

Fox, Justin. 'Shouldn't the Guggenheim Be Called the Ehrenwiesen?' *Bloomberg*. (April 14, 2017).



Shouldn't the Guggenheim Be Called the Ehrenwiesen?

A building's name often doesn't reflect the colorful truth in its history.

By [Justin Fox](#)

15 April 14, 2017, 10:00 AM EDT



Seems to be missing something. *Photographer: Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images for HUGO BOSS*

There is an art museum on Fifth Avenue between 88th and 89th streets in New York that owes its existence to a woman named Hildegard Anna Augusta Elisabeth Rebay von Ehrenwiesen -- aka Baroness Hilla von Rebay, aka Hilla Rebay.

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It's not named after her, though! Instead, it's called the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Heard of it?

The museum wasn't *all* Hilla Rebay's doing: Solomon Guggenheim's fortune was also essential in making it possible. Then again, Solomon had a fortune mainly because his father had assembled one, [1](#) yet it's not the Meyer Guggenheim Museum, either.

The ways things get named after people in this world are a source of endless fascination and sometimes puzzlement. Explorer Amerigo Vespucci was not the first European to visit the Americas, although he does seem to have been the first to realize that they represented previously unknown landmasses. Death-penalty opponent Joseph-Ignace Guillotin played no role in developing a beheading device, but he did propose in a speech to the French National Assembly in 1789 that at least lopping people's heads off would be more humane than hanging them or breaking them on a wheel. He was mortified when such contraptions rapidly came into regular use and were referred to as guillotines.

There's a whole academic literature on the often perverse naming of scientific concepts. Sociologist Robert K. Merton proposed the "Matthew effect," which contends that joint discoveries are usually attributed to the scholar who was already more famous. The name comes from the Gospel of Matthew:

For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

Sure enough, while Merton attributed this insight to his fellow sociologist and wife, Harriet Zuckerman, he usually gets the credit. (Historian of science Margaret Rossiter later coined the "Matilda effect" to describe the phenomenon of male scientists getting more credit than female ones for joint discoveries.)

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Finally, statistician Stephen Stigler proposed “Stigler’s law of eponymy,” which holds that *no* scientific discovery is named after its original discoverer. He credited Merton with the idea, of course. As Stigler described it, this practice is inherent in the scientific process, as new concepts are proposed, ignored and then chewed on for a while before becoming widely accepted - - and then often aren’t definitively named for another few generations after that. [2](#)

When it comes to buildings and institutions, the process tends to be less drawn out. These days, they’re usually named for whoever puts up the money to build or restore them. This has the advantage of simplicity, and it also creates an incentive for rich people to donate. But it can get complicated, as with Lincoln Center’s recent decision to wipe the name of original donor Avery Fisher off its concert hall and replace it with the name of a new one, David Geffen. And the practice does push aside sometimes-fascinating creation stories with a dull “he gave the money.”

As is the case with the Guggenheim. I was introduced to Hilla Rebay’s story by the museum’s current exhibition, “Visionaries: Creating a Modern Guggenheim,” which focuses on the six collectors whose former possessions form the core of the Guggenheim’s holdings in New York and Venice, [3](#)Rebay among them.

Rebay was a Prussian army officer’s daughter who was trained as a pianist and painter, took up abstract art in her early 20s, then fell in with the Der Sturm group of avant-garde artists in Berlin, which included Marc Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee -- and fell in love with one of them, Rudolf Bauer. She broke off that romance in the face of parental opposition, although she remained a patron and cheerleader of Bauer’s art, which she thought was superior to the similar but more famous work of Kandinsky. Then, in 1927, she emigrated to the U.S.

One account I read of Rebay’s life made it sound as if her career had hit a dead end in Europe, and she was looking for a new start. In an oral history recorded in 1966, Rebay described it as a decision made on a whim while she was recovering from a ski accident. In any case, she was a hit in

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Roaring Twenties New York -- exhibiting her abstract work to much acclaim while paying the bills by painting portraits of the rich and famous.

They didn't get much richer in those days than Solomon R. Guggenheim. He was in his late 60s, mostly retired from the family mining business and devoted to hunting and golf. His wife, Irene, had tried to get him interested in art, and the couple had been buying Old Masters and Barbizon School landscapes, but his heart wasn't in it.

Irene Guggenheim met Rebay at an art gallery reception and commissioned her to paint her husband. At some point during or after the sittings for the portrait, Solomon got a look at some of Rebay's collection of works by herself, Bauer and other abstract painters, and he was hooked. Any rich guy could collect Old Masters; this was something different and interesting. Before long the Guggenheims and Rebay were making joint art-buying trips to Europe, and Solomon and Rebay were cooking up plans to showcase the burgeoning collection in a Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York.

There were continuing rumors that this wasn't all that the elderly magnate and three-decades-younger artist were cooking up, but there doesn't seem to be any actual evidence of an affair. There is evidence that Irene came to regret bringing the demanding, sometimes difficult Rebay into the family. As Irene and Solomon's grandson Peter Lawson-Johnston recalled in a memoir:

Unsurprisingly, considering the amount of time, energy, and money he lavished on her, the baroness was less well-liked by my mother and grandmother, who referred to her privately as "The B." Even at an early age, I sensed that "B" did not stand for "baroness."

The Museum of Non-Objective Painting opened in a temporary space on East 54th Street in 1939, with Rebay as the director. [4](#) She sought out architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design a permanent

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home. “I explained to him what I wanted, a museum that goes slowly up,” she recalled in 1966. “No staircase, no interruptions.”

A building that met those specifications was finally completed in October 1959. By then Solomon Guggenheim was dead (so was Wright), and Rebay was persona non grata at the museum. In his will, Solomon left Rebay in charge of the project, but three years after he died in 1949, the family-dominated Guggenheim Foundation board gave her the boot -- and, around the same time, determined that the museum would be named after him. Rebay died in 1967 never having set foot in Wright’s building.

Her rehabilitation at the Guggenheim seems to have begun in 1993, when museum director Thomas Krens published a history of the museum that gave her full credit for her role in founding it. In 2005, the Guggenheim hosted a retrospective of her work. It’s not going to be renaming itself the Guggenheim-Rebay anytime soon, though. And it shouldn’t -- “the Guggenheim” is a great name. It’s just not the whole story.

1. *Yes, Solomon and his brothers were smart guys who preserved and increased that fortune. But they would have been exercising their business acumen on a far smaller stage if it hadn’t been for their father’s bold bet on copper mining in the 1880s.*
2. *His prime example was the Gaussian distribution (aka the normal distribution, aka the bell curve), which was first described by Abraham de Moivre in 1733, elaborated upon by Pierre-Simon Laplace beginning in the 1770s, elaborated upon again by Carl Friedrich Gauss in 1809, and only began to be regularly described as the Gaussian distribution in the 20th century.*
3. *There’s also a Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, and one under construction in Abu Dhabi, but their permanent collections consist of newer work.*
4. *There was an exhibition devoted to those early days at the Leila Heller Gallery in New York earlier this year. I missed it.*