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**Tefaf Maastricht 2025** 

The German baroness who

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dreamt of a 'museum temple' - and created the Guggenheim Hilla von Rebay — a brilliant painter in her own right — was instrumental in shaping one of the great American institutions



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Hilla Rebay photographed by László Moholy-Nagy in 1924 © Alamy Stock Photo

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Roula Khalaf, Editor of the FT, selects her favourite stories in this weekly newsletter.

Jennifer Higgie

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New York had seen nothing like it. In 1939, an exhibition titled *Art of* Tomorrow opened on East 54th Street. Like portals to another realm, abstract

paintings by artists including Rudolf Bauer, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Ben

Nicholson and others were hung close to the floor, the air was thick with incense and the music of Bach and Beethoven softened the roar of the traffic

also happened to be the museum's first director: Baroness Hildegard Anna Augusta Elisabeth Rebay von Ehrenwiesen — better known as Hilla Rebay. 66 Who was this German aristocrat, who was so instrumental in shaping one of the Rebay had long dreamt of a great American institutions? Born in 1890 'museum-temple' filled with abstract art and in 1943, she in Strasbourg, then part of Germany, she found the architect who was drawn from an early age to both the could turn her vision into a possibilities of art and spiritualism. After reality: Frank Lloyd Wright studying in Cologne, in 1909 she moved to Paris and enrolled at the Académie Julian, one of the few European art schools that had, since its opening in 1868,

nurtured the talents of female artists. A wonderful photograph of the baroness

grubby smock and modern boots. The following year, she enrolled in Munich's

Klee. The German city was host to a generation of artists keen to shake off the

at the academy inscribed "La Parisienne!" shows her seated, smiling, at her

easel, an enormous palette in her left hand, her hair piled high, dressed in a

forward-thinking Debschitz-Schule, which counted among its teachers Paul

outside. The new gallery, grandly called the Museum of Non-Objective

Painting, was the first iteration of what was, in 1952, to become the Solomon R

Guggenheim Museum. The exhibition was curated by one of the artists, who

dusty shackles of the 19th century. In 1911, a group of them, led by Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc and Gabriele Münter, formed Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), to explore the spiritual and emotional possibilities of art via expressionism, abstraction — which they termed "non-objective" — and symbolism. The baroness drank it up.



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The young artist began a tempestuous romance with the pioneering modernist Rudolf Bauer. Although their relationship was to end acrimoniously in 1944 — Bauer accused Rebay of being a Nazi (she wasn't) and married his maid — the

Museum Foundation

© Alamy Stock Photo

The paintings are singing."

acquired by Guggenheim.)

baroness's belief in his genius never wavered and, thanks to her influence, many of his works entered the Guggenheim's collection. But that was all in the future. In 1927, Rebay was restless to explore new horizons. Now guided not only by avant-garde developments in art, but by astrology, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Theosophy, she emigrated to the US with the intention of opening a gallery of non-objective art. Although she had been mining the possibilities of abstraction, ever pragmatic and in need of money, she accepted commissions to paint portraits of New York's high society, who were keen to welcome this intriguing, bohemian aristocrat into their midst. In 1928, Solomon R Guggenheim, whose wife Irene had bought one of Rebay's collages, came calling. The resultant portrait is accomplished, if conventional: the philanthropist, a study in tweedy browns, sits cross-legged,

looking out with a solemnity that belies his adventurous spirit. During the long

hours of sitting for his painting, the millionaire formed a close friendship with

the artist; within months, Rebay was Guggenheim's art adviser, convincing him

that a new world demanded a new artistic language.

An installation view of 'Art of Tomorrow' at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, in New York, 1939 © Solomon R. Guggenheim

Rebay's relationship with Bauer helped her establish connections with artists

in France and Germany and, at her behest, Guggenheim acquired works by

leading artists including Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger, László Moholy-Nagy

and others. In July 1930, Rebay travelled to Europe with Guggenheim and his

wife and introduced them to Kandinsky, who was teaching at the Bauhaus in

Dessau. Guggenheim promptly bought "Composition 8" (1923), an exuberant

study in lines and circles — the first of more than 150 works by the artist that

would enter the collection. In 1937, Rebay declared: "Non-Objectivity will be

the religion of the future. Very soon the nations on Earth will turn to it in

thought and feeling and develop such intuitive powers which lead them to

harmony." That year, Guggenheim launched the foundation that was to

become one of the most famous galleries on the planet.



Rebay had long dreamt of a "museum-temple" filled with abstract art and, with

vision into a reality: Frank Lloyd Wright. She told him she was seeking "a lover

of space, a fighter, and originator" and he rose to the challenge - although it

took 16 years for it to be built. In 1959, the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum

Guggenheim's blessing, in 1943, she found the architect who could turn her

From left to right, Frank Lloyd Wright, Hilla Rebay and Solomon R Guggenheim looking at the model for the Guggenheim Museum

By the time the museum opened, however, Guggenheim himself had been dead

possibly, been fired — from her role as director, frustrated with the new, more

Apparently, she was not invited to the opening of the museum that she was so

instrumental in creating. Understandably embittered, she never set foot in it.

Rebay retreated to her homes in Connecticut and New Hampshire, where she

For decades, Rebay's role in establishing the Guggenheim overshadowed her

gifts as an innovative artist, although in 2005, the touring exhibition Art of

Tomorrow: Hilla Rebay and Solomon R Guggenheim went some way to re-

establishing her reputation. In recent years, with a long-overdue light being

At this year's Tefaf in Maastricht, the Parisian Galerie Raphaël Durazzo is

Rebay's importance should be overlooked," Durazzo told me recently. He

cast on the achievements of creative women, her star is, once again, on the rise.

staging Hilla Rebay: A Forgotten Pioneer of Modern Art that will include 11 of

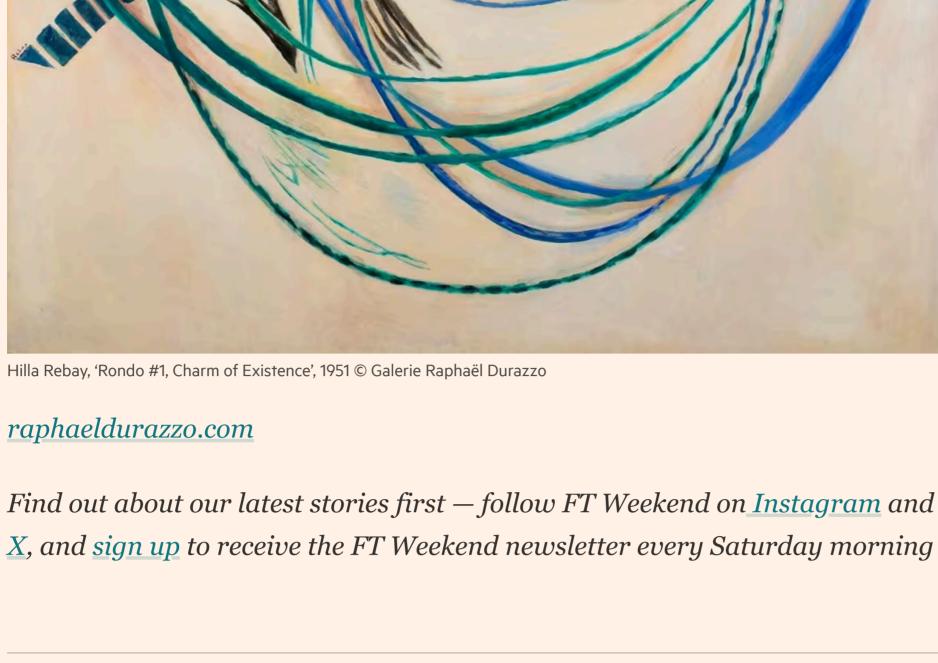
her works from 1917 to 1958. "I find it absolutely insane that someone of Hilla

paused and smiled. "Her work is music on canvas. There is a perfect harmony.

for 10 years and, in 1952, Rebay, plagued with ill-health, had resigned — or,

conservative leadership of the Guggenheim after her mentor's death.

continued to paint her vivid abstractions. She died in 1967.



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