Speaking of Patterns

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

The Lady Friend and I hadn't been anywhere to speak of outside the Bay Area, all winter and spring. Anyway it seemed like a great idea: breaking away and seeing Humboldt County and Eureka again. As the hour drew near, I began having second thoughts. Was it worth the grind, three hundred miles north and three hundred miles south on 101? Everyone I cared about in the '50s and early '60s when I lived up there intermittently has been long gone.

My afterthoughts drove the lady Friend to distraction. "O.K." she said. "Let's cancel the reservation at the Red Lion right now!"

But, of course, we were going. In fact, I make the pilgrimage every year or two. Don't ask why because I don't really know. It's just something I do, a pattern I fall into when the time comes around.

* * *

The time has come around for the "Stein Collection: Matisse, Picasso and the Parisian Avant-garde" at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art. The works were bought by Gertrude Stein, poet, novelist, critic, and brothers Leo and Michael; and Michael's wife Sarah. All were expatriate Americans living in Paris in the early years of the last century when they began acquiring the labor of young artists, both radical and mostly unknown.

It is one thing to see the work of an established painter or sculptor in a museum; it is another to chance money on the unfamiliar. Gertrude Stein, who grew up in Oakland, put it well: "It is very difficult now that everybody is accustomed to everything to give some idea of the uneasiness once felt when one first looked at all these pictures on the walls."

Which reminds me. When I was with the CBS News show, Sunday Morning, I did a piece about a New York collector who, getting on in years, was giving a large part of his art to a state university. When he was a young man he wanted to be a painter, but tiring of life in a Paris garret, he became a successful stock broker instead. He never lost his eye for art, the meritorious as well as the meretricious. Like the Steins, he had the gift to recognize the real

thing most of the time.

The kick was in gambling on the artist' s future. Did young Henri or Paul or Pablo, have staying power? Would their stuff make it to the important collections? Like the Steins, the gambler I knew lost a few but when he won he won big.

More than 300 works by Matisse, Picasso, Paul Cezanne, Pierre-August Renoir, Jaun Gris and other immortals will be on the walls of SFMOMA through Sept. 6.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.