

# 31 WOMEN

AN  
EXHIBITION  
BY PEGGY  
GUGGENHEIM

19 / September / 2024 — 5 / January / 2025



Berenice Abbott [attributed to], *Peggy Guggenheim poses at her Art of This Century Gallery in New York, October 22, 1942.*

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In 1943 the collector Peggy Guggenheim organized one of the first exhibitions dedicated exclusively to the work of women artists in the United States at her New York gallery Art of This Century. Titled *Exhibition by 31 Women*, one of Guggenheim's objectives was to highlight the contribution of women artists, who had often been dismissed as muses, imitators, or companions of famous male artists by the patriarchal mindset of the time. The artists selected for *31 Women*—which included well established female creators and emerging talents—came from Europe and the United States, many of whom were linked to Surrealism and abstract art.

*31 Women. An Exhibition by Peggy Guggenheim* is a tribute and an acknowledgment of sorts to Guggenheim's initiative through a selection and a new reading of The 31 Women Collection repository, a collection that includes works by artists who participated in the historic show.

As a preamble, the first room in the exhibition sets off with a piece of furniture designed by the Austrian architect Frederick Kiesler for Art of This Century accompanied by photographs and documents demonstrating Peggy Guggenheim's will to promote the work of women artists. This objective was materialized both in *Exhibition by 31 Women* and in a later exhibition titled *The Women* (1945), which inspired a series of solo shows, such as those dedicated to Sonja Sekula, Irene Rice Pereira, and Pegeen Vail.

The second part of the exhibition is articulated in four sections that propose an approximation to some of the main thematic axes and strategies explored by the creators in *31 Women*, who sought to assert their independence and avoid clichés associated with the label "female artist" that were commonplace in the art world of the time. Aware of the challenges they faced for being women, these artists often went against the grain by utilizing the dominant artistic languages of their time: they reinterpreted the contributions of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism to highlight the patriarchal precepts such movements were based on.

# THE “SELF” AS ART

The first section establishes the important role played by the creative strategy of self-representation in the work of women artists of the time. Through elaborate costumes and extravagant make-up, which they wore in their daily lives or during improvised performances, the artists constructed alternate identities that allowed them to elude the rigid female behavioral models determined by bourgeois ideology.



Dorothea Tanning, *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*, c. 1940. Watercolor, ink and crayon on paper. The 31 Women Collection

# STRANGELY FAMILIAR

The second section examines the reinterpretation of traditional genres such as the landscape and still lifes developed by the artists in *31 Women*. Driven by their creative imagination, mundane objects and landscapes seem imbued with an aura of unsettling strangeness. The house is no longer a warm and welcoming refuge linked to femininity, but instead a threatening territory that opens up to mystery and the unknown.



Meret Oppenheim, *Souvenir of the "Lunch in Fur"* (1936), 1972.  
Fabric, paper artificial fur and artificial flowers encased under glass.

The 31 Women Collection

# BESTIARIES

The third section analyzes the important role of animal representation in the iconography of women linked to Surrealism. A mythical universe inhabited by transforming bodies was portrayed in their works; a free world in which the emancipation from inherited identities seems possible and the boundaries between humans and animals are blurred.



Milena Pavlovic-Barilli, *Juno and Vulcan*, 1936.  
Oil on canvas. The 31 Women Collection

# *THE MIDDLE WAY:* LANGUAGES OF ABSTRACTION

Lastly, the fourth section studies the important contribution to abstract languages made by the artists who participated in *31 Women*. As proven by the documentation on display, many of these artists played an important role in key organizations related to the dissemination of abstraction in the United States, such as the New Bauhaus or the association American Abstract Artists. Distanced, for the most part, from Abstract Expressionism—the predominant style of painting in North America at the time—they were attracted to the wide range of creative possibilities afforded by abstraction. In particular, their focus on the hybridization of artistic practice and their interest in decorative arts stands out, tying into what one might consider as an identifying trait of abstract art produced by women artists since the early 20th century.



Buffie Johnson, *The Middle Way / The Great Mother Rules the Sky (Astor Mural)*, 1949-1959. Oil on canvas. The 31 Women Collection

In the way of an epilogue, the final room includes an outline of relationships—an atlas of sorts—composed of photographic portraits of the thirty-one artists who participated in the exhibition of 1943. In this way, the many connections that existed between the artists and Peggy Guggenheim are made visible, highlighting the networks of collaboration and friendships they established beyond those maintained with their male counterparts.

# 31

DJUNA BARNES / XENIA CAGE /  
LEONORA CARRINGTON / LEONOR FINI /  
SUZY FRELINGHUYSEN /  
ELSA VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN /  
MERAUD GUINNESS GUEVARA /  
ANNE HARVEY / VALENTINE HUGO /  
BUFFIE JOHNSON / FRIDA KAHLO /  
JACQUELINE LAMBA / EYRE DE LANUX /  
GYPSY ROSE LEE / HAZEL MCKINLEY /  
ALINE MEYER LIEBMAN /  
LOUISE NEVELSON / MERET OPPENHEIM /  
MILENA PAVLOVIC-BARILLI /  
BARBARA POE-LEVEE REIS /  
IRENE RICE PEREIRA / KAY SAGE /  
GRETCHEN SCHOENINGER /  
SONJA SEKULA / ESPHYR SLOBODKINA /  
HEDDA STERNE / SOPHIE TAEUBER-ARP /  
DOROTHEA TANNING / JULIA THECLA /  
PEGEEN VAIL GUGGENHEIM /  
MARIA HELENA VIEIRA DA SILVA



## Fundación MAPFRE

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## Curator

Patricia Mayayo

## Dates

From September 19<sup>th</sup>  
to January 5<sup>th</sup> 2025

## Opening hours

Mondays (except public holidays):  
2 pm to 8 pm  
Tuesdays to Saturdays:  
11 am to 8 pm  
Sundays and public holidays:  
11 am to 7 pm  
(Last entry 30 minutes before  
closing time. Visitors must leave the  
galleries 10 minutes before closing)

## Admission

Standard: 5€  
Reduced: 3€  
Free entry: Mondays  
(except public holidays)

## Guided tours

7€  
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## Educational visits for schools and families

Hours and bookings:  
<https://www.fundacionmapfre.org/arte-y-cultura/colegios-y-familias/>



## Audio guide

Spanish and English: 4€

## Bookstore

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