

THE PAINTINGS OF FLORINE STETTHEIMER · FLAMBOYANT SUBVERSIVE

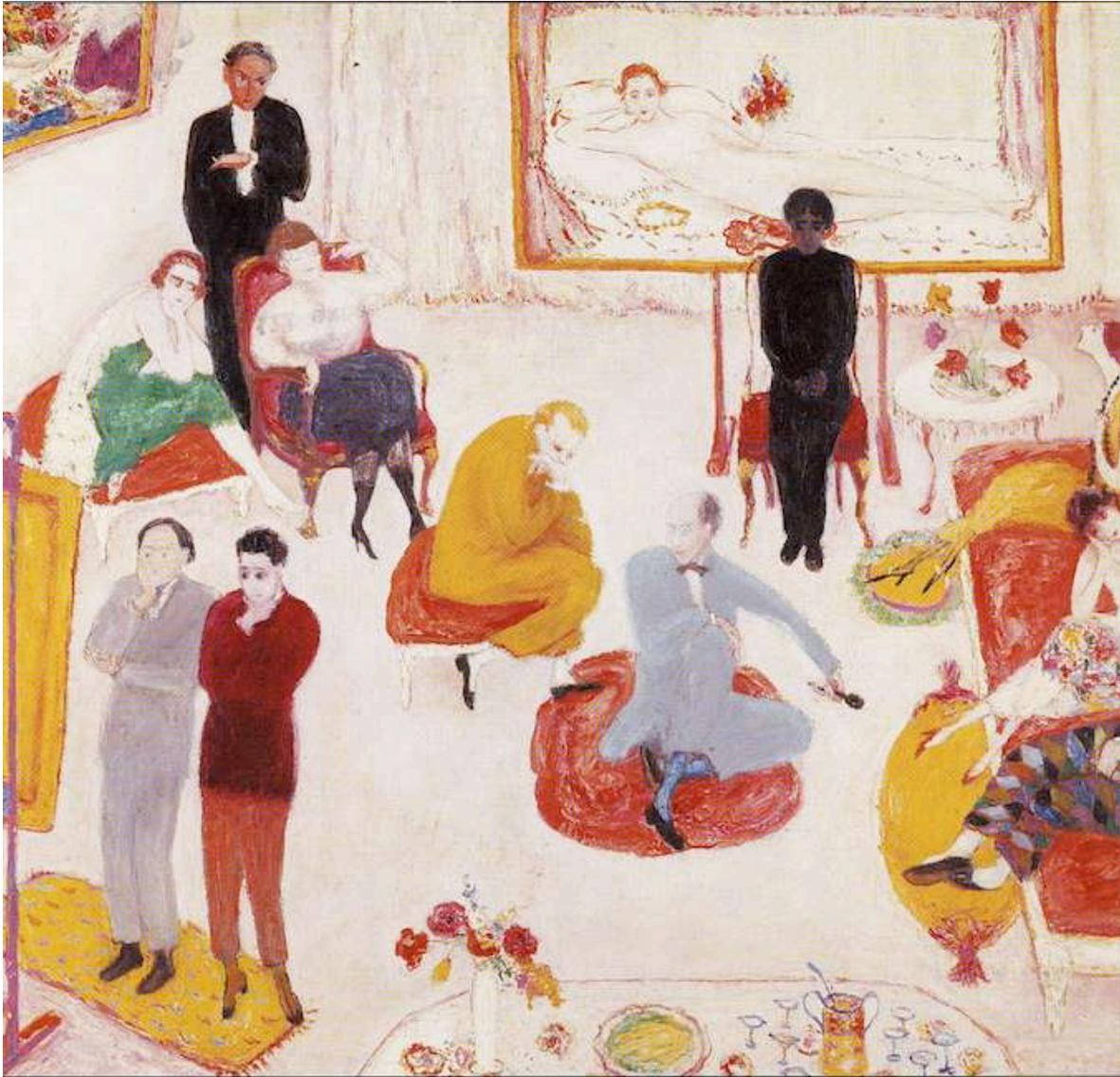
OIL PAINTING CLASS · SADIE MURDOCH



Florine Stettheimer, Self Portrait with Palette (Painter and Faun), 1915, Oil on canvas

Today we are going to look at the oil paintings of American painter, poet, bon vivant and theatre designer, Florine Stettheimer. Stettheimer was born in 1871, and lived in New York City. In the period between the two world wars, she was part of a vibrant social and cultural avant-garde scene. Along with her sisters Ettie and Carrie, she presided over informal gatherings at her home in Manhattan, in what are known as 'salons'. These gatherings were a place where members of the avant-garde – artists, poets, musicians and writers – hung out and amused one another, exchanging ideas and insights about art and life.

The Stettheimer's circle of friends included Marcel Duchamp, arch Dada subversive, along with Carl Van Vechten, Albert Gleizes, Gaston Lachaise and many others.



Florine Stettheimer, Salon, 1915, Oil on canvas

Stettheimer developed an original, highly stylised form of painting. It is steeped in artifice, each element operating like a sign or symbol. Nothing is accidental or remotely naturalistic; her paintings are like frozen moments from a carefully scripted play or performance. And yet they are exuberant, a bit cheeky and unashamedly decorative.

In a subtle and inventive way, Stettheimer was a bit of a political radical in her choice of subject matter. She painted the first feminist nude self-portrait in 1915. In this work we see below, she is model and artist, holding a bunch of flowers as a wry comment on ideas of 'the feminine'. Stettheimer also made paintings depicting controversial issues of race and sexual preference, depicting for the time a set of radically androgenous figures in her portraits and groups of figures, and, in the case of "Asbury Park South" from 1920, a racially segregated beach in New Jersey, just across the river from Manhattan.



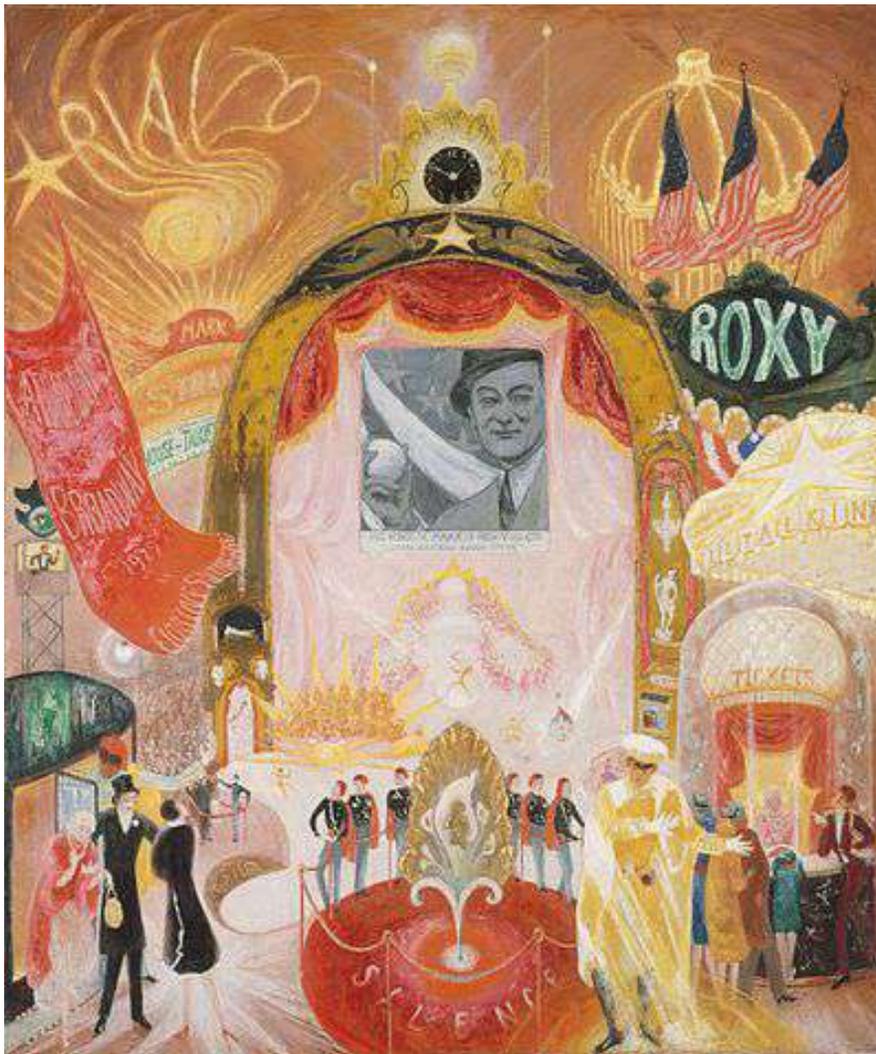
Florine Stettheimer, Nude self-portrait, 1915, Oil on canvas



Florine Stettheimer, Asbury Park South, 1920, Oil on canvas

Although Stettheimer was not an activist in the cause of racial equality, African Americans appeared regularly in her work, for example *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the opera for which she designed the sets and costumes in 1934. Her sense of solidarity with the causes of racial equality can be inferred not only from her work but from her close friendship with one of the staunchest supporters of African American culture, the music critic, and fellow bon vivant, Carl Van Vechten. One of the most ambitious and complex of all Florine Stettheimer's social investigations of the '20s is devoted to a Black environment, the segregated beach of Asbury Park South, as seen above.

Her major body of work is the *Cathedrals* - the *Cathedrals of Wall Street*, *Broadway*, *Fifth Avenue*, and *Art* - a series of four monumental paintings.



Florine Stettheimer, *The Cathedrals of Broadway*, Oil on Canvas

All painted between 1929 and 1942, each painting is five feet by around four feet and is structured around a central arch form, depicting New York's economic, social, and

cultural institutions. The Cathedrals of Art is a fantastical portrait of the New York art world. Microcosms of three of the city's major museums and their collections are watched over by their directors. Here we see the Museum of Modern Art (upper left), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (centre), and the Whitney Museum of American Art (upper right). A gathering of art critics, dealers, and photographers of the day, including Stettheimer herself appears around the Metropolitan's grand staircase.



Florine Stettheimer, The Cathedrals of Art, Oil on Canvas



The Cathedrals series, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Florine Stettheimer, The Cathedrals of 5th Avenue, Oil on Canvas

As with all Stettheimer's, the paintings are impressive from a distance but also bear close scrutiny due to the intricate details and surface textures of the paint. In Stettheimer's paintings, saturated colour meets delicate pastel shades. The overall affect is ornamental like a giant tapestry or wall hanging. In a sense, they are a type of intimate 'History Painting'. They also evoke the Rococo paintings of the French Ancienne Régime - works by Boucher, Watteau and Fragonard - painting the seemingly frivolous social antics and parlour room dramas of the wealthy and leisured classes of the time. They appear whimsical in some ways, yet the vivid colours and inventive pictorial spaces, with their strange rhythms create a kind of theatrical space in which her figures and portraits operate as gently savage caricatures. There's understated satire going on here, that perhaps the artist did not intend, but I feel that in some ways, she understood and was critical of, the fanciful and superficial nature of her world.



Florine Stettheimer



Florine Stettheimer, Beauty Contest to the Memory of P.T. Barnum, Oil on Canvas



"Family Portrait No. 2", 1933, Oil on canvas

Like other early 20th Century painters that we have seen, Florine Stettheimer depicted her social and cultural milieu. In “Family Portrait No. 2” of 1933 above, we see the artist in her home in New York, on the Upper West Side. The family group includes her sisters, on the artist’s right. Framed by in a shell-like golden mandorla, is the matriarch, Rosetta Walter Stettheimer. The artist herself, however, is clad in the dark painting suit that served as her work outfit, set off by sprightly red high-heeled sandals. The world of the Stettheimer’s is laid out amid Manhattan’s skyscrapers, with the Statue of Liberty in the background. The scene is dominated by the enormous bouquet that dominates the composition. Perhaps each flower is meant as a reference to a sister; perhaps the willow-like frond binding them all together is meant to refer to their mother.



Florine Stettheimer, Spring Sale at Bendels, Oil on canvas

The mature style of Florine Stettheimer is based on highly idiosyncratic responses to a wide variety of sources, ranging from European Symbolism, to the decorative style of Henri Matisse and the set designs of the Russian Ballet which the artist encountered in Paris before World War I. Primitive and folk art also seem to have played a role in the formation of the artist's style as well as did, perhaps, the elegant and incisive graphic cartoons of Vanity Fair magazine. My favourite painting is this one in which, on a hot Summers day, the female figures recline and flop out on *chaise longues* no doubt after a night of salon hosting.



Florine Stettheimer, Heat, 1919, Oil on canvas