

Peggy Guggenheim life in London revisited

Posted on May 4, 2026 by Lucia Latanesi

VENICE — Venice is hosting the first museum exhibition devoted entirely to Peggy Guggenheim's London years, on view at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection until October 19, 2026 before travelling to London and New York.

"Peggy Guggenheim in London. The Making of a Collector" sits inside Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, the Grand Canal home where the American heiress lived from 1949 until her death in 1979 and which now houses her museum.

The show traces the eighteen months, from January 1938 to June 1939, when Guggenheim ran her first gallery, Guggenheim Jeune, at 30 Cork Street in central London's Mayfair district.

"Guggenheim Jeune became a key point of reference for the European avant-gardes," said Karole P.B. Vail, the collection's director and Guggenheim's granddaughter, at the press preview, "because it promoted local and international artists associated with Abstraction and Surrealism."

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Herbert Read and Peggy Guggenheim (*Credits: Guggenheim Collection*)

A radical opening act

The gallery launched with an exhibition of drawings by French poet and artist Jean Cocteau. Nineteen shows followed in quick succession, including the first solo exhibition in England of Russian abstract pioneer Vasily Kandinsky, alongside Yves Tanguy and Wolfgang Paalen.

Guggenheim also staged England's first group exhibition of collage and a show of children's work that included a painting by a young Lucian Freud**,** marking his exhibition debut.

Guggenheim bought at least one work from nearly every show, building toward an ambition she would not realise in London, namely a contemporary art museum. Her uncle, Solomon R. Guggenheim, had founded his own foundation in New York two years earlier.

Beyond the origins

The Venice exhibition pairs works once shown at Guggenheim Jeune with later pieces by Jean Arp, Kandinsky and Tanguy, and adds artists Guggenheim would later collect, among them Eileen Agar, Barbara Hepworth, Rita Kernn-Larsen, Piet Mondrian, Henry Moore, Cedric Morris and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Paintings, sculptures, works on paper, photographs, puppets and archival material fill the rooms.

After Venice, the exhibition moves to the Royal Academy of Arts in London from November 21, 2026 to March 14, 2027, then to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York from April 16 to September 12, 2027.

Guggenheim's own verdict on her life's work feels apt. "I'm not an art collector. I'm a museum," she once wrote.

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