

Audrey Jones Beck

Steven Fenberg's
interview with
Thomas P. Lee, Jr.

Renowned art collector Audrey Jones Beck always said she had two sets of parents: her own and her grandparents, Jesse and Mary Gibbs Jones. She spent as much time with the Joneses as she did with her parents and had her own room in her grandparents' Lamar Hotel penthouse in the heart of downtown Houston, where she grew up.

While undertaking several projects to renew and maintain knowledge about her grandfather, Jesse Jones, Steven Fenberg became close friends with Audrey Jones Beck. Mr. Fenberg recently interviewed Thomas P. Lee, Jr., who was at one time curator of the Beck Collection and, after his departure from the MFAH, remained Mrs. Beck's dear friend and advisor throughout her life.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER: Steven Fenberg wrote and was executive producer of the Emmy award-winning PBS documentary, *BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A BILLION? The Story of Jesse H. Jones*. He is currently community affairs officer at Houston Endowment and is writing a biography about Jesse Jones.



Audrey Jones Beck was born in Houston, Texas, on March 27, 1922, to Audrey and Tilford Jones. Tilford was Mary Gibbs Jones's son from her first marriage to Will Jones, Jesse's first cousin. Jesse and Mary married in 1920 after her divorce from Will, and two years later Audrey was born. Even though Jesse was Audrey's third cousin, he was the only grandfather she ever knew and her grandparents treated her like the child they never had. Audrey attended The Kinkaid School, Mt. Vernon College and the University of Texas at Austin. She met Ensign John Beck in 1941, and eight months later they had

the first military wedding at Christ Church Cathedral in Houston.

Audrey ultimately inherited most of the 6,000-acre ranch her great-grandfather, M.T. Jones, had acquired on the banks of Buffalo Bayou in the 1880s after he arrived in Houston and had become immensely successful in the burgeoning lumber industry. The Houston Ship Channel grew up on the land where M.T. and his son, Will, raised cattle and cotton. The land was passed from Will to Tilford and then to Audrey. Once it became hers, Audrey sold the land and turned the proceeds into what is now The John A. and Audrey Jones Beck Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH).

In the most recent Beck Collection catalogue, Mrs. Beck recalled, "My romance with Impressionism began when I first visited Europe at the age of 16 as a student tourist, complete with camera to record my trip. I paid homage to the *Mona Lisa* and the

Audrey Jones (Beck) with her grandparents, Mary Gibbs Jones and Jesse H. Jones, 1937.

Venus de Milo, but the imaginative and colourful Impressionist paintings came as a total surprise. Works by these avant-garde artists, who had rebelled against the academic tradition of the day, were scarce in American museums at the time. For me, they were not only the epitome of artistic freedom, but a visual delight. I returned home with many pictures, but none taken with the camera. My images were museum reproductions.”

Steven Fenberg: When did you meet John and Audrey Beck?

Thomas P. Lee: I was a new employee at the Museum [of Fine Arts, Houston] in 1971, and the Becks had just purchased Guillaumin's *The Seine in Paris*. There is a lot centered on that picture: the beginning of my professional relationship with Mrs. Beck and Mr. Beck, and the first understanding of what she wanted to accomplish with her collection. When I saw the painting, I was absolutely astounded at the unbelievable quality, to say nothing of its size. It was clearly Guillaumin's greatest painting, and that is when I knew what Mrs. Beck was all about.

SF: What did you determine about her?

TL: That Mrs. Beck was going after absolutely the very best she could to create a student collection where people of all ages could come and learn not only about artists themselves but their interconnectedness, and that the only way one could truly learn was from high, high quality. That is when I realized they weren't clicking off a laundry list of artists that they wanted to buy. They wanted specific paintings. I don't think that they had known about Guillaumin's picture until it came up for auction and she just decided, I have to have it. That was 1971 and it followed a decade of fantastic acquisitions that Mr. and Mrs. Beck made on their own, really without professional consultation. They began collecting about 1961 or '62.

SF: How did the Becks become interested in collecting art?

TL: I think it was her dream, and John Beck finally came around. He was a businessman who enjoyed the financial aspects of the collection. Knoedler and several other dealers would come to town and set up shop at the Warwick or the Rice Hotel and have people in for cocktails or lunch and sort of show their wares. A couple of people asked Mrs. Beck, "Would you hang some things in your house? Why don't you take some of these? Just take them!" At that point the Becks were doing all kinds of things in Houston, from Jones Hall to the museum. She was a founding trustee of the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Ballet, and at one time served on the board of the Houston Symphony Society. For almost all of her adult life, Mrs. Beck was also on the board of direc-



Audrey Jones (Beck) before inaugurating a high-speed train built during the Great Depression with funds from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a government agency chaired by her grandfather, Jesse Jones. She frequently stood in for him at official events.



*John Albert Beck and
Audrey Louise Jones Beck,
1942.*

tors of Houston Endowment, the philanthropic foundation established by her grandparents, the Joneses. The Becks were everywhere, you know, and sought out by people because they were so interesting and so much fun. So, they would have these paintings at home and she would take snapshots of them and record the price. Well then later, they would appear at auction at Sotheby's and Christie's, and she would say to Mr. Beck, "Look, we could have had it for \$35,000. It just sold for \$120,000!" Well, that piqued his interest and coincided with his sale of his heavy equipment company, so he was able to spend more time assisting her. I think eventually he came around to see Audrey's full point of view before his untimely and tragic death.

SF: When did John Beck pass away?

*TL: In 1973, right at the pulse, at the takeoff of the art market. He never held back Mrs. Beck but he would sometimes ask, "Is something like this really worth this much money?" He wondered that when they bought their Seurat for \$350,000, which was the most they had ever paid for a painting. It was the last figural Seurat that was going to come on the market as a finished painting for a long time. There are lots of oil sketches but Mrs. Beck recognized it. She said, "If I don't buy this, I'll never have a Seurat." She never liked to settle on things. It was never a question of, "Oh, I've just got to have a Seurat, let's just buy that one." That was never the issue. It always had to be the best. And John Beck agreed and I think that was the launch of a very, very serious era. Even so, their earlier acquisitions—the Derain, the Bonnard, the Toulouse-Lautrec, the Mary Cassatt—all of those were bought in the '60s. And it is amazing at the clip that they came in. But in the early '70s, the Modigliani, Braque's *Fishing Boats*, and the Seurat were acquired. And that is a real turn in their collection.*

SF: Besides her trip to Paris as a teenager, where do you think the inspiration came from to focus on Impressionists and post-Impressionist artists?

TL: I think she saw them as a real change in painting. Some of them extremely courageous, some of them very Bohemian. She thought that was a lot of fun. She was interested in their lives and how they came to produce these remarkable things. And that is why there is such strength in the Fauve area in her collection with Derain, Dufy, Vlaminck, Maruquet, and Friesz. It is as if she were there in 1905, you know. She knew what they were trying to do.

Mrs. Beck could paint and she learned a lot about the artists and their painting by copying them. She had been



*Audrey Jones Beck
lunching with Jesse
Jones at the Rice Hotel's
Empire Room, 1940s.*



*Audrey Jones Beck handing the key to the Jesse H. Jones Hall
for the Performing Arts to Mayor Louie Welch, at the opening
ceremony, 1966. Houston Endowment built Jones Hall and
gave it to the city as a gift in honor of Mr. Jones.*



Amedeo Modigliani's Portrait of Leopold Zborowski in the Beck's living room during Christmas, 1960s.

looking for a Maximilien Luce and the *Rue Ravignan-Night* became available and cost some money, but when she saw it she flipped because of the scene with the street lights casting light. I remember talking with her and she said, "Imagine what it took to paint this painting." She put herself in the artist's frame of mind, in the artist's shoes in front of the pallet, in front of the canvas, and thought, how was this done?

SF: *When you met the Becks, the paintings were at their home.*

TL: They were all there. The Derain was at the end of the living room. You saw the Braque and Modigliani as you came in. That is the way students at Rice and the University of Houston experienced the collection. The Becks were very generous about letting people in to study and enjoy the collection. Then the paintings were loaned to the National Gallery in Washington, D. C., and after they came home, we began planning for the installation of some of them at the MFAH. That was the fall of 1973. And that is when John Beck died. It was so staggering.

We were all bewildered. We were all just completely in shock about it. It was during that period that I had to consult with Mrs. Beck a number of times about the signage in the galleries and how were we going to name the collection. And this was just one month after Mr. Beck had died. Well, I need

not have worried for a single minute. She was just as gracious and wonderful as she could be. But John Beck's passing ended her interest in having the collection at home, but did not stop her from buying paintings.

SF: *So from then on, the paintings were bought by Mrs. Beck for display at the museum?*

TL: That's correct. Sisley's *Flood on the Road to Saint-Germain* was one of the first paintings she bought after Mr. Beck died. She admired Sisley's paintings of the floods and did not want one of his landscapes. She lost one to Baron van Thyssen at auction, but within eight months she bought hers. I don't think I've seen another Sisley on the market of that rare and wonderful subject matter since then.

As I learned more about Mrs. Beck's taste and her intellectual interests, I would see things in catalogues and send them over to her with a little note, "What do you think about this?" "Does this interest you?" I'd get a phone call, "Well, of course it interests me! Find out everything you can about it." And, of course, she was very scrupulous. She started with the condition of the painting. She worked through the provenance. She wanted to know where it had been published, if it had been published.

I would go to her home with books from the museum library, and she had her own library. We would lay out all the books, and they were just everywhere, all over the floor. She would say, "Well, it's better than that one. It's better than that one. Look, it's the same year as that one." She began to finalize her ideas that started with more than intuition. She had a visual sense of how things had to be in a painting. Then, she would have time by herself where she worked out the money and decided, "I'm paying X number of dollars and that is it." This was particularly at auction. You know, Mr. and Mrs. Beck were very fond of buying at auction. And, of course, Mr. and Mrs. Beck were so fantastically appealing and attractive, everybody just liked them.

SF: *How long did you work with Mrs. Beck?*

TL: I left MFAH in 1977 and went to the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. However, I remained very close with Mrs. Beck and helped her find and acquire paintings until she passed away in 2003. She never saw the last painting she bought. She just knew Ripple-Ronai's *Interior* from photographs. The Ripple-Ronai is interesting because Bonnard painted a Ripple-Ronai picture in his own painting, *In the Painter's Studio*, which Mr. and Mrs. Beck bought in 1964. When I saw the great Ripple-Ronai, I thought, well, we are coming full-circle. That purchase, along with the Kupka, perhaps suggested a new direction in the collection.

SF: *What can you say about the Beck collection today?*

TL: The collection is an almost artist-by-artist encyclopedia of

what was happening in Impressionist and early modern art. She wanted to show the great individual cornerstones of each movement, like Derain's *The Turning Road* to exemplify Fauvism, Mary Cassatt's *Susan Comforting the Baby* to show the best of American Impressionism or Bonnard and Vuillard to represent the Nabis. She also liked to explore less well-known artists and wanted them represented by their very, very best examples. There are all these great paintings she just responded to immediately. I think of Kirchner's *Moonrise: Soldier and Maiden* or Roualt's *The Three Judges*. The great Jawlensky's *Head of a Woman* is possibly one of the most under appreciated paintings in the collection because of the way it fits in with Fauvism but also represents a whole different trend as African masks and other cultures influenced European art at that time. Some of these artists were unknown to museum goers when she bought them. Albert André would typically not appear on any museum's list, but Mrs. Beck's painting just knocked everybody over when they saw it. There was no hesitation on her part at all when she first noticed it. But she was always cautious about size, especially in works by the lesser-known artists. She didn't want something to be too big because she did not want to send the message to students that a painting was important because it was big.

SF: *What were Mrs. Beck's intentions for the collection?*

TL: She wanted the Beck Collection to be a gift to the citizens of Houston and to those who come to visit the city. She wanted to enrich their lives. She loved seeing young people respond to the collection. She especially enjoyed reading comments from grade-school students and getting letters from dealers or connoisseurs who would write and say they had never seen anything like the quality in a particular painting before.

Mrs. Beck created the collection with as much intelligence as she did with resources. And I think that is where we really owe her a tremendous, tremendous debt. When a painting was the best quality she could financially handle, and it met her criteria of beauty and importance, then she would move. She had personal preferences. We can go back to something like the Renoir, the little portrait of the girl reading that was bought in the 1960s, very, very early on. I remember she would talk about it and say, "You know, there's really nothing I don't like about it." Her Renoir, small as it is, represents a kind of intimacy both of paint, subject matter and color that satisfied everything she needed to know about Renoir. After our conversation, I went back and looked at it and thought, You know, she's right.

The John A. and Audrey Jones Beck Collection can be seen at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in the Audrey Jones Beck Building. Thomas P. Lee, Jr. is a native Houstonian, lives in Houston and continues to pursue his interests in art. 📺

Audrey Jones Beck breaking ground for the Audrey Jones Beck Building at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, with then Houston Endowment chairman Jack S. Blanton, Sr. looking on, 1999.



Childhood friends and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston benefactors, Caroline Weiss Law and Audrey Jones Beck at the opening of the Audrey Jones Beck Building.