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FLORINE STETTHEIMER:
A Re-Appraisal of the Artist in Context

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FLORINE STETTHEIMER:
A Re-Appraisal of the Artist in Context

by

Melissa M. Liles

B.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1991

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of the Arts
of Virginia Commonwealth University
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Master of Arts

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Gail Y. Liles (1936-1993), whose free spirit, loving support, and unremitting encouragement was a constant source of inspiration. For this, I am eternally grateful.

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FOREWORD

Florine Stettheimer was an independent painter and eminent "art hostess" among the avant-garde in New York City during the years between the World Wars.¹ Presiding over one of the most influential artist salons, Stettheimer was fully aware of the Euro-centric formalism and abstract tendencies that engaged many of her contemporaries. Professionally trained at several academic institutions at home and abroad, Stettheimer eventually abandoned tradition and created a style unlike any other during this period. Prior to the break, her works appear competent but derivative of both American and European academic examples. In 1916, Stettheimer rather suddenly affected a naive or unschooled style that did not fit within any academic or vanguard movement. This new style, what I have termed conscious naiveté, can be considered the genesis of Stettheimer's mature works.

Most of the critical writing on Stettheimer's work has been preoccupied with notions of femininity. Unable to fit her style within any particular category, writers chose to describe it as something that only a woman could produce. Perceptions of women as possessing a more sensitive and emotive nature than men has led many writers to consider Stettheimer's style as exclusively feminine. For example, Marsden Hartley wrote in 1931 that her painting contained, "a precious, incisive wit that only a feminine nature can express" and claimed that her style reflected, "a highly sensitized nature becoming to a woman of special culture and of special cultivation."² These assumptions

¹ Parker Tyler, Florine Stettheimer: A Life In Art (New York: Farrar, Straus and Co., 1963) 5.

² Marsden Hartley, "The Paintings of Florine Stettheimer." Creative Art, July

have not been challenged by writers nor have they attempted to define what it is to be feminine.

Much attention has also been granted to the iconography of the works. In 1946 an anonymous reviewer stated, "Most of Miss Stettheimer's paintings were a diary of the doings of herself, her mother, sisters, and friends."³ Henry McBride wrote in 1918 that the individuals portrayed in Stettheimer's paintings were "extremely well known in the most advanced Greenwich Village circles," and that "Not to know the fair artist...is to argue oneself unknown."⁴ It has been the tendency of many writers to identify the members of the illustrious gatherings depicted in Stettheimer's paintings rather than investigate the artist's stylistic evolution. But, the pivotal shift in style that occurred in Stettheimer's work has not been examined.

Stettheimer's wealth did enable her to paint in a highly individual mode since she did not have to rely on the art market. It was perhaps her wealth and seemingly untrained style that prevented the art world at large from taking her work seriously. Most of her encouragement and support came from the close-knit group of artists who frequented the Stettheimer salon. Writers in recent years have tended to reiterate notions put forth by the critic and artist's friend Henry McBride as well as her biographer Parker Tyler. This thesis proposes to shift the focus away from the feminizing stylistic analysis surrounding Stettheimer's work to an examination of the artist's pre- and post-1916 style.

1931: 18.

³ "A Stranger Here Herself." Newsweek, 14 October 1946: 118.

⁴ Henry McBride, "Florine Stettheimer at the Independents." The Sun, April 28, 1916.

CHAPTER ONE: Florine Stettheimer and the Early American Avant-Garde

THE WORLD IS FULL OF STRANGERS
They are very strange
I am never going to know them
Which I find easy to arrange.⁵

Florine Stettheimer (1871-1944) painted well over 100 paintings, wrote two unproduced plays, an abundance of unpublished poems, and designed the set and costumes for the successful production of Gertrude Stein's **Four Saints in Three Acts**, 1934. Her most productive years were those she lived in New York City between the World Wars, 1917-1941. A New York native, Stettheimer was born in Rochester on August 29, 1871 into a wealthy German-Jewish mercantile family. At the turn of the century her father deserted the family and, thus, a tight bond was formed between Florine and her two sisters Carrie and Ettie (figure 1). All three Stettheimer daughters spent the remainder of their years both unmarried and as the principal caretakers of their aging mother, Rosetta. The three sisters were encouraged by their mother to pursue both their creative and educational desires. To this end, Florine, who had been drawing since the age of 15, attended the Art Students League in New York where, from 1892 until 1895, she studied with Kenyon Cox. Under his tutelage Stettheimer mastered the most formal and academic of methods and proved herself to be an excellent draftsman, as may be seen in the surviving drawings from that period (figures 2 & 3).

Along with their mother the Stettheimer sisters moved to Europe in 1906 where they would spend the next eight years traveling between Germany, France, Italy, Spain,

⁵ Florine Stettheimer, Crystal Flowers (New York: Privately Published, 1949) 59.

and Switzerland. During this time Florine kept extensive diaries that chronicle her travels. These include numerous visits to museums, exhibitions, palaces, and places of historical interest. Labeled on the cover as "impersonal impressions of Art in travels," these early diaries were ultimately edited by her sister Ettie in 1948 before they were donated to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University. Her diaries illustrate an accumulated knowledge of art history but unfortunately do not include any critically specific references to contemporaneous artistic influences. The journal entries do, however, pay special attention to the "Old Masters," particularly Titian and Velázquez. While in Europe Stettheimer continued her art studies in Munich, Stuttgart, and Paris, the details of which are unknown. In addition to her documented visits to the Louvre, Prado, Salon D'Automne, and various Secession exhibitions, Florine and her sisters were exposed to current trends in the performing arts, including performances by Diaghilev's Russian Ballet (*Ballet Russes*) in 1912. In her diaries she acknowledges a particular interest in the set and costume designs and the impact of this exposure became evident in her painting as she began to use theatrical devices such as canopies and curtains within the composition. For example, Stettheimer's painting *Delphinium and Columbine* (figure 4) of 1923 displays a still-life enframed by curtains in a stage-like atmosphere.

In 1914, shortly before the outbreak of World War I, the Stettheimer's returned to New York City. The New York that they returned to had just begun its way toward becoming a new artistic and cultural center of the West. Although the emergence of modern art in America trailed behind the European movements, there was a great desire

among American artists to break away from the European academic traditions. As early as 1908, the artists who formed "the Eight" or Ash Can School of painting sought to fight the conservative forces and derivative works advocated by the National Academy of Design. Artists such as John Sloan, George Luks, and George Bellows wanted to paint subject matter relative to everyday experience, which included the foes of rapid urbanization and capitalization. On the other side of the modernist aesthetic was the less political and more expressionistic painters and photographers of the Stieglitz group. In 1905 Alfred Stieglitz had created his Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, also known as "291." Stieglitz, like the painters of the Ash Can School, loathed the formulaic styles promoted by the academies and encouraged artists to express scenes of the American experience. First and foremost, praising the idea of the individual, Stieglitz discouraged American artists from training or working abroad. Nonetheless, Stieglitz was responsible for bringing forth the first American exhibitions of the European moderns which included Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso, Henri Rousseau, and Rodin among others. The publications Camera Work (1903) and 291 (1915), also under the aegis of Alfred Stieglitz, advanced an international program of modern art.

In 1913, one year before the Stettheimer's returned home, the International Exhibition of Modern Art also known as the Armory Show was held at the Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory in New York City. This exhibition was the first to expose modern art to the public at large. Although Stieglitz had introduced many of the artists to America, his galleries had been in the service of a very select and intellectual group of spectators. The Armory show, described by Milton Brown as "without doubt the most important

single exhibition held in America," contained a monumental 1,300 works in eighteen galleries.⁶ The art ranged from J.A.D. Ingres and Eugène Delacroix to Vincent Van Gogh and Odilon Redon to Alexander Archipenko to Marcel Duchamp. Widely attended, the exhibition provided the first pinnacle for the emerging avant-garde in America.

In the wake of the Armory show a number of important exhibitions, publications, galleries, and salons emerged. In 1916, the Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters was held at the Anderson Galleries of New York. One year later, the ambitious first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists was held at the Grand Central Palace in New York City. This massive show of 2,400 paintings and 350 sculptures was prided on the fact that it was a democratic exhibition with it's "No jury, no prizes" policy. Further, publications such as The Blind Man (1917), Rongwrong (1917), and New York Dada (1921) were made possible by the support of the independently wealthy Walter Arensberg, whose conversion to the modernist aesthetic was made possible via the Armory Show.⁷ In 1915 the Modern Gallery opened and was managed by Marius De Zayas who later opened and operated the De Zayas gallery from 1919-1921. Exhibition support for women artists also began to increase. In 1908, the Knoedler Galleries sponsored an all-woman exhibition and Stieglitz gave one-women shows to Pamela Colman Smith in 1907 and Georgia O'Keeffe in 1917. Women were instrumental, as well, in the promotion and development of the American modernist aesthetic and in

⁶ Milton Brown, American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 47.

⁷ Robert Crunden, American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism, 1885-1917 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 411.

1918, through the efforts of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Juliana Force, the Whitney Studio was founded.

The steady influx of European artists émigrés and repatriated Americans after 1913 spawned the unofficial opening of several artistic salons in New York City. The three most important salons of this era began with Mabel Dodge in 1913, and continued with Walter and Louise Arensberg in 1914 and the Stettheimer salon in 1916. In Greenwich Village, the heart of the new bohemia, Mabel Dodge became hostess to a wide assortment of individuals which included artists, poets, anarchists, socialists, suffragists, pagans, Freudians, and any one else whom she deemed interesting. She wanted her salon to rival that of her good friend Gertrude Stein in Paris. The evenings were organized into conversations orchestrated by a single leader and the topics discussed were as varied as its participants. In describing her purpose, Dodge declared, "I wanted to know everybody...I wanted in particular, to know the Head of Things, Heads of Movements, Heads of Newspapers, Heads of all kinds of groups of people."⁸ The Arensberg salon differed from that of Mabel Dodge in two ways. First, it consisted mainly of avant-garde artists (primarily proponents of Dadaism) and, second, it was less well organized. Evenings at the Arensberg's consisted of dinner, chess, music, and intimate rather than forum conversations. Walter Arensberg, in many ways, was creating connections for his artist friends by introducing them to other patrons and collectors.

Upon Florine Stettheimer's return to the United States she was introduced by the writer Avery Hopwood to several artists such as Carl Van Vechten in 1915 and Marcel

⁸ Crunden 411.

Duchamp in 1916. She also developed in 1916 a close friendship with the dancer Adolph Bolm from the *Ballet Russes*. That same year the Stettheimer's began to entertain New York's high bohemia (artists, writers, critics, dancers, scholars, etc.) in their salon on West 76th Street. Thus began the tradition of Florine's "unveiling" parties.⁹ During these gatherings the well-dressed sisters, Carrie and Ettie, would offer an elaborately prepared menu. Typically, the guests engaged in conversation, oftentimes in French, about Florine's most recent painting which was ceremoniously unveiled before the assembled. Georgia O'Keeffe described the process; "Florine Stettheimer made very large paintings for the time, and when a painting was finished she had an afternoon party for twenty or twenty-five people who were particularly interested to see what she had been painting."¹⁰ The salon's setting and atmosphere was decidedly Victorian, International, and aristocratic; the modernist revolution in America had been built upon expatriation and Old World accumulated wealth. The guest list often included such artists as Francis Picabia and Duchamp, exponents of New York Dada; Albert Gleizes, International Cubist; and the American modernist set which included Alfred Stieglitz and Charles Demuth. Paul Rosenfeld wrote of the salon in 1946, "Art was an indispensable component of the modern, open, intellectual life of the place. The sisters felt it as a living issue. Sincerely they lived it."¹¹ For Florine, the Stettheimer salon became the important opportunity to exhibit her paintings to a sophisticated and well-educated audience. It also

⁹ Barbara Bloemink, Friends and Family: Portraiture in the World of Florine Stettheimer (Katonah: Katonah Museum of Art, 1993) 5.

¹⁰ Anne D'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., Marcel Duchamp (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973) 212.

¹¹ Paul Rosenfeld, "Florine Stettheimer." Accent, Winter 1945: 100.

served as a source for the subject matter for her work. For example, her painting *Soirée* (figure 5) of circa 1918 depicts one of the Stettheimer salon gatherings. The artists Gaston Lachaise and Albert Gleizes, bottom left, are shown contemplating one of Florine's paintings while others observe and discuss the additional works that surround them. Generally well received by the guests, Stettheimer's paintings were mostly autobiographical in content and could be described as a chronicle of a privileged society; one which included herself, her family, and the New York avant-garde.

1916 was also the year of Stettheimer's first and only solo exhibition during her lifetime. Encouraged by Marie Stern, her friend and the director of the Knoedler Gallery in New York City, Florine agreed to exhibit 12 of her paintings but only if she had complete creative control of the installation. The exhibit was held upstairs in a small gallery space designed to replicate the artist's boudoir in which Stettheimer was accustomed to viewing the work (figure 6). Stettheimer hired a carpenter to duplicate the gold and white furniture of her studio and she draped the walls with sheer, delicate materials, hung cellophane curtains, and covered the floor with red carpeting. Unfortunately the reaction of the press to the show was neither widespread nor impressive. The approximately 10 reviews ranging from The Evening Post, The World, to American Art News, among a few others, were all published in New York City and few went very far to describe the work. The critical commentary included such various terms as "pretentious," "independent," "modest," and "inventive."¹² Stettheimer

¹² These terms were extracted from various reviews in The World, the Evening Post, and the Evening Mail all from October 21, 1916 and also The World from October 24, 1916 and can be found in the Stettheimer archives at Columbia University.

recorded in her diary on October 17, 1916, that "quite a few people were in to see my X., (her reference to exhibition) but they must have been friends of the family--and only one party asked to see the price list. My name is up on the outside now on Fifth..." Later, on October 24th, she wrote, "I am not selling much to my amazement-sold nothing."¹³ The exhibition catalogue for the Knoedler show (October 16-28, 1916) listed the titles of the 12 works shown, all of which had been painted during or before the year 1915.

It is significant that after this date, circa 1916, one can detect a notable shift in style in Stettheimer's work, from what can be described as *fin de siècle* decadence to a consciously naive or unschooled style. Her earliest works reflect the formal academic tradition that was advocated in the United States by the Art Students League and National Academy of Design at the turn of the century. Her transitional works from the years 1906 to 1915 are highly derivative of European vanguard tendencies such as Post-Impressionism and Fauvism. After which, Stettheimer's transformation of style was based on her further rejection of formalistic values in art, such as the use of atmospheric perspective and *chiaroscuro*. Stettheimer's new mode of painting placed her works in sharp contrast to the academic training that she had received and also to the accepted modes of painting in America which included the stark realism of the Ash Can School or the expressionistic and abstract styles that engaged many of the painters in the Stieglitz group. But although her style changed, she remained faithful in her choices of subject matter. Portraits of her family, friends, and still-lifes remained the staple of her painting. Later, she added scenes of New York to her *oeuvre*.

¹³ Florine Stettheimer, unpublished diaries, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (October 17, 1916).

Although Stettheimer's reaction to her solo exhibition was one of disappointment, it did not discourage her from participating, throughout her career in over 20 group exhibitions, or from sharing her works with her contemporaries within the confines of her studio/salon. Stettheimer was also involved with various artist groups, such as the Society of Independent Artists, the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, the Modern Painters of America, and an early member of the Société Anonyme.

As mentioned, Stettheimer's exposure to the *Ballet Russes* in 1912 proved to have a profound effect on her creativity in later years. Soon after arriving back in New York, Stettheimer began to compose the scenario for her unproduced ballet **Orphee of the Four Arts** which included an album of forty drawings, several canvases, and four plaster figurines. On October 5, 1916 Stettheimer wrote in her diary that, "My composing the ballet was a means of getting away from the war--like the Greeks invented their gay mythology to make life possible for their melancholy dispositions."¹⁴ Stettheimer's continued interest in the theatre led to her commission to design the sets and costumes for Gertrude Stein's opera **Four Saints in Three Acts** (figures 7 & 8). The premiere of **Four Saints** was held at the Wadsworth Atheneum on February 7, 1934 and was, according to Henry McBride, "the artist's first and only venture into the modern world of publicity," and was "successful from every point of view; and thoroughly enjoyable to her."¹⁵ The set design, like the majority of her paintings, was based on the familiar surroundings of the artist's boudoir. Indeed, it included materials similar to the

¹⁴ Stettheimer, unpublished diaries (October 24, 1916).

¹⁵ Henry McBride, Florine Stettheimer (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946) 30.

Knoedler installation in 1916 such as cellophane curtains and crystal flowers. At the time of her death in 1944, Stettheimer was working on her second ballet/play, **Pocohontas**, which she planned to do in collaboration with the musician Virgil Thomson. Despite her interest in theatre, Stettheimer continued to paint. Her last canvases were the **Cathedrals** series, which are comic and stage-like portrayals of the art of commerce in New York City. Her unfinished **Cathedrals of Art** is a humorous but critical statement of the art world, including its dealers, museums, and market on which she did not have to depend on due to her financial status.

On May 11, 1944 Stettheimer died of cancer at the New York Hospital. Her sister Carrie died six weeks later. The surviving sister Ettie was granted control over both estates. Stettheimer's paintings were placed in various private and public collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The artist's papers, which included the edited diaries and correspondence, were donated to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University and also the Butler Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University. Ettie also had her sister's studio and boudoir photographed for posterity. Stettheimer's library of art books was donated by Carl Van Vechten to Fisk University in Memphis, Tennessee. A posthumous exhibition of Stettheimer's work was held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946 under the direction of Marcel Duchamp and Monroe Wheeler. The catalogue was written by her friend and critic Henry McBride. And in 1949, Ettie, along with the help of Van Vechten, published a book of Florine's poetry, which they entitled Crystal Flowers.

CHAPTER TWO: A Pivotal Shift in Style

THEN BACK TO NEW YORK
And skyscrapers 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.¹⁶

Stettheimer was 43 years old when she returned to New York in 1914. Her poem "Then Back to New York" suggests that she was excited by the changes that had been taking place while she was in Europe during the early years of this century. By 1914 the emergence of modern art in New York had been firmly established among members of the avant-garde. Through her friendships with several avant-garde artists and writers such as Carl Van Vechten and Avery Hopwood, Stettheimer's exposure to various modes of vanguard painting was immediate. Barely two years after Stettheimer's return to the United States and shortly after her unsuccessful solo show of 1916, a pivotal shift in style occurred in her work. Although trained at the Art Students League in the strictest academic sense, Stettheimer's new mode of painting was based on a forceful rejection of her formal training and other contemporary styles. The conscious naiveté that she adopted can be described as the artist's attempt to reinvent her own expressive and stylistic vocabulary while restraining elements of her academic training.

¹⁶

Stettheimer, Crystal Flowers 79.

Like many artists, Stettheimer altered her style several times before reaching maturity. Examples of her mature style such as *Soirée* (figure 5) from circa 1918 are better understood through the examination of Stettheimer's stylistic evolution. Her early drawings such as *Profile of Dante* (figure 9) and *Head of a Girl* (figure 10), both around 1886, exhibit Stettheimer's inherent but unschooled abilities. Both drawings display a concise use of line and modeled shadowing that is remarkable for an untrained 15 year old. Stettheimer's paintings executed during the years she attended the Art Students League, such as *Study of a Nude* (figure 11) and *Portrait of My Sister Carrie in White Dress* (figure 12), both circa 1893-95, show a purposeful development in the same academic vein. Her brushwork is loose and open and her palette is limited to the use of white, gray, black, and earth tones. The figures are well modeled through the use of chiaroscuro and are similar to the figure types produced by the example of her teachers Kenyon Cox and H. Siddon Mowbray. The portrait of her sister is reminiscent of Whistlerian figure painting that was promoted by Cox, Robert Henri, and other members among the Art Students League. Stettheimer's early style, solidly structured and dark tonal figure studies, is based upon the accepted modes of realist painting produced in number among American and European academies.

Stettheimer's European exposure and training between the years of 1906 and 1914 led the artist to experiment in several vanguard European styles. During this time one can see two phases of experimentation: 1) French impressionistic style and 2) Symbolist inspired. Her painting *Two Bathers by a Group of Trees* (figure 13) from 1911 contains the impressionistic qualities of vibrating light and atmosphere facilitated by small,

choppy, and color juxtaposed brushstrokes. Academic modeling of the figures is replaced by a heavy reliance on line. This period begins Stettheimer's continuing interest in the experimentation of paint application.

Post-impressionistic styles of painting, such as Symbolism, were inspired by a variety of elements including Japanese prints and psychology. The Nabis (or Prophets), although more mystical in subject matter, shared the Symbolist devices of bright and arbitrary colors, ornamental surfaces and flat patterns. Stylistic elements of both groups were ultimately incorporated into Stettheimer's mature work. Her affinity to these groups was purely stylistic, not conceptual. Early examples of these influences can be seen in Stettheimer's *Two Flower Vases and Statue of Aphrodite* (figure 14) of circa 1911. In this painting one can see the Oriental use of a tipped-up perspective with the table and the use of an ornamental background as seen on the left side. The decorative quality and perspective of the painting are similar to the interiors that were produced by Pierre Bonnard from the same period. Like Bonnard, Stettheimer's emphasis on decoration and Far Eastern arabesques denies the mysterious or ambiguous qualities that were emphasized among the Nabis. In this example, the paint application is thick and the brushwork is less controlled than Stettheimer's impressionistic work. Akin to the still-lifes of the Symbolist Odilon Redon, the flowers in this painting are not modeled by academic standards, rather they present more of the essence of the bloom than an exact likeness. The ideas of essence versus exactitude and a love for a highly decorative atmosphere are borrowed elements from the Symbolists and Nabis that Stettheimer would continue to utilize throughout her career.

The paintings that Stettheimer created upon her return to New York mark the first signs of the artist's emerging independent style. The most significant work from this transition period is *Family Portrait No. 1* (figure 15) painted in 1915. Although in this painting one can recognize a variety of European influences, most notably Fauvism, there is an attempt by the artist to translate them into her own unique idiom. The use of modeling has begun to wane in comparison to the body types Stettheimer produced during her Art Students League period. The flattening of pattern and heavy use of decoration show the artist's devoted attention to detail. It is during this period, 1914-1916, that Stettheimer abandoned the use of a paint brush and began to thickly apply color with a palette knife. In a detail of *Family Portrait No. 1* (figure 16) the heavily impastoed surface is readily visible. The bold color and overall decorative quality of this work is derived from the artist's exposure to French Fauvism during the first decade of this century. This style of portrait is typical of the paintings that were included in Stettheimer's solo show of 1916.

Stettheimer's emerging independence in the realm of painting may be seen not only in her conscious rejection of major contemporary and academic styles, but also with her use of extremely personal subject matter. After her solo show of 1916 and in response to the lack of positive critical appraisal, Stettheimer had adopted an idiosyncratic mode of painting that can be compared in many ways to the works of naive or primitive painters. Her forceful rejection of certain formalist values in art resulted in the artist's highly independent method of expression which included such devices as ambiguous space, arbitrary colors, reversal of scale, and flat, simplified figures.

Stettheimer's painting *Sunday Afternoon in the Country* (figure 17), 1917, documents a family event which included the company of many well-known artists such as Edward Steichen and Marcel Duchamp among others. The figure types have changed dramatically in comparison to those she painted at the turn of the century. They are simplified, flat forms that are given identity through the artist's use of visual clues. For example, her self-portrait, seen on the right side of the background, shows the artist painting at her easel. Edward Steichen, seen on the left side of the foreground, is presented with his camera. Her mother, on the right side of the foreground, is seen playing a favorite board game. A narrative is implied with the various actions and interactions of the figures and the composition creates a crowded design that becomes characteristic of her works after this date. The very intimate nature of Stettheimer's paintings, described by her sister Ettie as "an autobiography composed of visual poems," has been a rich source for iconographical readings for writers since the early 1920's.¹⁷

Stettheimer's painting entitled *Heat* (figure 18) chronicles a birthday party given for her mother in 1919. The artist's abandonment of academic perspective has been replaced by three arbitrary fields of color to establish distance. The languishing trees and figures and the hot colored hues reveal, as does the title, the summer season in which they celebrated the occasion. The lack of modeling of the figures and their vagarious placement creates an effect of weightlessness and the figures almost seem to float in space. Another composition painted in 1919, *Lake Placid* (figure 19), illustrates Stettheimer's affected naive treatment of space. Again there is no particular definition of

¹⁷ Introduction written by Ettie Stettheimer in *Crystal Flowers* (Privately Published, 1949), v. See also the writings of Henry McBride and Parker Tyler.

foreground, middle, or background. Similar to Oriental and primitive devices, the balcony, the raft, the ladder, and the interior of the canoe are all tilted toward the spectator to fully reveal the contents. Heavy outline is used to define the figures and objects in space. The figures are sylph-like, sinuous, androgynous, all of which describes the real life fashions of that era. Stettheimer's figure types are similar to those used in fashion illustration and recall the work of Erté from 1913 onward.

The culmination of Stettheimer's mature style occurred in her portraits from the 1920's. Stettheimer never required individuals to pose. Instead, she would often sketch her subject matter without their attention. The result when translated into painting were portraits that evoked the character of the person rather than an exact likeness.

Stettheimer's 1923 painting *Carrie W. Stettheimer, with Doll's House* (figure 20) shows a dramatic change in style from the portrait of her sister that she painted in the 1890's (figure 12). Modeling is replaced by a heavy reliance on line and therefore the figure appears to have little volume. In the earlier portrait her sister is shown standing in a studio background. The later portrait is filled with a number of her sister's attributes most notably the doll house that she created and her family in the background. The attention to detail and the heavy use of the pictorial clues of personal symbols became a hallmark of Stettheimer's style at this time. All of her portraits contain collateral material that has specific allusions to the sitter. For instance, her *Portrait of Carl Van Vechten* (figure 21) of 1922 shows the artist/author surrounded by novels and a typewriter. In the distance there is a reference to the theatre district with a marquee that spells out the name of the actress Fania Marinoff who was Van Vechten's second wife. Stettheimer cleverly spelled

out her name and the date of the painting on the typewriter's keyboard to establish both authorship of the work and her intimate connection to Van Vechten.

In 1923 Stettheimer painted *Portrait of Ettie Stettheimer* (figure 22). In a rare comment by the artist on her own work, she described the iconography of the Christmas tree in this portrait as "the burning bush of Moses."¹⁸ This comment was perhaps made in jest as Stettheimer and her family, Jewish in descent, celebrated the Christian holiday. The paint application of the fire at the top of the Christmas tree is very thick which creates texture and the illusion of dimension. The figure of her sister Ettie is defined by the use of a curvilinear outline. The highly simplified figure, now characteristic of her style, is reduced to a flat plane of color with the exception of the arms and legs. In similar fashion Stettheimer painted her *Portrait of Myself* (figure 23) in the same year, 1923. This self-portrait shows an androgynous figure type that is suspended in mid-air. A cloak that the figure rests upon appears to be a reference to a giant bloom. The artist faintly painted her name in the clouds and included a bouquet that recalls her early painted still-lifes. She has also painted two sets of eyes, one atop of the other, which may be symbolic of her vision as an artist. This mysterious conception of herself also recalls the work of the Symbolists, most notably the portraits and still-lifes created by Odilon Redon, that she had been exposed to while in Europe.

In addition to family portraits, Stettheimer also painted numerous portraits of her artist friends who included Alfred Stieglitz, Louis Bouché, and Adolfo Best-Mauguard. In 1923 she painted *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (figure 24) as a tribute to their

¹⁸ Stettheimer, unpublished diaries (October 2, 1923).

friendship. In this work, Stettheimer alludes to Duchamp's enigmatic art and to his alter ego Rrose Selavy with the inclusion of a second figure. Both figures are flat and sinuous but the facial features are very close to Duchamp's likeness. The figure of Rrose Selavy is seated upon a curious mechanical spiral which alludes to Duchamp's infamous ready-mades. Stettheimer created a frame using Duchamp's initials, a visual joke that perhaps alludes to his notoriety.

Stettheimer's style, which may be regarded as conscious naiveté, remained constant after 1916. There is little change stylistically between the works she painted in the late teens and twenties and her last works painted in the thirties and early forties. Stettheimer's *Family Portrait No. 2* (figure 25), 1933, shows a scene similar to the portrait of her family painted in 1915. The figures in the latter portrait have evolved into more elongated and androgynous body types. Eighteen years later the sisters remain the same. They are still portrayed as very fashion conscious and youthful. Like the earlier portrait, the sisters and mother are arranged around a very large bouquet of flowers. In *Family Portrait No. 2*, Stettheimer employed a reversal of scale in which the foreground still life is much larger than the figures, perhaps equating the sisters to the flower blooms. She incorporated the family's names, their address, and the year of the painting into the composition. The addition of text was used in many of her paintings as a structural device. Her interest in the form of the letters and the impact of their presence was also shared by some of her contemporaries, most notably Stuart Davis and Charles Demuth.

Stettheimer's last paintings were her *Cathedral* series, which she began in 1929 and continued until her death in 1944. These paintings were unique in that the subject

matter did not specifically chronicle a single event in the artist's life. Each painting dealt with a particular theme. The first was *Cathedrals of Broadway* from 1929 in which she celebrated the theatre district of New York City. The second was *Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* of 1931 and third was *Cathedrals of Wall Street* of 1939 in which she portrayed the art of commerce in their respective districts. And, finally, her unfinished *Cathedrals of Art* of 1942 is the artist's satirical commentary of the art world, its dealers, museums, and market. The *Cathedral* canvases contain an array of complicated imagery, each having its own set of visual clues. Her inclusion of these details may be seen as a culmination of attributes. In *Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* (figure 26) the artist is shown with her sisters above the grill of the car on the right hand side. They watch a wedding as Arnold Genthe photographs the ceremony. Various flags, civic officials, and commercial names are included in the composition. A brightly colored canopy and carpet draw the spectators attention to the bride and groom, while the arch of St. Patrick's Cathedral frames the central event. The *Cathedral* series exhibits Stettheimer's affinity for the theatre that was born out of her exposure to the Russian Ballet in 1912. Each painting is condensed in such a way that it alludes to a stage setting. Her *Cathedrals of Wall Street* (figure 27) uses the New York Stock Exchange as a back drop. Rays of gold radiate from the institution and acts as a spot light. Once again, Stettheimer has included herself in the composition. She occupies a position in the right side of the foreground holding a banner inscribed, "TO GEORGE WASHINGTON FROM FLORINE ST. 1939." The artist also included several references to American history by depicting a native-American chief, a civil war veteran, and New York's Mayor LaGuardia. The unfinished *Cathedrals of Art*

(figure 28), the final work in the series, contains a plethora of art historical references. Quotations from Picasso and Henri Rousseau are seen on the left side of the composition and in the center, behind the haze of suggested light, is a reference to the Old Masters. The names of New York City's roll call of museums and art publications are boldly inscribed within the architecture that refers to the Metropolitan Museum's interior. Stettheimer humorously depicted the art critic Henry McBride in the foreground holding "stop" and "go" flags to illustrate the power that critics wield in the art market. An infant is seen in the center of the foreground drawing while he is being photographed by George Platt Lynes and documented by a critic. This vignette within the painting refers to the development of new art and how young artists are revered. The aging Stettheimer included herself as the "*commere*," or godmother, of the museum and placed herself within a canopy, effectively and symbolically placing herself outside of the action of the art world. Although she had won the admiration of her artist friends, Stettheimer never received attention from the art world at large. Her paintings were not placed into public collections until after her death and it was only through the efforts of a handful of supporters that she was given the honor of a posthumous retrospective in 1946.

Stettheimer's change in style from a traditional mode of painting to that of an individualized and highly idiosyncratic mode of painting occurred shortly after her unsuccessful solo show of 1916. Stettheimer's disappointment with the exhibition and her recent exposure to avant-garde painting at that time may have prompted her to adopt an affected unschooled style. In the introduction of his book American Salons, Robert Crunden defines artists of the modernist era as "a collection of the excluded," including

the "Jewish in a Christian society" and the "female in a male society."¹⁹ Stettheimer's significant shift in style may have been the artist's attempt to set herself apart from her male peers or perhaps her ideas were shaped by the notion of individuality as advocated by Stieglitz and his supporters. Stieglitz called upon artists of the modern era to express their subjective American experience, one that would not rely on the august teachings of the academy. Stettheimer's rejection of modernist abstraction and other currents of the time suggests her need to be independent and self-assertive. A strong sense of individualism is implicit in her own unorthodox style.

On the other hand, there was a strong interest in folk art and naive painting among early American avant-garde artists and collectors. In addition to European influences, Stettheimer's style may have been effected by her exposure to these collections. Stieglitz exhibited Henri Rousseau in 1910 at his Photo-Secession Gallery and the group held a continuing interest in the exhibition of naive or primitive painters as well as African sculpture and children's art. Other early advocates and collectors of American folk art included Louise and Walter Arensberg, Elie Nadelman, and Hamilton Easter Field who began the Ogunquit School of Painting and Sculpture in 1913. These collections were hardly insignificant for they influenced many American modernists such as Marsden Hartley in much the same way that African sculpture influenced their European counterparts. Similar to primitive or naive painting, Stettheimer used such devices as lack of perspective and modeling, the use of text to announce subject matter, and crowded compositions.

¹⁹ Crunden xiii.

Stettheimer did not reveal in her diary any specific artistic influences. Her sister Ettie wrote in the introduction of her posthumously printed poetry book, "I think she must have read everything concerning art published in English, French and German...excepting the long formal treatises on Aesthetics."²⁰ Stettheimer's biographer, Parker Tyler, described Stettheimer as a "permanent Fauve" and he also believed that her painting had a specific affinity with Oriental painting.²¹ Stettheimer always began her paintings using a Chinese white ground and this resulted in the quality of white light, an Orientalizing effect. Her paintings, as early as 1911, do exhibit the Oriental device of a tipped-up perspective and decorative quality but the overall translation of these elements shows a closer affinity to European quotations of Eastern art. Through her diaries of her travels it is known that she attended a variety of exhibits while in Germany. During this time she was exposed to English and Continental Art Nouveau, the emerging Jugendstil movement, Fauvism, and the works of Symbolist and Nabi inspired painters.²² Stettheimer's mature style is an amalgam of her European experimental phase and her incorporation of primitive or naive tendencies. Her work can clearly be associated with the development of the modernist aesthetic as there was no homogeneous direction in its emergence but rather a variety of influences that was born out of post-impressionism. The dramatic change in style of figure types, the experimentation with paint application, a freer use of color, an absolute disregard for academic perspective, and her consistent use of private visual clues are what distinguishes Stettheimer's pre- and post-1916 works.

²⁰ Ettie Stettheimer iii.

²¹ Tyler 14.

²² Elisabeth Sussman, Florine Stettheimer: Still Lifes, Portraits and Pageants 1910-1942 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1980) 2.

CHAPTER THREE: The Critical Reception of Florine Stettheimer

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--²³

The earliest critical references of Stettheimer's paintings were the handful of reviews and announcements of the artist's 1916 solo show at the Knoedler Galleries. The 12 works included in the exhibition were described as "decorative," "pretentious," and "more ambitious than successful" by anonymous reviewers in the New York publications the Eagle, The World, and the Evening Mail respectively.²⁴ Aside from these generalized epithets, the majority of the reviews comment on Stettheimer's color choices which are described as "striking" and "curious."²⁵ But overall, the early reviews are indifferent. A few can even be categorized as mere announcements. It is not until 1918, two years after Stettheimer's pivotal shift in style, that she would be recognized again in the press. Henry McBride contributed two paragraphs in The Sun to Stettheimer's entry at the second exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists. The painting included was Stettheimer's *La Fête à Duchamp* which McBride arbitrarily entitled the "Birthday Party." McBride's comments were preoccupied with the social function of the subject rather than Stettheimer's new independent style. He concluded by stating, "The more I

²³ Stettheimer, Crystal Flowers 26.

²⁴ These early reviews are located in the Stettheimer Archives in the Butler Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University and are dated October 21 & 22, 1916.

²⁵ The World (October 21, 1916) and American Art News (October 21, 1916).

think of it the more miffed I am that I wasn't asked to that party."²⁶ Soon after McBride would become personally acquainted with Stettheimer and, ultimately, one of her chief critical supporters.

There were only a half dozen or so reviews written on Stettheimer during her lifetime despite her active participation in a number of group shows which included the Independents annual exhibitions from 1917 until 1926, the Salon d' Automne in 1922, and several American modernist group shows. In 1921 Stettheimer was included in the **Exhibition of Oil Paintings and Drawings Showing the Later Tendencies in Art** at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. A review of the show entitled "Radical Artists Show Their Work" describes Stettheimer rather vaguely as a "social satirist" and there is no critical mention of style.²⁷ It was not until Stettheimer's **Cathedral** series from the late 1930's and early 1940's that she imbued her paintings with derisive wit. She did, however, during this period, infuse her paintings with an animated sense of individualism which may more aptly be described as tongue-in-cheek. Her new mode of painting was based on a rejection of formalism and the subject matter was often about the celebrations of friends and family. As such, the reviewer may have perceived Stettheimer's unorthodox style as an attack on the academic art establishment. It is interesting, notwithstanding, that Stettheimer would be identified in 1921 by David Lloyd as "radical" and exhibited alongside such noteworthy artists as Charles Sheeler, Marius De Zayas, and Louis Bouché.

²⁶ McBride, The Sun.

²⁷ David Lloyd, "Radical Artists Show Their Work." Evening Post, April 16, 1921.

Probably the earliest, most descriptive review of Stettheimer's work was written in 1922 by her friend and contemporary Carl Van Vechten. Van Vechten states in a rather poetic and subjective manner that Stettheimer's work is both hermetic and original and he equates her style to jazz music. He believed that her work had a spiritual quality that cannot be replicated by using traditional means. He stated:

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.²⁸

By using the term "jazz," Van Vechten has rather succinctly described the idiosyncratic and fluid nature of Stettheimer's painting. The word "jazz" connotes a variety of applicable descriptions such as syncopated, rhythmic, and improvisational. The historical implications of the word is more suggestive. The era, often referred to as "the jazz age," is distinguished by its liberties, sensations, and cult of individualism.²⁹ Although jazz was appreciated rather quickly among the modernists, it was historically criticized in the mainstream press for its primitive associations. In 1922 an anonymous reviewer stated:

Jazz has a new rhythm, a new arrangement of tones, a piquancy, a verve and stimulating qualities which are a real contribution to music...Jazz is the victim of its wild modern devotees who are as bad as the voodoo worshippers of darkest Africa.³⁰

²⁸ Carl Van Vechten, "Pastiches et Pistaches." The Reviewer, February 1922.

²⁹ Edward Lueders, Carl Van Vechten and the Twenties (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1955) 44.

³⁰ "Calls America Still Savage Musically," New York Times, 11 October 1922: 15.

Stettheimer's style may be seen as akin to jazz in two distinct ways. First, jazz was a sort of folk or primitive development of indigenous music or, in other words, it did not derive from the formalist traditions of music. Secondly, jazz was a form of popular or "pop" music and, as such, appealed to the masses. In comparison, Stettheimer's style was based on her rejection of formalistic precepts used within academic painting. Also, her approach to painting was straightforward and comprehensible and sharply contrasted with the analytical and conceptual works made by her contemporaries such as the Cubists and Dadaists.

Stettheimer was described again as an "original" in 1924 by Penelope Redd who claimed, "Florine Stettheimer invents a new mode of expressing symbolism as original as the Chinese..."³¹ Both Van Vechten and Redd believed that her style was based on the evocation of feeling or spirit. Their ideas were shaped by the Symbolist notions of "essence" in which a painter tries to portray the anima or character of the subject versus an exact likeness. Redd continued her praise by designating Stettheimer as:

...the only woman painter in America, and indeed there would seem to be few elsewhere who project an individual point of view on canvas...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.

Stettheimer's painting differed from other contemporary women artists such as Marguerite Zorach and Georgia O'Keeffe both of whom maintained accepted modern

³¹ Penelope Redd, "Review of Carnegie International of 1924." Pittsburgh Post, May 11, 1924.

styles among their male peers. In addition to Stettheimer's style, it may have been the highly personal nature of her work that kept some writers at a distance. Her staunchest supporters were, albeit significant writers and artists in their own right, personal friends of the family.

Stettheimer's new independent style after 1916-what I have termed conscious naiveté-places her works in sharp contrast to contemporaneous modes of painting, such as Cubism. Her work could not be easily categorized and, therefore, many writers tended to arbitrarily define her style as feminine. Marsden Hartley, in 1931, described Stettheimer's style as an "ultra-lyrical expression of an ultra-feminine spirit."³² Hartley believed that Stettheimer's works were composed of "a precious, incisive wit that only a feminine nature can express" and that her style was:

...nothing but the refined sentiments and clarified observations of a highly sensitized nature becoming to a woman of special culture and of special cultivation.³³

In 1932, Paul Rosenfeld would concur:

...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 humor and pathos of what is merely embellishing.³⁴

Rosenfeld later reviewed Stettheimer's posthumous retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. He described her style then as "feminine as is a boudoir; frail, delicate, ornate" and that the feeling of her work evokes "something anaemic, a trifle blasé."³⁵

³² Hartley 19.

³³ Hartley 21.

³⁴ Paul Rosenfeld, "The World of Florine Stettheimer." The Nation, May 4 1932, p. 522.

Rosenfeld's remarks are the antithesis of Van Vechten's observations. Van Vechten found her work to be lively and spirited whereas Rosenfeld interpreted her figure types as languishing and perishable. No doubt, both writers believed her style to be singular but their conceptions differed greatly. Van Vechten defined her individual style as modern and related it to the vigor of jazz. Rosenfeld saw the decorative quality of her work as equating to femininity, which had a negative reaction within the realm of painting at this time despite the rise of feminism in the 1920's. Hartley's reaction seemed to be focused on Stettheimer's station in life. By defining her as a woman of special cultivation and by using a feminizing stylistic approach to her work, Hartley suggests that Stettheimer lacks the profundity of an artist.

Henry McBride wrote, in the 1946 exhibition catalogue, that Stettheimer's early style had:

...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.³⁶

McBride described her mature style as "spirited" and "original" and that:

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...³⁷

The dichotomy of McBride's remarks indicate the difficulty in which writers had in classifying her work. On the one hand her style was seen as rigidly feminine probably due to her heavy use of decoration and pastel palette. On the other hand, writers could

³⁵ Rosenfeld, Accent 101.

³⁶ Henry McBride, Florine Stettheimer 11.

³⁷ McBride 51.

not deny the improvisational quality of her style, described by McBride as freedom.

Similar to Van Vechten's notion of jazz, McBride believed that Stettheimer's work was distinctively native or American.

Stettheimer's willful naiveté was met with critical opposition by the editor of ArtNews who described her work as trivial in 1946. This assessment was challenged by Glenway Wescott who offered a reply:

Like it or not, Florine Stettheimer had originality, which in the pictorial art of our country is rare and important. This often entails some solitariness and oddity; it did in her case. ...As for the spirit of it, you will find the equivalent in literature more often than in pictorial art...the aesthetic sense scarcely distinguishing itself from the more intimate emotions³⁸

Stettheimer's so-called freedom and femininity was often viewed as eccentric or odd. The idea of the "eccentric" artist was a popular romanticized notion held during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In contrast to Wescott's appraisal, Hartley believed that the oddity of Stettheimer's vision was based primarily on its feminine expression.

It is after the posthumous solo exhibition that the critical support from friends and acquaintances began to wane. Several brief mentions of her work are printed in the late 1940's and early 1950's as there were six organized Stettheimer exhibitions. In the era of Abstract Expressionism, however, the reception was purely nostalgic. In 1963, Parker Tyler published the only existing monograph on the artist entitled Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art. Tyler's survey devotes countless pages to the clothes, the menus, and to the company that the "spinster" Stettheimer kept, and was written in a rather tabloidesque manner.³⁹ He accuses early writers of "harping on her feminine nature" but nonetheless,

³⁸

Glenway Wescott, "Stettheimer: A Reply." ArtNews, January 1947.

Tyler, like Hartley and Rosenfeld, regarded her work as a "lyric and feminine form."⁴⁰

Tyler cites Fauvism, Orientalism, Bonnard, and fashion illustration as chief influences on her style. But his biography of the artist concentrates on his conception of Stettheimer as fragile. Tyler regarded Stettheimer's relative obscurity to be the fault of the artist and not the limited press during her lifetime. He construes Stettheimer's "indifference to publicity" as the artist's effort, "to compensate for an early severe shock of a professional nature."⁴¹ This "early shock" refers to her unsuccessful solo show of 1916.

The modest amount of writing on Stettheimer in recent years tends to reiterate the notions put forth by her biographer Parker Tyler and the 1946 exhibition catalogue by Henry McBride. Most of the literature superficially describes her work as having a feminine style and, indeed, it seems to ignore what is clearly visible, notably Stettheimer's conscious rejection of accepted styles. Whitney Chadwick asserts that Stettheimer's style had "fashioned a myth of the feminine" and that her unconscious approach, or feminine sensibility, had insured that she would not be taken as seriously as her male colleagues within the art world at large.⁴² Stettheimer's choice of style had, in fact, placed her work outside of the mainstream in that it did not exclusively follow a particular school or movement within the American modernist tradition.

Rather than view Stettheimer's mode as feminine, Linda Nochlin chose to define it as "subversive."⁴³ In 1975, Nochlin wrote that Stettheimer's choice of style was a

³⁹ Tyler 23.

⁴⁰ Tyler 113, 42.

⁴¹ Tyler 23.

⁴² Whitney Chadwick, Women, Art and Society (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990) 281.

⁴³ Linda Nochlin, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive." Art In America,

feminist gesture, one which was "a conscious step, radical in the twenties."⁴⁴ Her style did deviate from standard academic traditions but there is no evidence that her rejection of both the formal and contemporary modes of painting was, indeed, a feminist expression. Diary entries and correspondence by the artist do not substantiate this claim. Moreover, the language of several contemporaneous critics suggests otherwise. For example, Carl Van Vechten described Stettheimer's work in masculine terms by relating her work to the vigor of jazz.

Other contemporary writers agree with Nochlin and view Stettheimer's individuality as a conscious feminist reaction. In 1977, Barbra Zucker described Stettheimer as an "environmental feminist" due to the creative control she took in the 1916 Knoedler Gallery installation.⁴⁵ In assuming control over the installation that was undeniably feminine in its references, Stettheimer took a radical step. Indeed, it is the installation itself and not the paintings within the exhibit that pointed to the direction she was to take. While the 12 paintings included in the Knoedler show were derivative of *fin de siècle* European examples, the boudoir installation was without precedent. In 1982, Donna Graves asserted that Stettheimer's "eccentric" style was chosen by the artist as a means of coping with "a world unfriendly to feminine genius."⁴⁶ Graves viewed Stettheimer's rejection of accepted modes as an attempt to place herself outside of the critical arena. This does not seem probable for she continued to exhibit in a number of

September 1980: 65.

⁴⁴ Linda Nochlin, "What is Female Imagery?" *Ms.*, May 1975: 82.

⁴⁵ Barbara Zucker, "An Autobiography of Visual Poems." *ArtNews*, February 1977: 69.

⁴⁶ Donna Graves, "In Spite of Alien Temperature and Alien Insistence: Emily Dickinson and Florine Stettheimer." *Woman's Art Journal*, Fall/Winter 1982/83: 26.

group shows even after her early disastrous solo show. Furthermore, Stettheimer apparently found critical reviews of her work to be of importance since she made several acknowledgments of them in her diaries.

In the exhibition catalogue and in the installation of the 1993 show entitled **Friends and Family: Portraiture in the World of Florine Stettheimer** the curator Barbara Bloemink focused exclusively on the iconography of the works. The exhibition can be described as a mere catalogue of who's who in the life and times of Florine Stettheimer, as if to say that her art connections are of greater value than her artistic accomplishments. Of the eighty-three items included in the exhibition, only twenty-four paintings are by Stettheimer's hand. The majority of images-drawings, photographs, and several sculptures are by notable contemporary artists: Alfred Stieglitz, Gaston Lachaise, Francis Picabia, Elie Nadelman, and many others. The critic Roberta Smith reviewed the exhibition and noted that the Stettheimer paintings in the show were forced to "struggle against an onslaught of ancillary material." She concluded that "the Katonah [Museum] show too often bogs down in iconographical readings."⁴⁷ Yet again, the prominent shift in style that occurred in Stettheimer's work along with her conscious rejection of accepted styles has not been examined nor have there been any attempts to deconstruct previous notions of femininity found in the critical language accorded to her paintings.

The difficulty of categorizing Stettheimer's work has forced many writers to arbitrarily define her style as exclusively feminine. Carl Van Vechten was perhaps the only writer to attempt to define her work. His idea of "jazz" referred to the modern

⁴⁷ Roberta Smith, "The Very Rich Hours of Florine Stettheimer." New York Times, October 10 1993, Vol.: 39 (Section 2).

aspects and to the improvisational and syncopated rhythms of her style. In contrast, writers such as Marsden Hartley and Paul Rosenfeld viewed her work in a rather rigidly conceived characterization of style identified as feminine. Parker Tyler pointed out Stettheimer's appropriation of European inspired Orientalism and Fauvism. Henry McBride justly believed that Stettheimer's mature style contained an element of playfulness and that the rejection of her academic training was a revolutionary American trait. Other writers such as Glenway Wescott and Donna Graves regard Stettheimer's mode of painting as eccentric. Linda Nochlin ascribes a contemporary reading to her work by assuming that Stettheimer's alternative style was a conscious feminist gesture. Her style may more rightly be described in the language of Van Vechten and McBride. Although Stettheimer relied heavily on European vanguard currents such as Fauvism, there was an expectancy among American modernists to present a completely domestic view. Terms such as "freedom," "jazz," and "native" were fashionable constructs of the era that relate to her highly individual style. By viewing her work in the context of modernity, the observations of Van Vechten and McBride are antithetical to the emasculated ideas that have been historically accorded to her work.

CHAPTER FOUR: Summary and Conclusions

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 man⁴⁸

During the second decade of the 20th century, Florine Stettheimer was exposed to a variety of artistic styles, both European and American. By virtue of her academic training she already possessed the technical means to adopt those she chose to establish her own idiom. By investigating the artist's stylistic evolution one can see a variety of influences. Her earliest works reflect the formal academic tradition that was advocated by the Art Students League and National Academy of Design at the turn of the century. While in Europe, 1906 to 1914, Stettheimer experimented with a variety of vanguard styles, including Fauvism and Symbolism. Upon her return to New York, Stettheimer's independent style began to emerge. Although aware of the most advanced currents of the time through her close association with New York's avant-garde, Stettheimer's new mode of painting was based on a forceful rejection of both her academic training and other major modernist styles like Cubism. Rather than view her work in a modern context many writers have opted to define her style as eccentric, feminine, or subversive. Due to this type of critical language Stettheimer's work has been historically marginalized when, in fact, her individual style should be considered a part of the modernist revolution.

⁴⁸

Stettheimer, Crystal Flowers 23.

The only extant comment by Stettheimer concerning her pivotal shift in style was printed in 1921. Stettheimer announced that the war had caused her to drop tradition and that suddenly she would "represent life as [she] sees and feels it."⁴⁹ By reviewing her poetry one can get some sense of the artist's attitudes on various subjects ranging from the use of female models to art directors. Although sometimes irreverent, these poems do not disclose Stettheimer's ideas on her own work. The diaries do, however, provide some information as to what she had been exposed to while in Europe. Unfortunately, her sister's meticulous editing of alleged family matters may have destroyed evidence. It is simply impossible to determine what has been lost. The remaining passages of the diaries are rather fragmented. No critically specific references to contemporaneous or modernist influences have survived if they were, indeed, recorded.

Stettheimer's documented European travels reveal that she had an accumulated knowledge of art history and had been exposed to a number of vanguard currents such as Fauvism and the Jugendstil movement. While she tended to favor the ancients and made several approving references of the Old Masters, she did not specify in writing any contemporary influences outside of the Russian Ballet. During her stay in Germany, she visited several Secessionist exhibitions including Gustav Klimt and Ferdinand Hodler. The Viennese Secession movement and Continental Art Nouveau, well-known at that time, had strong ties to the ornamental and decorative arts. Stettheimer's paintings, likewise, exhibit an incredible attention to detail and decoration. She filled her compositions to capacity, leaving very little room for empty space. Her work also shares

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Sussman 5.

similarities with Japanese prints that were popular in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the Fauvist tradition. These influences can be seen with her use of flat patterns, lack of modeling, bold color choices, and a tipped-up perspective. Other European tendencies that held a continuing influence on her work were the art of the Symbolists and Nabis. Very similar in content and style, both groups shared the idea that the purpose of art was not to reproduce the appearance of nature but rather to evoke an essence. Stettheimer's affinity with the Nabi and Symbolist movements could be directly related to their interest in creating a highly personal realm in their art as well as the assertion of the primacy of individual sensibility. Stettheimer's appropriation of these elements were purely stylistic and not necessarily conceptual.

Perhaps the greatest influence on Stettheimer's style was her exposure to the Russian Ballet in Paris in 1912. The set and costume designs were created by Leon Bakst who replaced the traditional attire with an erotic and orientalist inspired construction. Body paint and exotic jewelry were used to accesorize the event. Their production of **L'Après-Midi d'un Faune** broke further conventions with the use of a modernist musical score. Immediately following the performance, Stettheimer began to create the scenario for her unproduced play **Orphee of the Four Arts** in which she mimicked the orientalizing palette of Bakst's designs. Stettheimer eventually translated the use of theatrical devices to her paintings. Canopies, curtains, lace, fringe, and rosettes began to appear as framing devices in many of her still-lifes. The figural paintings were condensed in such a way that her crowded compositions were able to relay an implied

narrative, much like a theatre set. Also, she always began her paintings with a bright Chinese white ground which gave the illusion of a spot light or stage lighting.

Stettheimer's mature style that transpired after the year 1916 is, in fact, an amalgamation of these styles. On the simplest level, her mature works seem to be untrained and completely uninfluenced in that they do not fit within any recognizable modernist school or movement. As such, Stettheimer's new mode of painting placed her works in sharp contrast to the academic training that she received at the Art Students League and also to the abstract tendencies that engaged many of her contemporaries. Nevertheless, Stettheimer did incorporate a number of universal modernist ideas and devices in her work. Most notably, the use of color to reveal states of feeling, the use of pleasing design, and the illogical juxtaposition of objects in space.

The difficulty of fitting Stettheimer into a category or movement has resulted in the focus, by many writers, on her so-called feminine sensibility. Some writers considered her style to be a bizarre feminine form and thus the critical commentary surrounding her work has reflected this bias. Terms such as "sugar-coated," "dainty," and "Christmas tree art" have been used to describe her style.⁵⁰ Despite the obvious differences in their styles, both Stettheimer and Georgia O'Keeffe shared the delimiting designation of "woman painter." As such, both have fallen prey to "essentialist" stereotyping.⁵¹ Nonetheless, while critics like Paul Rosenfeld viewed O'Keeffe's flower

⁵⁰ Jerry Saltz, "Twilight of the Gods: Florine Stettheimer's *Cathedrals of Art*, 1942," *Arts Magazine*, March 1992: 22.

"A Stranger Here Herself," *Newsweek*, 14 October, 1946: 116.

Rosenfeld, *The Nation* 523.

⁵¹ The essentialist theory is based upon the belief that women have a biologically inherent essence or feminine nature which consists of certain qualities such as nurturing,

paintings as a correlative of female sexual experience, her adoption of modernist abstraction ultimately led to her acceptance into the art historical canon.⁵² The same cannot be said of Stettheimer. Her refusal to participate in either the academic or avant-garde modes of painting isolated her art and, therefore, effectively denied it access to broad critical evaluation.

Stettheimer's work was appreciated within the confines of her salon by her artist friends, most of whom were a part of New York's avant-garde. Carl Van Vechten stated in 1963 that Stettheimer "did elicit interest, respect, admiration, and enthusiasm for her work in art."⁵³ Her need to share her works through the unveiling parties suggests that she considered herself to be a part of the modernist revolution. Linda Nochlin noted in 1975 that Stettheimer, "knew what the avant-garde was doing...But eventually she said No to both the academic and the avant-garde modes" and that this decision was a calculated feminist expression.⁵⁴ Stettheimer's choice of style was, indeed, used to set herself apart from her peers. It is questionable whether this stance was a feminist gesture. It is my belief that Stettheimer, although acquainted with progressive social circles and not unlike some of the European artist émigrés, was herself rooted in 19th-century bourgeois values and culture. At the turn of the century, Stettheimer along with her family, moved to Europe and remained there for eight years where she received further painting instruction at various studios in Munich, Stuttgart, and Paris. Similar to the themes contained in the amateur works produced by European middle and upper class

intuition, and irrationality.

⁵² Paul Rosenfeld, "American Painting," Dial 71, December 1921: 666-670.

⁵³ Tyler xiii.

⁵⁴ Nochlin, Ms. 82.

19th-century women, and even those women artists of professional standing such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, the subjects of Stettheimer's paintings tend to be limited to areas of socialization such as the garden or parlor. The majority of her paintings can be described as cordial or inviting and are antithetical to the abstract and conceptual works that occupied many of her contemporaries.

George Cotkin asserted in his book, Reluctant Modernism, that "despite its spirit of rebellion and experimentation, the American *fin de siècle* was also marked by an attempt to maintain many assumptions essential to Victorianism."⁵⁵ He described the intellectual and artistic climate of early twentieth century as existing "between the precipice of modernity and the certitude of Victorian ideals."⁵⁶ The Stettheimers, like many of the European expatriates, existed within the framework of Old World Victorian family values and because of this Florine found herself under the watchful eye of her mother and sisters. Her public affairs were scrutinized since the family name was at stake. Even after her death, Stettheimer's diaries were edited by her sister Ettie so as not to reveal the inner workings of their household. It is, therefore, difficult to assume that Stettheimer's rejection of abstraction and other modernist currents was an act of feminist subversion. Her consciously naive style enabled her to paint the highly personal figurative subject matter in her work without conforming to the outmoded formal conventions of her training or to the impersonal methods of the abstractionists.

⁵⁵ George Cotkin, Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992) 131.

⁵⁶ Cotkin 153.

Stettheimer's conscious naiveté may more aptly be described as an alternative modern overture.

Stettheimer's wealth permitted her to paint with a certain amount of freedom and individuality as she did not have to depend on the art market for her livelihood. The modest amount of critical response during her lifetime may be due to the fact that some writers could have regarded her work as the outcome of a wealthy lady amateur. Henry McBride believed that "Miss Stettheimer's obscurity was not so much due to the public's indifference as to her own."⁵⁷ Parker Tyler, her biographer, believed that Stettheimer's "indifference to publicity" was caused by her disappointment of the 1916 solo exhibition.⁵⁸ Her sudden shift in style after the solo show suggests she was aware of the derivative quality of her earlier works. Donna Graves believes that Stettheimer's new choice of style was an act of refuge, that by "playing the role of the amateur" she could shield herself from professional criticism.⁵⁹ This statement is highly unlikely for two reasons. First, Stettheimer continued to exhibit after her failed show of 1916. Secondly, she was considered a modernist among her peers and most writers. She was included in over twenty group shows in which she exhibited alongside such notable modernists as Joseph Stella, Arthur Dove, Konrad Cramer, and Stuart Davis. Stettheimer considered herself a professional painter and found critical reviews of her work to be important as they were noted in several entries of her diaries. She did, however, for reasons unknown, reject later offers made by Carl Sprinchorn and Alfred Stieglitz for solo exhibitions.

⁵⁷ McBride, Florine Stettheimer 10.

⁵⁸ Tyler 23.

⁵⁹ Graves 23.

Stettheimer's reasons for her change of style from a traditional mode of painting to one that is individual and highly idiosyncratic can only be surmised. One could take the romantic notion that Stettheimer was merely rebelling against the industrial progress or against the anxieties of modern life but this does not seem probable. Her paintings are about celebrations of family and friends or about certain events and are, therefore, too particularized for that theory. It may be that Stettheimer was following a general trend in her interest of naive painting since she was involved with the Stieglitz group of American modernist painters. Exhibitions of naive and primitive painters as well as the art of children were held at the Photo-Secession Gallery. Stettheimer's notable shift in style was based upon the forceful rejection of academic standards in painting. Arbitrary color choices, the use of text to announce subject matter, crowded compositions, a heavy reliance on line, and the absence of atmospheric perspective were all a part of the artist's conscious stylistic naiveté.

Stettheimer's alternative modern approach was the artist's attempt to reinvent her own expressive and stylistic vocabulary. Her rejection of modernist abstraction and other currents of the time suggests her need to be independent and self-assertive. While she kept the company of some of the most advanced painters of the modernist era, she did not adhere to their methods. Instead, her art is direct and cordial, it appeals to the senses rather than to the intellect. Carl Van Vechten's evaluation of her work is perhaps the most fitting. His comparison of her style to jazz places her work in a contemporaneous American context. The "jazz age" can be characterized as modern and non-conformist. Jazz music is based on improvisation and lively syncopation. Stettheimer's highly

idiosyncratic method of painting, despite its seemingly untrained qualities, evokes a very fashionable and modern spirit. Stettheimer's conscious rejection of both traditional and avant-garde modes of painting has marginalized the artist's work. Due to its highly individual and idiosyncratic forms, Stettheimer's style was not easy to define and therefore was often ascribed a feminizing stylistic analysis. Stettheimer's pivotal shift in style may have been a conscious effort to individualize and to establish herself as a qualified and memorable artist among her predominantly male peers. It is not a case of radical feminism but rather a sophisticated approach to the modernist dilemma.

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Figure 1: *Photo Portrait of (Left to Right) Florine Stettheimer, Carrie Stettheimer, and Ettie Stettheimer.* ca. 1914. (Photographic Source: Parker Tyler, Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Co., 1963).



Figure 2: *Girl in Peasant Dress Holding Spindle*. ca. 1885. Pencil on Buff Paper, 18 1/2 x 12 7/16 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.



Figure 3: *Study of Draped, Pinned-up Handkerchief*. ca. 1906. Pencil on Buff Paper, 18 7/8 x 12 7/16 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.



Figure 4: *Delphinium and Columbine*. ca. 1923. Oil on Canvas, 36 x 30 inches.
Collection of Mitzi S. Briggs, New York.



Figure 5: *Soirée*. ca. 1918. Oil on Canvas, 28 x 30 inches. Collection of Yale University, New Haven.



Figure 6: *Photo of Artist's boudoir*. no date. (Photographic Source: Parker Tyler, Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Co., 1963).



Figure 7: ***Costume and Set Design from Four Saints in Three Acts.*** 1934.
(Photographic Source: Henry McBride, Florine Stettheimer. New York:
The Museum of Modern Art, 1946).



Figure 8: *Costume and Set Design from Four Saints in Three Acts.* 1934.
(Photographic Source: Parker Tyler, Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art.
New York: Farrar, Straus, and Co., 1963).



Figure 9: *Profile of Dante*. ca. 1886. Pencil on Buff Paper, 12 5/8 x 9 1/2 inches.
Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

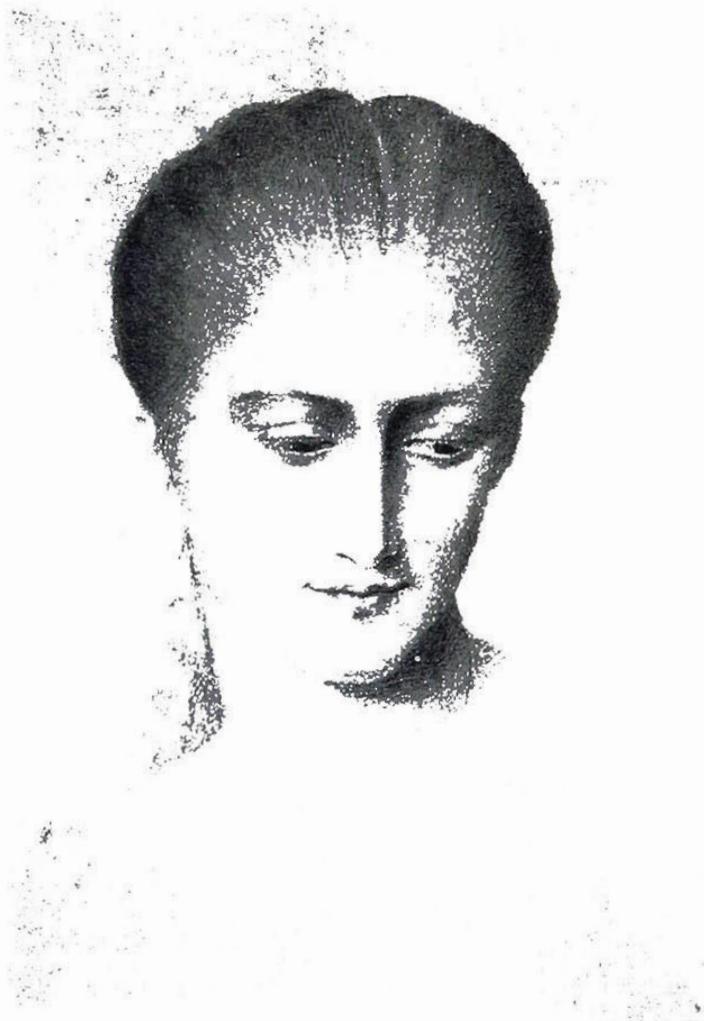


Figure 10: ***Head of a Girl.*** ca. 1887. Pencil on Buff Paper, 12 3/4 x 9 inches.
Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

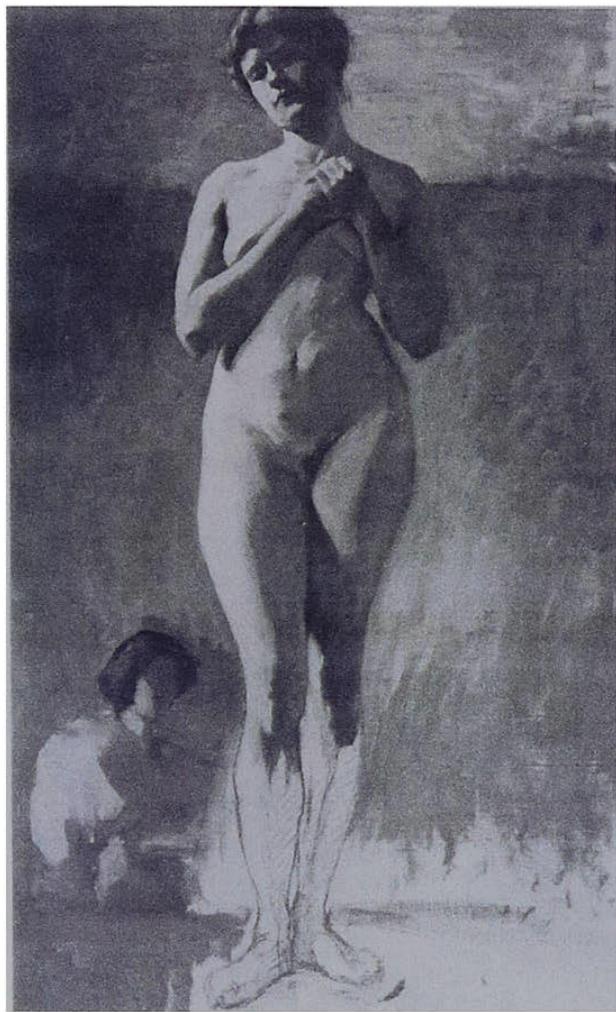


Figure 11: *Study of a Nude*. ca. 1893. Oil on Canvas, 30 x 18 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.



Figure 12: *Portrait of My Sister Carrie in White Dress*. ca. 1893-95. Oil on Canvas, 90 1/2 x 47 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

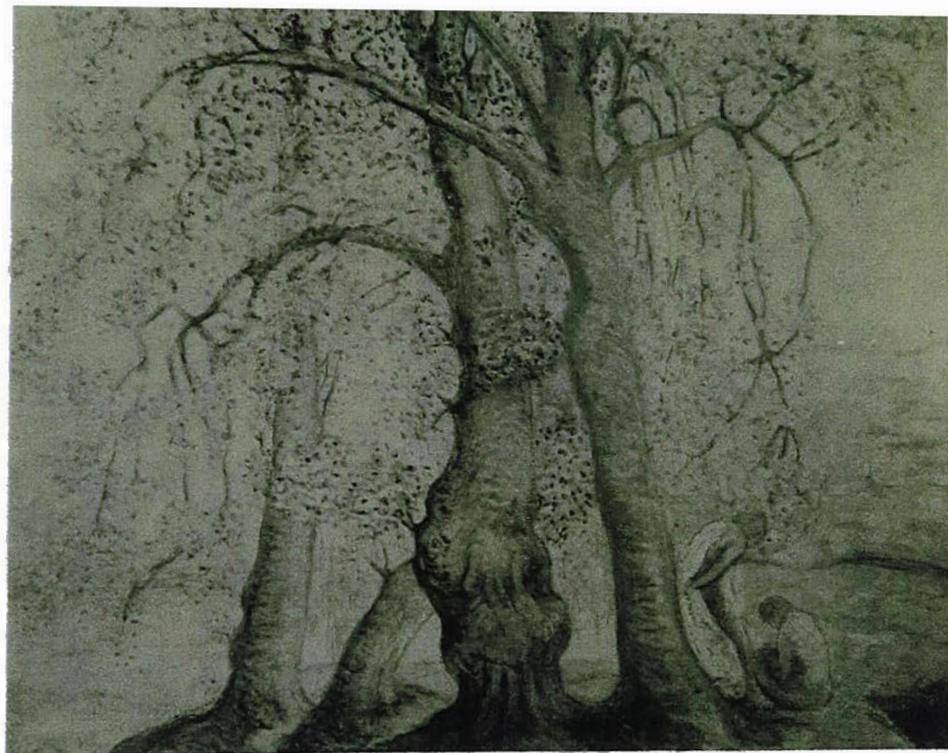


Figure 13: *Two Bathers by a Group of Trees*. 1911. Oil on Canvas, 29 x 36 1/4 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

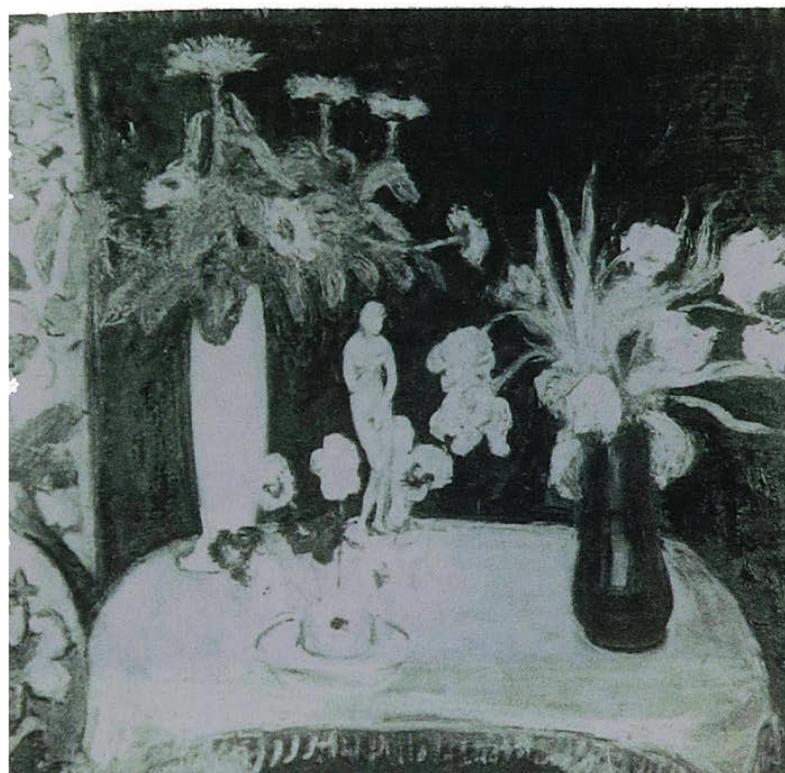


Figure 14: *Two Flower Vases and Statue of Aphrodite*. ca. 1911. Oil on Canvas, 32 x 32 3/8 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.



Figure 15: ***Family Portrait No. 1***. 1915. Oil on Canvas, 40 x 62 1/4 inches.
Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

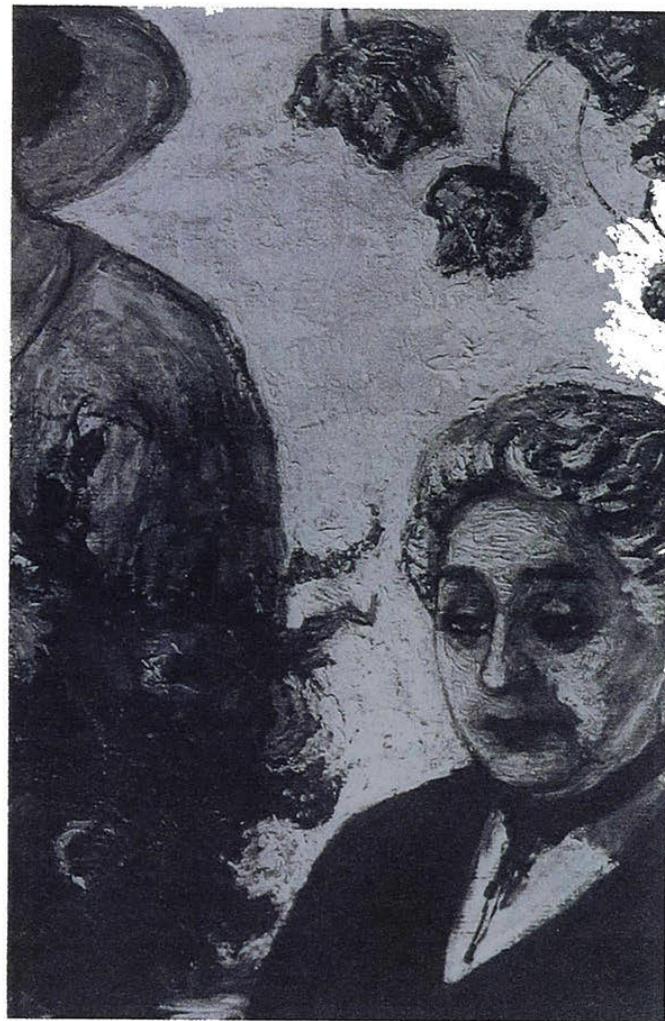


Figure 16: **Detail of *Family Portrait No. 1*.** 1915. Oil on Canvas, 40 x 62 1/4 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

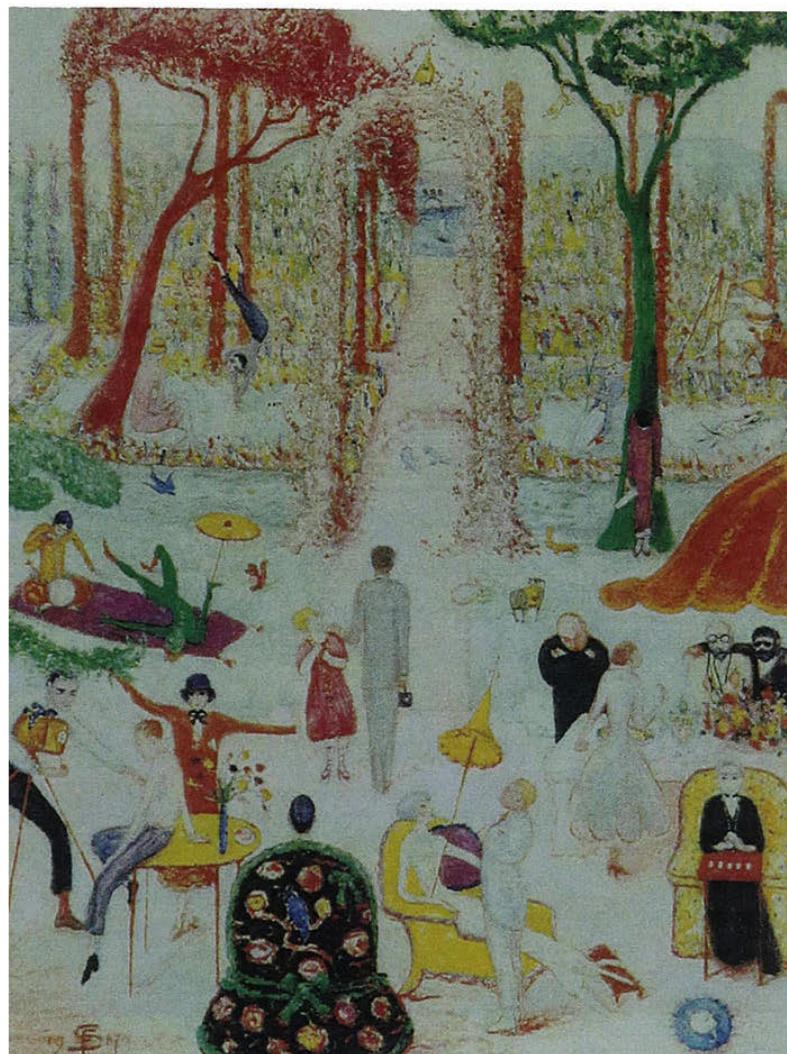


Figure 17: *Sunday Afternoon in the Country*. 1917. Oil on Canvas, 50 1/2 x 36 1/2 inches. Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

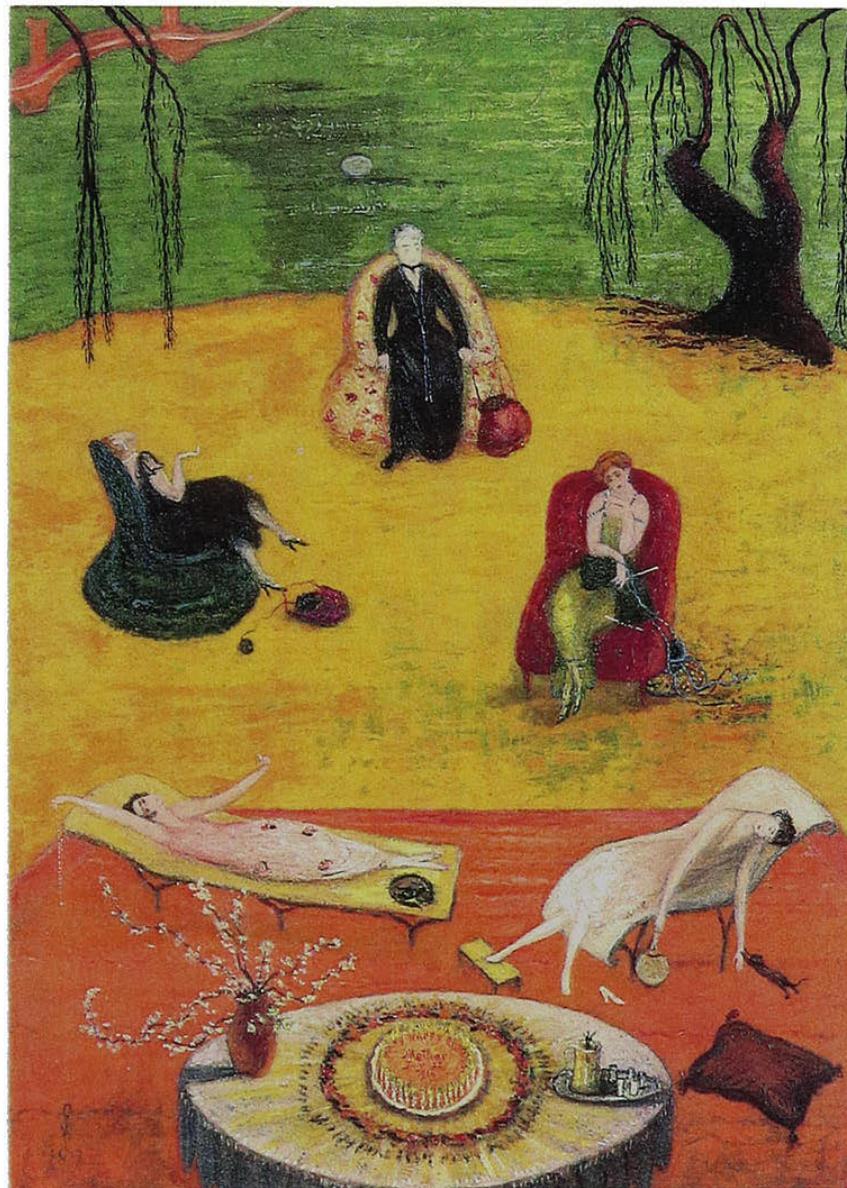


Figure 18: **Heat.** 1919. Oil on Canvas, 50 x 36 1/2 inches. Collection of the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

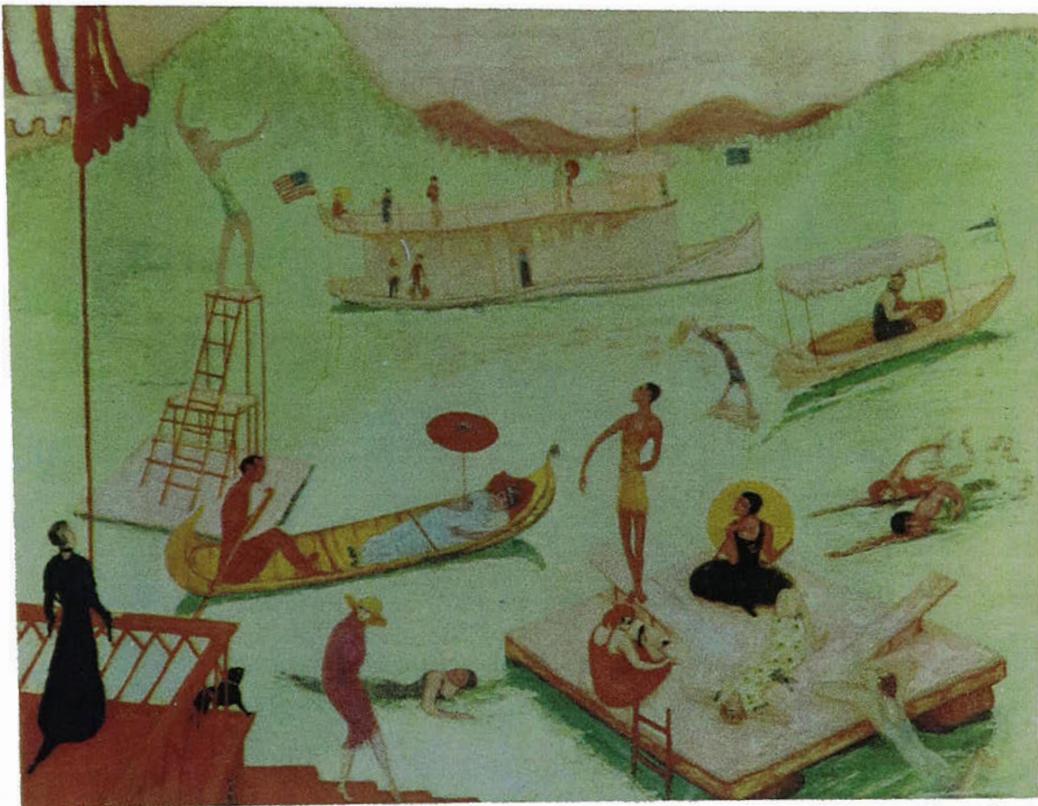


Figure 19: *Lake Placid*. 1919. Oil on Canvas, 40 x 50 inches. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

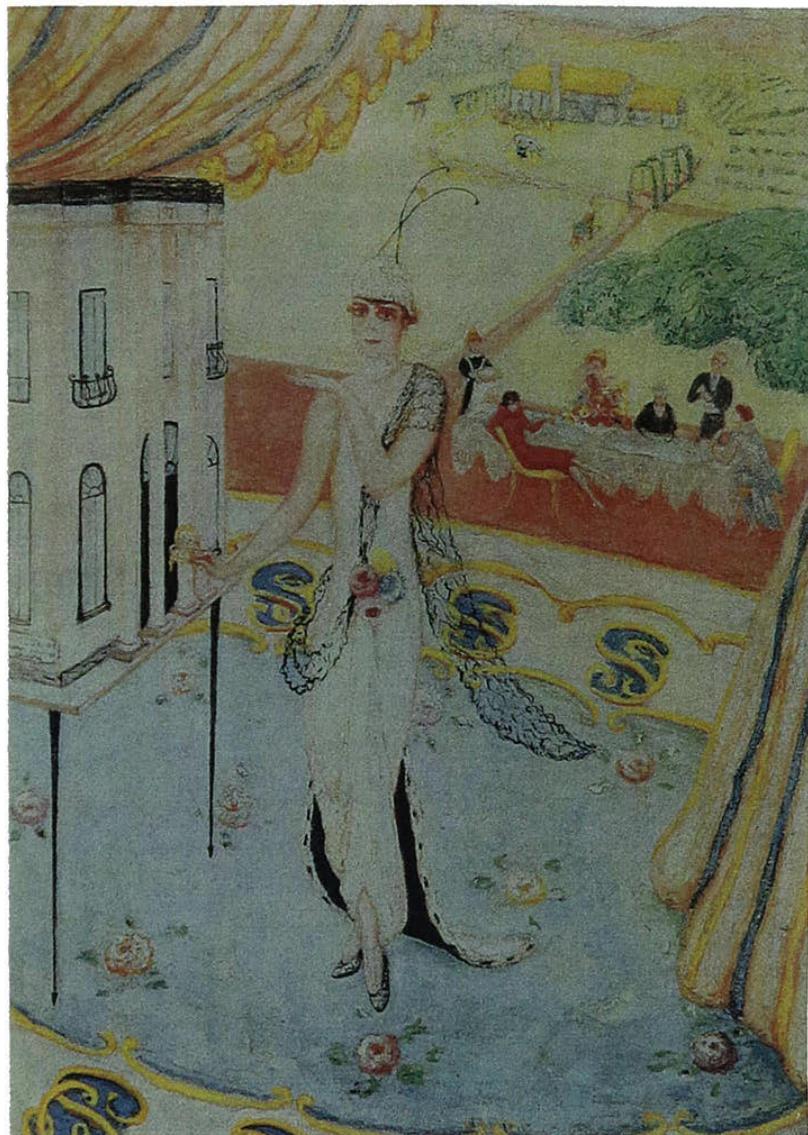


Figure 20: ***Carrie W. Stettheimer, with Doll's House.*** 1923. Oil on Canvas, 37 7/8 x 26 1/8 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

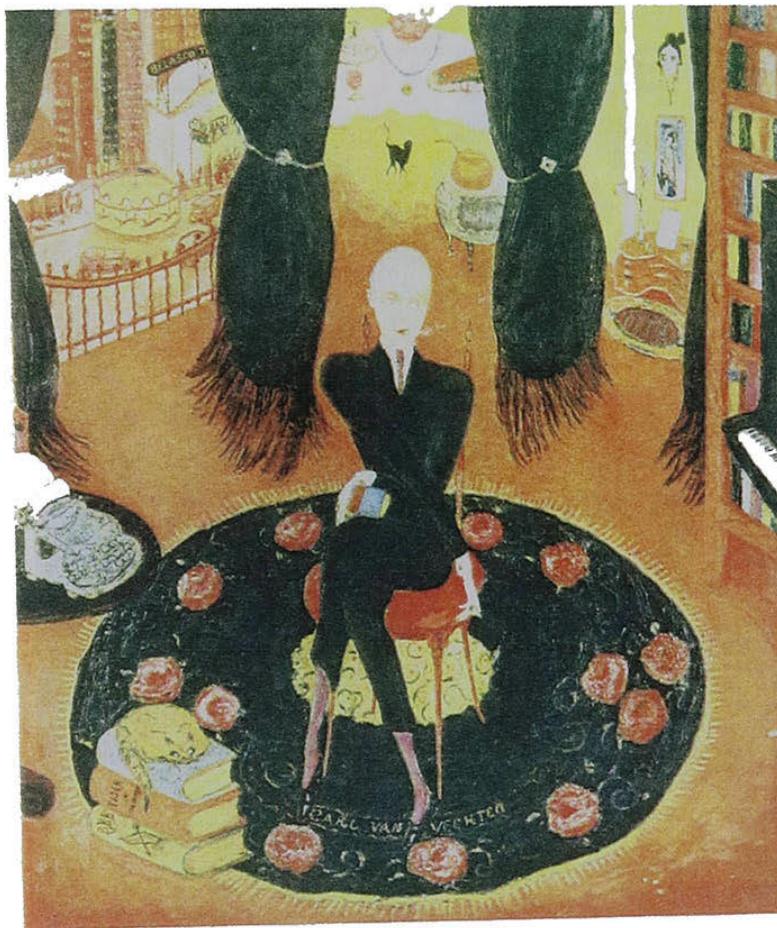


Figure 21: *Portrait of Carl Van Vechten*. 1922. Oil on Canvas, 40 x 22 inches.
Collection of Yale University, New Haven.



Figure 22: *Portrait of Ettie Stettheimer*. 1923. Oil on Canvas, 40 3/8 x 26 1/2 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

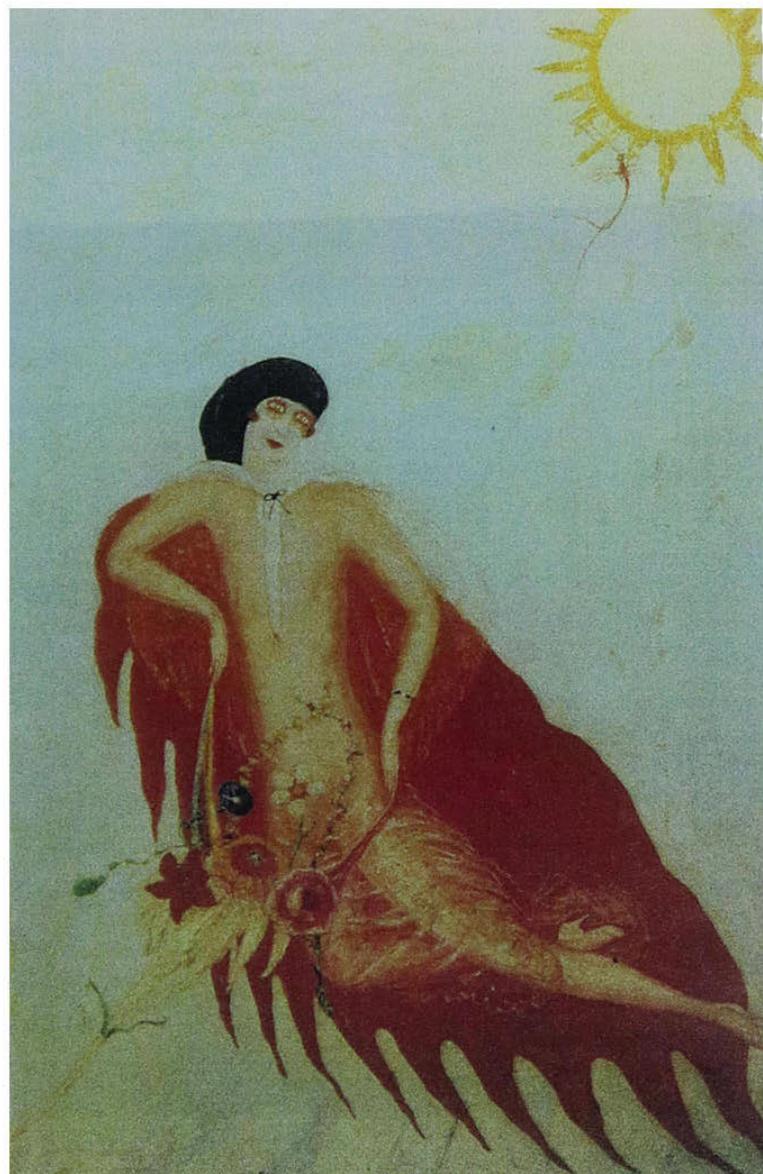


Figure 23: *Portrait of Myself*. 1923. Oil on Canvas, 40 x 26 inches. Collection of Columbia University of the City of New York.

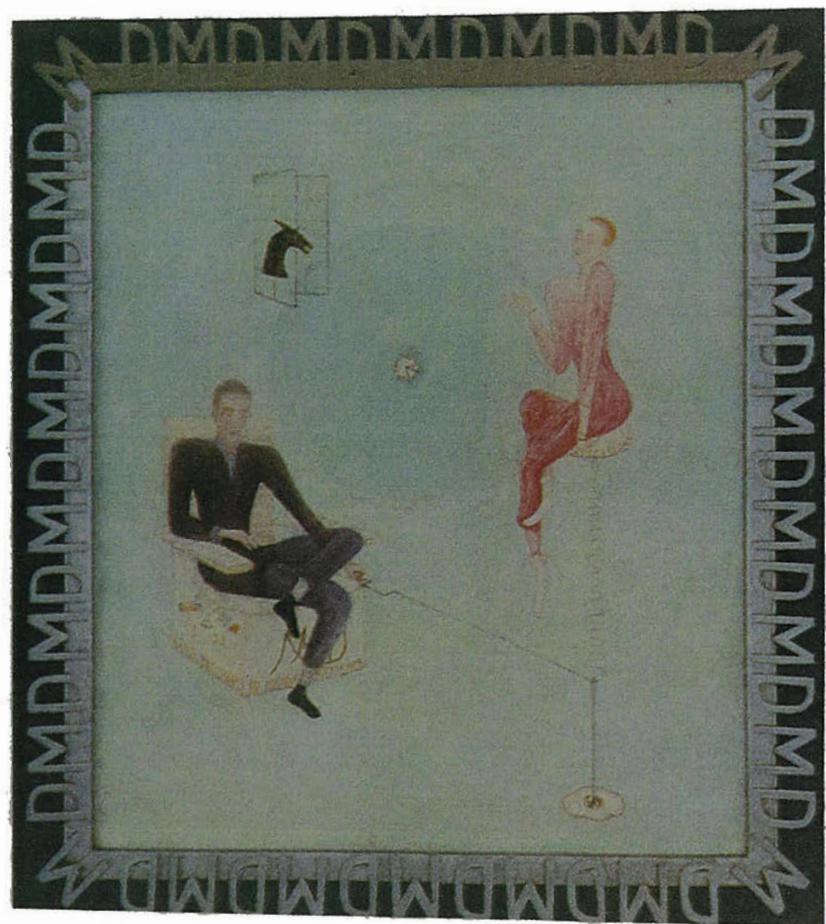


Figure 24: *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*. 1923. Oil on Canvas, 30 x 26 inches.
Collection of William Kelly Simpson, New York.



Figure 25: *Family Portrait No. 2*. 1933. Oil on Canvas, 46 1/4 x 64 5/8 inches.
Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

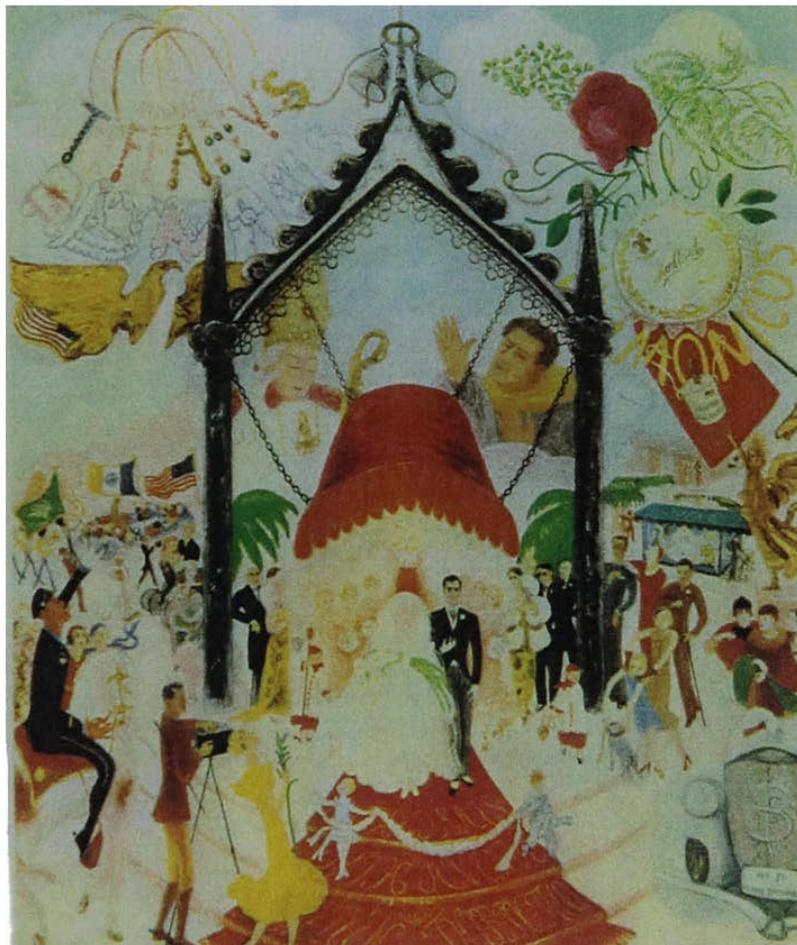


Figure 26: *Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue*. 1931. Oil on Canvas, 60 x 50 inches.
Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 27: *Cathedrals of Wall Street*. 1939. Oil on Canvas, 60 x 50 inches.
Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

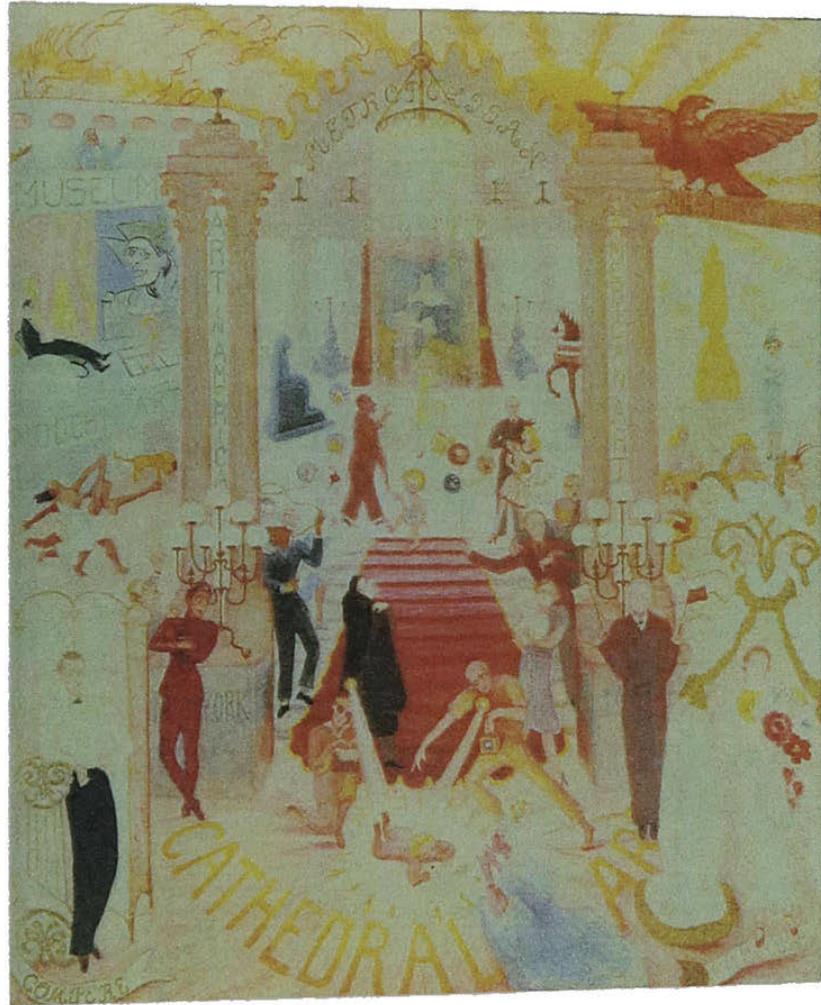


Figure 28: *Cathedrals of Art*. 1942. Oil on Canvas, 60 x 50 inches. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.