

# Week 6 Day 1: Gertrude Stein

ENGL201: Introduction to Modernism



# Gertrude Stein (1874-1946)

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- Jewish American novelist, poet, playwright, and art collector.
- Student of psychologist William James, but highly skeptical of “automatic writing” experiments.
  - Understood her work to come from an “excess of consciousness.”
- Stylistic experimentation at the level of “the sentence”:
  - Often attempted to use visual art techniques like cubism to produce “word portraits” (*Three Lives*);
  - Play with impressionistic descriptions of objects (*Tender Buttons*);
  - Experimentation with gerundive verb tenses (*Making of the Americans*).
- *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933)
- *Tender Buttons* (1912)
- *The Making of Americans* (1925)

“Stein created within the boundaries of the Left Bank community a culturally rich and emotionally rewarding separate existence, but the question remains: was this seclusion born of necessity or choice? Stein simultaneously portrayed herself as a public person, the head of an important salon, and an artist exiled by the Modernist fathers. She was discriminated against, as a woman and as a lesbian. Her ‘enormous ego’ apparently developed in reaction to a community of artists who refused to take her work seriously. Stein did not become bitter; she appeared unscathed by the mockery and maintained a persistent charm that disarmed even her most voluble critics.” (Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, 158)



# Alice B. Toklas (1877-1967)

- Gertrude Stein's life partner.
- Hosted wives of visiting artists while Stein hosted the artists.



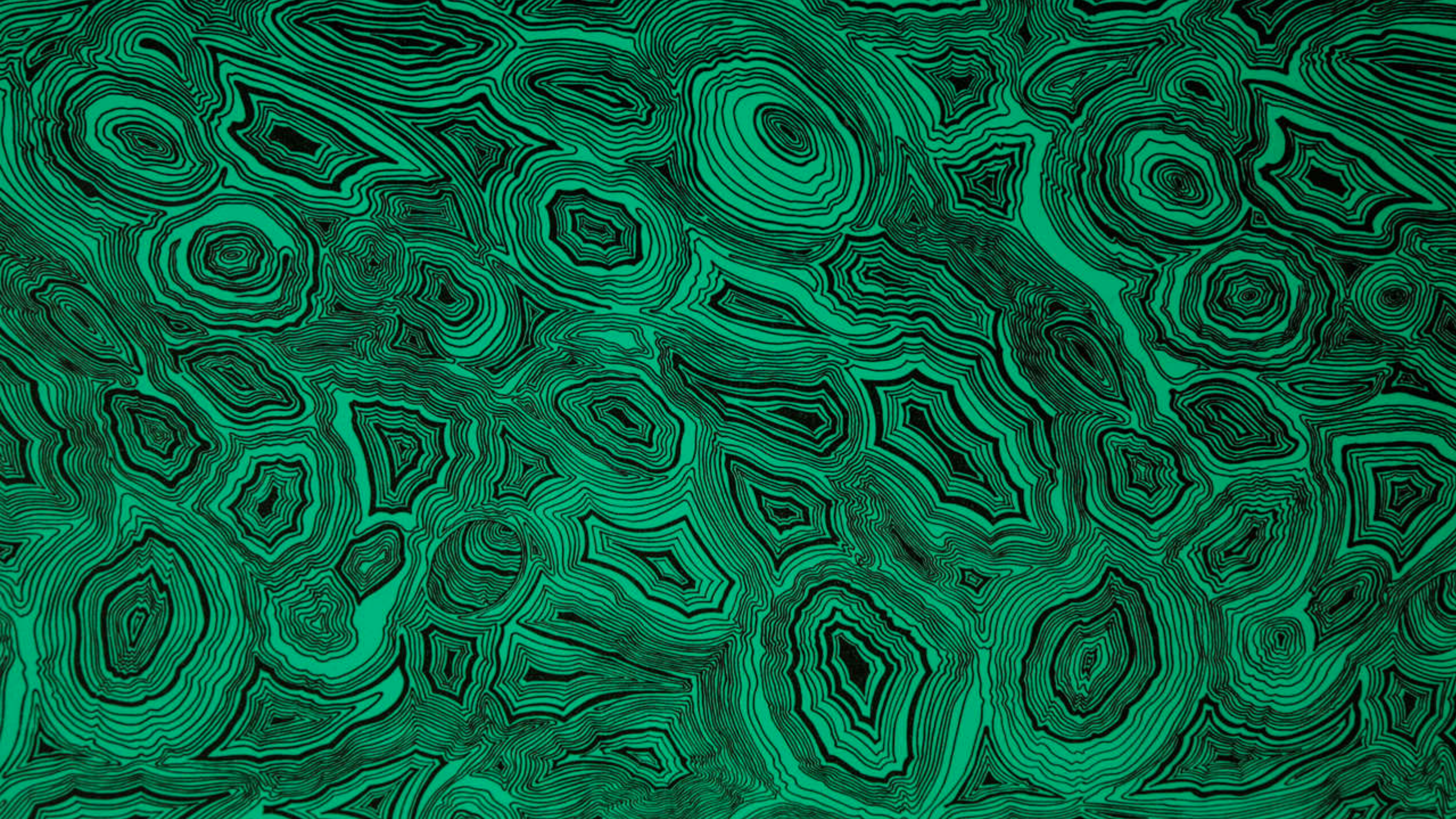


Pablo Picasso  
'Weeping Woman' 1937



Marcel Duchamp  
Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2  
1912









What is Stein's relationship to the erotic?

# Two Arguments

1. Linguistic obscurity made it possible for Stein to write lesbian erotic literature, but to fly under the (legal and social) radar).
2. Linguistic obscurity is *integral* to the modernist experimental expression of lesbian erotics.

“Stein’s position as an alienated, misunderstood writer was due not only to her status as a woman writer in a highly patriarchal environment but also to her status as a *lesbian* writer. Her writing constitutes both the expression of the social (the lesbian writer writing against dominant culture) and the negation of the social (Stein’s language denies the claims of the patriarchy by writing a different language...one that the patriarchy can only read as nonsense). In this reading of Stein’s work, she was not doing something different from Modernism; she was writing lesbian Modernism....the erotic elements of Stein’s writing seem to open the way to more radical investigations of language, serving to liberate her thinking and to guide her writing to another, higher, theoretical stage of development. Sexual expression is intimately linked to linguistic expression.” (Benstock 162-163)