

Small city Perth is poised to pull off an art coup in the region with a series of big world-class exhibitions over the next five years titled Great Collections of the World. It kicks off with the *Peggy Guggenheim Collection from Venice*, renowned for being a treasury of Modern Art, reports **CLARISSA TAN**

PERTH is a sleepy city. That's why we go there. All year round, Singaporeans make the short flight to Western Australia's capital to escape our own mad metropolis, eager to soak up the good weather and good wine in a thoroughly pleasant town where the greatest energy expended is in the swatting of flies.

Now, besides sipping your Chardonnay and enjoying the "Fremantle Doctor" – the breeze that blows in from the sea and which causes people to say, "I feel better" – you can also enjoy world-class art exhibitions featuring the likes of Picasso, Duchamp, Rothko, and Pollock.

The Art Gallery of Western Australia, the state's main art museum, has launched a five-year programme that's both ambitious and clever. Called *Great Collections of the World*, it will roll out a show every Spring that is both top-notch in quality and highly specific in theme, rather in keeping with Perth's rich-but-small status.

"We're hoping it will become an annual appointment with visitors," says Dr Stefano Carboni, director of the museum. "The idea is to put together, from October to January, a relatively small, very focused, very high quality exhibition proceeding from a world renowned collection. We hope to build our audience year after year, and make it a series that's interesting and different in concept."

The Art Gallery couldn't have landed a more suitable exhibition for its inaugural year. Currently on show are 35 artworks from the famous *Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice*, itself a 400-piece collection whose permanent home in Peggy's old Venetian residence is one of the biggest tourist draws in the Italian city. Following on Dr Carboni's "highly focused" strategy, the Perth exhibition has concentrated on the life of Peggy Guggenheim herself, as well as on the artworks (which include pieces by Giacometti, Brancusi, Magritte – basically all the Western greats from the 1930s to 1950s.)

Peggy, the niece of billionaire Solomon R Guggenheim, the man who founded New York's Guggenheim Museum, was an heiress who not only collected art, but financially supported many artists who later became famous thanks to her patronage. For instance, she offered Jackson Pollock a monthly stipend that enabled him to dedicate his time to painting, and held his first solo exhibition in New York. Rothko's first solo, too, was Peggy-backed.

The Perth exhibition, besides the 35 artworks on loan, has many intriguing photos of Peggy across the years, often taken with famous works of art or the artists themselves.

"I didn't want this to be a simple operation of 'highlights from', or 'masterpieces from'," says Dr Carboni. "I spoke with Philip Rylands, the director of the Venice collection, about a specific focus. The collection in Venice is shown in her home, and was opened to the public after she died. They kind of take it for granted that Peggy's personality comes through when you visit. She's all over the place, in the garden, in the mansion.

"But the centre has never lent as many as 35 works, so that means the collection has never been marketed, as you wish, as Peggy's collection. We decided an ideal angle for the



Pablo Picasso, Half-length portrait of a man in a striped jersey, 1939, gouache on paper, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, ©Pablo Picasso/Succession Picasso. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010



Max Ernst, Attirement of the Bride, 1940, oil on canvas, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, ©Max Ernst/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Modern Art on show: The Art Gallery of Western Australia will roll out a show every Spring that promises top-notch quality and a focused theme like the Peggy Guggenheim Venice Collection



Wassily Kandinsky, Upward, October, 1929, oil on cardboard, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, ©Wassily Kandinsky/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Peggy in Perth

exhibition would be what all these 35 works have in common, which is Peggy.

Dr Carboni says the Art Gallery is about to sign up its next *Great Collection* exhibition, but he cannot reveal any details at the moment. "It will be from a foreign, well-known institution and the idea is that it has to be exclusive – if not exclusive to the world, at least exclusive to Australia.

"Next year, we're going to have the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in town at end-October. So the exhibition is going to coincide with CHOGM and it's important that we make it a bit special for the visitors, which would include Queen Elizabeth II."

The chatty Dr Carboni, who hails from Venice himself and used to be the curator of Islamic art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, reveals a competitive streak when talking about how *Great Collections* is pitching itself.

"When there is a great exhibition in Sydney, Melbourne or Canberra, everyone in Perth feels they should make a point of travelling there. What I want to do is try to reverse this trend. The people from the East coast of Australia can come to Perth."

Dr Carboni wants to attract offshore tour-

Centre of art gravity: Dr Stefano Carboni (right), director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia hopes to build an audience year after year with the *Great Collections*



Alberto Giacometti, Woman with Her Throat Cut, 1932, bronze, cast 1940, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, ©Alberto Giacometti/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Sculpture: Swiss artist-sculptor Alberto Giacometti shocks with his Surrealist *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (left), showing a woman's body splayed open and arched

ists too. "I hope that a lot of international visitors, including, of course, from Singapore, will know about this exhibition, and in some cases make a point of travelling between September and January. This is going to help me go to our Minister of Culture and the Arts, and the Minister of Tourism, to say: 'You see, we are generating business for the state.'"

He sees the art scenes of Singapore and Perth as working for, rather than against, each other. "I think exhibitions in Perth and Singapore can be complementary and not competing. There's a steady flow of Perth and Western Australian visitors to Singapore and vice versa, so important exhibitions will only be beneficial for this exchange. The only competition I can see is if a museum in Singapore goes after the very same exhibition I'm trying to secure, but I think this is a remote possibility."

Dr Carboni says the Art Gallery would need about 70,000 visitors to balance the budget of holding the Peggy Guggenheim exhibition. Tickets are A\$20 (S\$25) each.

"People in Perth are notoriously slow in going to see exhibitions so I'm not too worried about the fact that it's a bit slower than I was hoping for. I know that it's going to build up very quickly in the last few weeks of the exhibition, when there will be a sense of urgency."

The tongue-in-cheek alternative translation for laid-back "WA", the acronym for Western Australia, is Wait Awhile. Obviously, Dr Carboni is hoping that its inhabitants will not wait too long.



©The Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, Photo Archivio Cameraphotopoeche, Gift of Casa di Risparmio di Venezia, 2005

Venetian sojourn: Peggy Guggenheim in her bedroom at the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, in Venice, in the early 1950s. Behind her is the *Silver Bedhead* made for her by American sculptor Alexander Calder between 1945 and 1946

Born into high art and adulation

DRAMA surrounded Peggy Guggenheim's life, some of it tragic, all of it fascinating. Her father, a wealthy American businessman, died on the Titanic.

At 21, she inherited the equivalent of US\$20 million (S\$26 million) in today's terms. She then volunteered as a clerk at an avant-garde bookshop. Her first marriage to French-born Laurence Vail, a Dada collagist, hurled her into the bohemian circles of 1920s Paris.

Peggy started collecting art with a voracity and passion, adopting as her motto: "Buy a picture a day". Among her advisors were Marcel Duchamp, English poet Herbert Read, Andre Breton and Samuel Beckett. (Beckett, a one-time lover, urged her to collect contemporary art as if it were "a living thing".)

Peggy continued snapping up art, at not-very-exorbitant prices, through the early years of World War II. She acquired at least 10 Picassos, 40 Ernsts, eight Miros, four Magrilles, three Man Rays, three Dalis, one Klee, one Wolfgang Paalen and one Chagall.

She exhibited Kandinsky and Tanguy in London. Artists such as Duchamp and Brancusi became lifelong friends. Seemingly oblivious to the war, she astonished Fernand Leger by buying his *Men and the City* on the day Hitler invaded Norway, on April 9, 1940. She picked up Brancusi's *Bird in Space* as the Germans approached Paris.

In 1941 Peggy, a Jew, finally had to flee

Nazi-occupied France. She did so with the German Jewish artist and soon-to-be second husband, Max Ernst. (The naked female figure in Ernst's hallucinatory 1940 painting *Attirement of the Bride* is often speculated to be Peggy, but this is highly implausible as the two had probably not yet met when the painting was done. They divorced in 1946.

Peggy had a knack of spotting artists just before their styles achieved a maturity and fruition – on returning to New York for instance, she held solo exhibitions for Pollock and Rothko, before the former shot to fame for his "action" painting and the latter for his duo-chrome "multiforms".

The 1940s was a time when art friendships were formed or broken based on whether one supported Abstraction or Surrealism. In 1942, when Peggy opened her New York museum Art



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Installing the Greek Pavillion: Peggy established her modern art collection in 1947 at the 24th Venice Biennale with (far left) Joan Miro's *Dutch Interior II* and *Seated Woman II* (centre)

of This Century – soon one of the most exciting venues for contemporary art in the city – she wore two different earrings. "I wore one of my Tanguy earrings and one made by Calder, in order to show my impartiality between Surrealist and Abstract art," she later wrote.

In 1947, Peggy returned to Europe and later bought the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni on the Grand Canal in Venice, where she lived till the end of her days.

Every afternoon she would have her two gondoliers bring her around in her private gondola, with her little dogs.

She was the last person in Venice to own a private gondola. In the 1960s, Peggy commissioned painter Edward Melcarth to create batwing and butterfly sunglasses.

Along with her pouf of white hair, red lipstick and zany earrings, they became her signature look. She died in 1979, two days before Christmas.