EXHIBITIONS

The Steins Collect
San Francisco, Paris and New York

by RACHEL SLOAN

Four of the most influential tastemakers in early twentieth-century Paris defied almost every stereotype that had previously been attached to that role: they were not aristocrats, politicians or even particularly wealthy. They were four American expatriates from San Francisco – three siblings and the wife of the elder brother – of relatively modest means but also of adventurous and sophisticated taste and boundless energy. Gertrude, Leo, Michael and Sarah Stein. Gertrude and Leo set up house in a small flat in the rue de Fleurus in 1903 and began building a collection that ranged from recently crowned modern masters such as Cézanne to the then-obscure Picasso and Matisse; Michael and Sarah followed suit in nearby rue Madame, throwing the bulk of their support behind Matisse. Their rival Saturday evening salons, attended by a veritable Who’s Who of the avant-garde, became legendary, and no account of the history of Modernism is complete without a discussion of their pivotal role. Yet until recently, Gertrude’s notoriety – no doubt bolstered by her zeal for self-promotion – has recently, Gertrude’s notoriety – no doubt bolstered by her zeal for self-promotion – has never been the subject of an exhibition. The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso and the Parisian Avant-Garde, seen by this reviewer at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (closed 6th September 2012), makes handsome amends for this neglect. This exhaustive and, at times, exhaustive exhibition includes many of the most celebrated paintings they owned or commissioned – Matisse’s blazing Woman in a hat (cat. no.113; Fig.64) and Picasso’s magisterial Portrait of Gertrude Stein (no.238) to name only two. Although the parade of canvases by Matisse and Picasso represents an embarrassment of riches, the checklist is just as notable for the many unexpected byways it explores – a chilly, cat-eyed nude by Félix Vallotton (no.438), a lush, Rococo-inflected one by Bonnard (no.3) and two intimate, early Fauve ones by Henri Manguin (nos.82 and 84) that represented some of Leo’s earliest forays into collecting; a selection of the ukiyo-e Sarah and Michael bought in San Francisco and a Meiji-era cloisonné pot (ex-catalogue) they owned which Matisse incorporated into Still life with geraniums of 1910 (Bayerisches Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich); and oil-sketches by the students of the short-lived Académie Matisse, whose establishment was spearheaded by the redoubtable Sarah. Masters of the preceding generation like Cézanne, Renoir and Manet are represented by relatively minor (although, in the case of Cézanne, still exemplary) canvases and a handful of prints; these artists’ recent critical canonisation had placed most of their more ambitious paintings beyond the Steins’ budgets, making their shift toward younger, less established artists a matter of astutely making a virtue of necessity.

Given the exhibition’s focus on collecting, the display assumes an even greater importance than usual, and the show’s San Francisco incarnation was notable for the ways it cleverly suggested (rather than slavishly replicated) the experience of looking at these extraordinary paintings in their original settings. Instead of the large, sterile white-cube spaces and the widely spaced single hang that have, for better or for worse, become the norm for the institutional display of modern art, the exhibition galleries were small and intimate. Their scale, in concert with a judicious use of double-hanging, a generous but not excessive selection of period photographs (some of them magnified a hundredfold into murals; Fig.67) and several pieces of the heavy Italian Renaissance furniture that both Stein households favoured for their ability to serve as a foil for the shock of the new, evoked something of the way Saturday evening salon visitors must have experienced this extraordinary assemblage and, just as importantly, the way the Steins lived with these works on a daily basis. The intimacy of the display also had the welcome side effect of restoring a sense of these paintings’ initial power to scandalise, something all too easy to forget now that they and their creators have sat so long in the pantheon of Modernism and endless reproduction has blunted their impact. Hanging Matisse’s Blue nude: memory of Biskra (no.139; Fig.65) at the centre of a tightly packed arrangement underscores its raw physicality in a way that a sparser display cannot match, thrusting the viewer into a tense confrontation with the aggressive double stare of the model’s eyes and breasts. Conversely, placing Picasso’s The architect’s table (no.260; Fig.66) in such an intimate setting draws out the domestic quality of this dense and wilfully complicated Cubist still life; incorporating Gertrude’s calling card, which she left at the

64. Woman in a hat, by Henri Matisse. 1903. Canvas, 86.7 by 59.7 cm. (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; exh. Grand Palais, Paris).

Bateau Lavoir upon paying a call on the artist but finding him absent, it is as much a record of a mutually inspiring friendship as it is an exercise in dismantling the conventions of Western art.

The decision to encompass the Steins’ lives as collectors until the very end, rather than focusing solely on the glory years before the First World War, means that there is inevitably something of a falling-off in the second half of the exhibition. Michael and Sarah, having lost a significant portion of their Matisse collection because of their fateful decision to lend to an exhibition in Berlin on the eve of the First World War, not only never managed to recover the missing paintings but found themselves priced out of the market by the artist’s skyrocketing fame (which, ironically, they had helped to secure); Leo more or less ceased collecting following his estrangement from Gertrude in 1914; and Gertrude, also finding Picasso’s new work beyond her means, turned her attention to younger and more affordable artists. The received wisdom that with age she lost her eye for the best and the boldest modern art is contradicted to a certain degree by her support for Juan Gris (nos.67–71 and 74) and Francis Picabia (nos.219 and 221), although their work hung in the company of decidedly lesser artists like Pavel Tchelitchew (no.433) and Francis Rose (no.263) and the proliferation of portraits of Gertrude seems to confirm the idea that in her later years she incurred the disdain of more discerning collectors and patrons. The Steins’ decision to return to San Francisco in 1935, as well as their tireless promotion of Matisse among their friends in that city, also eventually resulted in SFMOMA possessing one of the richest collections of the artist’s work in the United States. While the curators have taken scrupulous care not to pit the Steins against each other (even though an undercurrent of competition between the two pairs certainly played a role in shaping their collections, and Gertrude relished the rivalry between the ‘Matisseites’ and ‘Picassotites’ that she helped to fuel), it is ‘the Mike Steins’ who ultimately emerge as the subtlest and most sensitive collectors and patrons, bearing out Matisse’s claim that Sarah was ‘the really intelligently sensitive member of the family’ and richly deserving of continuing scholarly attention.

The catalogue, lavishly illustrated and containing a veritable library’s worth of documentary material (including, in addition to photographs of the interiors of all the Stein residences, an inventory of the entire collection and Sarah’s notebook from her involvement with the Académie Matisse), will be indispensable to scholars of modern art for years to come. Nevertheless, the wealth of photographs of the evolving collection only hints at the paintings’ electrifying physical presence. Gertrude once remarked that ‘you can either buy clothes or buy pictures. No one who is not very rich can do both’. As this excellent exhibition makes abundantly clear, the Steins chose wisely indeed.


Poussin and tapestry

Rome, Bordeaux and Paris

by KOENRAAD BROSSENS

SINCE THE Manufacture des Gobelins’ symbolic four-hundredth birthday in 2007, the Mobilier national, keeper of one of the world’s most impressive tapestry collections, has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis. Under the auspices of Bertrand Schottier, the Mobilier’s administrateur général, Arnauld Brejon de Lavernée and Jean Vittet revitalised the institution from a quasi-comatose patient to a healthy and visible actor on the international tapestry scene, not least by the organisation of an international symposium, the publication of the immensely rich La collection de tapisseries de Louis XIV, and a handful of small-scale but nonetheless very interesting exhibitions held at the refurbished Galerie des Gobelins. One of