

## INTRODUCTION

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“Day by day make it new / Yet again make it new!”<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound’s charge to his generation sums up Sara and Gerald Murphy’s philosophy and achievement. They not only pioneered a modern way of living but also elevated into an art form the notion of making each day “new.” Archibald MacLeish called them “*the* representative figures of their age” because, as transatlantic avant-gardes, they epitomized the many expatriates who flourished amid the artistic ferment in France during the 1920s.<sup>2</sup>

When the Murphys and their young children arrived in France in 1921, Europe was just beginning to recover from the senseless devastation brought about by the Great War, which had decimated a generation of youth and shattered established values and ideals. Europe welcomed spirited young people from the United States and elsewhere, who found that many cities, especially Paris, offered an open milieu for unfettered expression. The anything-goes atmosphere fostered invention and the exchange of ideas, and art, literature, music, and theater thrived. “Every day was different and there was always something exciting going on,” reminisced Gerald, citing a menu of balls, exhibitions, theatricals, manifestations, nightclubs, and cafés.<sup>3</sup>

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Caption to come.

It is not surprising that Sara and Gerald Murphy were among those drawn to Europe after the war. From the beginning of their marriage in 1915, they were determined to blaze a path that diverged from the expectations of their families and the constricted, snobbish, socially elite world into which they were born. It was critical to Gerald—unusual in those times—that he and Sara be equal partners in creating an existence anchored by “the real issues of life: home, children, work, friends, nature” and “not things.”<sup>4</sup> In 1919 he declared to Sara: “What we are doing is fresh, new, and alive.”<sup>5</sup>

Gerald, who began to study art only after arriving in Paris, is increasingly recognized as a significant painter even though he produced just a small body of work. Moreover, as a couple, the Murphys were conceptual/performance artists *avant la lettre*. They expended great effort, although it never seemed forced or calculated, to make each moment original and meaningful. One friend noted that even the most mundane act—the way Gerald prepared a cocktail, or a walk from the Murphys’ house to the beach—was somehow transformed into a memorable event: “He was a very exciting person to be around because there was always something new about everything he did and the way he perceived things was fresh.”<sup>6</sup> The Murphys’ life became an artistic exercise, informed by discipline, a keen sense of pleasure, and aesthetic complexity.

In addition to creating art, Sara and Gerald served as

muses to some of the major figures of twentieth-century arts and letters. John O'Hara wrote to Gerald in 1962: "All your friends wanted to capture Gerald and Sara and their life—the life, the way of life."<sup>7</sup> The Murphys are best known as the models for Dick and Nicole Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, but they also inspired other novels, short stories, poems, paintings, plays, articles, memoirs, and biographies. Many literary friends recalled their time in the Murphys' company as the best moments in their lives. In part this was because, as Linda Patterson Miller notes in her essay here, for a brief period Sara and Gerald personified an aspect of the main literary theme of the era, a kind of dream life—life as we would like it to be—which stands in sharp contrast to life as it really is.

The Murphys were also in some sense patrons of the arts. Although they never asked for works of art or favors in return, they actively supported the careers of such "unknowns" at the time as Ernest Hemingway, Fernand Léger, Cole Porter, John Dos Passos, Archibald MacLeish, and Dorothy Parker. In addition to advice and encouragement, the Murphys offered introductions and financial assistance. They championed new art forms well past the 1920s, continuing to sustain artist-friends even after the Depression devastated their fortunes. That the Murphys' circle of friends in France included so many talents who were to emerge as artistic giants was no coincidence. Sara and Gerald were not only uncannily attuned to the future; they were also people of sophisticated and ecumenical taste. They were at once open to everything and exceedingly choosy, and they paid close attention to the things and especially the people they cared about.

The very broadness of the Murphys' interests—encompassing music, dance, art, literature, and poetry (not to mention gardening, design, and cuisine)—calls for responses from experts in a variety of disciplines. Like Cubist art of the period, which often filters the same scene through multiple, overlying views, the ten essays included here each address a different aspect of the Murphys' lives, friends, art, and influence, thereby offering a fuller, more nuanced, and multiperspectival understanding of who they were and what their place in history is. There is inevitably some overlap in such an interdisciplinary approach, with certain key events, reactions, and personal characteristics reiterated and at times contradicted from essay to essay.

Calvin Tomkins introduces us to the Murphys, whom he met when they and his young family both lived at Sneedens Landing in the late 1950s. In time they became close friends, and Sara and Gerald opened up to Tomkins in a way they did with few other people during their long lives. Privy to hours of reminiscing by the Murphys, Tomkins experienced "the freshness and excitement of early modernism in the 1920s." His profile of the Murphys, "Living Well Is the Best Revenge," first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1962 and was later expanded into a book. In his essay "Remembering Gerald and Sara," Tomkins conveys the Murphys' "utterly captivating" charm, as well as Gerald's wistfulness about his unfinished career as an artist.

My essay offers an overview of Sara and Gerald's lives, with a particular emphasis on the 1920s and 1930s. I draw largely on their own words or those of friends and family, often from unpublished letters, diaries, and interviews. Gerald is the focus of most of the essays in this book, largely because he was the one who consciously invented and realized "a private vision of paradise, imbued with warmth, beauty, intellect and taste."<sup>8</sup> But none of this would have been possible without Sara. She was Gerald's model for all that was best in life. I have tried to convey through her letters her contribution to their partnership and her warmth, love of life, and originality.<sup>9</sup> Much of the Murphys' story is about friendship, and Sara lavished an almost maternal warmth and attentiveness on the people she loved. My essay also offers an analysis of Gerald's small body of work. His paintings represent a particularly American response to the modern school of Paris and, like many Cubist and Surrealist works, contain coded or hidden references.

In "The Murphy Closet and the Murphy Bed," Kenneth E. Silver, an expert on French art and culture of the early twentieth century, examines Gerald Murphy's impeccable style in light of conflicts about his sexual orientation. Silver brings insight and compassion to understanding Murphy's struggle to repress and hide leanings that were unacceptable at the time. The manner in which concealment "helped to shape the life he led and the art he made" is explored through Gerald's self-presentation: from his literal costumes (for fancy dress balls) to his daily clothes (business and casual attire) to, ironically, his nudism—a penchant for which is apparent in many photographs. Silver decodes Gerald Murphy's lost self-portrait of 1928 as "a portrait of the artist as a gay man looking out from the closet" and compares it to the work of Jasper Johns.

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Related to Silver's thesis is Amanda Vaill's consideration of Gerald Murphy's theatrical impulses. Murphy's interest in all forms of theater, she argues, offered a means of disguise from uncomfortable truths, since "in the theater concealment is normative and unconventional behavior unexceptional." Vaill, the Murphys' most thorough and engaging biographer, discusses Gerald and Sara's interactions in 1920s Paris with the revolutionary Kamerny Theater of Moscow and Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; Gerald's collaboration with Cole Porter on *Within the Quota* for the Ballets Suédois; and back in America, his last excursion into the theater, the ballet *Ghost Town*, created in 1939 for Serge Denham's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. She also discusses MacLeish's play *J.B.*, making the case (as Linda Patterson Miller does in regard to Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*) that this literary work by a close friend referred to a period of estrangement in the Murphys' marriage, after tragic loss, which was followed by reconciliation and a strengthening of their relationship.

Trevor Winkfield brings both an artist's and a writer's eye to his analysis of Gerald Murphy's notebook, which contains entries for forty-two possible pictures (plus one for a "construction in frame")—only a small number of which were completed. Winkfield places Gerald's work in context and enables us to see how "Paris made him a great American painter." Through careful analysis of the notebook, which he dubs *The Artist's Eye* or *A Spy's Manual*, Winkfield identifies the formal inventiveness, intellectual rigor, and sharp eye for observing and transforming "slivers of minutiae" that mark Gerald's art. The notebook, a treasure trove of ideas, provides insight into the workings of Gerald's imagination and supplies us with hints of what he was thinking about as he sat down to paint.

In her essay, Linda Patterson Miller, author of *Letters from the Lost Generation: Gerald and Sara Murphy and Friends* (2002), examines the work of writers who used the Murphys as subjects either in memoirs or fiction. Chief among these literary figures are F. Scott Fitzgerald, Archibald MacLeish, John Dos Passos, Philip Barry, and Ernest Hemingway. Patterson Miller's extensive knowledge of the correspondence between the Murphys and their friends, as well as her familiarity with external events and the inner workings of this cast of characters, informs her understanding of the literature that grew out of their friendships. She uncovers, too, the literary equivalent of the Cubist use of coded imagery.



Gerald and Sara on La Garoupe beach, Antibes, summer 1926.  
GERALD AND SARA MURPHY PAPERS, BEINECKE LIBRARY, YALE

In "*Les Enfants du Jazz*," Olivia Mattis, a musicologist who specializes in the links between music and art in the twentieth century, discusses the central place of music in the Murphys' lives and the key, often behind-the-scenes role the couple played in promoting new or then-forgotten forms such as jazz, African American spirituals, and American and Spanish folk music. Their collection of scores and recordings influenced and aided composers from Virgil Thomson and Nicolas Nabokov to Richard Rodgers and Cole Porter, serving as the basis for two motion picture soundtracks and two ballet scores. Besides collecting and promoting all kinds of music, they also performed new as well as unfamiliar songs and dances for a broad network of friends ranging from Isabella Stewart Gardner to Erik Satie. Mattis touches on the head-spinning number of musical personalities involved with the Murphys as she offers the first examination of this vital aspect of their lives.

Like Calvin Tomkins, the poet William Jay Smith presents a firsthand account of the Murphys. He met Gerald and Sara Murphy in 1954 through the novelist Dawn Powell, who had shown them Smith's small book of visual poetry entitled *Typewriter Birds*. Gerald was so taken with the book that he contacted Smith about buying it in quantity. In addition to personal recollection, Smith interprets two paintings by Murphy through the lens of poetry, seeing in them the depiction of "the triumph of time and death" manifested as visual or concrete poems.

The curator and art historian Kenneth Wayne looks at the Côte d'Azur arts community of the 1920s, viewing the Murphys and their Villa America in the context of three other artistic villas and châteaux on the Riviera: Villa Noailles, Picabia's Château de Mai, and the Château de Clavary. He describes the differences among these artistic enclaves, whose guests included many of the Murphys' friends and at times the Murphys themselves.

Dorothy Kosinski, the Dallas Museum of Art's Barbara Thomas Lemmon Curator of European Art, traces Gerald Murphy's critical fortunes as an artist. She touches on his early fame in Paris in the 1920s and the anonymity that followed until 1960, when he was "plucked from obscurity by the fledgling Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts." The museum's new director, Douglas MacAgy showed five of Murphy's paintings in a group exhibition entitled *American Genius in Review No. 1*. In the course of questioning why MacAgy mounted a show that resurrected forgotten artists, Kosinski revisits the political forces at work in Dallas and the nation during the McCarthy years. She concludes that MacAgy's exhibition was an attempt to defy the cultural conservatism that assailed Dallas in the 1950s and to counter assertions that identified modern art with communism and anti-Americanism.

The essays in this volume strive for a balanced portrait of Sara and Gerald Murphy, plumbing the dark side of their lives as well as shedding light on the multiple ways they served as models for the best that life could be. The writer Donald Ogden Stewart summarizes the impression they made on many: "Once upon a time there was a prince and a princess, that's exactly how a description of the Murphys should begin. They were both rich, he was handsome; she was beautiful; they had three golden children. They loved each other, they enjoyed their own company and they had the gift of making life enchant-

ingly pleasurable for those who were fortunate enough to be their friends."<sup>10</sup> Even after tragedy struck and financial reversals undermined their way of life, they continued, as Calvin Tomkins has noted, "to live at the highest level of sensitivity to cultural and natural stimuli."<sup>11</sup> They also demonstrated respect for every person's dignity and could not abide prejudice or injustice. Early on they championed jazz and African American music as art forms, deploring the demeaning minstrel shows popular at the time. In later years they came to the aid and defense of friends persecuted during the McCarthy era (Paul Draper, Dashiell Hammett, Barry Adler) or banned from restricted communities (Lillian Hellman). Their invention was the creation of an environment based on goodwill, simplicity, domesticity, friendship, and "living well." This way of life laid the groundwork for much that we still look upon as modern. Their lesson for today is the value they placed in, as Sara put it, "simplest, botto-  
mest things."<sup>12</sup> Such sentiments constituted a worldview that was to prove particularly compatible with the nascent modernist movement. By the time the progressive group L'Esprit Nouveau declared in their October 1920 manifesto, "There is a new spirit. . . . A great period is just beginning,"<sup>13</sup> Sara and Gerald were already "making it new."

#### NOTES

- 1 Ezra Pound, *Cantos LII-LXXI* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1940), 11 (Canto LIII).
- 2 *Those Paris Years: A Conversation between Archibald MacLeish and Samuel Hazo*, videocassette (University Park: Penn State Audio-Visual Service, 1987).
- 3 Gerald and Sara Murphy, audiotape interview by Calvin Tomkins, c. 1960. I am grateful to Calvin Tomkins for allowing me to quote from these tapes.
- 4 Gerald Murphy, letter to Sara Murphy, November 12, 1916. Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence between Sara and Gerald is in the Honoria Murphy Donnelly Collection.
- 5 Gerald, letter to Sara, June 9, 1919.
- 6 Fanny Myers Brennan, interview by Linda Patterson Miller, June 22, 1981. I am grateful to Linda Patterson Miller for sharing with me the tapes and transcripts of the many interviews she conducted.
- 7 John O'Hara, letter to Gerald Murphy, 1962, Honoria Murphy Donnelly Collection.
- 8 William Rubin with the collaboration of Carolyn Lanchner,

*The Paintings of Gerald Murphy* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1974), 10.

- 9 Gerald certainly appreciated these qualities. As late as 1936, he wrote to Sara: "I wonder if anyone who wants as much feeling of life as you do,—ever really gets it. . . . You certainly have always given it to people. People talk of you with emotional gratitude." Gerald, letter to Sara, April 18, 1936, quoted in Linda Patterson Miller, ed., *Letters from the Lost Generation: Gerald and Sara Murphy and Friends, Expanded Edition* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 164.
- 10 Donald Ogden Stewart, *By a Stroke of Luck! An Autobiography* (New York: Paddington Press/Two Continents, 1975), 117.
- 11 Calvin Tomkins, conversation with the author, May 19, 2004.
- 12 Sara, letter to Gerald, 1915.
- 13 Le Corbusier, in *L'Esprit Nouveau* (October 1920).



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