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Fountain of Youth

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Cortesía Museo Rosengart/Martina Meier

Angela Rosengart, 81, erect as a dancer, strides purposefully through a room abundantly bedecked with paintings. Nattily dressed in red, her hair pulled tightly back in a chignon, a necklace composed of bronze spirals dangling from her throat, she might be a woman half her age. Around her, the works of art, bold, colorful and brazen, act like a backdrop to the charismatic aura she exudes.

As it happens, the paintings encircling here were done by Picasso — still, she almost upstages him. Suddenly, Angela stops midroom and slowly glances at each of the works — like a mother savoring the sweet countenances of her sleeping children. She turns to face me, her expression a composition of joy and gratitude. “Each picture here is a portion of my soul,” she says.

“He [Picasso] was electrifying. You could sense him chewing and digesting you.”

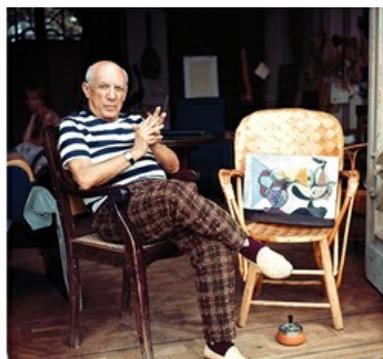
We’re standing on the first floor of the Rosengart Collection, a museum Angela founded, curated and donated to the Swiss lakeside city of Lucerne 11 years ago.

Born from her family’s personal art collection, the museum, a former bank building, holds more than 250 masterworks by some of the world’s best-loved artists. Artwork by Klee, Seurat, Chagall, Cézanne and Modigliani — among others — can be found here.

But it’s Picasso who rules the roost. The Rosengart Collection showcases not only 50 of his paintings but also a compendium of photographs taken by David Douglas Duncan that document Picasso’s work.

Still, the pièces de résistance for most visitors are the five portraits Picasso painted of Madame Rosengart herself. (In one, she wears the very necklace she dons today.) “Oh, they are not so important,” she says humbly, though she glows as she says it. “I crept into history through the back door,” she explains — as if everyone could have had the chance to model for Picasso.

As art dealers, the Rosengarts



Angela joined the family business as a teenage apprentice, but when her father noted her keen eye and sense for trends, he quickly moved her into the position of partner. “We had the exact same tastes,” she says, remembering him. That made it easy for the duo to pick the best works for their clients from the various artists’ ateliers they visited around Europe.

There was only one problem: The Rosengarts often liked a painting or sculpture so much, they yearned to keep it for themselves. “We bought what we loved from the artists,” she says. That worked well for their business, except sometimes the Rosengarts just couldn’t stand to let a piece go. “I suggested many times that we should keep things,” she says, mischievously.



Angela Rosengart
Portrait by Pablo Picasso
1964
Cortesia Museo Rosengart

Most often her father agreed. Sometimes they even resorted to hiding favorite works in the closet to keep them from being sold. Naturally, by retaining so many stellar works, they amassed an extraordinary collection. (“My father always said, ‘We don’t have a collection, we simply own nice pictures.’” she notes demurely.)

For years, these artworks hung in their modest home in Lucerne without any security at all. It was only after her father’s death that the never-married and childless Angela realized that when she died, the artworks would be sold and dispersed in myriad directions. Her solution to keep them together made her a benefactor and created the fabulous Rosengart Collection.

This is the eighth time I’ve perused the museum. Each time I visit, I only become more enamored of the works that hang here.

Cortesia Museo Rosengart But what really keeps me coming back is Angela Rosengart herself. “This is my real home,” she says of the museum, where she works every day. “I get new revelations all the time,” she continues, noting that the artworks still speak to her.

To walk the floor with Angela is to hear abundant anecdotes about the artists she knew. Her musings about the works instruct: “Did you know Picasso loved the color gray? Look how many shades you see here!” Sometimes her memories are spurred by the paintings — “Ah yes, I remember that Chagall gave us this one for my birthday.”

Of course, people are particularly curious about Picasso. What was he like, and how did he come to make her portrait? Which portrait does she prefer? Were she and Picasso lovers? Angela met Picasso first with her father in Paris. A shy teenager, she had never yet received a compliment from a man. But when Picasso saw her, he couldn’t stop himself. “Rosengart,” Picasso said to her father, “you have a very beautiful daughter.”

It was five years later that she first posed for him when the Rosengarts visited his workshop in Vallauris on the French Riviera. “Today I shall do your portrait,” he had said, rather like a mandate. (According to Angela, had she asked him to do it, he would have refused.)

“I was terrified,” she says. “Oh those eyes were like X-rays. They burned right through me.” As she tells me this, we linger in front of a Duncan photograph that captured Picasso’s intense gaze — the *mirada fuerte*, as they say in Spain. “You see,” she tells me, “He was electrifying. You could sense him chewing and digesting you, swallowing whatever he looked at. This was how he made his creations.” As it turns out, Angela’s father never left her alone with Picasso, so the rumors of a fling can be put to rest. “Picasso was always polite and kind to me,” she says.



Michelle Falzone/Getty Images

Angela reckons they visited Picasso some 50 times throughout the years. She was fascinated by his relentless creativity. Picasso did portraits of her four more times. Perhaps this is why the denizens of Lucerne call her the “Muse of Picasso.”

“Were you his muse?” I ask. She smiles, pauses and seems to recede into the past. “I think ‘muse’ would be an exaggeration,” she says at last.



Cortesia Museo Rosengart

Her favorite portrait is the lithograph Picasso created in 1964. He had envisioned it in advance — and when the Rosengarts came to visit, he said, “It’s good you have come. I have something particular in mind.” With that, he etched her in the spiral necklace she wears today and emphasized her big, beautiful eyes. “Ah, so you were his muse,” I say. She simply shrugs. After some thought, Angela says: “Though I met him in his 70s, Picasso was never an old man.

“He was passionate and always working. He once said to me: ‘I work and work and then to rest—I work again.’”

Around Picasso, everything was fodder: cigarettes, a fish found on the beach, a bit of mud, an old chair or an apple. “Art came from everything.” This still amazes and inspires Angela: “It seemed that with his art he could overcome age.”

We pause and consider the concept. Angela begins to tell me about the first painting she ever bought

— a simple drawing by Paul Klee of a little girl with a bow in her hair.

“I fell in love with it,” she says, her expression wistful and sweet. “It cost me an entire month’s wages.” I realize at once that to watch her tell a story about the past is to see her lose years. Her face transforms to that of a younger woman — perhaps the face that Picasso saw. I suddenly recognize that, like Picasso, she is fueled by passion. Passion and reverence for art.

So, I can’t stop myself. I ask her. “What keeps you so young?”

“Art keeps art lovers young,” she replies, and she gestures at the art-filled rooms of the Rosengart Collection — her fountain of youth.

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