

Florine Stettheimer

Henry McBride

Author

McBride, Henry, 1867-1962

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primary documents, installation views, and an
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florine Stettheimer

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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FLORINE STETTMEIER

By Henry McBride

The art of Florine Stettmeier is of peculiar and varied interest. With a directness and simplicity which suggest the primitive, she developed a formal and decorative talent of absolute originality.

In general her art is biographical, narrating the important role which she and her mother and sisters played in the modern art movement in New York. Her fantastic compositions are like illustrations for a twentieth-century fairy tale and include many fond and sardonic likenesses of painters, sculptors, photographers, writers, museum directors, actors and dancers, as well as a few Lotharios and Egerias.

During her lifetime, the greater part of her work was known only to her friends. Uncompromising in her instinctive mode, proud but unambitious, happily self-enchanted and self-effacing, she had not cared to have an exhibition since 1916, although single pictures were occasionally shown at The Museum of Modern Art and elsewhere. She died in 1944.

Marcel Duchamp directed the exhibition which this book records and Henry McBride, the dean of American art critics, has written the accompanying text. Both men were life-long friends and constant admirers of the artist.

Mr. McBride, in his deft and profoundly wise biographical essay, considers all aspects of Miss Stettmeier's work: its social background, the puckish humor of the genre pictures, the formal portraits, the ravishing elegance of the flower pieces, and her famous stage settings and costumes for Gertrude Stein's opera "Four Saints in Three Acts."

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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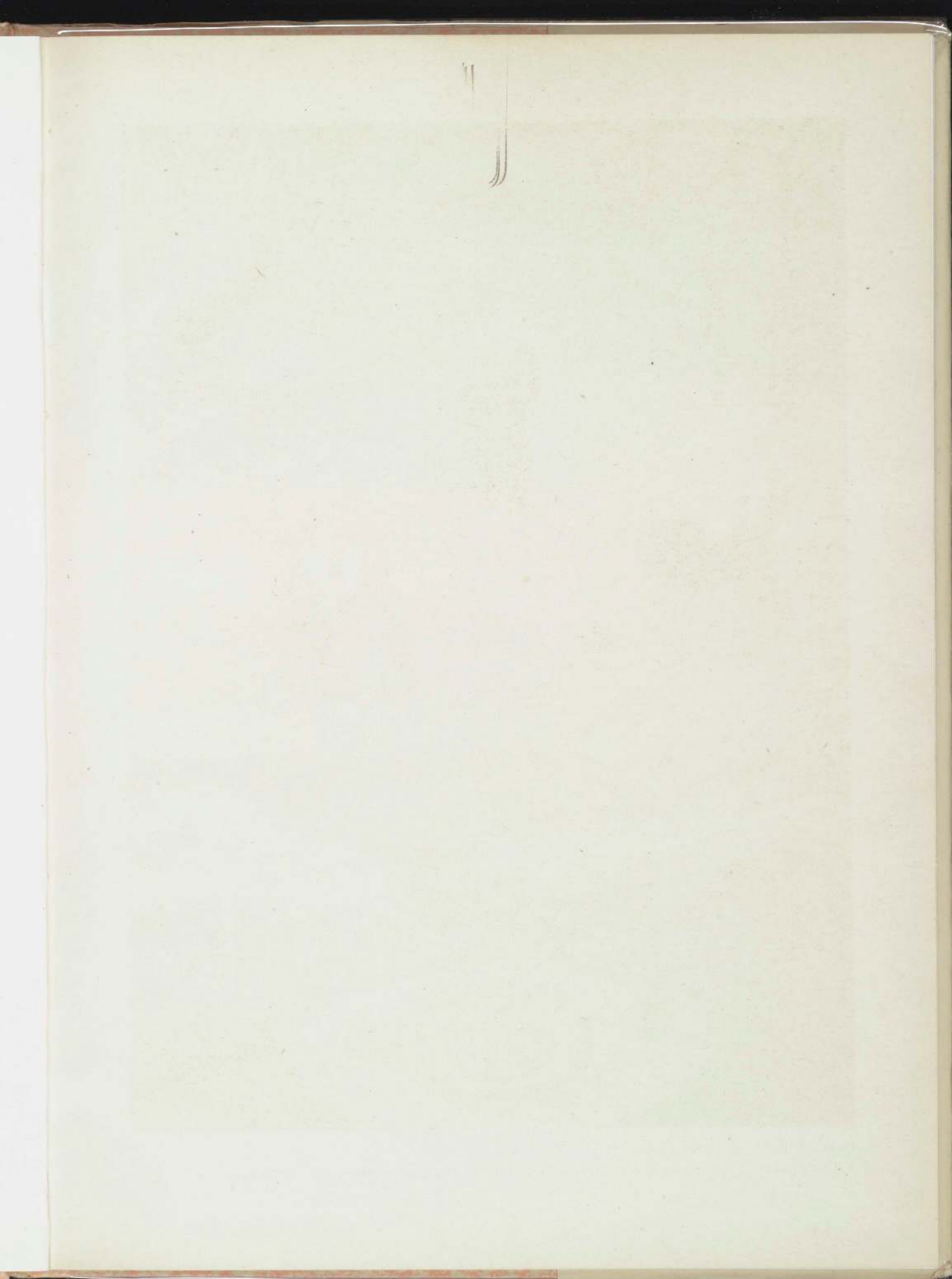
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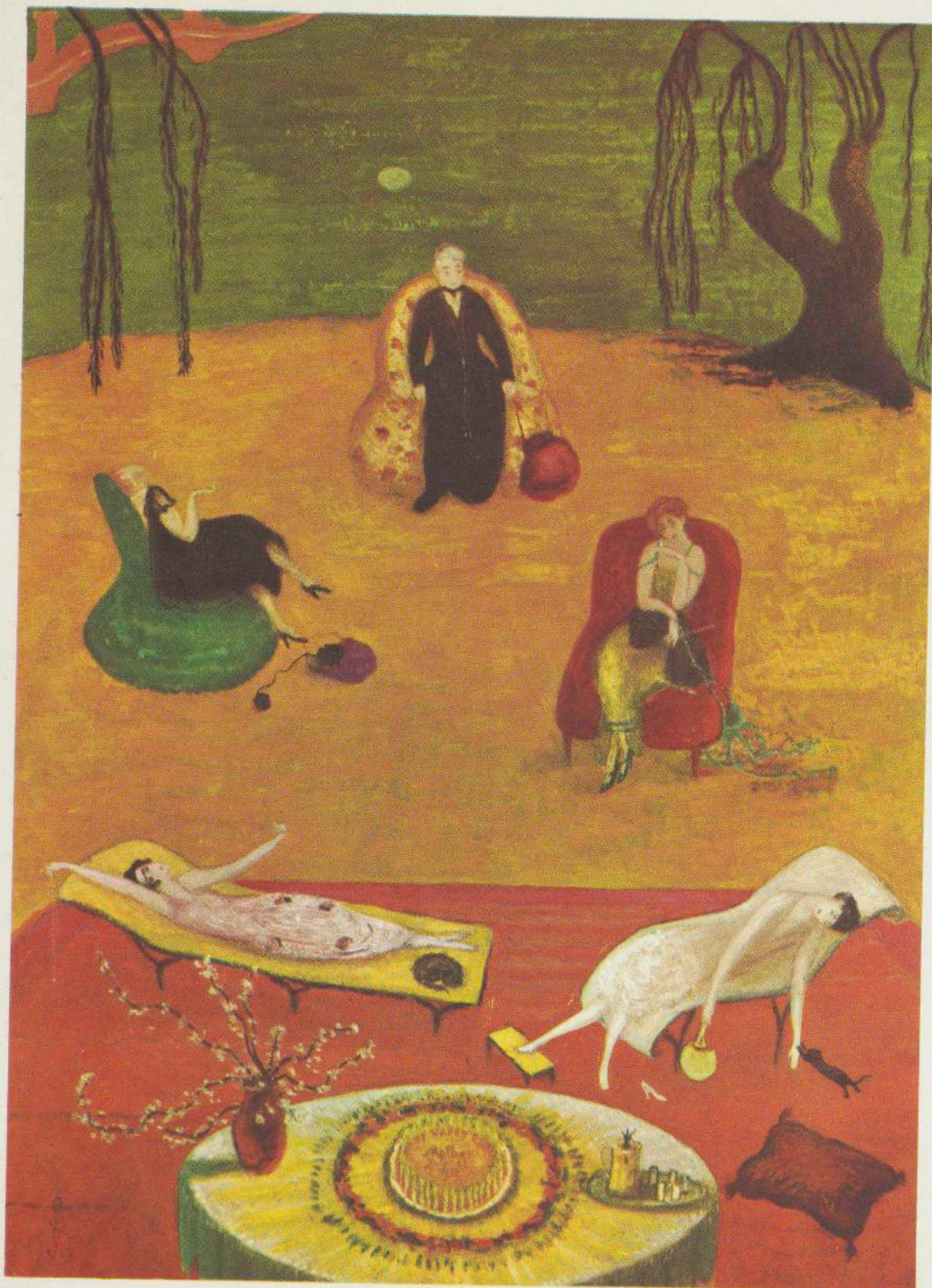
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Heat. 1919. Oil, 50 x 36½". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

This picture of the artist and her sisters with their mother commemorates the latter's birthday.

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HENRY Mc BRIDE

florine Stettheimer

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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acknowledgment and lenders

The President and Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art wish to thank Mr. Marcel Duchamp for his services as Guest Director of the Florine Stettheimer Exhibition. They also extend their grateful acknowledgment to the following:

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Foreground, left: the artist's mother viewing the aquatic scene from the balcony; and the artist herself descending the steps. Right: the Marquis de Buenavista standing on a raft; Marie Sterner lying down and the artist's sisters Ettie and Carrie seated, the latter with a sunshade; and Elie Nadelman, half in the water. Left: Maurice Sterne paddling a canoe in which reclines Elizabeth Duncan. Right, swimming toward the raft: Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and the artist's sister Ettie. In the launch: Professor E. R. A. Seligmann; and on the surfboard, his daughter Hazel.	
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Right above hood of automobile: the artist and her sisters. Between them and the wedding party: Charles Demuth behind Mrs. Valentine Dudensing and her daughter; and Muriel Draper leaning on Max Ewing's shoulder. Foreground, left: Arnold Genthe photographing the ceremony, and Mrs. Walter Rosen. Background, left: Charles A. Lindbergh parading in an auto.	

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Florine Stettheimer

*"All things counter, original, spare, strange:
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise Him."*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

I

Fame is the most uncertain garment man assumes. No one knows exactly how to acquire it, nor how to keep it once acquired. There are instances of some who have striven to avoid it—unsuccessfully. There are others who have spent fortunes in the effort to attain it—with equal success. Who is the most famous person alive today? I know, but I won't tell you, for before the words may be put into print he may be buried in obloquy. How long does fame last? There is Homer, of course. There are also Byron and Shelley but already more people read their piquant biographies than their so-called deathless verse. And Sir Walter! Who reads the Waverley novels? Yet oceans of ink were once spilled in their praise. The obscure Walt Whitman wrote anonymous letters to the Press attacking his own poetry knowing that to be "one of the ways"; but in the late years of the old man's life Richard Watson Gilder, just to be nice, used to print occasional couplets by Walt in the *Century Magazine*, couplets which were immediately reprinted in the newspapers with mocking comments much like those leveled today at the work of Gertrude Stein. Fame is a most uncertain garment. Yet fame, apparently, is what the Museum of Modern Art now desires for the late Florine Stettheimer.

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Family Portrait #1. 1915. Oil on canvas, 40 x 62". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

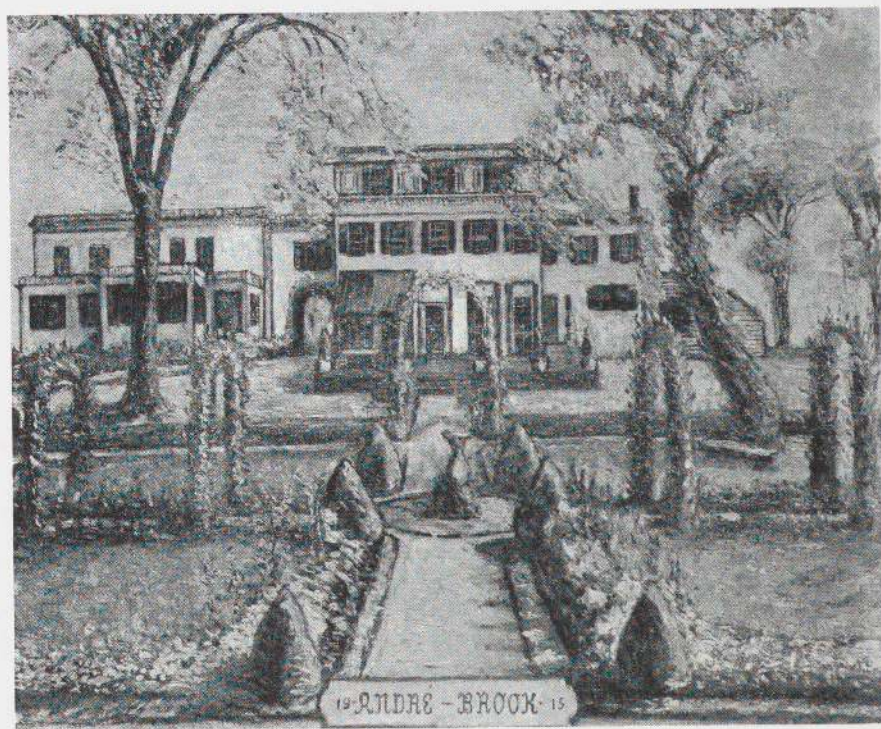
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Miss Stettin died in May 1944 unrecognized as an artist by the world at large. There were no obituaries in the newspapers. Museums as a rule exist upon reputations ready-made but this time it starts to make one. The occasion, therefore, is unusual. In fact, in my experience, it is unprecedented.

Miss Stettin's semi-obscurety was not so much due to the public's indifference as to her own. Hers is not a tale of hardship or neglect. She and her two sisters, Miss Carrie and Miss Ettie, presided over a salon that had considerable to do with shaping the intellectual and artistic impulses of the period just past, although at the dinners and receptions which followed in quick succession in their house and in which hardy ideas were put into words which echoed sooner or later in other parts of the city, she seemed often a furtive guest rather than one of the *genii loci* which she undoubtedly was, for her demure presence invariably counted. The artists who came to these parties came there because of her, most of them in the *avant garde*, such as Gaston Lachaise, Charles Demuth, Pavel Tchelitchew, et al., but all the others in attendance, the writers, singers, dancers, and sometimes even scientists, were definitely interested and amused by Florine's paintings from the

moment they first became aware of them. Although this certainly did not constitute fame it was just as certainly not neglect. She had a numerous and faithful following and it was consciousness of this doubtless that lent her the authority that soon appeared in her work and emboldened her to perfect the highly original style which the public is now called upon to appraise.

This style was at first "regular." That is to say she painted in the open-brush-stroke manner derived from the Frans Hals, Velasquez, John Singer Sargent traditions, and which Academicians thirty years ago thought was to be the permanent, final method for painting everything. As employed by Florine in the family portrait which used to hang over the sofa in the small reception room at 58th Street, it brought her somewhere in line with the van Dongen of Paris of those days, but there was already enough freedom and femininity in the work to bar it from the then public exhibitions, femininity when too openly avowed being almost as reprehensible in those days as freedom of expression. For that matter van Dongen himself would not have been any too welcome to those juries.



André Brook. 1915. Oil on canvas, 28 x 34". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

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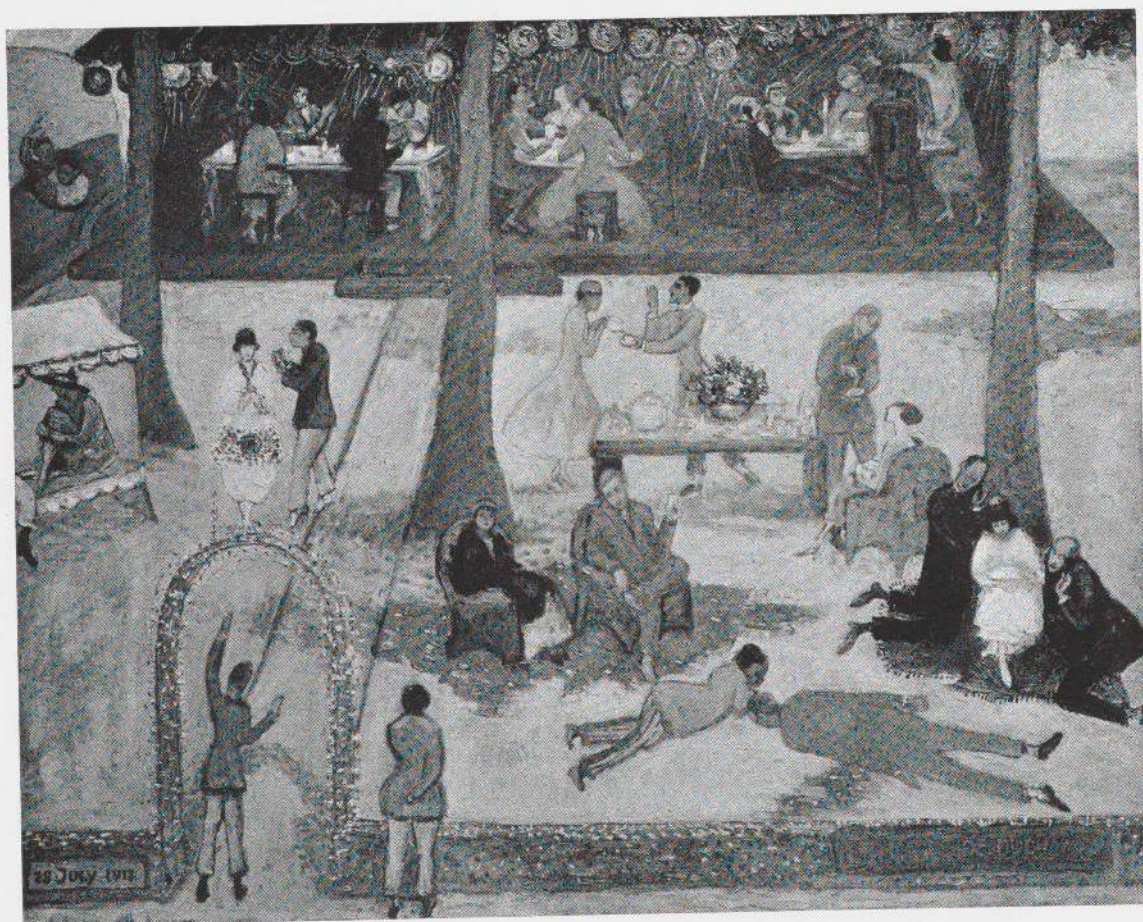
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La Fête à Duchamp, 1917. Oil on canvas, 35 x 45½". Collection Mr. and Mrs. John D. Gordan.

In this picture certain figures are shown as they appear at different stages of the party. Upper left: Marcel Duchamp waves his hand from the automobile driven by Francis Picabia; and in the foreground on the left, they are entering the garden. Facing them, above the archway of flowers: the artist and Albert Gleizes, and seated in the swing, Fania Marinoff. Center, beyond the refreshment table: the artist's sister Carrie and the Marquis de Buenavista. Right, beside the table: Avery Hopwood speaking to Mme Gleizes (Juliette Roche). At the foot of the tree: the artist's sister Ettie with two likenesses of Leo Stein, one on each side. Sprawled on the grass: Picabia and Rocher. Seated on two chairs, side by side: Elizabeth Duncan and Carl Van Vechten. At the supper table on the terrace, the entire party: the artist's sister Ettie proposing a toast on the left, and Marcel Duchamp on the right responding to it.

She did not have to go far in search of subject matter. She looked upon her sisters, her mother and herself as phenomena of surpassing interest (which they indeed were) and did them many times, singly and in groups; and it is possible to surmise that the series of pictures of parties was undertaken more or less as background to an *histoire de famille*, for the "*famille*" pointed up all the compositions, even Mrs. Stettheimer appearing in them, usually aloof and occupied with the

game of Russian Bank the while her giddy daughters enacted the rôles of Julie de Lespinasse, Mme du Deffand and Mme de Staël in modern dress.

The artist had not progressed far in this sequence of portraits and party-pictures when it became apparent that she had shaken off the conventional premier-coup of the pseudo-Sargents and had evolved a manner that was to do her for the rest of her painting days. It is not a manner that may be hit off in a word. It might be thought to disdain manner in that it is wilful, unconcerned with precedent and as unpredictable as the flight of a butterfly in a garden of flowers; and yet nothing could be falser than to attribute its effects to lucky accidents. Miss Stettheimer knew what she was doing. She had laws of her own and knew them positively even though she never defined them to herself. She followed her inner impulses with strict integrity and spared nor time nor labor to realize them.* Very early she began to lean heavily upon the use of white pigment. Miss Ettie Stettheimer once remarked to me that she thought a special quality of her sister's work was its power of giving off light. This I, in turn, thought to be due to the artist's lavish, preparatory build-up of Chinese white on the canvas, whites which often were piled up in relief before the actual painting began. Once this got under way I imagine the artist stopped at nothing. She sometimes applied thin tints only partly covering the heavy white base; she sometimes, I suspect, smudged areas of thick paint into smoothness with a cloth, giving it the appearance of a liquid that has been poured on rather than brushed. The actual brushstroke of the usual artist is so seldom employed† in her later works that it suggests a palpable avoidance of "quotations," so confirmed had she become in the habit of doing things in exactly her own way;— but with all these irregularities she was always able to get precision where and when she wanted it. Although she took all the license of a *primitif* she was by no means one herself. Her "line" was a draughtsman's line (she had been a pupil of Kenyon Cox at the Art Students

* The following quotation from Florine Stettheimer's diary during early student days in Munich illustrates her continuous inquiry into matters of technique:

"Rafaello came in on us during work this morning. I was glad for I had been experimenting with poor results in a study of the depths of the laurel trees. And had been wishing for some more brilliant medium than casein. He told me to come over and see some of his 'Proben'—as he had been trying for warm depths also. . . . I told him I should follow him. The weather was wretched. . . . But I learned some important things from Schuster-Woldan's experiments. He said I was lucky to just step in and learn the results of ten years of hard work. So I went to Bruggers and got some Copal varnish and hope to get at those laurels tomorrow."

† "I confess to looking at some of the new pictures years ago with scepticism, for there were all sorts of doings in them not to be observed in other artists' work and which looked impermanent. But they have lasted. In the twenty years or so that I have known them I have seen no discoloration of the pigments nor any fading, which is more than I can say for most of the American impressionistic work of the same period."

From the article in *View*, October 1945.

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Sunday Afternoon in the Country. 1917. Oil on canvas, 50 x 36". Durlacher Brothers.

Foreground: Edward Steichen photographing Marcel Duchamp, attended by the artist's sister Ettie; Baron de Meyer seated with back turned; Baroness de Meyer under a parasol with Paul Reimers, and the artist's mother playing Patience. Center: Ratan Devi and Adolph Bolm with a parasol. Dr. Arnold Genthe with Mme Bolm; Alfred Seligsberg with arms crossed, the artist's sister Carrie and Albert Sterner with Jo Davidson. Background: left, Marie Sterner watching Paul Thévenaz; right, Paul Chalfin, the Marquis de Buenavista against a tree, and the artist at her easel.



at Rupert Hughes' farm

Picnic at Bedford Hills. 1918. Oil on canvas, 40 x 50". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

The artist seated alone with a parasol; her sister Ettie recumbent on a carpet, in conversation with Elie Nadelman; her sister Carrie and Marcel Duchamp setting out the repast.

League), calligraphic, like so much of the best modern "line," and never to be accused of fumbling. Her colors instantly forgot they came from the paint-box and took on the tints of the flowers. When she painted flowers she was never literal in her descriptions of them. The flowers in her flower pieces were, as they were to Odilon Redon, mere points of departure. They are, I believe, sufficiently botanical, but they are also unearthly. I never heard her speak of Redon, and she would not have thought herself related to him, yet there is a kinship between their flowers. Both imbued them with the occult, something reaching out of this world to that other; and of the two, Florine granted them more actual freedom, and the blossoms in her vases wriggled upward with a whimsicality in the stems that is not to be outmatched

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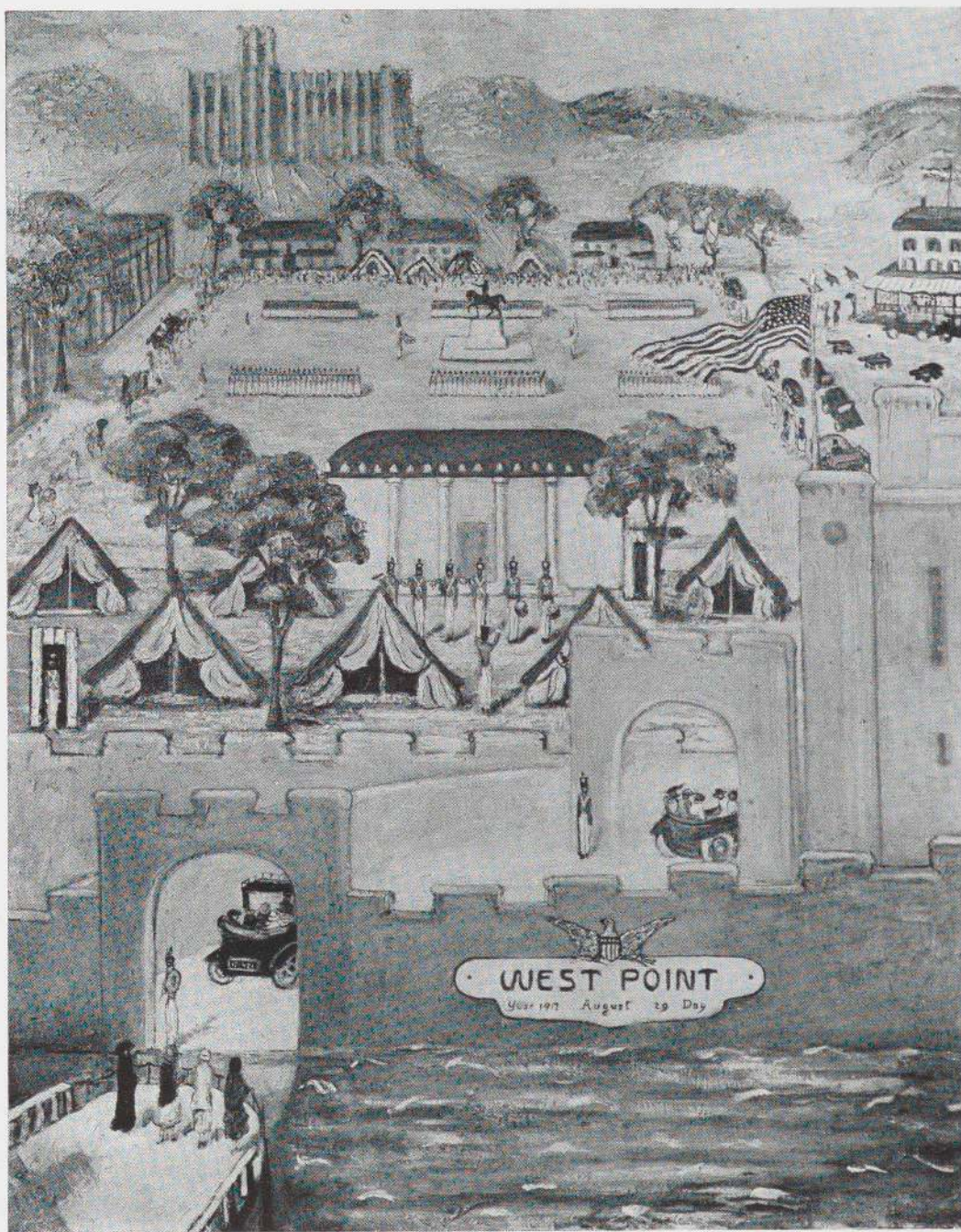
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New York, 1918. Oil on canvas, 60 x 42". Collection Virgil Thomson.



West Point. 1917. Oil on canvas, $45\frac{1}{2} \times 35\frac{1}{2}$ ". Collection The United States Military Academy, West Point, N. Y.

This commemorates a visit of the artist, her mother and two sisters in August, 1917.

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for waywardness in the "automatic" paintings of Miro. Emerson said somewhere, and I think it is in one of his letters to Carlyle, that he would like the word "whim" engraved over the door to his library. With equal pertinence it could have been engraved over Florine's.

III

*The world is full of strangers
They are very strange
I am never going to know them
It is easy to arrange.*

F. S.

The only one-man show that Miss Stettheimer permitted herself occurred in the Knoedler Galleries at a time when Marie Sterner was conducting a series of exhibitions there. This was early in her career (1916) before her style had crystallized, before the cathedral pictures and the more important portraits had been painted, and although the press was kind enough in commenting upon it, the attention of the general public was not caught. The artist was vaguely dissatisfied with the exhibition herself and decided that if she ever indulged in a one-man show again it would have to be in a room a little more closely attuned to her special requirements and, preferably, decorated for the occasion by herself. The opportunity for this never materialized. More than one of the dealers expressed a desire to undertake it but each for one reason or another was refused, and in the end Miss Stettheimer began to be regarded by them as "difficult."

Maybe she was. But then she had no real occasion to sell her paintings and when the thing was suggested by her friends as an *événement* natural to the life of an artist, she used to smile and say that she liked her pictures herself and preferred to keep them. At the same time she did lend to public exhibitions, and among them, surprisingly but not inconsistently, to those of the Independent Society where the conditions are exceedingly cruel to anything less than pictures of mural size. But this was a concession to public spirit—of which she had plenty.

In spite of Miss Stettheimer's efforts to protect herself from the clamor of modern activity she was by no means a recluse in the Emily Dickinsonian sense though like that poet she astonished people occasionally by shrewd comments upon phases of existence from which it had been presumed she had been shielded. Details

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Asbury Park South. 1920. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

Looking down from the reviewing stand: Carl Van Vechten. Foreground center: Marcel Duchamp and Fania Marinoff. Right, between park bench and railing: the artist with a parasol. On the beach beyond, in conversation with a sun-burned figure, Avery Hopwood; and Paul Thévenaz photographing. The beach is one segregated for Negroes; and the above-mentioned were led by Carl Van Vechten to interest themselves in the welfare of the Negro race.

in Florine's cathedral pictures recall the mild surprise of Washington legislators at the political acumen displayed in Emily's shy replies to their questions at the dinners to which her father led her during his term as a legislator. The physiognomy of ex-Mayor Jimmy Walker flung up large among the listed glories of the "Cathedral of Broadway" decoration, the wildly comic items in the "Beauty Contest," the beach scene at "Asbury Park," and the frantic excitement of a "Spring Sale" in a pretentious fifty-seventh street dress establishment, are doubly surprising as coming from

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Beauty Contest: To the memory of P. T. Barnum. 1924. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

Upper left: Edward Steichen photographs the contest, with Edna Kenton and the artist looking on.

her. There is nothing malicious in them but a wealth of Puck-like allusions to the foolishness of mankind. The gay familiarity with almost sacrosanct themes, such as Florine's "George Washington" sitting-room annexed to her studio, was something in line, too, with Emily Dickinson's intimacy with Jehovah. George Washington's bust was enshrined in a corner alcove, and I believe there were some statuettes of him here and there, and here hung the "West Point" painting now actually owned by the great military academy up the Hudson. The atmosphere of the little room was patriotic, rather preciously patriotic, but truly patriotic just the same.



Spring Sale (At the Dressmaker's). 1921. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40". Durlacher Brothers.

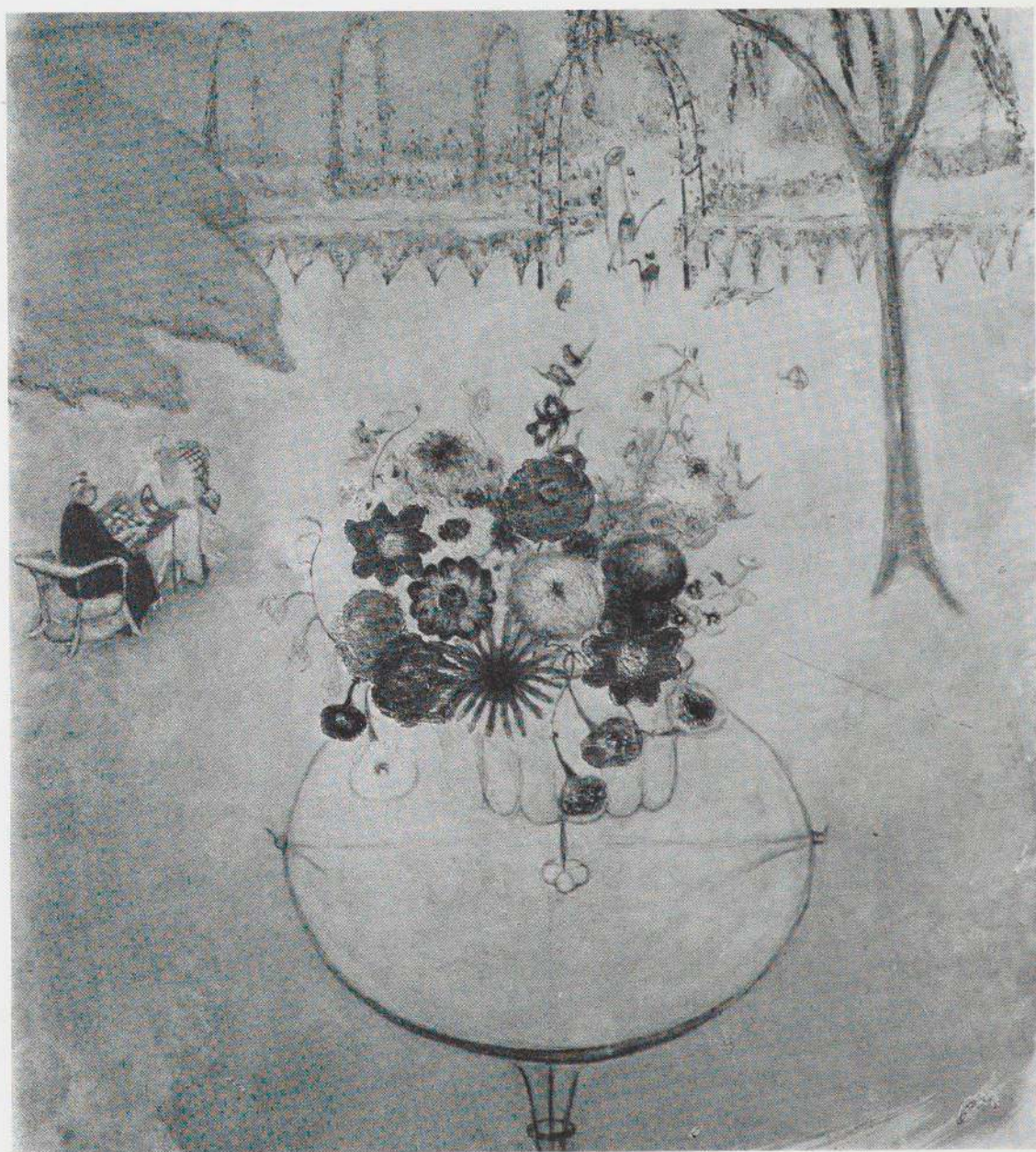
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*Then back to New York
 And skytowers had begun to grow
 And front-stoop houses started to go
 And life became quite different
 And it was as tho' someone had planted seeds
 And people sprouted like common weeds
 And seemed unaware of accepted things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

F. S.

The studio itself was one of the curiosities of the town; and very closely related, in appearance, to the work that was done in it. The lofty windows (the studio was double-decked) were hung with billowy cellophane curtains, and the chairs and tables were in white and gold, the tables in glass and gold, and I have a remembrance of lamps screened with white beads and unreal but handsome gilt flowers in the vases. I certainly recall some gilt flowers in a golden bowl on the dining-room table, reinforced by draperies of some golden fabric at the windows.

The windows of the balcony which looked down into the studio were hung with ancient Nottingham lace which incited the ribald to ironic comment; comment, however, which left the artist quite undisturbed, so positive was her affection for lace even in its simplest and least pretentious manifestations. It continually crept into her pictures. It almost became her sign-manual, like the butterfly signature employed by Whistler. It appears in her most serious portrait, that of her mother, painted in 1925. It reappears again and again and finally in the last family group, the one that was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art's fifteenth anniversary exhibition "*Art in Progress*" in May, 1944, the costumes of Mrs. Stettheimer, Miss Carrie and Miss Ettie all being embellished with lace and only the artist herself renouncing it to wear a severe painting-suit proper for the occasion. It got into the artist's costumes and properties designed for the famous Virgil Thomson—Gertrude Stein opera "*Four Saints In Three Acts*"; very happily when it was seen that the camera taking a shot at Saint Theresa in the first act was draped with a black lace mantilla, and very dramatically when a lady magnificently got up in black lace



Russian Bank. 1921. Oil on canvas, 40 x 36". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

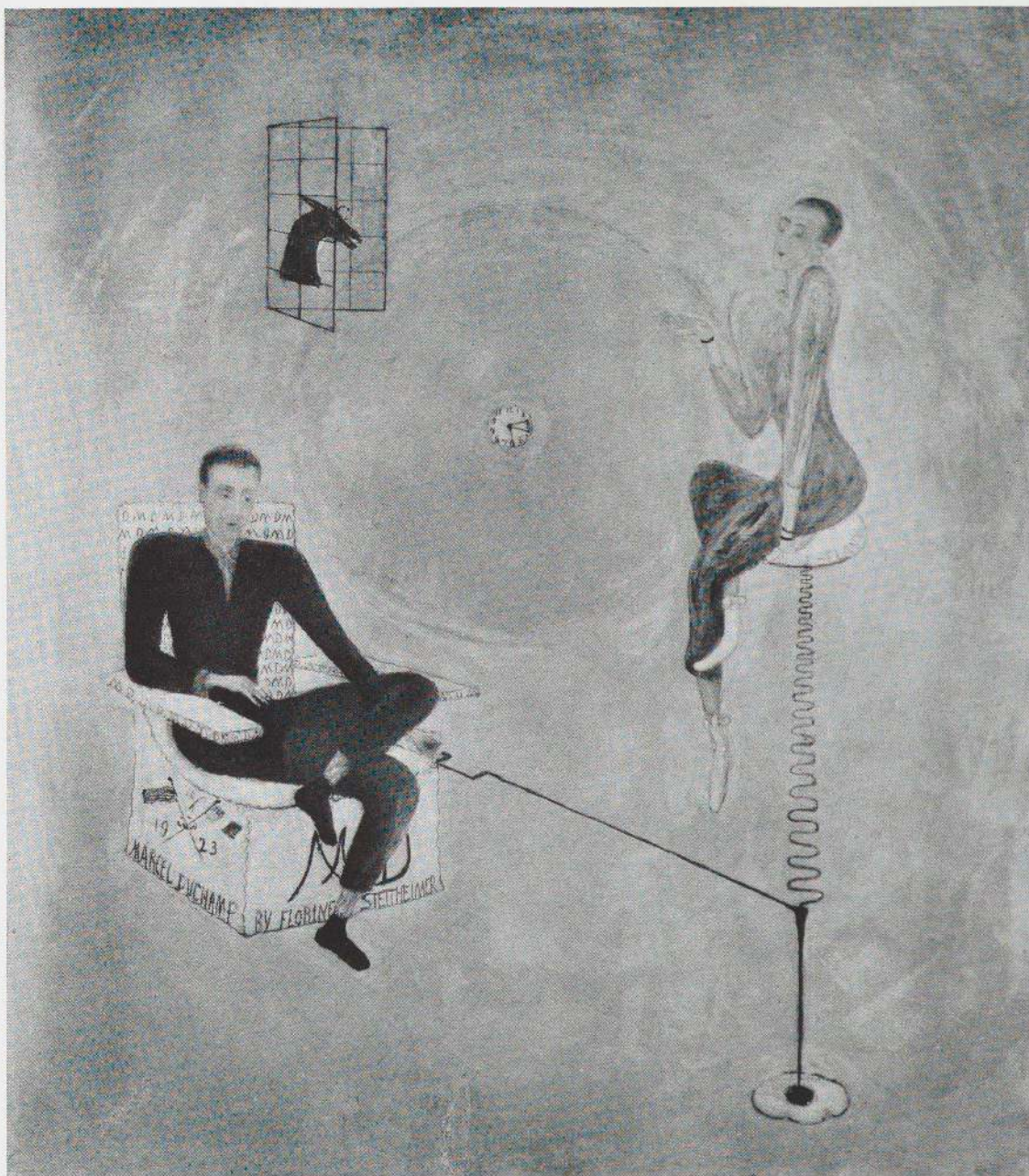


Delphinium and Columbine. c.1923. Oil on canvas, 36x 30". Durlacher Brothers.

makes a sudden appearance to say to Saint Ignatius; "In a minute"; and then promptly vanishes. So much costume for so little in the way of conversation must have seemed to Miss Stettheimer the height of extravagance, and wittily absurd in itself. Certainly it seemed so to the opera's audiences. The "In a minute" got a rapturous "hand" at every performance I attended.

It was also Miss Stettheimer's original intention to frame in the entire stage picture with an enormous lace paper frill, much as boxes of candy were decorated years ago, but she was dissuaded from this. Probably the fire laws did the dissuasion.

This description of the studio is vague, I am afraid, and I have not particularized its fantasy enough, but anyway those who saw "Four Saints" will easily see the connection between such a studio and the famous stage sets. The atmosphere was alike in both.



Portrait of Marcel Duchamp. 1923. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.



Portrait of Carl Van Vechten. 1922. Oil on canvas, 28 x 26". Collection Carl Van Vechten.

Upper left are allusions to the sitter's interests and affections: a café in Paris, the marquee of a theatre with the name of his wife, Fania Marinoff. Above, a figure in white represents Carl Van Vechten as a cook, with the *cordon-bleu*. A piano indicates his activity as a music critic. Upper right: the actress' dressing table with a Japanese print and a Nô mask of Fania Marinoff.



Portrait of Henry McBride. 1922. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

The background beyond the tennis courts consists of allusions to various works of art: one of the artist's own flower pieces, a female nude by Gaston Lachaise, a church by Charles Demuth, a watercolor by John Marin, and a marine by Winslow Homer.



4 Saints in 3 Acts. Artist's scale model of scenery and costumes.

V

The designing of these stage sets and costumes marked the artist's first and only venture into the modern world of publicity but it was successful from every point of view; and thoroughly enjoyable to her. The "difficult" Miss Stettheimer was not in the least difficult on this occasion, suggesting that she was not in reality difficult at all but merely aware of the conditions in which her art flourished and this time found them met. All the circumstances connected with the presentation of the opera were ideal and worthy of more prolonged study than is here possible for they brought actors, musicians and artists into the same sort of collaboration that produced the Diaghileff ballet successes in Paris; and it is odd, seeing how frantically eager the New York theatre is to be thought artistic, that none of its impresarios have since inquired into the process by which "Four Saints" so definitely got that way.

The first happy accident connected with the affair was the fact that the composer Virgil Thomson had lived in close communion with the artists of Paris during his stay there and got to know the real ones from the spurious. His admiration for Florine's work was instantaneous, occurring on his first visit to the studio, and it seemed to be settled at once that she would be the inevitable artist for the décor, were Heaven to be kind enough to permit so unusual and delightful event as the presentation of this opera to occur; and she in turn had such complete faith in



Self Portrait. 1923. Oil on canvas, 40 x 26". Collection Miss Ettie Stett-
heimer.



4 Saints in 3 Acts. Act I.

"An Opera to be Sung." Scenery and costumes by Florine Stettheimer (executed by Kate Drain Lawson); Book by Gertrude Stein; Scenario by Maurice Grosser; Music by Virgil Thomson (conducted by Alexander Smallens); Choreography by Frederick Ashton; Production by John Houseman. First produced by The Friends and Enemies of Modern Music at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, February 8, 1934.

Virgil's judgment that when Heaven did finally relent and say, "Get on with it," the discussions as to details between the two of them were always easy.

The next happy accident—and this is most important and has never been sufficiently descanted upon—was the decision of A. Everett Austin to do the opera in the Hartford Atheneum's theatre of which he was then the director, for Mr. Austin was an ardent enthusiast for baroque art and was generally credited with the emphasis his museum laid upon this form of expression. Just how far along the rehearsals had progressed before the entire company (including singers, dancers, musicians, costumers, and of course Mr. Smallens the orchestra leader, Mr. Thomson the composer, Freddy Ashton the English choreographer and the marvelous electrician Mr. Feder) migrated to Hartford for the finish, I do not know, but I do know that the last-minute improvisations, occurring as they did in a museum and with all the contributors drinking in ideas from the baroque masterpieces that surrounded them,



4 Saints in 3 Acts.

St. Theresa II, Bruce Howard; St. Theresa I, Beatrice Robinson Wayne; St. Ignatius, Edward Matthews

were of inestimable value to the production. That is the point I should particularly like to have made clear to Broadway—not necessarily that all opera productions should be fabricated in museums but that the museums should be used as consultants and that the artists employed should be real ones.

The première was a howling success, for the opera, for the singers, for the entrancing stage-pictures. I don't recall a readier reception for a new piece either in America or abroad. It is true the audience was a bit special. It had been recruited from all over yet everybody seemed to know everybody and that gave it peculiar charm. Half of them were of the *avant garde*, aware that a Gertrude Stein opera was

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about as advanced as anyone could ever hope to get in this world and fully persuaded, even before the curtain went up, that the evening could not possibly be a failure. One would laugh either against Gertrude or with her. One, in any case, would laugh. Whatever stage-fright there may have been about the theatre, it was certainly not in evidence out front.

When the curtain went up—or rather, was “pulled apart,” for the little Atheneum theatre is very chic—there was a gasp of astonishment and delight. This *avant garde* after all knew something about pictures and could see at once that the saint kneeling in front and clad in voluminous purple silks was quite as ecstatic as anything El Greco had ever devised in that line, and that the costumes of the two Saint Theresas and the other saints, as well as the effects produced by the cellophane background and the remarkable lighting bestowed upon them by Mr. Feder, were all addressed to the painter-like eye. They felt at home at once with that sort of thing; unlike Mr. George Jean Nathan whose disgust with the opening refrain, “It makes it well fish,” was not theirs. They knew the jargon of the artists and something of the jargon of the saints, and “It makes it well fish” recalled to them the ancient symbolic fish of the sarcophagi, standing for the sanctity that is so notably a preoccupation with saints. It seldom paid to quarrel with Gertrude’s locutions. She usually knew what she was about. Even the matter of the two Saint Theresas (Virgil Thomson’s solution to one of his musical problems) could be defended. When the dispute about this was at its height I met Mrs. W. Murray Crane at one of the New York performances who said: “Why such a fuss? After all, some of the leading authorities hold that there was something dual in Saint Theresa’s nature.” The Hartford audience was better prepared for these matters than the New York critics were to be later on when the show was transferred to the big Forty-Fourth Street Theatre, but they paid less attention to the Gertrude Stein words, at first, than they did to the Stettheimer sets which they avidly “ate up,” as the phrase goes, until the absurd interruption of the strutting Compère and Commère awakened their ears as their eyes had been previously by the costumes, and they sat back comfortably in their chairs to listen to the fantastic dialogue, definitely laughing with Gertrude rather than at her, and definitely enchanted with Virgil Thomson’s music and Florine Stettheimer’s colors.

During the first entr’act and whilst the heroes and heroines of the occasion were taking curtain calls to the accompaniment of cheers (the shrinking violet Miss Stettheimer taking a solo bow in her turn with extreme nonchalance) I dashed backstage just in time to see this violet being ardently embraced by Freddy Ashton the

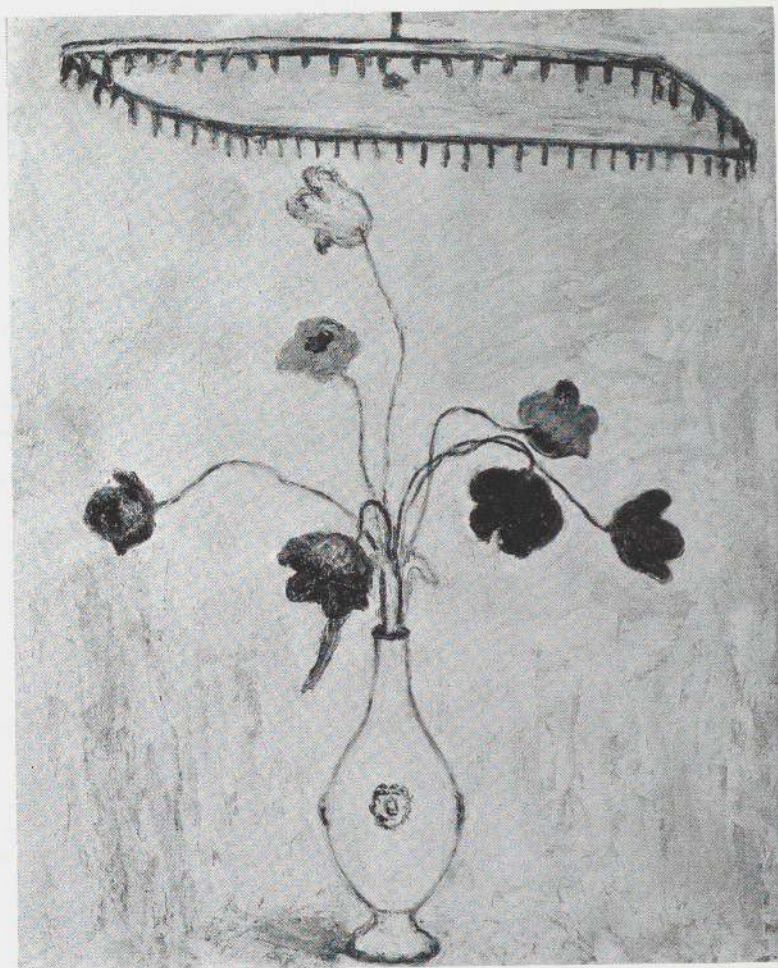


Family Portrait No. 2. 1933. Oil, 46 x 64 1/2". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer. Left to right: the artist, her sister Ettie, her mother, and her sister Carrie.

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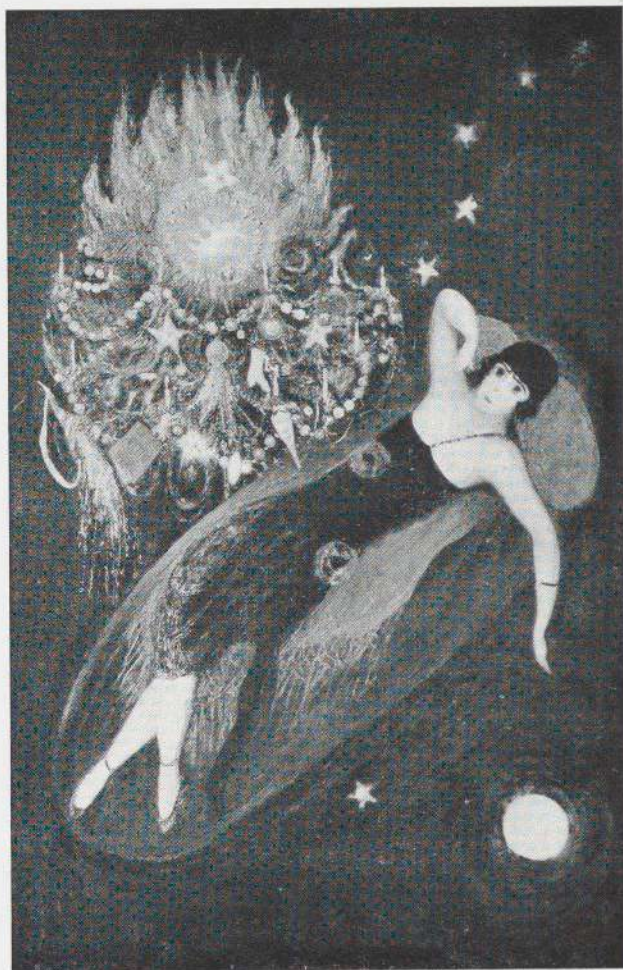
Tulips under a Canopy. c.1925. Oil on canvas, 40 x 32". Collection Mrs. Huddleston Rogers.

choreographer, both of them in the kind of heaven that only artists know, at the way things were going; and I could not resist the thought that for Florine this was genuinely a coming-out party. She came out indeed but she stayed out only for the duration of this opera. She took an enormous amount of innocent satisfaction in her contribution to it and I have the idea that she scarcely missed a performance of the work. Even during the last days of the run, when the piece had been transferred to the Empire Theatre, she had constructed at her own expense a decorative gadget of stars and symbols that swung in the air above the last scene and made it to her mind, and to mine too, distinctly more "well fish." But I suppose Mr. George Jean Nathan never will understand this. We can't all be symbolists.



Portrait of My Mother. 1925. Oil on canvas, $38\frac{1}{4} \times 26\frac{1}{4}$ ". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

Portrait of My Sister, Ettie Stett-
heimer. 1923. Oil on canvas, $40\frac{3}{8}$ x
 $26\frac{1}{4}$ ". Collection Miss Ettie Stett-
heimer.



VI

Miss Stettheimer's best portrait, in my opinion, is the one of her mother. This is eminently fitting in the case of an artist whose horizons for such a long time were kept within the limits of her own home. It is an idealized portrait done with great tenderness and love and yet touched with irrepressible wit. I call it witty the way the straggling carnations break the severe blacks of the piano. I think it witty the way the palm-leaves venture into the composition and the way in which the laces frame in the mother's dream-picture of her children in the background. The mother's faintly bewildered but uncomplaining expression as she thinks of these children is witty, too. It is a true apotheosis; and it is a picture, I believe, that will take permanent rank in the not too great an array of distinguished American portraits.



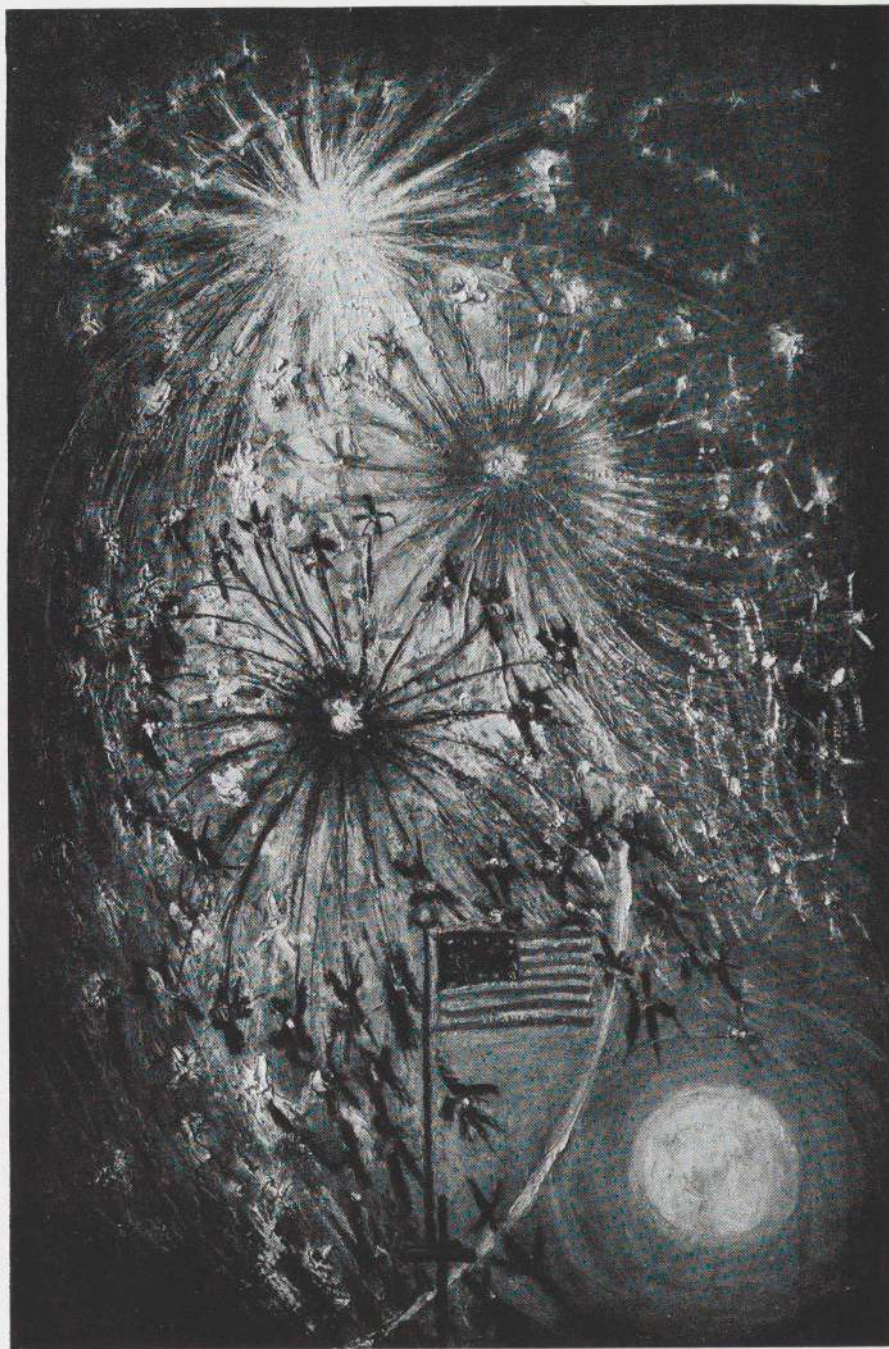
Natatorium Undine. 1927. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

Upper left: Fania Marinoff at the table, and the artist with a parasol. Seated along the edge of the pool in a striped bathing dress: the artist's sister, Ettie.

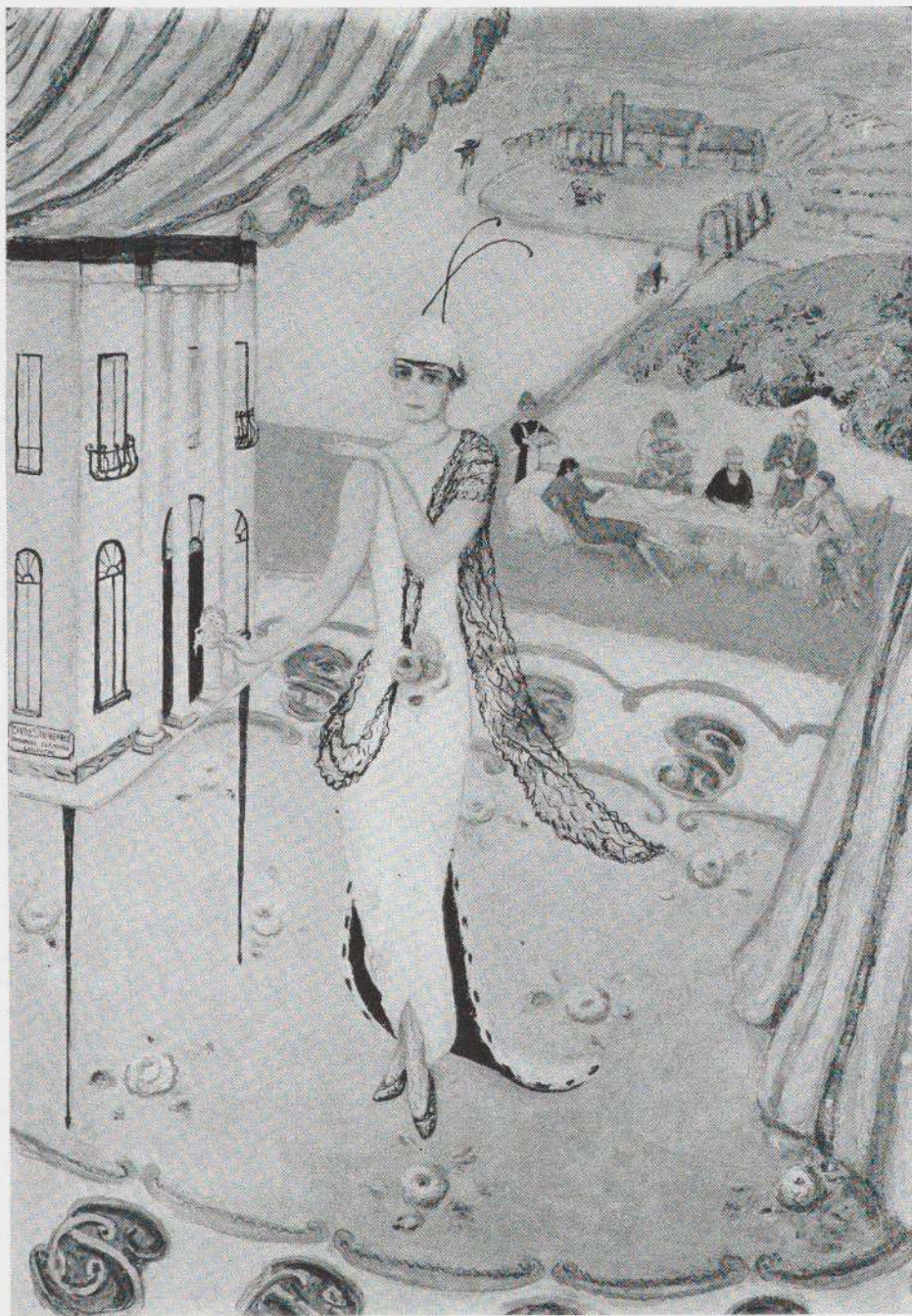
The same amused insight characterizes the portraits of her sisters and gives curious incandescence to the family group pictures, and notably to the last one, the one that was being shown in this Museum at the time of the artist's death. I had occasion then to remark upon it in my review of the exhibition for the New York Sun, and as what I said remains my opinion, here it is:

"It is fragile, with the fragility of a flower but it also has the authority of a flower. The artist herself is seen, in painting garb, on a lofty city terrace, with her two sisters and her mother, and in the distance the Chrysler Tower which always seems as though it might itself have been a Stettheimer creation, looms like something in the Arabian night. The whole picture, in fact, is an Arabian Nights' Entertainment; very exquisite, very charming, and if you wish to be reassured on that point, very exact as to the likenesses."

That last quoted phrase, no doubt, should be qualified. It applies to the family portraits but not to those of outsiders. She could take all sorts of liberties with her own people but never departed from the resemblances. No matter how slight the reference to a Stettheimer it was always recognizable. The drawings of the mother,



Fourth of July #1, 1927. Oil on canvas, 28 x 18". Collection Mrs. Huddleston Rogers.



Portrait of My Sister, Carrie W. Stettheimer. 1923. Oil on canvas, 37½ x 25½" Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

often in the background of the recorded party-activities of the daughters, are more "like" than any photograph of the lady could have been. The study of Miss Ettie, groomed like one of Scheherazade's heroines, reclining beside a Christmas tree ablaze with lights and searching the starry heavens, wide-eyed, for the mystery of life, is as happy a blend of her worldliness and spirituality as any psychiatrist could ask for. Miss Carrie's portrait is less fortunate. The intention is again playful but the result is slightly operatic. If she had that side it was not always visible to all of her friends. The portraits of the artist's "Aunt Caroline" and of her teacher "Fräulein von Preiser of Stuttgart" also suggest opera but obviously what laughter there is is leveled less at the personages than at the vanished fashions they were called upon to illustrate.

VII

New York
At last grown young
With noise
And colour
And light
And jazz
Dance marathons and poultry shows
Soul-savings and rodeos
Gabfests and beauty contests
Skytowers and bridal showers
Speak-easy bars and motor cars
Columnists and movie stars.

F. S.

When it came to the portraits of "outsiders" the joke was more important than the resemblance. Among those thus immortalized were Carl Van Vechten, Marcel Duchamp, Virgil Thomson, Louis Bouché, Baron de Meyer, Joseph Hergesheimer and the writer of this essay. Of these portraits the most whimsical is the one of Marcel Duchamp.

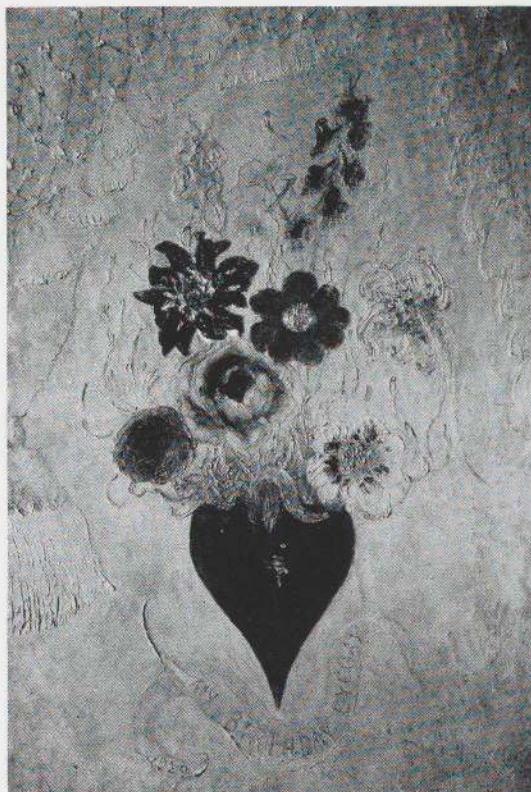
"*There was nothing accidental in this,*" I wrote in an account published last October in "View," "*for Marcel in real life is pure fantasy. If you were to study his paintings and particularly his art-constructions, and were then to try to conjure up his physical appearance, you could not fail to guess him, for he is his own best creation, and exactly what you thought.*"



Portrait of Alfred Stieglitz. 1928. Oil on canvas, 38 x 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". An American Place.

Here and there in the background, appear names of artists represented by Alfred Stieglitz, notably: John Marin; Marsden Hartley; Arthur Dove; Paul Strand; and Georgia O'Keeffe. Behind Stieglitz is a view of Lake George, where he lived.

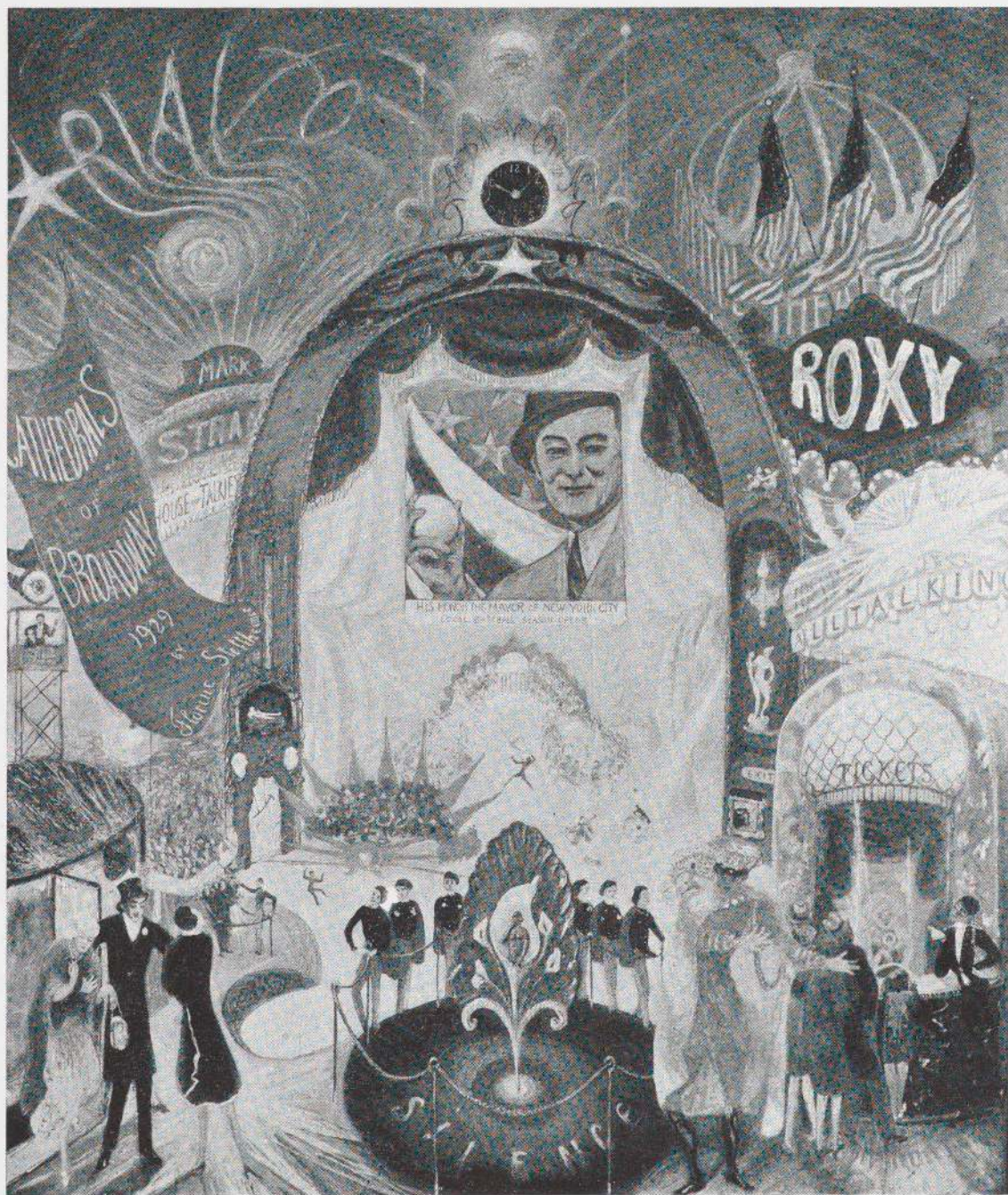
My Birthday Eyegay. 1929. Oil on canvas, 38 x 26". Collection Edward James.



In the portrait he is something of a Pierrot perched aloft upon a Jack-in-Box contraption which he is surreptitiously manipulating to gain greater heights for his apotheosis. Among the 'outside' portraits this is the best from the point of view of pure painting. It is also the simplest. The most complicated character in the whole range of contemporary art has been reduced to one transparent equation."

It is scarcely necessary to explain that these highly imaginative portraits did not depend upon actual sittings.

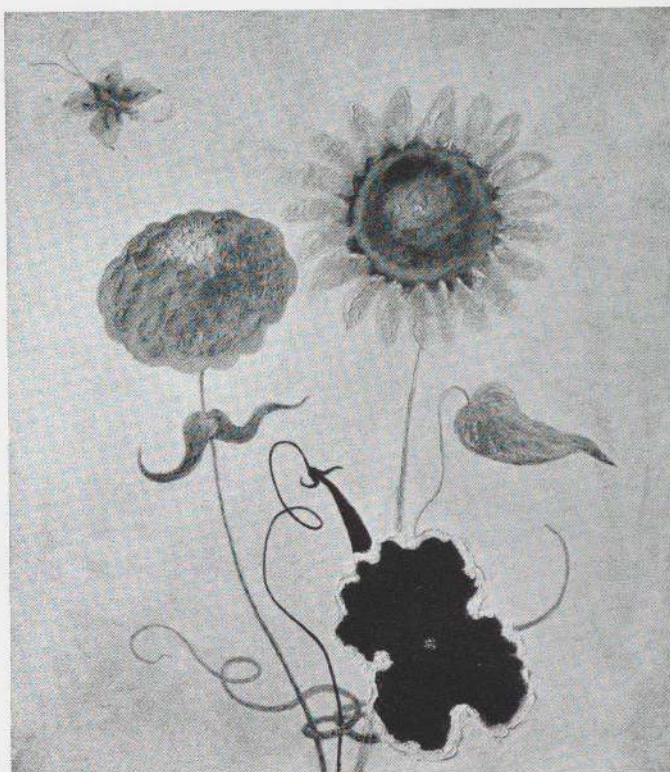
"I suppose I came nearer to sitting than most of the others," to continue with the article in "View," "for my portrait originated during a house-party given by the Stettheimers in a Seabright cottage many years ago and one evening I detected the artist over in one corner of the salon furtively jotting down, presumably, some of my lineaments, but I was not permitted to see what hieroglyphics she had acquired nor how many—but they must have been few. At the time of this house-party the Seabright lawn-tennis tournament was in progress and as I was in those days something of a player and mad about the game I went over each afternoon to see what the sensational new Frenchmen, Borotra, Cochet and Lacoste (then playing for the first time in



Cathedrals of Broadway. 1929. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

Lower left corner, entering the night club: the artist in a black coat, her sister, and Stella Wanger, accompanied by the latter's son.

Three Flowers and a Dragonfly.
1928. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26".
Collection A. Everett Austin, Jr.



America) were doing. When my portrait made its debut the next winter I was as much astonished as anybody else to find myself seated in the picture against a background of a tennis tournament in full progress. Up above in the sky were references to my aesthetic preoccupations, such as a hint of the celebrated palm-tree watercolor by Winslow Homer, the statue of a "Woman" by Gaston Lachaise, a watercolor by John Marin and so on but the heavy emphasis on tennis in the picture was something that I had to explain away to many critics. I scarcely yet have lived it down.

"The heavy emphasis in the Carl Van Vechten portrait is laid, properly enough, on books; two heavy tomes occupying the foreground, one of them being the already classic 'Tiger in the House'—but in spite of these products of a mature mind Miss Stettheimer preferred to take an ageless view of the author and portrayed him as a guileless youth. She rejected age in all of her friends for that matter and in the portraits turned us into the essences of what we were. The 'too, too solid flesh' meant nothing to her. She weighed the spirit. She knew very well that Mr. Van Vechten frequented cafés both in Paris and in New York, and said so in the picture—but apparently she did not hold it against him."



Cathedrals of Wall Street. 1939. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.

Lower left, holding up the dedicatory pennant: the artist. At the foot of the statue of George Washington: Grace Moore about to sing. Foreground, in the center: Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, escorted by Fiorello H. LaGuardia, Michael Ericson in an American Legion uniform, Michael J. Sullivan—a Civil War veteran, Clagett Wilson and an Indian chief.



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VIII

The unloved painting;

I was pure white

You made a painted show-thing of me

You called me the real-thing

Your creation

No setting was too good for me

Silver—even gold

I needed gorgeous surroundings

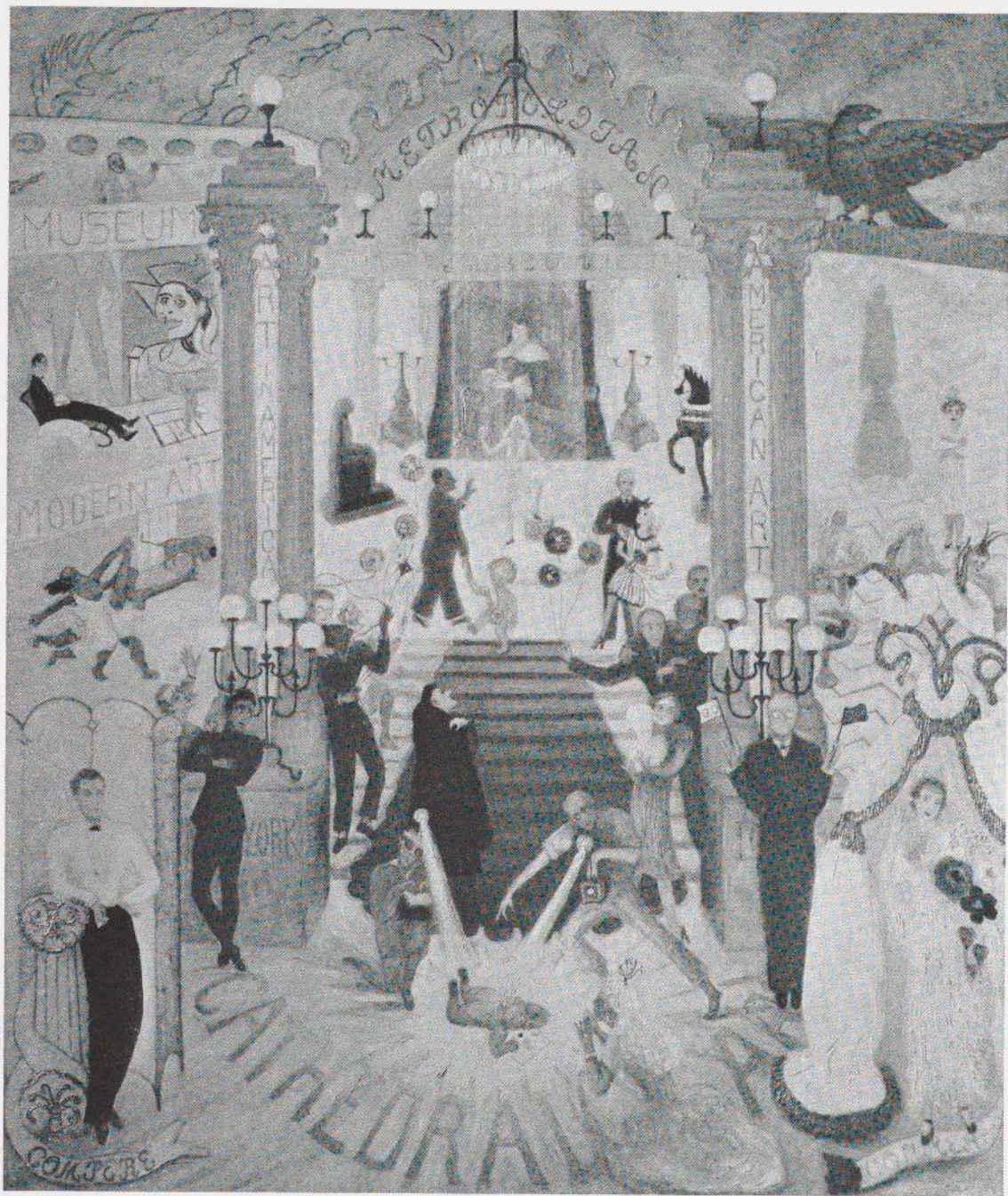
You then sold me to another man.

F. S.

With this posthumous exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art the trial by the public of Miss Stettheimer's work begins. I have no doubt whatever but that it will win permanent regard. It has a spirited and original style. It is not a case, as so often happens, of borrowing from European sources. It is strictly native. It has our special way of making fun of things, of getting rid of formality and stiffness and testifying to affection through light-heartedness. It is that necessity we have of calling our great men by their first names, of reducing everything to one level, of being—in a word—democratic. It is this quality that has already caught the attention of the foreign artists who have seen it, such as Pavel Tchelitchew, Marcel Duchamp, and just lately Christian Bérard. They rate it among their most interesting "finds" in America and relish its accent exceedingly.

Now what pleases the "discerning few" can please the general if the general be given a chance at it. In art, as in religion, the public finally arrives at the true values. You remember in *The Brothers Karamazoff* the old priest's dying admonition to the younger men: "Give them the Bible. Do not think they will not understand." Nothing that is worth while is above the public comprehension. There are no closed doors to opinion and certainly there is no class distinction in thought. "What Plato has thought you can think." Shelley told one of his friends that he "wrote for only six people." Gertrude Stein told me personally in 1914 "but I'd like to be acknowledged and have my books on the bookshelves like other writers." At a time when no one else in England thought much of William Blake, Charles Lamb said: "But there really is something great in 'Tiger, tiger burning bright.'" The six people who believed in Shelley, the six who believed in Gertrude, the six who believed in Blake have all had followers. The first step in the process of acquiring fame is to obtain the six believers. These Florine Stettheimer had. We will shortly be able to estimate their leavening power.

HENRY MCBRIDE



Cathedrals of Art (unfinished). 1942. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50". Collection Miss Ettie Stettheimer.
For identification of persons see opposite page.

addenda

The first three writers to get into print effectively on the subject of Miss Stettheimer's work were Carl Van Vechten, Paul Rosenfeld and Penelope Redd, of the Pittsburgh Sunday Post. Mr. Van Vechten and Mr. Rosenfeld were friends of the artist and favorably placed to know of her work from the beginning; Miss Redd rather remarkably recognized its qualities from a single example. Here are excerpts from their appraisals.

In *The Reviewer*, February 1922, Mr. Van Vechten wrote:

"I pause in wonder, also, before the canvases of Florine Stettheimer, canvases as gay as the fête at Neuilly. Her bowls of multi-coloured zinnias, fox-gloves and stocks are lacking in perversity. These are not the flowers of Demuth. They are apparently more honest, but no clairvoyant spirit standing before them would be misled by their honesty. Ecstasy is there but it is agathodemonic and not kakodemonic. It is perhaps, however, in her riotous picnics and parties, flooded with sunlight and splashes of violent colour that Miss Stettheimer is most original. This lady has got into her painting a very modern quality, the quality that ambitious American musicians will have to get into their compositions before anyone will listen to them. At the risk of being misunderstood, I must call this quality jazz. Jazz music, indubitably, is an art in itself, but before a contemporary American can triumph in the serious concert halls he must reproduce not the thing itself but its spirit in a more lasting form. This, Miss Stettheimer has abundantly succeeded in doing."

Mr. Rosenfeld wrote in *The Nation*, May 4, 1932:

"These brilliant canvases of hers do resemble gay decorations in coloured paper, and lacquered red and blue glass balls, and gilt-foil stars, and crêpe streamers, and angels of cotton wadding, and tinted wax tapers. That is because she has a highly refined decorative sense combined with a certain predilection for the ornamental, the frivolous, the festive; indeed a sense of the poetry and humour and pathos of what is merely embellishing. Many of her graceful, delicate shapes are imitated from festoonery, plumage, tassels, rosettes, fringes, bouquets, and all kinds of old-fashioned trappings. Others are in the forms of some Oriental elfin world in which everything is sinuous, diminutive and tendril-like; and huge bees and dragonflies and glorified insects and all sorts of non-human, vermicular, and winged creatures are the norm. She seems to delight in garish, tinselly, glittering colours; the colours of 'paste' and bric-a-brac and paper flowers; and induces her paint to form tiny sparkling brilliants. It is a fabulous little world of two-dimensional shapes with which she entertains us; but beautifully, sharply, deliciously felt; and perfectly communicative of the pleasure with which it was created."

In the Pittsburgh Sunday Post, May 11, 1924, Miss Redd said:

"Florine Stettheimer invents a new mode of expressing symbolism as original as the Chinese in this painting (a garden scene entitled 'Russian Bank'). She makes her garden not by the facts already described but in the superbly painted bouquet of flowers placed on a table, which makes a dazzling focus for the observer's eye. Miss Stettheimer is the only woman painter in America, and indeed there would seem to be few elsewhere who project an individual point of view on canvas. She carries the art of painting to its completest power in expressing a number of incidents occurring simultaneously. . . . Miss Stettheimer, more than any other painter whom we know, has developed a symbolic and decorative type of painting that also engages us by its human interest."

Cathedrals of Art. Opposite page.

In the foreground, left and right: Compère and Commère, Robert Locher and the artist. On the left, at the foot of the column inscribed "Art in America": A. Everett Austin, Jr.; and behind him on the right, Julien Levy and R. Kirk Askew, Jr., and on the left, with hand flung up, Pavel Tchelitchew. Seated in the upper left corner amid paintings by Picasso, Mondrian and Rousseau: Alfred H. Barr, Jr. The painting in the rear is by Frans Hals whom the artist admired. Standing in the upper right, in front of a sculptured figure by Gertrude Vanderbilt is Juliana Force. Lower right, at the foot of the column inscribed "American Art," with small flags marked Stop and Go: Henry McBride. Left of the column: Monroe Wheeler and two unidentified figures. Center foreground, adored by an anonymous female art lover, an infant personifying the state of the arts in this country, in an effulgence of spotlights, being photographed by George Platt Lynes. On steps: left, Alfred Stieglitz; right, holding a bust by Elie Nadelman, Marie Sterner. At the head of the stairs, with children: Francis Henry Taylor and Harry B. Wehle.

catalog

In dimensions height precedes width. An asterisk () before the title indicates that the work is illustrated. Unless otherwise noted the following paintings are lent by Miss Ettie Stettheimer, New York.*

- Landscape. c. 1914. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36".
- *André Brook (rear view). 1915. Oil on canvas, 28 x 34". *Ill. p. 11.*
- *Family Portrait #1. 1915. Oil on canvas, 40 x 62". *Ill. p. 10.*
- Flowers Against Blue-Green. c. 1915. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40".
- Flowers Against Wallpaper. c. 1915. Oil on canvas, 36 x 26".
- Tulips. c. 1916. Oil on canvas, 30 x 36". Lent by Durlacher Brothers, New York.
- *La Fête à Duchamp. 1917. Oil on canvas, 35 x 45½". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John D. Gordan, New York. *Ill. p. 12.*
- *Sunday Afternoon in the Country. 1917. Oil on canvas, 50 x 36". Lent by Durlacher Brothers, New York. *Ill. p. 14.*
- *West Point. 1917. Oil on canvas, 45½ x 35½". Lent by The United States Military Academy, West Point, New York. *Ill. p. 17.*
- *Heat. 1918. Oil on canvas, 50 x 36½". *Color frontispiece.*
- *New York. 1918. Oil on canvas, 60 x 42". Lent by Virgil Thomson, New York. *Ill. p. 16.*
- *Picnic at Bedford Hills. 1918. Oil on canvas, 40 x 50". *Ill. p. 15.*
- *Lake Placid. 1919. Oil on canvas, 40 x 50". *Color plate, p. 19.*
- *Asbury Park South. 1920. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60". *Ill. p. 21.*
- Portrait of Adolfo Best-Maugard. c. 1920? Oil on canvas, 28 x 18". Lent by Adolfo Best-Maugard, Mexico, D. F.
- *Spring Sale (At the Dressmaker's). 1921. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40". Lent by Durlacher Brothers, New York. *Ill. p. 23.*
- Still Life with Flowers. 1921. Oil on canvas, 26 x 30".
- Flowers in a Cup. 1921. Oil on canvas, 25 x 30". Lent by The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey.
- Flower Bouquet #1. c. 1921. Watercolor, 20½ x 29".
- Flower Bouquet #2. c. 1921. Watercolor, 19½ x 24½".
- *Russian Bank. 1921. Oil on canvas, 40 x 36". *Ill. p. 25.*
- *Portrait of Carl Van Vechten. 1922. 28 x 26". Lent by Carl Van Vechten, New York. *Ill. p. 28.*
- *Portrait of Henry McBride. 1922. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26". *Ill. p. 29.*
- Portrait of Baron de Meyer. 1923. Oil on canvas, 38 x 26". Lent by Durlacher Brothers, New York.
- Portrait of Joseph Hergesheimer. 1923. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26".
- Portrait of Louis Bouché. 1923. Oil on canvas, 28 x 18". Lent by Louis Bouché, New York.
- *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp. 1923. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26". *Ill. p. 27.*
- *Portrait of my Sister, Ettie Stettheimer. 1923. Oil on canvas, 40⅜ x 26¼". *Ill. p. 39.*
- *Portrait of my Sister, Carrie W. Stettheimer. 1923. Oil on canvas, 37½ x 25½". *Ill. p. 42.*
- *Self Portrait. 1923. Oil on canvas, 40 x 26". *Ill. p. 31.*
- *Delphinium and Columbine. c. 1923. Oil on canvas, 36 x 30". Lent by Durlacher Brothers, New York. *Ill. p. 26.*
- *Beauty Contest: To the memory of P. T. Barnum. 1924. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60". *Ill. p. 22.*
- *Portrait of my Mother. 1925. Oil on canvas, 38¼ x 26¼". *Ill. p. 38.*



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