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A Portrait of Myself: Gaze Through the Eyes of Florine Stettheimer

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Notes:

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Florine Stettheimer was a jazz-era saloniste with friends in high places. Fraternizing with Marcel Duchamp and Carl Van Vechten, she had her fingers on the pulse of early 1910s and 1920s trends in gender and sexuality.¹ She was a designer and a poet, but she was foremost a painter of the changing landscape of sexuality in the early 1900s. In her 1915 painting *A Model (Nude Self-Portrait)*, Stettheimer parodies the preexisting art historical canon of gaze and autonomy in order to critique her own society's view of women and their bodies. She looks to the works of Manet and Titian for her critique, but, later in her career, drops the issue entirely in favor of a more nebulous representation of gender and sexual autonomy. Stettheimer comes from a background of Victorian staunchness combined with the toll of the first world war on gender roles and identity, and paints from this bewildering in-between place.

Florine Stettheimer was born to affluent Jewish parents in Rochester, New York, in 1871. She was the last of four siblings, and before she was grown, her father had already left the family. Stettheimer was closest with her mother and two of her sisters, Ettie and Carrie.² Together, Florine and these two sisters were affectionately known as the “Stetties” by friends and socialites of the early 1900s.

Stettheimer studied at the Art Students League of New York for three years, but didn't begin producing her known oeuvre until after her return to New York from Europe after the start of World War I. From 1915 to 1935, the Stetties maintained a salon in New York for contemporary authors and thinkers, and later, for refugee thinkers and queer socialites of the

¹ Schjeldahl, Peter. 2017. “The Roaring Stetties.” *New Yorker* 93 (13): 90-91.

² Zucker, Barbara. 1978. “Florine Stettheimer: A Private Vision.” *Women's Studies* 6 (1): 89.

early 1900s. Stettheimer met many of her influential friends through this salon, such as queer author Carl Van Vechten and artists Marcel Duchamp and Georgia O'Keeffe.³

After one relatively unpopular solo exhibition in 1916, Stettheimer chose to never show her work publicly again. For the rest of her painting career, Stettheimer only showed her work within her carefully chosen circle of socialites and friends. Perhaps this accounts for the development of her otherworldly style, which begins to appear in the 1920s and 30s.⁴ The private and specially selected audience of the Stetties' salon gave Stettheimer a controlled environment in which to experiment with her style. Her secrecy was so extreme that she ordered her family members to destroy all of her remaining artworks after her death. Thankfully, her final request was denied, and much of her work now exists in both public and private collections. Stettheimer passed away in 1944, and in 1947 her works were displayed by her sister Ettie in a memorial show. The memorial show was Stettheimer's first public exhibition since 1916. People close to her spoke about her work and life at the exhibition, and her works are now collected most notably by the Jewish Museum in New York.⁵

One of Stettheimer's earliest pieces was a daring nude self portrait. She lays spread out among plush white bedding with red details, in front of a white curtain, revealing herself to be a true redhead and wearing nothing but a smug expression. Stettheimer herself has pale skin, with red hair and lips, so that her body seems to melt into the cushions on which she lays. She holds in her hand a bright bouquet of flowers, the focal point of the painting, while a string of amber

³ Schjeldahl, Peter. 2017. "The Roaring Stetties." *New Yorker* 93 (13): 90-91.

⁴ Smith, Jeanette M. "Portrait of My Teacher, Fräulein Sophie Von Prieser." *JAMA : The Journal of the American Medical Association*. 314, no. 4 (2015): 322-323.

⁵ Edward, Alden Jewell. 1946. Stettheimer Art in Memorial Show. *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Oct 02, 1946.



Image 1

beads rests on the cushion to her right. Her legs rest nonchalantly and cross at the ankle as she props her head up with one slender arm.⁶ The pose that Stettheimer strikes is not accidental. In fact, it seems rather familiar...

Florine Stettheimer's painting

A Model was directly influenced by Edouard Manet's scandalous nude portrait *Olympia*, finished in 1863 for the Paris Salon of the same year.⁷ The portrait depicts a woman lounging on plush white cushions, in the same semi-upright position as Stettheimer. She wears jewelry, including a gold bangle and a black choker. She wears slippers and has a flower behind her ear- more than Stettheimer can lay claim to wearing. The background of her chamber is dark and draped in velvet curtains. Even the servant bringing the Olympia (the subject) flowers is dark-skinned- it is understood that she is not meant to be the object of desire in this painting. *Olympia* would have been considered a beautiful painting in the mid nineteenth century if it were not for the fact that Olympia, the subject, was a prostitute.

Olympia indulges in a restful break between clients while a servant brings her flowers from a previous one. She is jaded and sure of her sexuality, staring out at the viewer as if to say "next." A black cat at the end of the bed makes a good companion to such a dastardly woman.

⁶ "Seeing Florine Stettheimer's "A Model (Nude Self-Portrait)" Through Language." The Jewish Museum. August 10, 2017. Accessed October 22, 2018.

⁷ Langer, Cassandra. 2017. "Camp Art in the Age of Modernism." *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 24 (5): 46-48.

This portrait made waves thanks to its main subject being a prostitute—a scandalous affront to the Victorian and academic idea of “disinterested viewing.”



The nineteenth-century concept of disinterested viewing

holds that one may view a nude body as long as the nude does not claim to pique a sexual interest in the viewer (thus, the use of the term “disinterested”). It was argued in the nineteenth century by academic artists that the less realistic a female nude was, the less likely it would be to pique male sexual interest. Conversely, the more realistic a female nude was, the more likely it would be to pique male sexual interest. The concept of disinterested viewing defended the production of idealized nude portraits of women: a Venus figure was so idealized and so far removed from Victorian sexual contexts that it was not lustful to gaze upon her, it was simply an appreciation of aesthetics. A prostitute, however, was far too realistic to be removed from Victorian sexual contexts. Therefore, the subject of the a prostitute in art was seen as interested viewing, and was definitely not accepted by the academy.

While Manet played with what was acceptable and not acceptable in his day, and with the concept of disinterested viewing, Stettheimer plays both with the concept of disinterested viewing (by parodying Manet) and with the concept of male gaze, which can be seen in the placement of her bouquet.

Stettheimer's appropriation of Manet's *Olympia* is especially interesting considering her treatment of the bouquet. To quote the Jewish Museum, Stettheimer "holds her own bouquet in the air."⁸ She could have adapted the servant to be one of her sisters presenting her with a bouquet from an admirer. She could have put it in a vase in the background of the painting, or she could have even omitted the bouquet altogether. Instead, she chooses to hold it in her hand. The bouquet is located in the exact center of her painting, and contains the highest color variation present in the composition, so it naturally draws the eye first. The bouquet is the first thing a viewer sees, so it is clear that Stettheimer intends to bring attention to it. So if it is so important, what does the bouquet mean?

In Manet's painting, the bouquet is understood to be a gift from a client or admirer of Olympia. The flowers are given to Olympia by a man. Stettheimer, on the other hand, holds her flowers herself. The viewer does not know where Stettheimer got the flowers. Did she receive them from a suitor? Did she pick them herself? It does not matter, as she is the one holding them now. It seems that Stettheimer treats the bouquet as a symbol for her sexuality. In Manet's painting, a male client sends the flowers to Olympia and they are presented by a servant. Using Stettheimer's logic, the bouquet (and control over Olympia's sexuality) has to be first given to her by a suitor (a man). Stettheimer holds her bouquet proudly in the air, as if to say "I am in control of my sexuality, and I always have been. I did not have to have a man give me control over my own body."

The fact that Stettheimer's self-portrait focuses on the bouquet rather than the nude is also noteworthy. Yes, this is a daring nude self-portrait. However, Stettheimer's body seems to

⁸ "Seeing Florine Stettheimer's "A Model (Nude Self-Portrait)" Through Language." The Jewish Museum. August 10, 2017. Accessed October 22, 2018.

melt into her surroundings through the use of a similar color palette. A pale-skinned girl with red accents nearly blends in with a white bed and background with similar red accents. The highest concentration of color variation exists in the center of the painting, where Stettheimer holds her flowers. It would seem that the shocking nature of Stettheimer's nude self-portrait is secondary to the point being made: Stettheimer's control of her sexuality. This raises the question, then: if a sexy, confident nude is not meant to be the focal point of *A Model*, then whose gaze is the painting catering to?

The concept of "the male gaze" in art assumes the point of view of a masculine, heterosexual man when framing images of women.⁹ Whether the viewer is or is not a man is irrelevant; most academic art of the nineteenth century was intended to be seen through the lens of this "male gaze." In her nude self-portrait, Florine Stettheimer purposefully engages male gaze by painting herself as a nude, but also by not making the nude body in question a secondary element in the painting's composition. She is saying that she is "an object of her own gaze" instead.¹⁰

Savvy viewers of *Olympia* will notice that Manet is no more the author of this "female reclining nude" position than Stettheimer is. Manet looks to Titian's painting *The Venus of Urbino* for his composition, taking from it not only the positioning of his subject, but also the contrast between a white foreground and dark background.¹¹ Manet also imports his servant from Titian's composition: of course, the servants are never the subject of the painting, but only

⁹ Korsmeyer, Carolyn, "Feminist Aesthetics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

¹⁰ Langer, Cassandra. 2017. "Camp Art in the Age of Modernism." *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 24 (5): 46-48.

¹¹ Schjeldahl, Peter. 2017. "The Roaring Stetties." *New Yorker* 93 (13): 90-91.

Image 3



playing a narrative purpose in each work.

In *Olympia*, a servant aids the painting's

narrative by bringing a bouquet to

Olympia herself. In *The Venus of Urbino*,

two background servants show the

subject's wealth and marital status by

digging through a *cassone*, a type of

wedding chest, for clothes for their mistress. In both cases, the servants are not the subject of the painting nor the object of desire: the sitter is.

It is here that Florine Stettheimer's parody of *Olympia* makes sense. Through shifting the focus of a nude portrait off of the nude body and instead to an inanimate bouquet of flowers, she makes a comment on both the significance of the bouquet (as a symbol for bodily autonomy and sexuality) and the insignificance of the nude overall. It is worth noting that of these three similar works, two were painted by men, and one was painted by a woman. In the two nudes painted by men, the female body is an object of desire, in the typical fashion of male gaze: seeing a woman through a man's eyes. In the nude painted by a woman, the female body is not the focal point of the painting and is not explicitly made to be the object of desire, denouncing the male gaze. Stettheimer's gender and sexuality both impacted the way she chose to paint herself: as an element secondary to the bouquet. She engages both Manet's portrayal of female sexuality and Titian's use of the male gaze in their work.

Stettheimer seems to care very much about making a point in her earlier works, but after her 1916 exhibition, her style begins to metamorphose. She cares less about rigid symbolism and

directly engaging with concepts of gender and sexuality, and favors more abstract representations of those ideas. Compare Stettheimer's 1923 self-portrait called *Portrait of Myself* to her 1916 work *A Model*. Differences are very clear right away: she is clothed in this self-portrait, and she floats in an illogical space. She wears an otherworldly crimson dress and cape and holds an unorthodox bouquet. Her body is languid, disproportionate, and borderline androgynous. It is clear that Stettheimer is less concerned about realism and narrative than she is about abstract portrayals of herself and others.

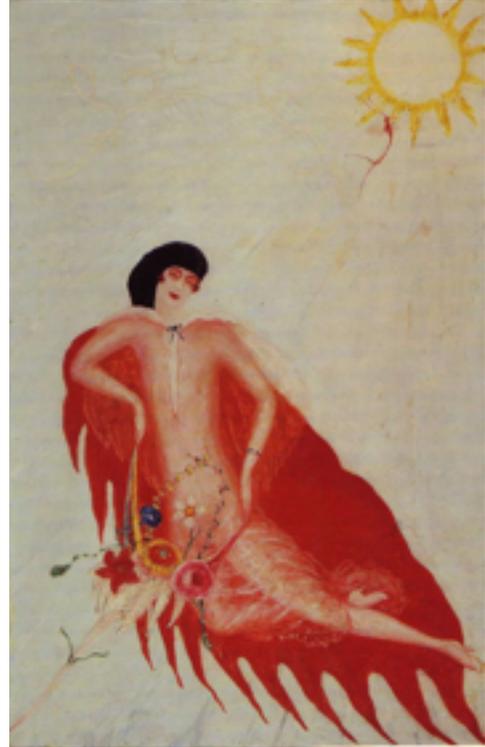


Image 4



Image 5

In *Portrait of My Sister Ettie Stettheimer*, Florine Stettheimer portrays her sister in a space similarly illogical to the one in her 1923 self-portrait. Ettie rests upon what seems to be a deep red chaise that looks more like an amorphous blob than anything else. She seems to be in a relaxed position, sprawling in a very casual manner. Her black dress comes down low on her chest, and her black bobbed hairstyle very firmly place her in the 1920s. Her pose may be described as similar to the “reclining female” seen in the former nudes discussed, but the viewpoint seems to hover over Ettie rather than seeing from the

side. Ettie's wide, red eyes peer back at the viewer like a doe. A Christmas tree, which is in flames for some reason, is juxtaposed to the side of the chaise. Ettie occupies a very abstract space: is it the night sky, with six stars and the moon seen in the background? Is she meant to be floating in the sky, or is she simply meant to be lounging in a dark room? Is a night sky meant to be related to *Portrait of Myself* (1923), in which Florine herself appears to be floating in a daytime sky, complete with a sun in the corner of the composition?

Stettheimer gives the viewer no clues as to what logic the space is meant to have in either of these 1923 portraits. It is thought that the goal of the abstract presentation of her later works was to portray someone as she saw them. Perhaps, to Florine Stettheimer, her sister Ettie felt like Christmas and the night sky, and she wished to show that in an unprecedented visual manner. Stettheimer later adapts this unique style to delve into deeper ideas of identity, such as one's sexuality or alter-ego.¹²

Looking to the works of Manet and Titian for inspiration and critique, Florine Stettheimer provided a canon of unique and thought-provoking portraits of herself and her sisters. Her access to a focus group of creative individuals helped to develop her otherworldly style. Even before the development of her distinct style, however, Stettheimer knew that she sought to make a statement about the male gaze and the art historical canon's portrayal of women. Through parody and the engaging of earlier works, Stettheimer critiques her own society's view of women and their bodies. She cavorted with the queer and nontraditional individuals of her day, and pulled from her experiences a way of thinking about gender and sexuality that was ahead of her time.

¹² Smith, Jeanette M. "Portrait of My Teacher, Fräulein Sophie Von Prieser." *JAMA : The Journal of the American Medical Association*. 314, no. 4 (2015): 322-323.

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Images Used

Image 1: Florine Stettheimer, *A Model (Nude Self-Portrait)*. 1915. Oil on Canvas. 48.25 x 68.25 inches. Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Image 2: Edouard Manet, *Olympia*. 1865. Oil on Canvas. 51.4 x 74.8 inches. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

Image 3: Titian, *Venus of Urbino*. 1534. Oil on Canvas. 47 x 65 inches. Uffizzi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

Image 4: Florine Stettheimer, *Portrait of Myself*. 1923. Oil on Canvas. 40.5 x 26.5 inches. Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Image 5: Florine Stettheimer, *Portrait of My Sister, Ettie Stettheimer*. 1923. Oil on Canvas. 40.5 x 26.5 inches. Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.