Saturday Evenings at the Steins'
Emily Braun

From 1906 until the outbreak of World War I, devotees and skeptics of modernism made pilgrimages to the Paris salons of the Stein families. "Some came to mock and remained to pray," wrote Leo of the not-uncommon conversions to the new religion, as it was aptly termed. It is no exaggeration to state that the Steins did more to support avant-garde painting than any other collectors or institutions anywhere in the first decade of the twentieth century. They also came to epitomize the societal freak show of bohemia for cultural conservatives. At 27 rue de Fleurus, home of Leo and his sister Gertrude, and 58 rue Madame, that of their brother Michael and his wife, Sarah, thrill-seekers and earnest amateurs hobnobbed with a cosmopolitan aggregation of insiders. The reactions to the paintings by Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso ranged from disdain to incredulity, but the astonishment of neophytes served only to spread the word, and crowds soon flocked to gawk at the controversial art and the owners who had consecrated it.

The legacy of the Stein salons extended far beyond the many canvases now ensconced in major museums in Europe and North America. In the confines of their weekly "at homes," avant-garde artists were comforted and economically sustained, their reputations enhanced by in-house competition and their careers furthered by introductions to soon-to-be collectors and impresarios. Critics and art historians absorbed ideas in the making. For artists and laymen, rue de Fleurus and rue Madame offered concerted apprenticeships on how to see, not merely look. The personalities, as well as the pictures, inspired new works of art and literature. The Steins themselves were as unconventional as the art on their walls, and they represented the possibility of self-discovery and reinvention. As Marsden Hartley confided to Gertrude, "I date much of my experience of freedom from those times at 27 which is itself peculiarly a place of freedom—a place where genuine ideas thrive and mediocrity walks away with discretion."

The first documented visitors to rue de Fleurus were Leo's artist friends, whom he met while taking classes at the Académie Julian or playing billiards at the Café du Dôme. In August 1905 Alfred (Alfy) Maurer and Mahonri Young brought over some fellow Americans to see and be "shocked" by the pictures. Leo used the atelier (attached to the ground-floor apartment where he and Gertrude lived) as his own studio, but it soon became an informal gallery where he displayed his Japanese prints and recently purchased works by Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henri Charles Manguin, and Félix Vallotton. With the acquisition of Matisse's Woman with a Hat (1905; pl. 13, cat. 113)—whose showing at the 1905 Salon d'Automne had achieved infamy in the press a few weeks earlier—the Steins' public profile as avant-garde collectors emerged. Simultaneously they began to favor late symbolist works by an unknown Spaniard, Pablo Picasso (see pl. 22). Sometime in 1906, likely after they acquired Matisse's even more controversial Le Bonheur de vivre, also called The Joy of Life (1905–6; pl. 15, cat. 117), from the Salon des Indépendants that spring, Leo and Gertrude decided to host regular Saturday evening receptions to accommodate the flow of visitors.

Michael and Sarah, who had advocated for Woman with a Hat and purchased their own works by Matisse soon thereafter, devotedly showcased the paintings and sculptures of the Fauve master. They too opened their doors on
Saturdays, apparently receiving at an earlier hour, whereas the salon at rue de Fleurus started at nine and went on well into the night, enabling visitors who so chose to attend both. The Steins perforce welcomed certain people, who wanted to see the art by daylight and without the hoi polloi, at other times during the week. No one was “at home” during the summers, when they vacationed in Italy or traveled elsewhere in Europe.

From the fall of 1910, when Alice Toklas moved in with Gertrude, the tenor changed at 27 rue de Fleurus. Leo’s interest in both collecting and proselytizing started to wane, and he increasingly absented himself from the Saturday evenings during the course of 1911, barely attending in 1912–13 (though visitors could often find him upstairs in his private quarters). Whereas the initial salon at rue de Fleurus had Leo “explaining and expounding” modernist aesthetics, under Gertrude’s aegis after 1912 it became a center for her promotion of her own writing and Picasso’s Cubism, both of which her brother disavowed.

In hosting a salon on a jour fixe, the Steins followed a venerable institution for the marketing of high culture, which had originated in their adopted France in the seventeenth century. Many salons developed into exclusionary enclaves for the upper classes, but they also functioned as a social equalizer. Private spaces that wielded influence beyond the drawing room, they mixed the sexes and social classes, creating new elites based on talent rather than birthright. Salons had long served as clearinghouses for the visual arts: patrons changed the pictures on the walls according to their influential tastes, invited habitués to show new work, and sold to other collectors or dealers. Men did hold or cohost salons, but the social power traditionally resided with women and the ideal of feminine politesse. Such gatherings began as a means of self-education for women when universities and careers outside the home were denied them. The most powerful salon women, including Sarah Stein, derived their influence from personal charisma and the quotient of male celebrity in the drawing room. Only a very few, like Gertrude Stein, succeeded in becoming both a hostess and a “genius,” a maîtresse de maison and a cher maître.

Since the Enlightenment, salons had been a means of assimilation into mainstream culture for Jews, and they afforded Jewish women, as well as their Christian peers, an outlet for their intellectual ambitions. Such was the case with Sarah, or “Sally,” Samuels, valedictorian of her high school class at age fourteen, who made a very favorable marriage to Michael Stein in her native San Francisco in 1894. The Michael Steins entertained a great deal in their “handsome flat,” which proudly contained a Steinway piano and Far Eastern art. A budding woman of ideas, Sarah began to take appreciation courses on art, music, and comparative literature after the birth of their son, Allan. Yet the stereotypes of French sociability did not sit well with the mores of upper-middle-class America. As she wrote in 1899 to Gertrude, who was then studying medicine at Johns Hopkins, “I’ve thought very often of your advice concerning my Salon-lady propensities and although occasionally the temptation has been there, I have fought it and I can truly say that I am happier and gladder that I can turn to Mike and the dear baby with a clear conscience, for a woman cannot be a Salon-lady these days, I fear, without flirting a wee bit, can she?”

Endowed with a formidable intellect rather than feminine seductiveness, Sarah found her métier in Paris, becoming a zealot for the cause of Matisse, increasing her status and authority in tandem with his success. Over
the years a whole cadre of women at the Stein salons, Alice Toklas and Etta and Dr. Claribel Cone among them, similarly came from comfortable American Jewish families that put a premium on education and appreciation of the arts. Several followed directly in Sarah’s footsteps—or were “hypnotized,” as her childhood friend Harriet Lane Levy put it—and bought works by Matisse early on. The Steins followed the usual salon protocol, in which the husband played the background role of financial supporter and took pleasure in his wife’s social luster. Michael Stein, whom Sarah never took for granted, was known for his gentle hospitality and for guiding American visitors through Parisian museums and galleries—another pedagogical arm of the Stein salons.12

From 1905 at least until 1909, however, Leo led the way in aesthetics, using the Saturday evenings to explain the pictures, which he genuinely appreciated and understood in the context of art history and the nascent formalist theories of his time. “He believed that if the important people in the art world, art curators, authors, critics, were to unite in what he called a conspiracy, they could, in a few months, overturn public opinion completely,” wrote a visiting American, the feminist Inez Haynes Irwin. “He talked everyone else out of the room, but we listened absorbed to his last word.”13 The dealer Ambroise Vollard favored the Steins, it was said, because they were not rich, but he shrewdly recognized Leo’s value as patron and spokesperson for an art that initially had no social or financial currency. According to Leo, Vollard once “expatiated on the conversation of French salons,” in an attempt to prod him into the beau monde: “I assured him that this sort of thing was not at all in my line, and quite out of the question, but I was surprised by his speaking of it. Meeting Picasso the next day, I told him about this strange attack. Picasso laughed. Yes, he said, Vollard had already spoken to him of this, and what splendid publicity I could supply if I would go out into society and talk about painting. In fact however, I confined myself to 27 Rue de Fleurus.”14

In a larger context, the Stein salons were but two in a city immortalized for many, including the aristocratic soirees of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, which were in eclipse, not only after the divisiveness of the Dreyfus Affair but also because of the new generation of bohemian social mores. The Steins were not the first to support renegades in the arts; already in the late nineteenth century, salon patrons fostered the assault against bourgeois norms and beau-arts tastes. Wilhelm Uhde, for example, a rue de Fleurus habitué, hosted his own gatherings every Sunday. Nor were they the only expatriates to draw in fellow Americans. Natalie Barney held a contemporaneous literary
salon, feminist and lesbian-identified, while among artists, the Edward Steichens and the Patrick Henry Bruces were known for their hospitality. Others gathered at the American Art Club in Montparnasse. The writers and artists who frequented the Steins’ also fraternized at the Café du Dôme and the Closerie des Lilas, or witnessed the latest work of colleagues in their studios. But nowhere else in the Western world except *chez les Steins* could one find the radically new in art—specifically, numerous examples by Cézanne and the best by upstarts Matisse and Picasso—on permanent display.

What we know of the Saturday evenings at the Steins’ relies on the memoirs of the main protagonists and their guests. These recollections are often inaccurate and partisan, swayed by the internecine rivalry that eventually dissolved the relationship of Leo and Gertrude. Not infrequently, visitors confuse rue de Fleurus with rue Madame or conflate their original impressions with stories about the Steins that circulated long after. Because Sarah destroyed her letters from Matisse toward the end of her life and never immortalized her own account in print, we know much more about rue de Fleurus. Gertrude famously embellished *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* to serve her self-aggrandizing purposes, eliminating Leo from the founding narrative in an act of literary fabrication that prompted him and many others to set the record straight upon its publication in 1933. More reliable, though smaller in number, are letters and diaries of the actual time and the reminiscences of lifelong American friends who were on the scene in the early years. Their testimonies lend more credence to Leo’s version than to Gertrude’s, demonstrating that he was not, at first, the pedant that he was later to become, his behavior exacerbated by the onset of deafness before the age of forty. Gertrude cannot be entirely condemned for her entertaining version of events: given the evanescence of salon conversation it was a long-standing tradition to re-create or even fictionalize the goings-on. Once a writer, she inscribed the address of rue de Fleurus, not rue Madame, in history; her popularizing story of the salon earned a far broader readership than any of her recondite literary tomes.

Visitors to the atelier at rue de Fleurus (pl. 25) entered a cluttered space with pictures at times skied four high, books everywhere, and portfolios of prints and drawings stacked against the wall. Gas lamps illuminated the pictures rather inadequately until electrical ceiling lights were installed a year or so before the war. At rue Madame, the paintings hung on picture rods in the aerie space of a former Protestant church. Massive Renaissance furniture with carved decorative details (purchased by the Steins in Florence) filled the public rooms of both apartments, with Islamic carpets underfoot. The Michael Steins shipped pieces of their Chinese collection from San Francisco. On his “junking trips” in Italy, Leo also purchased iron boxes, bronze mortars, terracotta saints, and carved wooden angels, even plaster casts of heads by Michelangelo and Donatello. The traditional, if eclectic, decor could not have been more of a contrast with the revolutionary art, but those of sharp mind intuited that the new would soon be valued like the old. For others, the patina of age offered reassurance and the curios something to look at if the pictures proved too overwhelming. When one visitor noted that he liked the Cézannes at rue de Fleurus and not those elsewhere, Leo explained that it was on account of the “exuberant milieu.” He compared it favorably to the house of his neighbor, an American vegetarian millionaire. “We spent an evening there in a religious hush looking at

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*Plate 25*

Rembrandts and Durers and Nanteuils. The walls were a cool grey, the carpet was cool, even the stove was cool—the esthetic chill as I called it.”

Extraordinary as the pictures were, the Steins needed more than shock value to accrue their cultural capital. The legacy of any salon drew from the brilliance of its guest list, both the habitués and a widening circle of newcomers. Gertrude knew this when she devoted the main of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas to documenting the accomplished and eccentric who streamed through the atelier. The expanding network depended on key “liaison officers,” among them the Americans Alfy Maurer and the theater impresario Mildred Aldrich; the Frenchman Henri-Pierre Roché, a node for the Parisian bohème and, later, the author of Jules and Jim; and the English art historian Matthew Stewart Prichard. The opening of the Académie Matisse in January 1908 produced a growing contingent of Germans (led by Hans Purrmann), Scandinavians, Russians, and Hungarians. Acquaintances from San Francisco flocked to both rue de Fleurus and rue Madame. Americans felt at ease with the informality of the Steins, but for foreigners, Lee Simonson remembered, it had the aura of a shrine: “Somber-suited or frock-coated Germans and Scandinavians, like pallbearers who had just interred the remains of traditional painting bowed at the courtyard door, murmuring ‘Hab die Ehre,’ solemnly made the tour of the studio, and bowed themselves out with more murmurs of ‘Besten Dank.’”17 The British—among them the critic Roger Fry and artists Jacob Epstein, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Augustus John, and Wyndham Lewis—were relative latecomers to the Steins abodes. In 1911 Paris-based Gino Severini brought F. T. Marinetti and Umberto Boccioni, but there was no love lost between the belligerent Italian Futurists and the laid-back hosts of rue de Fleurus.

Much has been made of the seeming gender inequality of Gertrude’s memoirs, in which men and women at rue de Fleurus are divided between “geniuses” and “wives of geniuses.” Taking on Alice’s third-person narrative voice in a clever literary device, Stein modestly vaunted her own position as the singular female deity at the Saturdays. Closer reading, however, reveals that Gertrude acknowledged the key roles played by her domestic goddess, Toklas, and their loyal cook, Hélène. And whereas Toklas chatted about perfumes, hats, and babies with several female habitués, Gertrude dutifully recorded the presence of professionals such as Mildred Aldrich and Dr. Claribel Cone. The Saturday evenings featured “New Women” such as the writers Mabel Dodge and Neith Boyce Hapgood, whose contacts were instrumental in furthering Gertrude’s career. For every “femme décorative,” as Gertrude characterized the habitué Fernande Olivier, Picasso’s lover, there was a “femme d’intérieur,” notably the strong-willed milliner Amélie Matisse, who worked hard to keep her family afloat economically and emotionally.

Artists’ wives and mistresses of disparate backgrounds and personalities populated the Stein salons, among them Germaine Pichot, Alice Derain, Marcelle Braque, Dolly van Dongen, Josette Gris, Eva Gouel, Bridget Gibb, and Gabrielle Picabia, not to mention artists’ mothers (Robert Delaunay brought his). Yet the Saturdays also attracted women who were artists in their own right, many of them unmarried, for whom the networking counted: Anne Goldthwaite, Achille Schille, Kathleen Bruce, Grace Gassette, Janet Scudder, Grace Mott Johnson, Ethel Mars, Maud Hunt Scuire, Mina Loy, Marguerite Zorach, Georgette Agatse, the miniaturist Myra Edgerly, and the future Sonia Delaunay. The painter Marie Laurencin held her own amid the giant egos, including that of her lover Guillaume Apollinaire: her depiction of her coterie features women on a creative par with men and deliberately feminizes the male figures (pl. 26). Well-educated American ladies from the West: Coast and alumnae of Johns Hopkins, Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, and the Harvard Annex added to the intellectual mix, while not a small number of them went on to purchase works by Picasso and Matisse as a result. Society figures and wealthy patrons such as Agnes Meyer, Lady Ottoline Morrell, Emily Chadbourn, and Elizabeth Montgomery Sears added to the variety of the gender difference at the Steins’, countering any stereotype of a passive femininity that Gertrude’s memoirs might have subsequently construed.
Both Stein households usually hosted a small group for dinner before other habitués and the strangers arrived, the latter customarily gaining entrance by dropping the name of someone who knew someone. "It was easy," Aldrich recalled telling an American concerned about protocol at rue de Fleurus. "The door was wide open. He had only to enter and look at the pictures as he would in a public gallery." Already in 1908 Sarah wrote to Gertrude that she could not have a private conversation with Patrick Henry Bruce because of the crowds. The insiders at the Michael Steins' often retreated to the back room, and Aldrich advised one American that Gertrude would not engage—she spoke only with her intimate friends. Max Weber remembered the early years of "lengthy and involved discussions," but Arthur Carles found it "all rather jumbled—the people and the pictures—confused impressions—complex." Often the sheer spectacle overwhelmed the possibility of unstructured viewing or intimate dialogue, let alone gossip. Instead people came to look and, eventually, to look at the lookers. "Last night we went to the Steins," wrote family friend Sylvia Salinger in 1912: "There were quite a number of people there. Some awfully funny ones, but we don't talk to that kind, just sit and watch while they look at the pictures. One very fantastic lady went all around the room with her lorgnette fastened first on one picture and then on another until finally they landed on me where they stuck.... I suppose if I am not there the next time she comes she'll take it for granted I've been sold."

Topics of conversation ranged from lowbrow to highbrow: palmistry, boxing, and the Katzenjammer Kids interspersed with talk about the latest exhibitions, Otto Weininger, and Sigmund Freud. Prim Americans did not easily mingle with bohemians, and language barriers could inhibit rather than facilitate intellectual exchange. As Salinger exclaimed: "These artist people are the limit trying to hold a conversation with. It's the hardest work ever! They just sit all kind of sprawled out and let you do the talking. If you get tired and stop—there is dead silence until you begin again." Harriet Levy, for her part, found the art talk "full of excitement, passion, anger, rebellion," but the professionals "used words whose meaning I did not understand."

Regardless of their professional background, attendees at first visit experienced a similar reaction to the art: disbelief, revulsion, and for many, an eventual communion with the lines, forms, and colors about which Leo and Sarah spoke so convincingly. "It is very difficult now that everybody is accustomed to everything to give some idea of the kind of uneasiness one felt when one first looked at all these pictures on the walls," Gertrude affirmed. Quite simply, people expected pictures to depict recognizable people and things, or at least to cohere stylistically. Typical was the description of a visit to the Michael Steins' apartment by the critic Lewis Hind in his 1911 book on Postimpressionism, one of the first in English on the subject. Initially horrified by the Matisse canvases—"that abortion of the female form so grotesquely naked!" as he described one—Hind told his readers that after an hour he felt compelled to stay: "I did not feel the 'tranquility' of which Mrs. Stein spoke, but I did feel a sense of excitement and stimulation. Here and there, as I waited and watched, an eccentricity seemed to start from the walls and say: 'I am alive. I am movement. I am rhythm. I exist.'"

Raucous debunking of modern art had become commonplace at the public salons, but viewing the same in the confines of a private home was a different experience again: one was a guest, after all, and a modicum of decorum had to be maintained. Hence, legions pretended to admire the art, only to snicker and belittle their hosts once they departed. But those who stayed or returned to Saturday evenings had the possibility of unselfconscious contemplation, ready explication, and even the possibility of a tête-à-tête with Picasso and Matisse—who were not such madmen after all. Moreover, the hosts had put their money where their mouths were. As a result, different kinds of social pressures came to bear: that of being considered philistine or missing out on a shrewd investment. Nicknamed the "Stein Corporation," the hosts were often accused of being speculators.

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Plate 27, cat. 139

Henri Matisse, Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra, 1907. Oil on canvas, 36⅞ x 55⅞ in. (93.1 x 141.4 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland.
them, they were afraid not to buy them. Afraid that they would turn out to be the important paintings the Stein’s [sic] said they were.” For their part, the Steins were famously indifferent to novices and naysayers, and the sureness of their insights frequently came across as arrogant. “Leo Stein was a bragart American,” opined the Hungarian sculptor Márk Vedres. “He’d crumple up the newspaper and declare it art.”

Lost to us are the animated conversations at the heart of the Stein soirées: those that addressed the pictures on the walls. From contemporary accounts we can surmise that Leo held forth in front of the canvases, emphasizing the visual tension between shifting planes and resolute mass, spatial illusionism and the flatness of the picture plane. During his sojourns in Florence, Leo had been led to Cézanne and schooled in aesthetics by Bernard Berenson; both men, in turn, were influenced by the psychology of William James and the role of tactility in the cognition of three-dimensional objects. Leo did not abide other contemporary theories that discussed the influence of the fourth dimension or Henri Bergson’s élan vital on modernist abstraction. Instead he encouraged the salon guests to dwell on the apperception of purely pictorial qualities, on the nonreferential visual power of liberated form, line, and color. As a result of Leo’s formalist insights, further propagated by Sarah, the Stein homes became the epicenter of a new language with a self-referential vocabulary all its own: “[Sarah] spoke for instance of a picture being plastic and solid at once. How that puzzled me!” exclaimed Irwin. “People giggled and scoffed after they left,” wrote Dodge, “not knowing all the same they were changed by seeing those pictures.”

The concepts of pure form, color sensations, plasticity, and rhythmic expression soon made their way into the published criticism of Walter Pach and Willard Huntington Wright and the artists’ statements of Max Weber, Morgan Russell, Andrew Dasburg, and many other habitués.

From the beginning, the stellar attractions at the Saturdays were Matisse and Picasso. Picasso sought to usurp Matisse as the leading figure of the avant-garde; he spurred his own creativity by competing against the number and notoriety of Matisse’s canvases at the Steins. Leo was the first, anywhere, to buy the work of both, but when he did so in 1905, the Fauve painter was way ahead in the game. Rue de Fleurus held the three most sensational paintings of the public exhibitions: Woman with a Hat, Le Bonheur de vivre, and, from the spring Salon des Indépendants in 1907, Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra (1907; pl. 27, cat. 139). Picasso’s blue and rose period canvases seemed tame by comparison, and Gertrude herself conceded that initially people came to see the Matisses and Cézannes. Only Picasso’s Gertrude Stein (1905–6; pl. 183, cat. 238), on the wall by the end of 1906, contained an inkling of his radical primitivism. Even that was strategically conceived to gain his patrons’ approbation and as a deliberate response to the daring images of real women that dominated the rue de Fleurus salon at its inception: Hortense Fiquet in Cézanne’s Madame Cézanne with a Fan (1878–88; pl. 2, cat. 10) and Matisse’s wife, Amélie, in Woman with a Hat. Picasso’s breakthrough picture, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907; Museum of Modern Art, New York), inspired by the corporeal violence of Blue Nude, was unsalable. He kept Leo and Gertrude abreast of his ambitious sequel, the monumental Three Women (1908; pl. 186, cat. 251), in order to coax their purchase and achieve parity with Matisse—at least at their house, for Sarah and Michael had thrown their full support behind his rival.

Both artists, in turn, had to stake their position with regard to the most formidable presence at rue de Fleurus: Paul Cézanne. Most contemporary artists had not seen the work of the reclusive master until a series of exhibitions in 1905, 1906 (after his death), and 1907; even then, the Stein salons did more to promote his influence than any other venue in Paris. Leo championed Cézanne—the catalyst for his own aesthetic awakening—as the liberator of pure form. “Matisse said once that Cézanne is ‘the father of us all,’ but he did not reckon with the phoenix Picasso, who had no father,” he wrote. Yet the Spaniard “had one rival who had to be met” and Leo watched with interest as Picasso pursued “the conflict” with Cézanne’s bathers and watercolors, which could be seen aplenty at rue de Fleurus. Leo intuited Picasso’s debt to the earlier master when he purchased his Rue-des-Bois and Horta landscapes over

Plate 28, cat. 437
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, In the Salon: The Divan, ca. 1892–93. Oil on cardboard, 23⅛ x 31⅝ in. (60 x 80 cm). MASP, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, São Paulo, Brazil
the course of 1909, paintings that were only later understood as founding moments in the history of Cubism. In hindsight, Leo’s precocious connoisseurship of Matisse and Picasso made perfect sense in relationship to the painter whose works served as a linchpin for most everything on the walls of rue de Fleurus: he lost interest in them precisely when the seminal influence of Cézanne on their art had run its course.

The financial need to sell tough pictures also drove the parrying. The Saturday evening soirées proved the best advertisement for the artists’ work—particularly that of Picasso, who chose not to show at the public exhibitions. At the Steins’, the two artists were a study in opposites. “Matisse felt himself to be one of many, and Picasso stood apart, alone,” observed Leo. Picasso’s ambitions drove him to compare himself with everyone and everything. He scrutinized Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s In the Salon: The Divan (ca. 1892–93; pl. 28, cat. 437), recounted Gertrude with some amusement, “and greatly daring said, ‘but all the same I do paint better than he did.’” Matisse dressed and conducted himself like a gentleman, holding his deep anxieties in check. “He was also witty, and capable of saying exactly what he meant when talking about art. This is a rare thing with painters,” Leo added. Picasso arrived “like a little bullfighter” surrounded by his often unruly tertulia of critics and poets: Apollinaire, Maurice Cremnitz, Max Jacob, and André Salmon. André Derain and Georges Braque, no longer Fauves, left Matisse’s side for the contender. Unsure of his French, and socially not yet at his ease, Picasso dressed down and liked to endear himself through clever aside. He let his entourage to bad-mouth Matisse, who had crossed a line by openly disparaging his emerging cubist style. The salon graces of old did not rule at rue de Fleurus, as Gabrielle Picabia recounted: “All those painters were très méchants towards each other. It used to shock me.”

The creative tensions between Picasso and Matisse abetted the other conflicts stoking at the Stein salons: those between Sarah and Gertrude, and Gertrude and Leo. Once Matisse opened his school, backed by Michael and Sarah, the camps divided between Matisseites and Picassoites, as Gertrude gleefully dubbed them. Gertrude had grown close to Picasso while she sat repeatedly for her portrait, but she competitively encouraged their alliance after Sarah became known as the high priestess of Matisse. Harriet Levy believed “that the two factions had identified their authority with the identity of the two painters,” and she felt “impaled between two forces.”43 Showing interest in Picasso at the Michael Steins could be perceived as heresy, while Martin Birnbaum earned Gertrude’s displeasure by mistaking one of the Spaniard’s paintings for a Cézanne: “To discover influences in the work of Miss Stein’s unapproachable master was almost a crime, and was in itself sufficient reason for being regarded as an unwelcome visitor.”44

Leo remained nonpartisan, although in March 1908 one guest perceived a complicated situation of “two hungry families pouncing” on everything Matisse produced. Sarah’s role in promoting Matisse was hugely influential, even if Alice Toklas later cut her down as “a provincial Madame de Stael.” Sarah was intimidating to some women but not to men. Like Leo, she commanded respect for her knowledge of modern art, yet her delivery was tempered by a genuine interest in others that her introverted brother-in-law lacked. As a result, some preferred the more relaxed atmosphere of rue Madame to the bohemian antics of rue de Fleurus. Bernard Berenson had mentored Leo in art history, but it was Sarah who won over the esteemed authority on Italian Renaissance art. “If you can ever convince me of any beauty in that toad, I’ll believe in Matisse,” Berenson taunted her, referring to the bosomy spread of The Gypsy (1905–6; pl. 29, cat. 118)—and she did.47

Sarah’s aide-de-camp at rue Madame was Matthew Stewart Prichard, a conduit to wealthy American society ladies and British cultural circles. His background in Asian and Byzantine studies, complemented by Sarah’s appreciation for Chinese art, proved critical to Matisse’s developing interest in flat, decorative abstraction. The intellectual exchange with these two kindred spirits was as valuable to Matisse as all the publicity that he garnered at rue de Fleurus. After Gertrude’s catty memoir, he defended Sarah as “the really intelligently sensitive member of the family,” an opinion seconded by Walter Pach and others.49
The salon dynamic between Leo and Gertrude was less overt and more complex. Until Gertrude published *Three Lives* in 1909, her presence did not count for much, and few paid attention to her.30 Indeed, she was noted mostly for her silence, a silence broken by a winning, deep-bellied laugh that left the most lasting impression upon visitors. When Alfred Stieglitz came to rue de Fleurus in June 1909, led by Steichen, he had no idea of the identity of the big, smiling woman in the corner. He was transfixed, instead, by the most marvelous explication on art he had ever heard—that of Leo Stein.31 Their old friend Hutchins Hapgood believed that had Gertrude penned *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* at the actual time of the salons, Leo would “have appeared, not only as the beloved and the important, but as the great spirit of twenty-seven rue de Fleurus, where Picasso and Matisse received material and spiritual nourishment, and she was vouchsafed the daily privilege of his presence.”32 Explicating visual images “with occasional flashes of genius” proved to be Leo’s great gift, one acknowledged by many, including his sister, who was determined little by little to surpass him, well aware of her brother’s crippling writer’s block and his abandoned enterprise as a painter.33

Both Gertrude and Leo had a personal investment in the notion of genius, and the Saturdays became both the test of their mettle and the contested field.34 Leo’s fluency with spoken language, the most evanescent skill of a salon, led him—for a time—to dominate a traditionally feminine domain. But Gertrude’s quiet attention belied the creative gestation stimulated by the pictures, personalities, and conversations around her. Trained as a medical researcher, she set about using the salon as her laboratory.

Stieglitz had asked Leo to write about his views on art for the periodical *Camera Work*, but he demurred. In 1912, instead, Gertrude sent him her short texts on Matisse and Picasso, and he published her first character typologies, directly inspired by the careerism that she had witnessed at rue de Fleurus. They announced a new form of literary portraiture, a genre that originated in the French salons of old.35 Gertrude’s writing incited the contempt of Leo, who felt that the word portraits reduced sociability to the discourse of nursery rhymes.36 With increasing confidence in her pursuit of “glory,” Gertrude began to win over salon habitués and build her own following with her warmth and personal magnetism.37 The last blow was her encroachment on Leo’s realm of connoisseurship. Picasso’s *The Architect’s Table* (1912; pl. 197, cat. 260), her first independently purchased work (encouraged by the artist’s sly trompe l’oeil depiction of her visiting card in the lower right of the composition), increased her stature as a pioneering collector. It was fitting that when their deep bond disintegrated, Gertrude, renowned for her physical bulk, identified with the disembodied facets of Cubism, while the emaciated Leo fell in love with Renoir’s corporeal abundance.

The title of Gertrude’s next book, *The Making of Americans* (1911), could have easily applied to her salon memoirs. Few American artists or maven of high culture in Paris from 1905 to the outbreak of war failed to attend one of the Stein Saturdays. The influence of their network

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*Plate 29

Henri Matisse, *The Gypsy*, 1905–6. Oil on canvas, 21⅜ x 18⅜ in. (55 x 46 cm). Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, on loan to the Musée de l’Announciade, Saint-Tropez*
on individual American artists and cultural impresarios like Steichen, Stieglitz, Marius de Zayas, Robert J. Coady, and Michael Brenner has been well documented. Circa 1905 James McNeill Whistler, William Merritt Chase, and Arthur Wesley Dow were the points of reference for those who had crossed the Atlantic. Many, such as Max Weber, saw their first Cézanne at rue de Fleurus; Maurer persuaded new arrivals that *Madame Cézanne with a Fan* was in fact a finished painting because it had a frame. Although many of the Stein regulars exhibited at the Parisian salons, they tended not to assimilate or to socialize with other French vanguard artists outside the Stein “at homes.” Rue de Fleurus and rue Madame offered the foremost seminars on modernism, an opportunity redoubled for some of the habitués who studied with Matisse; the master and his pupils sometimes went straight from the classroom to the Steins’.

The American contingent grew exponentially from a network that Leo established beginning in 1904 with Maurer, Young, and Maurice Sterne. He also gave several of them economic support by purchasing their works. Among the core group of early habitués were Bruce, Steichen, and Arthur B. Carles, who along with Maurer and Weber formed the New Society of American Artists in Paris in 1908. One introduction led to another in the close-knit community of expatriate practitioners: Samuel Halpert, Abraham Walkowitz, George Carlock, H. Lyman Saşen (a scientist by training, who helped convert rue de Fleurus to electricity), the sculptors Arthur Lee, Jo Davidson, and Elie Nadelman. Weber and Bruce were founding students of the Académie Matisse, and others who joined the classes, like Arthur Burdett Frost Jr. and John Lyman, also made their way to the Steins’. Pach became a regular at both salons by 1907. Another wave arrived in 1908–9, including Morgan Russell, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Lee Simonson, Andrew Dasburg, Morton Livingston Schamberg, and Charles Sheeler. Between 1912 and 1914 Alvin Langdon Coburn, Manierre Dawson, Edward Fisk, Joseph Stella, Charles Demuth, and Marsden Hartley all visited rue de Fleurus, but they engaged with Gertrude, not the disaffected Leo.

Although words and camaraderie helped, the real apprenticeship for the American artists took place with pen and brush. High-quality reproductions of contemporary art were rare, rarer still from private collections, and only in black and white. To see them in the flesh, one had to go to the Steins’—and a lot of flesh there was. Weber created a small painting of figures in a landscape (pl. 30) inspired by *Le Bonheur de vivre*, while Russell and Macdonald-Wright grafted the contorted pose and impossible skin tones of *Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra* onto their studies of Michelangelo’s sculptures.

Overall, the influence of Cézanne and Matisse for American artists (as opposed to American collectors) outweighed that of Picasso at the Stein salons: the theme of the socially marginalized in the blue period canvases and brooding expressions of the harlequins and other early work did not render a following; undoubtedly the monochromatic palette and symbolist interiority seemed too redolent of Whistler. At that time, rue de Fleurus did not contain any paintings by Braque to illustrate his invention of Cubism alongside Picasso; there were other opportunities for that, notably Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler’s gallery. In 1910 *Three Women and Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* were reproduced in Gelett Burgess’s sensationalist article “The Wild Men of Paris,” which publicized the Spaniard’s work directly overseas. Further, the moment of collage represented in Gertrude’s collection was all too brief before war.

Plate 30

*Max Weber, Sketch, 1906.* Oil on canvas, 7½ x 9½ in. (19.1 x 24.1 cm). Galerie Salis & Vertes, Zurich
put a temporary end to her salon: when she resumed it in 1918, Picasso’s cubist phase was over. Certainly Gertrude promoted Picasso’s style, especially with regard to her own writing, and the cubist pictures on the wall as of 1909 influenced the credibility of the movement. But one may surmise that without Sarah’s patronage, and lacking Leo’s support (let alone his acumen in explicating pictures as one artist to another) in the years 1909 to 1914, the Stein Saturdays did not have the same role in the dissemination of Cubism as they did for Postimpressionism and Fauvism.

The panoply of unconventional artistic styles seen at the Steins’ accompanied a pervasive sense of social freedom and countercultural bohemia at their weekly gatherings. Americans from different classes commingled with locals, foreigners, Jews, homosexuals, and the occasional aristocrat, following a pattern of expatriate salons that eroded differences of background and behavior. Europe provided the opportunity for the high-culture careers of the Steins, but their Saturdays, in turn, left their mark on the cosmopolitan character of Parisian modernity. Their lack of convention extended to the social protocol of the evenings, which was so unstructured as to be almost non-existent. “It was a world to be in ease in. No consequence hung upon what you told, upon what you said,” Harriet Levy insisted, while Vollard admired the reversals of hierarchy: “People who came there out of snobbery soon felt a sort of discomfort at being allowed so much liberty in another man’s house, and did not come again.”

They gave one “the feeling of independence,” recalled Max Weber of the Steins, “they were free economically.” “We were free,” affirmed Leo, who claimed that they spent everything they had on art, books, and travel and took on no debts. They stood out for donning comfortable sandals (specially designed by Raymond Duncan, brother of Isadora) and corduroy, a favorite of bohemian artists because it wore well and did not show the dirt. Sarah and Gertrude greeted guests in loose-fitting robes, and Leo sometimes wore a kimono. Typical of other salons, however, those of the Steins also established new demarcations between insiders and mere hangers-on, conscious of the authority that the Steins wielded as tastemakers and power brokers.

The Steins cultivated their sense of superior otherness in Paris as Americans and supporters of radical art. At rue de Fleurus and rue Madame, the hosts performed their newfound identities as the culturally eminent: having started out as middle-class natives of Allegheny, Pennsylvania, they were themselves as creative an invention as the pictures on the walls. Indifference to what others thought made the Steins a magnet for the similarly irreverent, nomadic, and reborn. Herein their Saturdays became “the cathedral of the international vanguard,” in the words of society painter Jacques-Emile Blanche, but it was a decidedly ecumenical house of worship.

Though unreligious, the Steins maintained strong Jewish identities, which added to their exotic appeal or, conversely, their disrepute. Mary Cassatt, indignant that new elites in the art world should be replacing the old, lashed out against the Steins with an anti-Semitic refrain: “They are not Jews for nothing…and the pose was, if you don’t admire these daubs then I am sorry for you; you are not one of the chosen few.” Typical of many reform Jews, the Michael Steins assimilated to the point of celebrating Christmas, while Sarah became an advocate of Christian Science. Yet they drew the line at intermarriage, as did Gertrude, who chose a Jewish lesbian partner. Though Leo did not (he married Nina Auzias in 1921), his self-conscious identity as an outsider was grounded in his experience of growing up a non-Christian, from his close association with fellow Jews in the minority at Harvard and elsewhere, to his cultivation of the look and sound of a prophet in the wilderness of modernism. Gertrude was known to be proudly Jewish and, like Leo, criticized those who denied their origins as the price of entrée into genteel society.

At the Saturdays, however, it was Gertrude who represented the ultimate figure of difference, the one whose open personality and sexuality produced a social aura all its own. Be they men or women, Americans or Europeans, visitors were taken by her fatness, earthy persona, and unconstrained appetite, which far exceeded the norms of femininity and upright Protestant comportment. Most described her calm demeanor and swathed physique as Buddha-like or compared her to a Hindu idol or Cambodian
caryatid. The blatant orientalism of the allusions underscored her Jewishness or what some less flatteringly termed her primeval Semitic features, while Alice Toklas, for some detractors, wore a concubine’s attire, “draped in some semi-Oriental gauze of sorts, with clinking bracelets, tinkling chains.” Given the additional presence of numerous Hungarians—and “Turks, Armenians and other Jews,” as Leo sarcastically noted—Saturdays at the Steins appeared to confirm the influx of the East into the West.

Gertrude’s sexual identity was equally threatening to the status quo for some: Agnes Meyer was repelled by her “masculine” identity. By contrast, the Swedish-born American sculptor and habitué David Edstrom found her “precious and lovely”—impossible to love romantically, he added, but attractive nonetheless. Other heterosexual men similarly found her intensity alluring, notably Picasso, who captured her “unfeminine beauty” in his series of monumental primitizing nudes, with hints of lesbianism in the pairs of touching female bodies. Three Women—with its triad of male, female, and androgynous bodies—epitomized the multiple identities tolerated at rue de Fleurus, while his Gertrude Stein captured the ambiguous sexuality of the sitter for all to see. Gertrude and Alice never advertised their same-sex relationship, as did other salon guests, such as the outré Ethel Mars, with her flaming orange hair and the exaggerated makeup that she shared with her companion, Maud Hunt Squire. Instead, their rather traditional domestic arrangement was enough to reassure the reticent and comfort the similarly oriented. Like other salons, the Steins’ provided a secure space in which to be oneself, without fear of surveillance or prosecution. They attracted a number of homosexuals and bisexuals, including the coterie of the German dealer Wilhelm Uhde, the young Oxford men brought by Matthew Prichard, Marsden Hartley and the German sculptor Arnold Rönnebeck, and Gertrude’s own group of female cohorts.

The racial and sexual fluidity exhibited by the Steins and their guests was reinforced by the display of outlandish bodies in the art. When it was first shown at the public salon, Matisse’s Le Bonheur de vivre caused a furore with its provocative mix of arcadian idyll and orientalist debauch. The Michaels Steins’ collection of Far Eastern art added to the ascent of the non-Western implicit in Matisse’s decorative style. Nudity in high art was nothing new, but The Gypsy incarnated an ugly beauty, threatening in its miscegenation of the European and the atavistic. With its masklike features and muscular anatomy, the Blue Nude wavered between male and female, black and pink skin, as did Picasso’s numerous studies for Les Demoiselles d’Avignon and Nude with Drapery, several of which Leo and Gertrude had dared to acquire. Gertrude’s writing, inspired by the modernist fragmentation of the paintings, with their lack of differentiation and structure, also stood for the “peaceful Oriental penetration into European culture,” as she phrased it, “or rather the tendency for this generation that is for the twentieth century to be no longer European because perhaps Europe is finished.” In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude tellingly banned the term salon, with its feminine and class connotations. Instead the “Saturdays” had a more casual ring, the “atelier” a more professional tone, and both suited the open-door, nondiscriminatory policy of the hosts.

Between 1906 and 1910, evenings at the Steins’ promised novel and liberating discoveries, but as Gertrude intuited, “once everybody knows they are good the adventure is over.” By the end of the decade, Matisse and Picasso had major dealers and financial security, making their appearances less critical at rue de Fleurus and rue Madame. With the opening of the Armory Show in New York in 1913, modernism officially came to America. The character of the soièes changed with Gertrude’s celebrity and Leo’s definite departure in the spring of 1914, at which point they divided their collection. Michael and Sarah lost the bulk of their Matisses in Germany while they were on exhibit there at the outbreak of war. “And everybody came and no one made any difference,” recounted Gertrude of the shift. “There were the friends who sat around the stove and talked and there were the endless strangers who came and went.” In the 1920s Gertrude continued to receive visitors
at rue de Fleurus, but she presided over a literary salon, and the acolytes came to worship her.

Saturdays at the Steins' marked a transition from the intimate salons of a previous generation to a more public spectacle, edging toward diversion as much as edification. They ushered in a new form of sociability that took hold back in the United States after World War II: that of the private collection tour, in which a vetted group of strangers enter a home to gawk at the art and accrue insider information on cutting-edge acquisitions. The Stein salons had become "one of the sights of Paris," in Leo's words, and something authentic was lost in the birth of art tourism.  

Part voluble institution, part unrepeatable performance, salons were by nature transitory, although their influence, as in the case of the Steins', could be enduring. Despite the rift in their relationship, Gertrude and Leo could agree on the Stein legacy: for a brief moment in time, four Americans in Paris "happened to be in the heart of an art movement: of which the outside world at that time knew nothing." 80 Long after the first cathedrals of the international vanguard shut their portals on rue Madame and rue de Fleurus, the disciples of the new religion, whom the Steins had inspired, continued to spread the word, the celebrity, and the marketing of modernism.
Notes


3. "Am to meet your friends tomorrow night and have dinner with them. And will take them to see your pictures. Young and I shocked some Americans the other day with them. The lady wanted to know if I was in earnest." Alfred Maurer to Leo Stein, August 2, 1905, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Beinecke YCAL, MSS 76, box 116, folder 2452.

4. Voltard 1936, 136; Saarinen 1958, 187; Saturday evenings at the Michael Stein’s were interrupted for a 2-year period in the summer of 1910 when they returned to San Francisco to be with Sarah’s dying father.

5. Family friend Sylvia Salinger wrote home in October 1912: "After supper we sat around and talked, Leo flitting in and out as if we weren’t there at all, after the first greeting and introduction,” and “Leo lives alone, mostly in this room—he does not eat with Gertrude and Alice at all.” Salinger 1987, 12, 14; see also Wineapple 1996, 379.

6. L. Stein 1996, 200–201. As Leo wrote to Alfred Stieglitz from Sestignano on April 10, 1911: “I can’t abide cubism of Picasso or the Walkowitz order…. Well I’m out of it all. Goodbye, good luck.” Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe Archive, Beinecke YCAL, MSS 85, box 466, folder 1108. On February 4, 1913, Leo wrote to Mabel Weeks, referring to himself as a “rank outsider…however I’m a cheerful one and take my deposing good-humoredly, like the soon-to-be late President” (L. Stein 1950, 49). On his disaffection with Gertrude and Cubism, see Wineapple 1996, 327–30.


9. Jelenko ca. 1965, 1–2. A pianist, Theresa Ehrman (later Jelenko) arrived with the Michael Steins in January 1904 to work as the au pair for their son, Allan, and returned to the United States two years later; she came back to Paris on her own in 1912.

10. Sarah Stein to Gertrude Stein, October 20 [or 30], 1899, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Beinecke YCAL, MSS 76, box 126, folder 2731.


13. Irwin n.d., 264. Irwin traveled to Paris in the spring of 1908 and accompanied the journalist Gelett Burgess to the Steins’ and to artists’ studios as he researched his article “The Wild Men of Paris,” which appeared in Architectural Record in May 1910 (Burgess 1910). Her memoirs were written later but based on notes from her diary.

14. L. Stein 1996, 193. Leo also admitted in a letter to Mabel Weeks dated February 7, 1913, “For conversation as an art I have no talent… the aesthetic and philosophical attitudes that I myself hold are too much the attitudes of the intellectual superman to be available as yet for the general public.” L. Stein 1950, 55.

15. Leo Stein, Notebook 2, unpagd.


17. Simonson 1943, 14.


19. For a revisionist account of Gertrude’s gender politics, see Norris 1997.


21. Sarah Stein to Gertrude Stein, Friday, [likely late spring, early summer] 1908, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Beinecke YCAL, MSS 76, box 126, 2732.


27. Hind 1911, 45. See also the detailed accounts by Irwin (n.d., 260); Levy (n.d., 28); and Salinger (1987, 30).


31. “People were beginning to go to their apartment to hear Leo talk about two new painters he had ‘discovered’ at the Indépendants exhibition—Matisse and Picasso. Earlier still he had come upon the Cézannes—and holding forth night after night in his big living room, he had forced people to see their value”; “Leo stood patiently night after night wrestling with the inertia of his guests, expounding, teaching, interpreting, always the advocate of tension in art!” Luhan 1999, 88, 89. See also Rewald 1989, 68–71.


33. Irwin n.d., 262.


35. G. Stein 1990, 41.


38. G. Stein 1990, 10.


40. J. Richardson 1996, 3–9, for la bande à Picasso.


42. G. Stein 1990, 64.

43. Levy n.d., 11, 12.

44. Birnbaum 1960, 40.


47. Levy n.d., 29.
Prichard's role is downplayed in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, though he is referred to as having "brought a great many young Oxford men." G. Stein 1990, 123.
49. Beraque et al. 1935, 3; Pach 1957, 72.
51. Stieglitz ca. 1922, 1.
52. Hapgood 1939, 247; see also 215.
53. W. H. Wright 1915, 284; Mellquist 1942, 252; Simonson 1943, 14–15. Gertrude's deep admiration for her brother's talents is documented in Wineapple 1996, 225, 278.
54. The competition between Leo and Gertrude and their "personal stake in the definition of genius" is discussed at length by Brenda Wineapple in her definitive study of their relationship, Wineapple 1996, 174–75.
55. G. Stein 1912, 21–25, 29–30. The portraits were written between 1909 and 1910; see Haselstein 2003, 723–27, 730.
56. Leo's parodies of Gertrude's "Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia" (1913) are found in L. Stein 1990, 48–49, and especially 56. He expresses his disdain for the same literary portrait in another letter to Mabel Weeks, February 7, 1913, in which he opines that it was directly influenced by Picasso's "latest form," and that both were "God Almighty rubbish." Ibid., 53.
58. Greenough 2000; Stavisky 1990; Morrin et al. 1986; Levin 1978; and Rewald 1989, 76–82. As Morrin writes in "An Overview: Post-Impressionism and North American Art" (Morrin et al. 1986, 19), "If there is a key figure in the dissemination of Post-Impressionist aesthetics for Americans, Leo Stein would be the prime candidate."
61. Two important exceptions are the four paintings by Matisse in the Michael Steins' collection reproduced in La Phalange, December 15, 1907, with an article by Apollinaire; and Burgess 1910, which featured Picasso's Three Women (as well as the first reproduction of Les Demoiselles d'Avignon).
64. Levy n.d., 4; Vollard 1936, 137.
67. Mary Cassatt to Mary Ellen Cassatt, March 26, 1913(?), in Mathews 1984, 130.
69. Stimpson 1986, 30–35. See, for example, Fisk 1912 and Davidson 1951, 174.
70. Draper 1929, 152.
71. Leo Stein to Gertrude Stein, February 3, 1913, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Beinecke YCAL, MSS 76, box 124, folder 2714.
72. Meyer 1953, 81.
73. Edstrom 1937, 239.
75. The description of Mars and Squires, memorialized by Gertrude in her word portraits "Miss Fur and Miss Skene," is that of Anne Goldthwaite in Breeskin 1982, 23.
77. G. Stein 1971, 21.