

## The Mama of Dada

“Gertrude Stein Comes Home” by Seymour I. Toll, in *The Sewanee Review* (Spring 2002),  
735 University Ave., Sewanee, Tenn. 37383.

When Gertrude Stein returned to America to begin her now-legendary lecture tour in 1934, it seemed that no one, perhaps not even the author herself, knew what Stein’s writing was all about. “I wonder if you know what I mean,” she mused to her audience on one occasion. “I do



Gertrude Stein (left) with Alice B. Toklas on board the S.S. Champlain, bound for New York in October 1934.

not quite know whether I do myself.” Yet Stein was such a celebrity that 15 reporters sailed out to meet her ship in New York harbor.

Though she’s been dead since 1946, Stein’s celebrity remains as intact as the mystery of how she won it, writes Toll, a

Philadelphia attorney. By the time of Stein’s homecoming, she had been living the comfortable life of an expatriate American intellectual in Paris for more than 30 years. With her partner, Alice B. Toklas, she had gained a certain renown for her salons (she befriended Picasso and Hemingway), her unconventional attire (sacklike dresses and thick stockings, “as if she wanted to be seen as a promenading stump”), and her impenetrable, “numbing” prose. The work she always considered her masterpiece, *The Making of Americans*, published in Paris in 1925, sold about 100 copies. It consists of 904 pages of sentences such as this: “Soon then there will be a history of every kind of men and women and of all the mixtures in them, sometime there will be a history of every man and every woman who ever were or are or will be living. . . .”

In 1933, Stein temporarily broke with her own literary conventions to publish a book written in comprehensible English, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*), though it retained one signature convention: It was Stein writing about Stein. The book put her in the public eye. She also wrote the libretto for Virgil Thomson’s 1934 opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which Toll compares to the writing of Dr. Seuss. The artsy crowd loved it. A few critics of the time—like some today—championed Stein as a kind of founding mother of modernism. But

her disavowal of punctuation (“necessary only for the feeble-minded,” she claimed), chronology, and recognizable syntax flummoxed the American reading public, and even the great critic and early Stein supporter Edmund Wilson eventually threw up his hands.

On tour, Stein charmed the crowds by playing the “lighthearted aunt,” mixing witty aperçus with surprisingly straightforward talk. The reporters who dogged her steps hoping to make her seem a joke were instead made to look like “dullards,” says Toll. “Why don’t you write the way you talk?” one demanded. “Why don’t you read the way I write?” Stein shot back. She showed a natural instinct for self-

promotion. For example, she limited the number of tickets sold to each lecture, ensuring that wherever she traveled, she would be the hottest attraction in town. Everybody clamored for face time with the new literary sensation. Stein, who was a conservative Republican, gladly had tea with Eleanor Roosevelt and dinner with Charlie Chaplin.

Stein’s incomprehensible prose became a running joke, inviting parodies in *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*. The dust jacket of one of the 26 books she published during her lifetime bore this note from publisher Bennett Cerf: “I do not know what Miss Stein is talking about. I do not even understand the title. I admire

EXCERPT

## *Naipaul’s Truths*

*Last December, on the day after being presented with the Nobel Prize for literature, V. S. Naipaul sat down in Stockholm for a televised conversation with three fellow literary laureates, Günter Grass, Nadine Gordimer, and Seamus Heaney, and with Per Wästberg, a member of the Swedish Academy. One might have expected that the topic under discussion would be writing and literature, but the Nobelists soon turned to politics. Naipaul, alone in resisting this direction, protested that he is not political: He just writes about people. “Perhaps that’s too frivolous,” he suggested slyly. Gordimer, perhaps failing to understand that there was more than a little irony in the air, and that in Naipaul’s view writing about people, far from being frivolous, is in fact precisely what a serious writer does, was quick to challenge his self-characterization, insisting: “Your very existence as a boy living under colonial rule in Trinidad was political!”*

*This was, needless to say, meant as praise. To many members of the literary (and academic) establishment, after all, colonialism is the paramount literary theme and political issue of our time, and to be a child growing up in a colonial setting is to fill a strictly defined role in a familiar morality play. It is to be a victim, and thus a figure of virtue, and thus, of course, political. And to be political is to be serious. (In such circles, indeed, politics is the ultimate seriousness.) For Naipaul, contrarily, who was that boy in Trinidad (he was born in Chaguanas, a village of 1,500 that his father sardonically called “the peasants’ paradise”), and who would certainly place colonialism at the head of his own list of literary themes, to be truly serious is to transcend the merely political. To be serious is to notice and remember the specifics, the contradictions, the ambiguities, to honor the whole human person rather than to reduce him or her to a one-dimensional symbol of virtuous victimhood or (for that matter) anything else. It is to tell the truth about the world, however much that truth may confound ideology, rather than (as Naipaul himself put it in his Nobel Prize speech) to turn “living issues into abstractions.”*

—Bruce Bawer, author of *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*,  
in *The Hudson Review* (Autumn 2002)

Miss Stein tremendously, and I like to publish her books, although most of the time I do not know what she is driving at. That, Miss Stein tells me, is because I am dumb.”

Perhaps the secret to Stein’s continuing fame lies in the lingering idea that we’re just not getting it. More than 50 years after her death, she’s the subject of new

publications, websites, and academic conferences. Lexus ads make knowing allusions to Stein’s work, and journalists quote her—“Remarks are not literature,” she once quipped. “Legends endure because their meaning persists,” writes Toll. “Yet the Stein legend flourishes even though its meaning has always been a mess. Its point is pointlessness.”

## *The Art Museum Comes Home*

“A World Changed? Art Museums after September 11” by James Cuno, in *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* (Summer 2002), 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Tom Krens, director of New York City’s Guggenheim Museum, thought he had a can’t-miss formula: “Great collections, great architecture, a great special exhibition, a great second exhibition, two shopping opportunities, two eating opportunities, a high-tech interface via the Internet, and economies of scale via a global network.” The museum opened flashy new branches in Bilbao and Las Vegas. Then came the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the Guggenheim was forced to lay off 20 percent of its staff. But the crisis for the Guggenheim and other museums is not just about money, argues Cuno, director of Harvard University Art Museums. The more significant issue is how museums “see their role changing as a result of those tragic events.”

The Guggenheim experienced phenomenal growth during the 1990s, but its ambitious global museum network eroded its endowment; more than \$23 million was shifted into its operating budget during 1999 and 2000. The New York museum relied heavily on tourist dollars to succeed, with more than 70 percent of its visitors coming from outside New York City, and 50 percent from abroad. When the terrorist attacks slashed those numbers by more than half, the museum’s finances suffered.

Many museums followed the Guggenheim model, embarking on major building expansions, opening restaurants and gift shops, and booking blockbuster exhibitions to attract more paying customers from out of town. There’s the problem.

They became ever more dependent on tourist dollars. More important, they started to forget what art museums really ought to be all about: the joy of art.

Cuno advocates the “better, surer strategy” of cultivating the museums’ “host communities.” By this he means developing life-long connections between the people who live closest to the museum and its permanent collections, connections that can lead to the kind of unrestricted donations that are the lifeblood of thriving museums. Curators would return to their more traditional roles as collection builders and researchers and move “away from the idea of the curator as ‘producer,’ as one curator recently described herself in a *New Yorker* profile.”

This strategy would take museums away from hunting for what Cuno calls “risky dollars” and making deals of the sort that have created an uproar over the nature of the sponsorship of the Brooklyn Museum’s *Sensation* exhibition and the since-aborted “hall of achievement” at the Smithsonian Institution.

While it may be too early to declare a universal victory for the “new, inwardly directed museum in place of the old, outwardly directed museum,” Cuno sees many hopeful signs. “Whereas one once heard museums described as contested sites, where ideas and social identities were in contest, one now hears museums described as sanctuaries, places of retreat, sites for spiritual and emotional nourishment and renewal.”