Peggy and her friend Roloff Beny, the Canadian photographer who lived in Rome. On one occasion Peggy asked me to make hotel reservations for herself and Roloff in Florence. A new hotel, the Caesare Agosto, close to the Ponte Vecchio, was my choice, and I explained to the manager that I would like to reserve two rooms on the top floor with the superb panoramic views for the distinguished patron of the arts and the famous photographer. I was not in Florence during their visit, but when I returned I went to the hotel to inquire if all had gone well. The manager informed me that they had kept the two rooms for only one night and the second day decided to share one room. Peggy told me that the hotel was perfect, but as she and Roloff were old friends they had decided that there was no need to pay for keeping two rooms.

Roloff, a brilliant photographer, creator of magnificent books about India, Ceylon, Iran, Japan and Italy shared Peggy's decorative style. His triplex apartment on the Tiber in Trastevere reflected her influence; however it was on a more flamboyant scale, a striking example of the Roman "Dolce Vita" lifestyle, a scene in which Roloff flourished during the 50s and 60s.

But while Peggy maintained her position with a quiet, authoritative self-assurance, Roloff was extravagant in proclaiming his own importance. One evening I accompanied him to a gallery in Rome, an opening of a de Chirico exhibition. A young journalist introduced himself to Roloff. Roloff announced, quite simply, "I am Roloff Beny."

"And are you an artist, Mr. Beny?"

Roloff turned on the young man with contemptuous fury: "Did you not hear my name? I am Roloff Beny, the most famous photographer in the world."

Indeed, reflecting upon my acquaintance with Roloff confirms the wisdom of not becoming acquainted with the creator of works of art which one greatly admires. Because I do admire those wonderful books, Roloff's creation.

That evening at the Gallery in the via Babuino were hung perhaps twenty characteristic works by the famous Maestro and sales were being made at top prices. An hour later we made our way to de Chirico's home, a house at the foot of the Spanish Steps, to attend a reception. As we filed into the house servants checked our coats. We

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entered large salons adorned with de Chirico works of all periods. The Maestro and his wife graciously received numerous admirers.

When the time came to leave I looked in vain for my coat. A servant told me that some of the coats had been taken upstairs. So I made my way to the floor above where I was startled to find myself in a series of rooms stacked high with de Chirico paintings, which were, in fact, his own copies of some of his most famous pictures. Did the proud purchaser of a de Chirico tonight in the gallery in Rome, or possibly another in Sydney or Los Angeles, imagine that the Maestro had reproduced quantities of the same picture? One more revealing glimpse into the Art Scene.

What was to be the destiny of Peggy's Collection? The Collection, a projection of her own image, must be given a certain immortality. This was her dearest wish. For years she enjoyed flattering overtures from the curators of the great museums who fancied adding a Peggy Guggenheim wing to their venerable institution, and they fêted the Collector accordingly. Her preoccupation was that the Collection must remain intact, that her heirs, son and grandsons, would not be able to alter any legal arrangements that she made. The thought that it might be a fine idea to bequeath each of her grandsons, attractive and promising young men, perhaps one picture each as a token from their famous grandmother, never crossed her mind. The Collection must remain as her monument, preferably in Venice.

I was fortunate to be a guest during a memorable visit from the formidable billionaire collector, Norton Simon, who came on behalf of the University of California of which he was a Regent. His mission was to persuade Peggy to leave the Collection to the University. It was a night of high comedy at the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni.

Simon, a notably tough and ruthless tycoon, had built up one of the most impressive art collections in recent years. Now he was coming to Venice, and for the first time, flying direct from California. Peggy had been advised of his arrival and considered it rather a bore. But she enjoyed a sense of power!

It so happened that the evening of Simon's arrival Peggy had arranged a small party for Alan Ansen, a poet and a former resident of Venice. In 1962 Ansen had been obliged to leave Venice when a zealous police chief decided to launch a campaign against well-known foreign homosexuals. He concentrated his attention on a few prominent foreigners, ignoring, of course, numerous Venetians whom it might be more difficult to persecute. Ansen had gone to Greece. Now he was briefly visiting Venice to see old friends including Peggy.

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Peggy had decided that it would be best to see Norton Simon the following day and when he called I was to give him the message. A late afternoon call: “This is Norton Simon to speak with Mrs. Guggenheim.”

“My name is John Phillips. I’m a friend of Mrs. Guggenheim. She said you would be calling and asked me to invite you for lunch tomorrow.”

A gasp. This was the great Norton Simon for whom minor mortals must wait for weeks in order to have a few moments of his precious time.

“I have an appointment for today. The Ambassador arranged it.”

I consulted Peggy and we decided why not ask him to come to the party.

“Mr. Simon, Mrs. Guggenheim is having a small party for an old friend. She says that she doesn’t think it’s your sort of party, but you’re very welcome to come if you like.”

A tall shaggy figure, a smiling Mr. Simon arrived. The tycoon was an agreeable surprise. I mixed him a memorable Bloody Mary. In fact, I mixed him several. He was enjoying himself and admired the Kandinsky and the Klee in the corridor. Peggy remarked:

“You’re much nicer than I’d expected. I usually don’t like rich people.”

Several hours later the party was breaking up. Peggy and I were alone with Alan Ansen. We realized that we hadn’t seen Mr. Simon for quite a while. Adjacent to the smaller salon facing the Grand Canal was the loo. Knocking on the door, we cried:

“Are you there? Mr. Simon? Are you all right?”

A long moan. “This is awful! This hasn’t happened since I was in college.”

Long flights plus Bloody Marys. We had to baby Mr. Simon, now a humble and touching figure. He must be given something to eat and as there was never anything in Peggy’s icebox, we decided to look for a trattoria. It was now almost midnight; only a spaghetti bar off the Piazza S. Marco, catering to German tourists, was open. After the spaghetti we accompanied Mr. Simon to his hotel. Tomorrow he would lunch with Peggy.

The following morning, recalling that Simon was coming and would ask her to bequeath the Collection to the University of California, Peggy demanded:

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“What shall I tell him?”

“Just say that as your great love is Venice, that you will agree to give the Collection provided that he agrees, and in writing, to contribute all necessary funds to prevent Venice from sinking into the sea.”

Peggy was delighted. After all, the press called her “L’Ultima Dogaressa” (the last Dogaress). A great international “Save Venice” campaign was underway. But even Norton Simon could not take on saving Venice. That afternoon he left the city, and I’m certain did not forget his first visit to Venice.

PEGGY AND VIOLET

In Florence, in 1960, I became a close friend of Violet Trefusis, the daughter of Alice Keppel, who was the most celebrated of Edward VII’s mistresses. From her mother, Violet inherited the splendid villa, L’Ombrellino, overlooking Florence. She was a notable figure in European Society and appealed very much to Peggy’s côté Lenbach. My relationship with Violet fascinated Peggy who was longing to meet her. The ensuing events as these two ladies, both *Monstres Sacrés*, met and became friends, must be viewed via the Comic Muse.

The curiosity was mutual. Violet was not acquainted with Peggy’s world. Violet’s Paris was that of the *gratin*, the international Gotha, literary salons, government ministers, royal personages. She had not the slightest interest in Surrealist or Abstract Art and would not have deigned to hang the latest Picasso in her villa. But Peggy was, she understood, a Legend. Also, Violet was curious, as I stayed quite often chez Peggy.

So in the Spring of 1962 when Violet was taking a cure at Abano Terme and I was visiting Peggy, a meeting was arranged. Violet would come to lunch.

Peggy was fascinated by the question of whether or not Violet was King Edward’s daughter and persisted to query me on this subject.

I gave my habitual reply:

“Not probable, but not impossible. It depends upon whether or not you accept the usual date given, 1898, for the first meeting of Alice Keppel and the Prince of Wales. Violet was born in 1894. However it is conceivable that they might have met before 1898; the Keppel family moved in court circles. What is certain is that intimacy with the King, until his death in 1910, had a great influence throughout Violet’s life. In fact, in her later life quite a few friends were struck by her resemblance to certain members of the

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Royal Family. These included François Mitterrand, who liked to imagine her to have been the King's daughter."

"Shall I curtsy to her?" Peggy demanded, flushed with excitement as the hour approached.

"Certainly not."

So there were no curtsies, but instead Peggy started to address Violet as Lady Violet.

"I am NOT Lady Violet," Violet asserted. Violet had often explained to me that the title of "Lady" signified very little, that every retired postmaster's wife had such a handle to her name. To Violet the only titles that mattered were very old ones; indeed, her husband, Denys Trefusis' family title was an example, as Denys' uncle was the 20th, or was it the 21st, Baron Clinton.

As Peggy persisted, Violet retorted:

"Well, if you must call me Lady Violet, then I will call you Lady Peggy!" That put a stop to it.

Both ladies were enjoying themselves. The luncheon, in the garden of the palazzo, was a success. Then it was time for Violet's siesta. Peggy installed her in her bedroom, in the silver bed that Alexander Calder had made for her. As this was a museum day and many visitors were expected, Peggy gallantly seated herself in the corridor by the bedroom, intimidating the visitors to silence so that Violet's siesta was assured. A few hours later, over tea, Violet invited Peggy to stay in Florence for her birthday party, the 6th of June. Peggy, to my surprise, accepted at once. This was a very busy season for the museum and she had always considered her presence in Venice to be indispensable.

A few weeks later Peggy arrived at the villa and plunged into the birthday festivities. Violet's entourage of Florentine contessas and ducessas were delighted to encounter the exotic collector. Violet found Peggy unexpectedly kindhearted and not pretentious; not at all a forbidding character, but pleasantly "cozy," Violet's word—if only she didn't collect those hideous pictures.... And Peggy seemed fascinated by the rarified atmosphere of L'Ombrellino, remarking that she had never heard such an exquisite voice as Violet's, that it was a joy to listen to her.

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Both enjoyed the novelty of this new friendship with the instinctive knowledge that there was no peril of rivalry. Both were *vedettes*, but revolving in very distant orbits.

For several years the friendship flourished until, during a subsequent visit by Peggy to L'Ombrellino, the fantasy of the Comic Muse made mischief. The fact is that Violet's incorrigible Professor Higgins instincts got the better of her as she was determined that Peggy should play a Liza Dolittle role. An inspiration: Violet decided that the only obstacle to Peggy's making a brilliant marriage was her nose. Violet would take her to Switzerland and have this arranged. She would wave her magic wand.

In her memoirs Peggy has treated the nose "problem":

"...in the winter of 1920, being very bored, I could think of nothing better to do than to have an operation performed on my nose to change its shape. It was ugly, but after the operation it was undoubtedly worse..."

But the fact was, as I proclaimed to Violet to no avail, that Peggy had been remarkably successful in her amours for nearly half a century, despite the nose.

Violet remained adamant, fixed in her purpose. In her most determined manner she invited Peggy to come to her bedroom for a "secret and important discussion." A mystified Peggy followed her. The proposition was that after the nose had been arranged in Switzerland, Violet would arrange marriage to a charming Scottish peer.

Of course, Peggy was dazzled by the offer. She did not in the least take Violet seriously, but her curiosity about the Scottish peer was intense. At dinner she persisted until Violet informed her that her future husband was to be Patrick Kinross. Peggy shrieked with laughter, exclaiming that Patrick was one of her oldest friends and not likely to propose marriage no matter how sublime a nose might be achieved. After this episode Peggy said she could not take Violet seriously and the friendship waned.

Since Peggy and her museum figured among the exceptional sights of Venice many notables came to sign her guest book. These included Lady Diana Cooper, who Violet liked to refer to as a "Goddess." Also, Truman Capote, Nancy Mitford, the Duke and Duchess of Bedford, among others. And, of course, the "Who's Who" of the international art world.

For the Biennale of Contemporary Art Peggy used to give a huge reception, but later she discontinued this practice. She enjoyed relating a certain incident that delighted her lively erotic imagination. Facing the Grand Canal in a central semi-enclosed area of the palazzo is a nude equestrian bronze by Marino Marini. The rider flourished a

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magnificent erection, which attracts considerable attention. In fact, the notable male member had been made by Marini so that the provocative part could be unscrewed, and this was done on occasions, for example, when religious processions were passing on the Grand Canal. At one of Peggy's crowded Biennale parties an audacious prankster or "collector" had made off with the precious part. For weeks Peggy queried all in Venice: "Who has it? Will he give it back?" As the "collector" did not manifest himself, Marini, very kindly, made a replacement, and with a lock.

To return to Peggy's côté Lenbach and the subject of royalty, in Venice resided a very rare specimen, the Princess Aspasia of Greece, who later was joined by her daughter, the exiled Queen of Yugoslavia. The Princess lived on a small island in the lagoon, a house with a large garden. She was not to be often encountered in Venetian society because she was said to have the evil eye. Many Italians would make the sign of the cross if her name were mentioned. It seems that her late husband, the King of Greece, had died after being bitten by her pet monkey, a Firbankian death. The only time that I met the Princess was when I accompanied Peggy for drinks at the home of the Rev. Victor Stanley. She was most gracious, praising my poodle, Orlando, whom she declared resembled "an heraldic beast."

My friend, Victor Stanley, had moved to Venice from Florence in the mid-sixties, accompanied by Peter Lauritzen, a young American, and I had introduced them to Peggy. An instant friendship was inevitable.

The tale of Victor's departure from Florence would be matter for a Trollope novel or one by Edith Wharton. A most cultivated vicar with a mellow Baltimore tone of voice and kind expressive eyes, Victor presided at the American Church. His popularity in Florentine society was exceptional. A sympathetic humorous manner as well as the most amusing gossip endeared him to the Florentine aristocracy as well as to the exiled royalty in residence, notably Queen Helen of Romania, the Princess Olga and their numerous families. No party was complete without Victor Stanley. However his social success did not please certain members of his congregation who led less mondaine lives. Despite many years in Florence they had not penetrated the salons of the aristocracy where Victor was an intimate, Perhaps they felt that their vicar should devote more time to them and less to the royal ladies.

The time for revenge came. Victor, having had a stroke, went to Sicily to recuperate. In a despondent mood he wrote a letter saying that for health reasons it might be best that he resign his position at the Church. His enemies, notably a provincial and affluent couple who were powers in the American Church, promptly called a meeting of the Church Committee. Although only a minority were present, they immediately sent a telegram to accept Victor's resignation, and the bishop was informed accordingly.

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Weeks later, Victor returned to Florence, fully recovered. By now the news of his resignation had spread widely and many church members as well as Florentine society were in despair. He must remain. Two sets of petitions were assembled and sent to the bishop: the first, sent by parishioners of the American Church, the second, by notable friends of Victor, including Queen Helen, Violet Trefusis, and half the Florentine aristocracy. But to no avail. The bishop also had little sympathy for his very cosmopolitan vicar.

What to do? Where to go?

In Venice, down a small canal from Peggy's home, was the charming Anglican Church of St. George which had been closed for some years. Victor's influential friends in Florence came to his rescue, notably Osbert Sitwell and Harold Acton. The Church of St. George was to reopen and Victor was to be the vicar. A fairy godmother appeared on the scene, a lady from Baltimore, an old friend of Victor. She wrote that she had planned to leave him a considerable legacy and instead decided to give him the sum at this time.

So Victor and Peter were soon installed in spacious rooms in a Venetian palace and within months they had charmed the Venetian grandees just as they had the Florentines. Peter, a scholar with a Princeton background and an Edwardian beard style, became an expert on the genealogies of the noble Venetians and of the histories of the famous churches and palaces, He was a perfect guide, often to be glimpsed in Peggy's gondola, discoursing on the marvels of Venice, as the hours slipped away on evocative canals.

Just as in Florence the exiled Queen of Romania had found Victor's friendship indispensable, now, in Venice, it was the turn of the exiled Queen of Yugoslavia. Victor and Peter were often to be seen with the poor queen and her mother in Harry's Bar.

Victor remained very much a part of the Venetian scene until his death in 1974. Peter remains in Venice, having married a cousin of Violet Trefusis, the Hon. Rose Keppel. A most erudite guide, he accompanies the most elegant American visitors to discover the wonders of Venice and Italy.

Among the Venetians whom I encountered with Peggy, none were more remarkable than Signora Lombardi and her son Franco. One evening we went to call on them in a nearby palazzo on the Grand Canal. I recall a series of vast rooms, hung with faded crimson satin, and numerous reliquaries, containing fragments of saints' remains. The Signora had long flowing white hair. She must have been well over eighty. She had been the mistress of d'Annunzio and Franco was said to be the poet's son. They divided

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their time between Venice and their property on Lake Garda. When I remarked that I lived in Florence, she replied that she had been there more than fifty years ago. Every night, I was told, the Signora Lombardi took dictation from other planets or stars. The previous night, seated with her blank pad, she received a long text in French from Edmond Rostand. This was difficult for her as she knew very little French.

Peggy's last years were not happy. She was lonely and increasingly infirm. Her old age was made unnecessarily difficult by her mania for petty economies. On one occasion, I recall, she needed treatments from a nurse several times a week. But she was unwilling to pay the fee for the nurse to come to the palazzo, preferring to spend the morning traveling with her secretary, in and out of motorboats, in order to have the treatment at a distant public clinic.

For me, Venice was a place where the spirit of melancholy often prevails. The feeling of decay is intense; the tawdry commercial banality of mass tourism is overwhelming. The sensuality of Venice frustrates. Quite different, for me, was Florence where one might enjoy a pleasant and well-ordered, day-to-day life. But Peggy was wedded to Venice. Most of her "babies," her Lhasa terriers, the focal point of her love for so many years, were buried in the garden, She waited to join them. For *Monstres Sacrés*, the final chapter can be exceptionally difficult. At least Peggy knew that her Collection would remain in Venice as she had wished, and with it, her Legend.

END

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