

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OPENS LARGE EXHIBITIONOF PAINTINGS BY FLORINE STETTHEIMER

With the opening today (Wednesday, October 2) of an exhibition of the paintings of Florine Stettheimer, the Museum of Modern Art puts on public view the works of an artist almost unknown to the public yet for decades famous and enthusiastically appreciated in a small circle of noted artists, authors, critics, connoisseurs, singers and dancers. The exhibition has been directed by Marcel Duchamp, for many years a friend of the artist. Before he left for Paris in June he selected the works to be shown and was to have returned in time to install them in the Museum's first floor galleries. Unfortunately, however, he was not able to obtain return passage before the opening so the installation has been completed by Monroe Wheeler, the Museum's Director of Exhibitions and Publications. Henry McBride, another long-time friend of the artist, has written the text for the volume which will accompany the exhibition.

Most of the fifty oils and two watercolors shown have been lent by the artist's sister, Miss Ettie Stettheimer, for when Florine Stettheimer died two years ago she still owned most of her paintings. Yet neither the art collector nor the public was responsible for this apparent neglect and indifference toward her work. The artist wanted it that way. Unlike most painters Miss Stettheimer did not need to sell her pictures and was very reluctant to part with them. Her paintings were as real to her as people. Many of them were in fact extraordinarily true--though scarcely realistic--portraits of her mother and three sisters and the artistic and literary friends whose life was so much a part of her own.

Although Miss Stettheimer painted individual portraits of her mother, sisters and herself, she often portrayed her family as a group in the midst of the innumerable picnics and parties they gave for their illustrious friends. All were duly and sometimes fantastically recorded on Miss Stettheimer's canvases. When painting portraits of her friends the likeness was unmistakable even though Miss Stettheimer disdainfully flung years aside and airily disregarded the logic of time and place. There was a sort of fourth-dimensional simultaneity in her individual portraits: the subject retained his

youth and at the same time was surrounded by the fruits and interests of his maturity. Henry McBride describes her portrait of Carl Van Vechten as follows:

"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."

One of the artist's most affectionate portrayals is that of the Stettheimer nurse, severe yet kindly, clad in a mustard-colored dress of the 80's with draped skirt. She stands beside an old-fashioned bureau with lace-covered top on which repose a bouquet of flowers, a prayer book, and a painting of the Virgin and Child with votive light. Hung on one side of the dresser is a lace-edged Valentine on which is inscribed

MAGGIE
Nurse
Teacher
Guide

Above the nurse's head, lace curtains part to reveal a wide shaft of sunlight in which float cherubim heads of her five little Stettheimer charges. Lace surrounded Miss Stettheimer. It was almost her signature. It was used decoratively in many of her paintings and in the fabulous duplex studio she occupied for so many years in the Beaux Arts building on 40th Street where the tall windows looked down on Bryant Park.

Miss Stettheimer took the public, which never knew her work, in her artistic stride, brushing it on to her canvases with delighted enjoyment of the absurdities of modern life. Her "cathedral" series began in 1929 with Cathedrals of Broadway, ablaze with the lights, and vivid with the colors and the personalities of that famous street. Her Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue painted in 1931 celebrates a fashionable wedding under a huge red bell with the happy couple being conspicuously photographed from the curb as they descend a red-carpeted stairway to the delight of onlookers, several of whom have the faces of her friends. Cathedrals of Wall Street is replete with waving flags, military bands, the Salvation Army, the George Washington statue on the sub-Treasury steps, gold-braided officers and carnationed dignitaries. The Stock Exchange, ornamented with a huge plaque of Roosevelt's face is surmounted, in the eaves of the building, by the heads of Bernard Baruch, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and J. Pierpont Morgan. The artist was unable to finish Cathedrals

of Art, begun in 1942 and peopled with such well known figures in the art world as Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Francis Henry Taylor, Harry B. Wehle, R. Kirk Askew, Monroe Wheeler, Henry McBride, and the artist herself. In this unfinished painting the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum serve as backgrounds, while American art, a naked infant flat on its stomach, scrawls pictures in the glare of photographers' lights.

Florine Stettheimer, born in New York, spent much of her early life in Europe, where her family travelled extensively from the 90's to the beginning of the first World War. She did, however, spend some time at the Art Students' League, where she was a pupil of Kenyon Cox. In 1916 she had her first and only one-man exhibition at Knoedler's. As Mr. McBride states in his foreword to the catalog, this was before the highly original style which identifies her paintings today had crystallized. Mr. McBride refers to her early style as "regular," and goes on to say that "she painted in the open-brushstroke 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 the artist began more and more to paint her family and friends she evolved into something much more original. Mr. McBride writes of it in part as follows:

"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."

The artist had exhibited a picture occasionally in group shows. At the time of her death a family group picture was being shown in the Museum's exhibition Art in Progress. Mr. McBride comments on the painting as follows:

"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."

Flowers, particularly in bouquets, are the subject of many of Miss Stettheimer's most sensitive paintings and she has sometimes introduced huge bouquets or individual flowers in her paintings of people. In the exhibition at the Museum, however, the spectator's interest will probably center upon her deftly composed group and individual portraits. In the "conversation pieces" the spectator will have the added pleasure of identifying many of the persons and personages portrayed. In a poem written shortly after she returned from abroad Miss Stettheimer forecast the scenes and people who were to appear on many of her best canvases:

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.

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.

This posthumous one-man exhibition of the work of Florine Stettheimer will give the public an opportunity to become acquainted with an artist whose individuality and sense of fantasy were first seen by New Yorkers in her highly original stage sets and costumes for Four Saints in Three Acts, by Gertrude Stein, with music by Virgil Thomson. The exhibition will continue through November 10.

NOTE TO EDITORS: I regret to state that because of the artist's extensive use of white and yellow the photographs of her paintings do not have enough contrast to make good reproductions. This is particularly true when there is much detail in the paintings as in the Cathedral series.

Sarah Newmeyer
Publicity Director