

## ***Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry***

**The Jewish Museum**

**May 5 – September 24, 2017**

### **WALL TEXTS AND LABELS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **FLORINE STETTMEIMER: PAINTING POETRY**

Florine Stettheimer (1871–1944) was the fourth of five children born to a wealthy Jewish couple, Joseph and Rosetta Walter Stettheimer. They were members of the elite, closed society of affluent Jews in New York, an exclusive group that included the Seligmans, Altschuls, Strausses, Morgenthau, Guggenheims, Bernheimers, and Warburgs.

Like many prosperous Americans of the Gilded Age, the Stettheimers were cultured and well-traveled. The father, a banker, deserted the household early on, but thanks to Rosetta's inheritance the family continued to live in comfort and independence. The three younger children, Carrie (Caroline), Florine, and Ettie (Henrietta), remained unmarried and were devoted to their mother and to each other. Before World War I they lived mainly in Europe, but in 1914, when Florine was forty-three, they returned to New York City, settling together in a grand apartment in Manhattan. The three sisters moved in artistic and avant-garde circles and established a notable salon in their home.

From a young age Florine had been drawn to the visual arts, theater, and poetry. She studied painting in Munich, Rome, Paris, and New York. In these cultural capitals she fell in love with Symbolist art and poetry, as well as the latest modernist experiments.

The works in this exhibition are drawn from all periods of the artist's life, from the 1890s to World War II. Stettheimer has sometimes been typecast as a lightweight feminine artist with a whimsical bent. This view is belied by her powerful rethinking of portraiture and her astute adaptation of European vanguard ideas to uniquely American imagery.

In addition to her work as a painter, Stettheimer was active as a costume and set designer and as a poet. In all these endeavors, she invested words, materials, colors, scenes with mystery and symbolic value. For Florine Stettheimer, Art was the cult that facilitated modernist transcendence, from the quotidian to the eternal.

**Stephen Brown**

**Neubauer Family Foundation Associate Curator**

*Family Portrait II, 1933*

Oil on canvas; frame by the artist

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer, 1956

In this iconic painting Stettheimer gathers many of the themes that preoccupied her throughout her career: family, New York City, theater. Here too are some of her most distinctive artistic techniques: the use of strong colors; the mixture of a realistic setting with dramatic, even surrealistic elements; and an ornamental frame that calls attention to the artwork as an object.

Stettheimer, her mother, and her two sisters are at home, framed by theatrical curtains and accompanied by three gigantic flowers—poppy, lily, and rose. In the background are landmarks of New York: the Statue of Liberty, the Art Deco Chrysler Building, and Radio City Music Hall. Inscribed at upper right is the family's address, Alwyn Court on 58th Street. At upper left are the words "4 St.s seen by Florine"—wordplay that refers both to the artist's collaboration on the avant-garde opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* and on the four Stettheimers as "saints" of New York.

*Self-Portrait with Paradise Birds, undated*

Oil on canvas

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

Stettheimer presents herself in an artist's smock. Pose and palette assert her vocation as a painter, echoing a long tradition in self-portraiture. This presentation of the self is a highly aestheticized one, emphasized by the Orientalizing decor of the screen behind her.

## **THE AVANT-GARDE AT HOME**

The Stettheimer fortune came from banking. The family was associated with many prominent houses in the German Jewish American community. The elder sister, Carrie, managed the family's affairs, leaving Florine and her younger sister, Ettie, free to pursue their interests: the visual arts for Florine, philosophy and literature for Ettie, who wrote under the nom de plume Henrie Waste.

The turn of the century was a period of cultural enrichment for this cosmopolitan young woman determined on the career of painter. Throughout the Belle Époque, Stettheimer traveled back and forth across the Atlantic. In Munich she came under the influence of the Symbolists, Jugendstil (Viennese Art Nouveau), and the vogue for Orientalism. Vienna offered firsthand acquaintance with the work of Gustav Klimt. In 1912 Stettheimer was living in Paris and sojourned in Spain, where she was enchanted by the work of Titian and Diego Velázquez. To this eclectic swirl of influences were later added the more radical ideas of the Dadaists and Surrealists. Stettheimer may be seen, in some sense, as the last of the Symbolists, filtering their European sensibilities through her own American perspective.

MY ATTITUDE IS ONE OF LOVE

is all adoration  
for all the fringes  
all the color  
all tinsel creation  
I like slippers gold  
I like oysters cold  
and my garden of mixed flowers  
and the sky full of towers  
and traffic in the streets  
and Maillard's sweets  
and Bendel's clothes  
and Nat Lewis hose  
and Tappé's window arrays  
and crystal fixtures  
and my pictures  
and Walt Disney cartoons  
and colored balloons

Marcel Duchamp

*Portrait of Florine Stettheimer, 1925*

Pencil on paper

Private collection, courtesy of Timothy Baum, New York

Duchamp was an intimate friend of the Stettheimer sisters, to whom he taught French and with whom he flirted.

*Portrait of André Brook, Front Facade, 1915*

Oil on canvas

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

André Brook was the name of the house in Tarrytown, New York, where the Stettheimers spent several summers.

*Portrait of André Brook, Back View, 1915*

Oil on canvas

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

*Nude Study, undated*

Charcoal on paper

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of Joseph Solomon, 1972

*Head of a Girl*, 1887–88

Pencil on paper, mounted on paper

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

Stettheimer began her art studies as a teenager in Germany, where she took drawing lessons at a private girls' school. Her pencil drawings and early painted studies are remarkable for their discipline and skill. An inscription on the mount reads "F. 16 years old."

Page from Florine Stettheimer's diary, 1912

Exhibition print

Florine and Ettie Stettheimer Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven

The Stettheimer sisters went to Europe aboard the luxurious liner USS *America* in 1912. On April 17, during the crossing, Florine noted, "So far we have had a marvelous crossing—the ocean has never been so calm before with us floating on her. . . . Jesse Straus, Irma and Beatrice are on board. The *Titanic* is supposed to have struck an iceberg—they are anxious." They had reason to be: Jesse's parents were on the *Titanic*, which had sunk three days earlier.

Florine Stettheimer, c. 1917–20

Photograph by Peter A. Juley & Son

Florine Stettheimer Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York

"New York," manuscript, undated

Exhibition print

Florine and Ettie Stettheimer Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven

Twelve hand-painted fortune-telling cards from a set of twenty-five, c. 1885

Watercolor on card

Florine Stettheimer Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York

Florine was fourteen when she painted these cards, probably for a family pastime. The figures include a mixture of traditional Tarot images (Time, Death) and some that suggest the artist's own future: a young woman and an artist's palette. Fortune-telling cards enjoyed a vogue throughout the nineteenth century.

*The Stettheimer Doll's House*, presented to the Museum of the City of New York, 1947

With a foreword by Ettie Stettheimer and a text by Janet Pinney

Collection of the Museum of the City of New York, Institutional Archives

The remarkable dollhouse made by Carrie Stettheimer over twenty years, from 1915 to 1935, came to the Museum of the City of New York after her death in 1947. The rooms display tiny original paintings by artists who were friends of the Stettheimer

sisters, including Marcel Duchamp (who contributed a miniature *Nude Descending a Staircase*), Alexander Archipenko, George Bellows, Gaston Lachaise, and Marguerite Zorach.

*The Crystal Flowers of Florine Stettheimer, 1949*

Foreword by Ettie Stettheimer

Frick Art Reference Library, The Frick Collection, New York, Gift of Lenore Weseley  
The Jewish Museum, New York

Stettheimer's poems share the Dada sensibility of her paintings and interior designs, but were known only to a few friends during her life. Curious, funny, celebratory, always acute, the poetry comments on a range of topics—likes and dislikes, nature, food, people, moods—casting unexpected light on the artist and her milieu.

Ettie Stettheimer, 1918

Frontispiece for *Memorial Volume of and by Ettie Stettheimer, 1951*

Photograph by Arnold Genthe

Mr. and Mrs. Rodolph Valentino from *Vanity Fair, 1923*

Photograph by Edward Steichen

Florine Stettheimer Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University  
in the City of New York

*Love Days, 1923*

Novel published by Ettie Stettheimer under her pseudonym, Henrie Waste

Many novels of the 1920s are thinly disguised romans à clef, offering a rich evocation of the period and identifiable portraits of real people. In *Love Days* the character Pierre Delaire ("stone of the air") is modeled on Marcel Duchamp.

*Portrait of My Teacher, Fräulein Sophie von Prieser, 1929*

Oil on canvas

Portland Art Museum, Oregon, Gift of the Ettie Stettheimer Estate

*Portrait of My Mother, 1925*

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Barbara S. Adler Bequest, 1971

*Portrait of My Aunt, Caroline Walter Neustadter, 1928*

Oil on canvas

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Portrait of My Sister Carrie W. Stettheimer in a White Dress*, undated

Oil on canvas

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

Florine's portrait of Carrie is an ambitious tribute to domestic piety, and may be seen as a response to the formal portrait genre exemplified by the celebrated American painters William Merritt Chase and John Singer Sargent.

*Family Portrait I*, 1915

Oil on canvas; frame by the artist

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

In Stettheimer's frequent group portraits, her family and friends are not only clearly identifiable, but represented in attitudes that express their inner selves—an idea with roots in Symbolist painting of the late nineteenth century. Here she shares an elegant afternoon outdoors with her sisters and mother. Ettie, at left with a Japanese parasol, is turned away, conversing with Carrie, who gazes at the viewer. Florine, too, looks outward, presiding over a rich bouquet of flowers and a dish of fruit that pays homage to the apples of Paul Cézanne. Their mother, Rosetta, in proper Victorian black, is reading a novel by Ettie, the family intellectual. Thick brushwork, deep jewel-tone colors, shallow perspective, and a wealth of surface pattern all suggest Stettheimer's familiarity with Post-Impressionist painters such as Pierre Bonnard and Paul Gauguin, infused with her own brand of social perceptiveness.

## **ORPHEUS IN PARIS**

In summer 1912 Stettheimer attended a performance in Paris of Claude Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*, danced by the Ballets Russes. She was inspired by this experience to create her own ballet, entitled *Orphée of the Quat-z-Arts (Or, Revellers of the Four Arts Ball)*. Over the next few years, in some forty-two sketches, nine relief maquettes, and four sculptures, she martialed her imaginative talents to create a play within a play on the theme of revelry and the transience of pleasure.

The plot concerns an annual costume parade of Parisian students called the Bal des Quat'z'Arts—an event noted for its artistic audacities. One summer evening, Georgette is visiting the Champs-Élysées with her father. Night and the student procession overtake their carriage and they are separated. In the bacchanalia that ensues, Georgette dances with Orpheus, the musician and prophetic poet of Greek myth, but the action is interrupted by Mars, the Roman god of war.

Stettheimer hoped to have her work performed by the Ballets Russes in New York in 1916, with Vaslav Nijinsky in the title role. Although it was never produced, the project liberated her sense of the power of exquisite fantasy. This selection from Stettheimer's fifty-five costume designs conveys her mastery of design, from sketch to work in the round.

All works related to *Orphée of the Quat-z-Arts* are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

*Georgette Dupetit*

Pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Apache Girl*

Watercolor and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Orpheus Leading the Procession with Eurydice*

Gouache, metallic paint, watercolor, and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Europa and the Bull*

Gouache, watercolor, metallic paint, and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Eurydice and the Snake*

Gouache, metallic paint, watercolor, and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Mars on Horseback (Adolph Bolm)*

Gouache and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Georgette in an Evening Gown*

Gouache, watercolor, and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Georgette Dancing*

Pencil, watercolor, and metallic paint on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Night and Diana*

Gouache, metallic paint, and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Eurydice, the Apaches, and Saint Francis of Assisi*

Gouache, watercolor, metallic paint, and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Orpheus (Nijinsky)*

Gouache and metallic paint on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Mars (Adolph Bolm)*

Gouache and pencil on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Georgette in an Evening Gown*

Oil, fabric, fur, yarn, and hair on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Procession: Zizim of Persia, Agnes of Bourgneuf, the Unicorn, and Pierre d'Aubusson*

Oil, fabric, and beads on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Androcles and the Lion*

Oil, yarn, fabric, and lace on wood

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Georgette Dancing*

Gouache and lace on paper on wood

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Eurydice and the Snake*

Oil, beads, and metal lace on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Wave Drawing Aphrodite on a Dolphin-Sea Lion*

Oil, lace, beads, and silver foil sewed and pinned to canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Mars, Mounted on a White Horse*

Modeling putty and pigmented, shellac-based paint on wire armature with brass sheet

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Wave*

Modeling putty and pigmented, shellac-based paint on wire armature with fabric, beads, and wood

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

### *Faun*

Modeling putty and pigmented, shellac-based paint on wire armature with brass sheet

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

### *Head of Medusa (Head of Ettie Stettheimer as Medusa), 1908 (1909?)*

Oil on canvas

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

### *Heat, 1919*

Oil on canvas

Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1957

The immediate subject of this painting is a celebration of the seventy-sixth birthday of the artist's mother. But the title, *Heat*, and the stylized poses of the four sisters suggest another set of concerns. The picture is conceived in vertical registers reminiscent of Japanese prints, each assigned a different, increasingly sizzling color. Rosetta Stettheimer sits bolt upright and alert at top; the middle two daughters are relaxed; the two at bottom are supine, in a state of heat collapse or color delirium.

Synesthesia, the confusion of one sense for another, fascinated the Symbolists and is a recurring idea in Stettheimer. Here heat and color merge; in later works color represents music or the emotions.

### *Self-Portrait with Palette (Painter and Faun), undated*

Oil on canvas

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

## **MANHATTAN VANGUARD**

Stettheimer returned from Paris to New York as World War I began, in late 1914. The move was a turning point. She was in her mid-forties and her art was ripe for transformation.

She had her New York art debut with a 1916 solo show at the prestigious Knoedler Gallery, but it proved disappointing, attracting neither press nor sales. The following year she exhibited in a more congenial venue, the newly formed Society of Independent Artists, founded by a group of avant-garde artists and gallerists that included her friend Marcel Duchamp. Already notorious for bringing Cubism to America three years earlier, Duchamp shocked aesthetes and intrigued Stettheimer in 1917 with his scandalous "readymade" sculpture *Fountain*, an upside-down urinal. Her own work, while not as overtly radical as his, shared a wry wit blended with biting satire.

The Stettheimer sisters developed a stratagem for unveiling new work, characteristic of the period: parties. Throughout the Jazz Age, their salon attracted a wide range of cultural personalities. Habitues performed the role of audience and

critic, on occasion making a cameo appearance as subject matter in Stettheimer's sophisticated pictorial satires. Full-length, with inscriptions and identifying attributes, and with a dainty sinuousness that conveys a whimsical sense of the personality, Stettheimer's portraits of the 1920s reveal the artist's astonishing powers of social insight.

#### OUR PARTIES

Our Picnics

Our Banquets

Our Friends

Have at last a *raison d'être*

Seen in color and design

It amuses me

To recreate them

To paint them.

The private sphere was fundamental in Stettheimer's art. In 1926 she and her siblings and mother moved into an ornate fourteen-room apartment in Alwyn Court on West 58th Street in Manhattan. The family decorated their home in the flamboyant, idiosyncratic style visible in this photograph.

The elaborate wall moldings and decorations of this room are the source for the incised motif seen in this gallery.

Florine Stettheimer's bedroom at Alwyn Court, with her self-portrait visible at left, after 1926, photograph by Peter A. Juley & Son. Peter A. Juley and Son Collection, Photograph Archives, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC

#### *Picnic at Bedford Hills, 1918*

Oil on canvas

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Gift of Ettie Stettheimer

By 1918 Stettheimer had articulated her unique style. Here figures are painted in a miniaturized, self-consciously naive manner that draws from folk art and Art Deco fashion illustration. The color palette, in contrast, is the sophisticated, vivid one used by Pierre Bonnard and Vincent van Gogh—with tree trunks in red and purple and a summer lawn in blazing yellow. Carrie Stettheimer and the red-headed painter Marcel Duchamp are setting out lobster, cake, and tea on a flowered cloth. Florine sits under a white parasol while the sculptor Elie Nadelman sprawls near Ettie. The name of each sister is inscribed for identification on her parasol. The indolence of summer for these prosperous aesthetes is underscored by the yeomen laboring in the fields of the background, rendered in quick dashes of color that owe something to Henri Matisse and Georges Seurat.

*Fete on the Lake*, undated

Oil on cardboard, mounted on board

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

*Portrait of My Sister, Ettie Stettheimer*, 1923

Oil on canvas, mounted on hardboard

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

*Portrait of My Sister, Carrie W. Stettheimer*, 1923

Oil on canvas, mounted on hardboard

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

Stettheimer presents her elder sister framed by theatrical curtains, dressed to the nines, and posing near her doll house. Against a background filled with picturesque pastoral incident, her family and friends take lunch in the open air.

*Portrait of Myself*, 1923

Oil on canvas laid on board

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

Stettheimer's portraits of herself and her sisters (seen nearby) display striking developments in style. The faux-naive manner has become more pronounced, with all suggestion of real, three-dimensional space eliminated. Here the background is pale and formless, so that the figure on her red-draped chaise longue floats in the ether, as if on a magic carpet. Hovering above her is her name in script, together with an emblematic sun and wispy mayfly. The floral bouquet is less an object than an extension of the artist's own body. This is an aesthetic metamorphosis, in which Art becomes a transcendent form of spiritual communication.

*A Model (Nude Self-Portrait)*, 1915

Oil on canvas

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

An artist's self-portrait in the nude may not be especially startling today, but was an innovation in the early twentieth century. The frontal pose, with bent elbow, bouquet of flowers, and curtain backdrop, is a direct citation of both Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, a provocative reworking of it. Stettheimer thus places herself—as both artist and subject—in the great tradition of western art history, while also questioning it.

*Portrait of Marcel Duchamp, c. 1923–26*

Oil on canvas

Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts, Gift of the Estate of Ettie and Florine Stettheimer

Duchamp appears in several works by Stettheimer. Here his disembodied head floats on a blank field like an ethereal apparition. The artist is probably citing a Symbolist painting by Gabriel von Max of the Veil of Veronica, which she no doubt knew from her time in Munich. She thus renders her cerebral, pioneering friend as the blasphemous savior of modern art.

Hearth screen, undated

Oil, gold paint, and beads on canvas, mounted on panel and set onto carved wood and metal base

Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967

*Portrait of Henry McBride, 1922*

Oil on canvas; frame by the artist

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, Gift of Ettie Stettheimer, the artist's sister

The art critic Henry McBride, a fervent supporter of modern art, is depicted as the umpire of a tennis match—a metaphor for his role as an influential arbiter of taste. In the background are references to the American artists whose work he promoted: Stettheimer, Gaston Lachaise, Charles Demuth, John Marin, and Winslow Homer. "When it came to portraits of 'outsiders,'" the critic later reflected, "the joke was more important than the resemblance."

*Portrait of Louis Bouché, 1923*

Oil on canvas

The Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, New York, Gift of the Baker / Pisano Collection

*Portrait of Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy, 1923*

Oil on canvas; frame by the artist

Private collection

The French Dada artist Marcel Duchamp was a member of the Stettheimers' inner circle. He is depicted here in the company of Rose Sélavy, the female alter ego he invented around 1920. He casually carries out his game of sexual transformation by means of a contraption operated from an armchair. The clock and the chess rook are both Duchampian symbols: the one a reference to the circularity of Dada time; the other an allusion to Duchamp's prowess in chess. The frame, composed of Duchamp's monogram in a circle of infinite repetition, wryly comments on his program of artistic self-promotion and his obsession with identity and its ambiguities.

## DUCHE

A silver-tin thin spiral  
Revolving from cool twilight  
To as far as pink dawn  
A steely negation of lightning  
That strikes  
A solid lamb-wool mountain  
Reared into the hot night  
And ended the spinning spiral's  
Love flight—

### *Portrait of Louis Bernheimer, 1923*

Oil on canvas; frame by the artist  
The Robert Hull Fleming Museum of Art, University of Vermont, Burlington, Gift of  
the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer

### *Portrait of Baron de Meyer, 1923*

Oil on canvas  
The Baltimore Museum of Art, Gift of Ettie Stettheimer

## **AMERICA, A SATIRE**

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Stettheimer elaborated the key elements of her style: the depiction of character and likeness, reference to identifiable places and historical details, the use of quirky and richly symbolic combinations of words, colors, and textures. She drew her subject matter from immediate observation and experience, with a broad interest in the interpretation of contemporary life. Her vision was uniquely and inventively American, with particular attention to the metropolis of New York City.

Stettheimer's art is often seen as an anomaly within the vanguard modernism of New York between the wars. It does not make any overt reference to the cutting-edge movements of the time: Cubism, Expressionism, and abstraction. But for all its singularity, it is highly attuned to cultural trends. Her vision recalls the traditions of genre and history painting—scenes of daily life and grand events—but infused with an entirely modern sense of satire. Through her art and her joy in life, the world was revealed and transfigured in a manner that revealed in its surface froth and its symbolic profundity.

## THEN BACK TO NEW YORK

And skytowers had begun to grow  
And front stoop houses started to go  
And life became quite different  
And it was as tho' someone had planted seeds  
And people sprouted like common weeds  
And seemed unaware of accepted things

And did all sorts of unheard of things  
And out of it grew an amusing thing  
Which I think is America having its fling  
And what I should like is to paint this thing.

In addition to her family's luxurious apartment, Stettheimer had a grand studio on West 40th Street, in the Beaux-Arts Building, overlooking Bryant Park. She had legendary parties in both home and atelier, bringing together luminaries of theater and art and scions of New York's well-to-do.

Stettheimer's studio hardly resembles the typical artist's workspace. Like her home, it is filled with ornate detail. This photograph is the source for the incised motif seen in this gallery.

Florine Stettheimer's studio at the Beaux-Arts Building, New York, 1944, photograph by Peter A. Juley & Son. Peter A. Juley and Son Collection, Photograph Archives, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC

*New York / Liberty, 1918–19*

Oil on canvas; frame by the artist

Private collection

Stettheimer celebrates the end of World War I with a canvas that tumbles together a variety of artistic practices and methods: the topographical view, the emblem, the carved relief, gilding, typography, and appropriation. Together these produce one of her more directly Dada works. Lower Manhattan has been compressed so that Federal Hall is next to City Hall; Grant's Tomb has moved south from 125th Street; the Metropolitan Life and New York Life Insurance buildings have relocated from 23rd Street; and the Statue of Liberty has pivoted to accost the viewer with her torch. Despite its whimsy, the painting manages to joyously exalt its subject.

*Fourth of July, Number 1, 1927*

Oil on canvas

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer

*Lake Placid, 1919*

Oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

*Birthday Bouquet, 1932*

Oil on canvas

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, Gift of Mrs. R. Kirk Askew Jr. in memory of R. Kirk Askew Jr.

*Asbury Park South, 1920*

Oil on canvas

Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York

The spectacle of a summer beach resort in New Jersey is captured by a master satirist. Brilliant yellow tones and lively movement across the canvas produce a sense of unrestrained joie de vivre. Circulating with the well-dressed sun worshipers are members of the artist's circle—Duchamp, the writers Avery Hopwood and Carl Van Vechten, and the actress Fania Marinoff. Just to the right of center, stands the artist-observer herself, under a green parasol. At first scarcely noticeable amid all this cheerful incident is that fact that black and white holiday makers are intermingling. In reality Asbury Park was a segregated beach.

#### ASBURY PARK

It swings  
it rings  
it's full of noisy things  
It's stretched  
along the water  
on a boardwalk  
Hurray  
We are gay  
is what the crowds say  
lying stretched on land  
along the water's sand

#### *Christmas, 1930–40*

Oil on canvas

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer

The Central Park skating rink in winter: in this curious composition, a cast of characters glides around a majestic golden Christmas tree, under an oddly fierce and summery sun. These include people in animal and fairy costumes and surreal sleds in the form of a swan, a shoe, and a pink chicken. This scene is flanked by two of Central Park's many nearby sculptures: snow-bedecked statues of the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt and William Shakespeare, respective patrons of German and English roots in modern American culture.

In the foreground at left Ettie Stettheimer places a rose at the plinth of the great explorer and scholar. In the background rises the statue of Christopher Columbus and beyond it the cityscape of Manhattan, dominated by cinemas, advertisements, and banks.

There was a vogue for such costumed winter skating parties, but the artist has turned the event into a tableau or allegory of American life and culture.

#### *Spring Sale at Bendel's, 1921*

Oil on canvas

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Miss Ettie Stettheimer

The Stettheimers were clients of the upscale fashion house established by Henri Bendel, renowned for its sophistication and commitment to the latest trend in

feminine elegance. Even so, the frenzy of the shoppers in Stettheimer's painting suggests an explosion of consumerist lust—an orgy of ritual madness inspired by wild devotion to the power of beauty and style.

*Beauty Contest: To the Memory of P. T. Barnum, 1924*

Oil on canvas; frame by the artist

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Gift of Ettie Stettheimer

The battle for beauty is again rehearsed as a spectacle, with a wickedly humorous homage to P. T. Barnum, philosopher of flimflam and a founder of the American circus. Here the assembled contestants from towns along the Jersey Shore (Atlantic City, Monmouth Beach, Spring Lake, Deal) defer to the winner: Miss Asbury Park, who strikes the pose of a flapper Botticelli Venus. As usual, many of the guests are friends, including the photographer Edward Steichen, shown with his camera behind the artist at upper left.

[NO PHOTOGRAPHY]

### **SACRED AND PROFANE**

Some twenty years after the designs for her ballet, *Orphée of the Quat-z-Arts*, Stettheimer renewed her interest in theater. In 1929 she was invited by the avant-garde composer Virgil Thomson to create the sets and costumes for his groundbreaking opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. The libretto was by the poet Gertrude Stein, and the passages of dance were choreographed by Frederick Ashton.

Stein evoked the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila in a stream-of-consciousness text that was rhythmic and unexpected, bizarre and profound, and not without comedy—traits also seen in Stettheimer's poems. This was paired with a core that matched Parisian urbanity with nostalgic Americana. High art and mass culture were joined—not least in Stettheimer's use of unusual materials—cellophane, vaudevillian feathers and sequins, and coral. The production was staged on Broadway rather than in an opera house, with an African American cast. Unconventional in every way, it created a sensation—gilded by the sublime contradiction of a Broadway success for Dada poetry and art.

### **ART IS SPELLED WITH A CAPITAL A**

And capital also backs it

Ignorance also makes it sway

The chief thing is to make it pay

In a quite dizzy way

Hurrah—hurrah

*Music, c. 1920*

Oil on canvas

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Gift of Mr. Joseph Solomon, New York

Edward Matthews as Saint Ignatius, Bruce Howard as Saint Theresa II in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1933

Photographs by Lee Miller

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Gift of the Virgil Thomson Estate  
[NO PHOTOGRAPHY]

Embry Bonner as Saint Chavez, Eva Jessye, chorus mistress in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1933

Photographs by Lee Miller

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Gift of the Virgil Thomson Estate

### **COSTUMES AND SETS FOR *FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS***

Toile, wire, coral, crepe paper, thread, feathers, and metal

Florine Stettheimer Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York

Rather than drawing sketches, Stettheimer conceived the costume and set designs for *Four Saints in Three Acts* in three dimensions, using handmade figurines and miniature stages. The maquettes are made with an eclectic mixture of paper, cloth, feathers, and beads. This exuberant bricolage, in which a work is assembled from a diverse assortment of available materials, is typical of the artist's idiosyncratic Dada sensibility. So too is the creation of miniature figures dwelling in miniature worlds.

Despite its title, *Four Saints in Three Acts* has thirty-three saints and four acts. The main characters are Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the mystic Saint Theresa of Ávila, but invented characters abound, including Saint Plan, Saint Settlement, and Saint Plot. The story is guided by a Mistress and Master of Ceremonies, called the Commère and Compère, or godparents.

Tree

Design for a stage prop for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Canopy for saint

Design for a stage prop for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Portal of the Cathedral of Ávila

Design for a stage prop for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Tree

Design for a stage prop for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Tree

Design for a stage prop for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Lion

Costume design for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Saint

Costume design for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Commère

Costume design for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Saint in a white dress

Costume design for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Compère

Costume design for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Dancer in a turban

Costume design for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Spanish Dancer

Costume design for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

Dancer

Costume design for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1929–33

#### **FOUR SAINTS IN PERFORMANCE**

Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* premiered on February 7, 1934, at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, under the auspices of a group called the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music. Two weeks later, on February 20, it opened in New York City.

Although rarely performed, the opera is recognized as a cultural milestone in American performing arts, offering radical experiments in form, narrative, musical style, and visual presence. There is little plot, but the action concerns imaginary incidents from the lives of a group of thirty-three real and invented Christian saints in sixteenth-century Spain. The protagonists are Saints Ignatius of Loyola and Theresa of Ávila, whose role is split between two performers, Theresa I and II. Choral music with roots in the African American church is a key component.

Stettheimer's aesthetics meshed seamlessly with the vision of Thomson and Stein. She drew on all her creative energies—visionary wit, her painter's eye for the drama of light and color, and the novel use of cellophane (a material invented in 1912) for the scenery.

Edward Matthews as Saint Ignatius in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, March 9, 1934

Photograph by Carl Van Vechten

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library

Beatrice Robinson Wayne as Saint Theresa I in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, March 9, 1934

Photograph by Carl Van Vechten

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library

Altonell Hines as the Commère in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, March 9, 1934

Photograph by Carl Van Vechten

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library

*Four Saints in Three Acts*, scene from Act I, the Cathedral of Ávila, 1934

Performance photograph by White Studio, New York

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Gift of the Virgil Thomson Estate

*Four Saints in Three Acts*, Act II, "Might it be mountains if it were not Barcelona"; Scene XI, The Celestial Mansion, "How many windows and doors and floors are there in it," 1934

Performance photograph by White Studio, New York

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Gift of the Virgil Thomson Estate

*Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1934

Souvenir book, Nathan Zatkan, editor; Henry-Russell Hitchcock, art director

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford

Gertrude Stein's name in electric lights over the 44th Street Theatre, New York, March 1, 1934

Photograph by Carl Van Vechten

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library

Windows at Gimbel Brothers department store, New York, shortly after the production of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, April 19, 1934

Photograph by Carl Van Vechten

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library

*Portrait of Florine Stettheimer*, 1941

Musical score by Virgil Thomson

Florine Stettheimer Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York

*Four Saints in Three Acts*, Act I, "Ávila: Saint Theresa half indoors and half out of doors," March 10, 1934

Performance photograph by White Studio, New York  
Florine and Ettie Stettheimer Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature,  
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven

*Four Saints in Three Acts*, Act III, "Barcelona: Saint Ignatius and One of Two literally";  
Scene IX, "Saints' Procession," March 10, 1934

Performance photograph by White Studio, New York  
Florine and Ettie Stettheimer Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature,  
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven

*Four Saints in Three Acts* footage, 1934

16mm silent film

Running time: 4 minutes

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Although *Four Saints in Three Acts* was a landmark in American theater, there is no complete recording of the original staging. This home movie, made by Julien Levy at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1934, shows short clips of several scenes: the Prologue ("Prepare for saints") and the famous aria "Pigeons on the grass alas."

The critic Carl Van Vechten wrote enthusiastically to Gertrude Stein, "Florine's costumes and sets . . . imagine a sky-blue cellophane background, set in white lace borders, like a valentine against which were placed the rich and royal costumes of the saints in red velvet."

*Flower Bouquet No. 3*, c. 1922

Gouache and watercolor on paper with metallic fringe; frame by the artist  
Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York

OCCASIONALLY

A human being

Saw my light

Rushed in

Got singed

Got scared

Rushed out

Called fire

Or it happened

That he tried

To subdue it

Or it happened

He tried to extinguish it

Never did a friend

Enjoy it

The way it was  
So I learned to  
Turn it low  
Turn it out  
When I meet a stranger—  
Out of courtesy  
I turn on a soft  
Pink light  
Which is found modest  
Even charming  
It is a protection  
Against wear  
And tears  
And when  
I am rid of  
The Always-to-be-Stranger  
I turn on my light  
And become myself

*Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry* is organized by the Jewish Museum, New York, and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

#### **DONORS TO THE EXHIBITION**

The exhibition is made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for American Art, the Weissman Family, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Estate of Stella Gordon Meierfeld.

Additional support is provided by The Skirball Fund for American Jewish Life Exhibitions, the Neubauer Family Foundation, the Joan Rosenbaum Exhibition Fund, and Ealan and Melinda Wingate.

Frame restoration is made possible, in part, by Eli Wilner & Company.

#FlorineStettheimer

Exhibition design: Galia Solomonoff, Alejandro Stein | Solomonoff Architecture Studio

Graphic design: Miko McGinty, Rita Jules | Miko McGinty Inc.

Lighting: Clint Ross Coller

Blanksteen Curatorial Fellows: Molly Channon, Alana Thyng  
Interns: Tobah Aukland, Da Hyung Jeong, Elizabeth Kandel, Michael Neumeister, Amanda Weiss, Pia Wong, Aurélie Bernard Wortsman

The companion volume to the exhibition is on sale in the Cooper Shop.