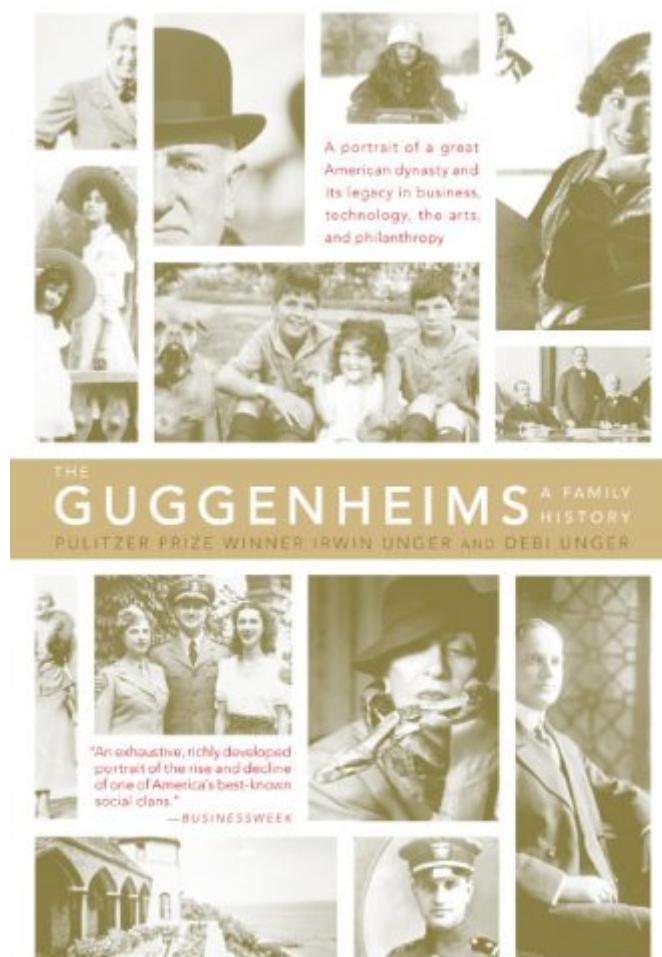


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The Guggenheims: A Family History



Synopsis

A portrait of a great American dynasty and its legacy in business, technology, the arts, and philanthropy. Meyer Guggenheim, a Swiss immigrant, founded a great American business dynasty. At their peak in the early twentieth century, the Guggenheims were reckoned among America's wealthiest, and the richest Jewish family in the world after the Rothschilds. They belonged to Our Crowd, that tight social circle of New York Jewish plutocrats, but unlike the others -- primarily merchants and financiers -- they made their money by extracting and refining copper, silver, lead, tin, and gold. The secret of their success, the patriarch believed, was their unity, and in the early years Meyer's seven sons, under the leadership of Daniel, worked as one to expand their growing mining and smelting empire. Family solidarity eventually decayed (along with their Jewish faith), but even more damaging was the paucity of male heirs as Meyer and the original set of brothers passed from the scene. In the third generation, Harry Guggenheim, Daniel's son, took over leadership and made the family a force in aviation, publishing, and horse-racing. He desperately sought a successor but tragically failed and was forced to watch as the great Guggenheim business enterprise crumbled. Meanwhile, "Guggenheim" came to mean art more than industry. In the mid-twentieth century, led by Meyer's son Solomon and Solomon's niece Peggy, the Guggenheims became the agents of modernism in the visual arts. Peggy, in America during the war years, midwived the school of abstract expressionism, which brought art leadership to New York City. Solomon's museum has been innovative in spreading the riches of Western art around the world. After the generation of Harry and Peggy, the family has continued to produce many accomplished members, such as publisher Roger Straus II and archaeologist Iris Love. In *The Guggenheims*, through meticulous research and absorbing prose, Irwin Unger, the winner of a Pulitzer Prize in history, and his wife, Debi Unger, convey a unique and remarkable story -- epic in its scope -- of one family's amazing rise to prominence.

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Customer Reviews

I can think of several reasons to read this fascinating story of an iconic American dynasty. A reader might want to know why the name Guggenheim is on a number of important art museums around the world and want to know how they got there. Another might know about the glory days of the seven brothers when they ruled copper mining and smelting. Another might know about the flamboyant Peggy Guggenheim and want to get more context for her life. Then there is Harry Guggenheim and his participation in and support of early aviation (he actually participated in air combat in BOTH world wars), his support of Robert Goddard's early rocketry research, and his friendship with Charles Lindbergh. Personally, I am fascinated by multi-generational family stories. How was the success that founded the dynasty achieved? How is the next generation formed to continue that success? Because business changes, the family will have to adapt. Can they continue the success? How do they hold things together or why does it fall apart? Splits within the family are inevitable simply because people will want to establish their own lives apart from somebody else's path. This book has a huge cast of characters because there were so many people coming in and out of this family. There is a great deal of divorce, faithlessness in the marriages that do occur, a shocking amount of suicide, and proof that money, fame, hedonistic sex, and intoxicants do not lead to happiness. This book does tell the story of certain members of the clan more fully. The story of the seven sons of Meyer Guggenheim (who founded the dynasty a \$5,000 dollar investment in a mine in Colorado) is quite fascinating. One of the sons, Ben, went down with the Titanic.

Most family biographies are hard to read and even harder to follow, as the generations begin to amass, narrative thrust seems to take a vacation. So it is with great pleasure that I can report THE

GUGGENHEIMS by Irwin Unger and Debi Unger "good to the last drop." The authors begin with a panoply of anti-Semitism in Europe and make it clear just how limited career prospects were for Jews of the second millennium, when they were forbidden all but the very lousiest jobs, and the jobs most guaranteed to annoy their Christian "brethren" (such as collecting rents and taxes). Unlike the other great Jewish families of "Our Crowd," the Guggenheims made their money primarily from mining, in the faraway and exotic paradise of Chile (mostly in copper, and silver and lead as well). By the turn of the century (1900) they were well on their way towards their legend. The biography has sweep and a certain falling grandeur, but I liked best the authors' marvelous pen portraits of the many younger Guggenheims. I liked finding out that Gladys Guggenheim wrote two cookbooks and was named "nutrition commissioner" of New York by Thomas Dewey in 1934. There's the shocking battle between the sisters Hazel and Peggy, over who could score with the most men sexually--when each got up to a thousand, the numbers started to blur. I bet! And then the terrible story of Hazel's 1928 rooftop tragedy. She had taken her two little toddlers, Ben and Terrence, up to an unlikely section of her apartment's roof garden, and somehow the two tykes tumbled off to their deaths. She was suspected as being some kind of Alice Crimmins-type Medea, but the family turned up a window cleaner nearby who claimed to have witnessed the whole thing and said Hazel was innocent and had indeed tried to save the kids!

initially i thought this was a poorly written book, too conversational, ungrammatical at times, reciting what twigs and leaves on the guggenheim family tree did or are doing in a linear, list-making sort of way. but after a while, the book really grew on me and i became comfortable with the writers' colloquial style and found the book interesting, especially in telling the story of the building of the guggenheim fortune in copper, tin and other metals, and then the story of how, after that business went caput and the fortune with it, certain guggenheims, mainly solomon and peggy, became giants in the world of 20th century modern art, enabling the guggenheim name to live on forever. the first part of this book tells how a german jewish immigrant, isadore guggenheim, and his seven sons built a fortune in copper and tin out west and in south america. the guggenheim's jewishness and way of dealing with it is a fascinating topic that recurs throughout the book, evoking stephen birmingham's "our crowd" and irving howe's "world of our fathers." the guggenheims alternately embraced and denied their judaism, and their struggle with their own identity and the identity that gentile society imposed on them is a running commentary and reflection on the decrease in antisemitism over the decades in this country, as schools or clubs that excluded earlier generations of guggenheims eagerly admitted their descendants to where their jewishness became virtually a non-issue.

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