

THE

Art OF
Life



Ever fond of sand and sea, Sara Murphy at the shore—in life and in art—in a family photograph and as rendered by Picasso in his pen and ink, *Reclining Nude with Pearl Necklace*.



When Sara Murphy wore her pearls to the beach, she couldn't have known what she set in motion.

Along with her husband, Gerald, and their three children, the beautiful Mrs. Murphy moved to France after World War I to escape the stultifying swirl of New York society. A new friend and neighbor, Pablo, a man who himself had little taste for accepted social mores, took note of Sara's choice of sunbathing accessories at the tiny beach they shared at Cap d'Antibes. Picasso promptly sketched a woman in pearls, a look he would employ in a range of drawings and neoclassical paintings.

Some years later, working on the first draft of the novel that would become *Tender Is the Night*, F. Scott Fitzgerald named his main characters after his friends Sara and Gerald. Perhaps it is unsurprising that, in the finished book, the renamed protagonist, Nicole Diver, wears her pearls on the beach, too.

But the pearls are not the point: the Murphys are.

The couple did not set out to become or to inspire artists, yet they managed to do both. Walking past a Parisian gallery in 1921, Gerald was stunned by his first viewing of canvasses by Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris. On returning to their apartment, he told Sara, "If that's painting, it's what I want to do." And so he did, exhibiting his work in Paris to the admiration of critics and other artists. His new friend Fernand Léger commented, "Gerald Murphy [is] the only American painter in Paris."

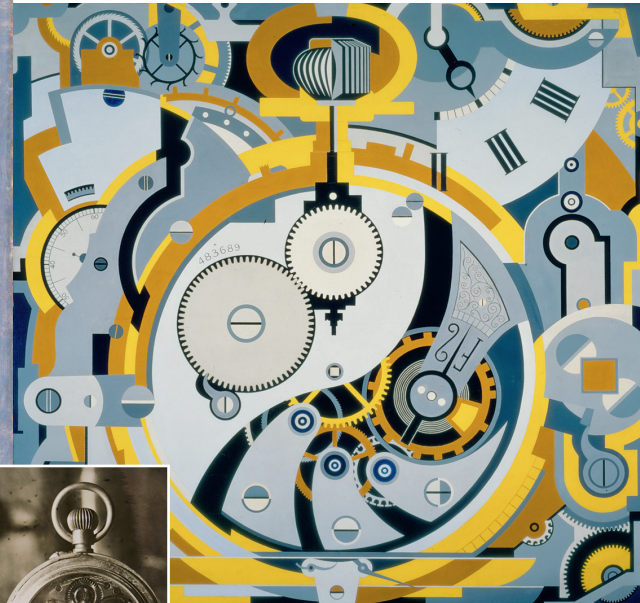
Lured to the Riviera by Gerald's Yale friend Cole Porter, the Murphys purchased a modest villa in 1924. At the time, few rich Europeans summered at Cap d'Antibes. But the Murphys brought East Hampton beach culture to their adopted home, and their multi-national friends embraced a refreshing new life of screen doors, beach cabanas and fun in the sun.



Left: Whether Sara served as Picasso's muse when he painted *Woman Seated in an Armchair* is the subject of debate among scholars, but Picasso's idealized view of womanhood certainly owed a debt to his friend and neighbor, Mrs. Murphy.

Below: Gerald Murphy's oeuvre was modest—some 14 paintings in a nine-year career that ended abruptly with son Patrick's illness—but his work was widely admired. When exhibited in Paris, Murphy's paintings shared gallery space with works by Joan Miró, Picasso and Fernand Léger.

Often described as "Precisionist," this painting, titled *Watch* (1925), is a melding of realism and cubism. Murphy's friend Archie (the poet Archibald MacLeish) purchased the painting for his personal collection.



The Murphys spent much of the 1920s at the Villa America, a time that proved to be the happiest of their lives. They made their home a welcoming place for a diverse list of American guests, including the Hemingways (Ernest, along with wives one and two), Dorothy Parker, poet Archibald MacLeish, novelist John Dos Passos and playwright Philip Barry. The rich cultural life they lived in France included interactions with Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, Russian dance impresario Serge Diaghilev, Jean Cocteau and a who's who of contemporary painters. The idyll at Villa America came abruptly to an end in 1929 when the Murphys' youngest child, Patrick, was diagnosed with tuberculosis.

In the past, Gerald and Sara Murphy have been memorialized in print, notably by Calvin Tomkins' essay in *The New Yorker* "Living Well is the Best Revenge" (1962) and in Amanda Vaill's book *Everybody Was So Young* (1999). But a forthcoming exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art takes a different angle of approach. The brainchild of Deborah Rothschild, senior curator of modern and contemporary art at the museum, "Making It New: The Art and Style of Sara and Gerald Murphy" will employ more than 50 paintings and a varied array of archival materials, including photographs, letters, music, books, manuscripts and other objects in an exploration of the context and the interplay between the couple, their influential friends and the emerging movement that came to be called Modernism. A catalog for the show, complete with nine essays by a range of scholars, will be published by the University of California Press, Berkeley.

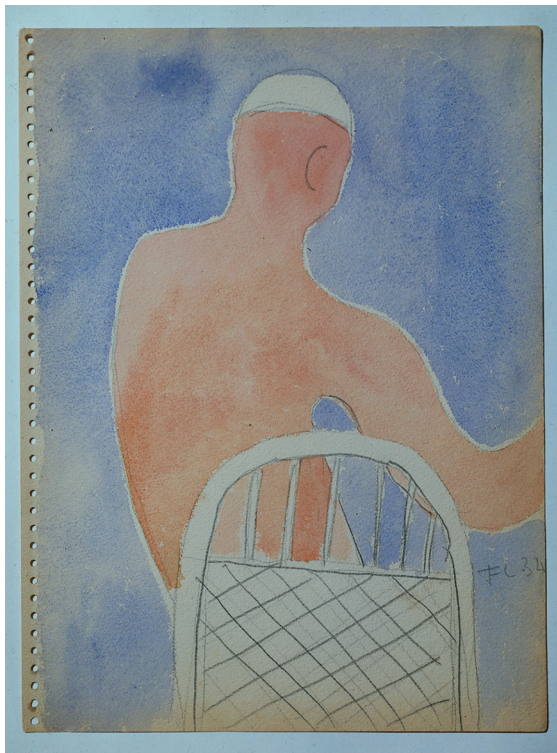
Many familiar faces will be on hand, both on the gallery walls and in two

documentary films made for the exhibition. The Villa America became a locus for a generation of expatriates, and dozens of photographic images and other ephemera will recall the Murphys' intimate relations with their friends and the art they created. The artists represented will include Gris, Picasso, Man Ray and Léger, but central to the exhibition are paintings by Gerald Murphy. All of his seven surviving canvases will be on view. Murphy's work, drawing upon machine and consumer imagery of the time, anticipated Pop Art.

Sara Murphy was unpretentious and direct. ("She is never coy," observed her husband.) While she was forever comfortable in her own skin, Gerald was enamored of costume—he worked as a set designer for the Diaghilev ballet troupe—and, in his personal life, he calculated the casual and the formal alike. He saw life as a kind of theatrical adventure, and he always dressed for the occasion. But the Murphys, despite their repeated appearances in the art of their time, were more than merely stylish and decorative. Beneath the patina



After purchasing the house in Cap d'Antibes, the Murphys replaced its peaked chalet roof with a roof deck—one of the first to be seen on the Riviera—with a panoramic view of the Mediterranean. Gerald's tastes in interiors ran to stark black and white; Sara introduced splashes of color with glass bowls of flowers, bright linens and majolica china. They renamed the place Villa America.



Gerald admired Fernand Léger, describing him as “an apostle, a mentor, a teacher.” The French painter, in turn, expressed his affection for the Murphy manner in a series of watercolors, including this portrait of Gerald.

and panache and a fairy-tale family life, Sara and Gerald Murphy seem to have been a warm and welcoming presence in a time of remarkable artistic, social and intellectual change. They were peripheral actors, to be sure, particularly when seen in the larger context of widely influential friends such as Picasso, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Cole Porter. Yet the Murphys—as host and hostess and, more importantly, as catalysts—brought a style and manner to the so-called “Lost Generation” that is essential to the culture of the era. ■

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MAKING IT NEW: The Art and Style of Sara and Gerald Murphy
will be on view from July 8 to Nov. 11, 2007 at the Williams College Museum of Art.

The exhibition is the centerpiece of a range of events in a manner the energetic and eclectic Murphys themselves would have appreciated. A newly commissioned play, *Villa America* by Crispin Whittell, will be in performance at the '62 Center for Theatre and Dance, produced by the Williamstown Theatre Festival, July 11-22.

In keeping with the College's emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, a series of gallery talks will explore the Murphys' tastes in literature, dance, food and theater. Other activities will include a symposium (Sept. 15), a family festival (July 14) and workshops for local teachers, providing a curriculum that blends history, art and literature.

"Making It New" will travel to the Yale University Art Gallery (Feb. 26-May 4, 2008) and the Dallas Museum of Art (June 8-Sept. 14, 2008).

For more information, visit www.wcma.org.