



*Portrait of Ettie*

*Florine Stettheimer*

# The Paintings of Florine Stettheimer

By MARSDEN HARTLEY

IN THE EXPLICIT SENSE of the term, I suppose no painter has been persistently permitted so much of refined obscurity as Miss Florine Stettheimer among the artists of this day and time. Obscurity is the special feast of anyone who has proven his or her dower rights to general publicity, such as all real artists sooner or later encounter.

In the case of Florine Stettheimer, the reasons are much too personal and special.

This artist has wished apparently to remain the property of special friends, and if she has not precisely avoided the kind of publicity that annual appearances are sure to bring with them, she has, for one reason or another, and, I almost want to declare, not legitimately, elected to remain out of the great parade of esthetic effusion that makes up what is called the art season of New York from year to year. There is every reason why she should have appeared openly long ago, and only those who have carefully followed the annual shows of the Society of American Independents can be at all aware that so charming and talented a painter exists at all.

Those who have been privileged to follow intimately the progress of this artist from year to year in a private manner can be aware of the delicate, fanciful humor of this woman painter, and what might seem, in the end, to come to a kind of snobbism can only in truth be called a respectable reticence, believing probably that there is always the right time and the right place for the reasonable exposition of one's personal, intimate disclosures.

The painting of Florine Stettheimer does not in the general sense belong to the concert hall, it is distinctly chamber music meant to be heard by special, sympathetic ears; it has about it an eighteenth century delicacy which has no place in

the present-day broadcasting system; it is not art for the hundred millions any more than the novel of Proust is meant to be a common language for multitudes to feast upon.

This work implies a definite degree of cultivation in the spectator in order to enjoy its almost whimsical charm, it implies that one must wish for ultra-refined experience in order to enjoy what it contains, for it is the work of a woman reared in cultivation, and the higher degrees of social life.

It is the ultra-lyrical expression of an ultra-feminine spirit, and must be considered as such if one is to enjoy the degree it is meant to convey.

We have, then, in these paintings of Florine Stettheimer a new and very personal addition to the rapidly increasing array of feminine expression in art, and when we speak of women artists, we must run the gamut of names all the way down from Vigée LeBrun, Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morissot, Marie Laurencin, Helene Perdriat, Cherie, Suzanne Valadon, Valentine Prax, Hermine David, Mme. Marval, Georgia O'Keeffe, even to Serafine the *femme de ménage*, whose pictures are now so popular in Paris, in order to place the work of Florine Stettheimer where it belongs.

There are doubtless others who might be added to this list of women celebrities, but these are certainly the outstanding ones, and the addition of the name of Florine Stettheimer to this conspicuous list will prove just how well this latter name stands among the feminine contributors to the art of today. It can be said at once that the work of Florine Stettheimer would be instantly accepted in the field of European art, if only for the reason that the best European culture, lying behind forming the basis of it, would be immediately recognized; at the same time it holds its American flavor by virtue of its freshness and



*Portrait of my Aunt*

*Florine Stettheimer*

clarity, by the special kind of wit that permeates it, and by the Americanism of its approach.

For my part, I can see the name of "Florine" standing out in all the galleries of Paris, and she would certainly acquire fame there for all the obvious reasons in the world.

This artist is a painter among painters, and proves that she knows her *métier* as well as the best of them. She speaks the language of her day in pictures that entertain every alert eye and mind which has been privileged to experience them, and she possesses a most distinguished personal quality not to be found everywhere—a precious, incisive wit that only a feminine nature can express.

Among all this fine assemblage of names which I have given, Florine Stettheimer stands alone by virtue of her one very particular gift, the gift of delicate satire and iridescent wit that permeates all of her pictures.

There is the element of playfulness in all of them, there is never a trace of *gaucherie* or grotesqueness, no striving for exaggerated neurotic realization, nothing but the refined sentiments and clarified observations of a highly sensitized nature becoming to a woman of special culture and of special cultivation.

Epic painting is like epic poetry, it must in the end be perfectly sober, for fancy, whimsicality and light laughter can have no place in it. Strictly speaking, the pictures of Florine Stettheimer can never be sober, because they tend always toward the most gracious and ingratiating degrees of light comedy, they depict the exquisite fatalities of heritage, and the exact measure of satire that springs from such sources, so that in the end, these pictures portray the true touch of comedy which inevitably belong to them. Florine Stettheimer seldom or never steps out of the social world for her art experience, she never chooses to represent experience which does not pertain to personalities and their habits and modes of expression with which she is especially familiar, she paints nothing she does not know, with the result that these highly keyed pictures flooded

with the incandescence of light rather than with mere light itself, become in their way sentimental histories of special gestures, traits and tendencies observed by her. She is in this sense a Proustian revealer of quaint conduct, it is her remembrance of things past that she presents, for these pictures represent her vision and her ideas of people she has known and seen with a sharp eye to the translucent comedy that emanates from them.

I am, of course, speaking of her gallery of what I want to call her fragrant portraits, for they seem almost to exhale pungencies and sweetnesses on the air about them, rather than to state any special sense of physical bulk or physical behavior.

They are not portraits of people, but rather are they penetrations into the mind and spirit of these highly accentuated types of hers. They are portraits of the qualities and essences that emanate from them, from their minds or from their delicately adjusted or maladjusted spirits.

So that in the final sum, it is comedy of a most meticulous sort that ensues, it is wit that must contain the weight of the argument, and in these ways Florine Stettheimer is by way of being a master in her own peculiar right.

This artist never reveals a heavy hand, she is never acrid or morose, never unkind in her sense of the comic.

She remains strictly in her own specific sphere, her vision is airy and ornamental, almost effervescent, she keeps within the scale of her fancies and observations, and allows nothing to enter her pictures which does not pertain strictly to the pleasurable aspects of things seen and things understood by her.

What these pictures have to do with the heaviness of esthetics is of no importance, nobody's business; what they have to do with the art of self-expression is everybody's. It should be everybody's privilege one day to see and enjoy these pictures, and it is to be hoped that a day will come when Florine Stettheimer will set aside all forms of preference, self-imposed barriers, and of stereotyped concepts of presentation, and let the



*Marcel Duchamp and Rosa Selavy*

*Florine Stettheimer*

casual spectator in at last upon a world of explicit charm, of quaint humor and incisive wit, revealing thereby perhaps the one artist of today whose works are permeated first of all with delicate and captivating feminine humor. It is not out of place to make other comparisons and to state that what Mrs. Fiske and Marie Tempest, to name only two masterful comediennes, have contributed to the art of the stage Florine Stettheimer contributes in a similar way to the world of picture making.

Comedy of a distinguished sort is rare in any field of expression, as all art is inclined to walk with heavy step. Florine Stettheimer knows

her métier as I have already said, both as artist and as social being, and the result in these portraits of hers is a delight for the eye and a pleasure for the mind and the senses.

There is aristocracy of experience, aristocracy of presentation—certainly no small contribution to the general art experience of the time.

I have dwelt chiefly upon the qualities of the portraits because I think that in the end it is by these that this artist will be best appreciated and best known, best represented, and we who have come to think of these portraits as the "Florine album" turn the plush volume from page to page, and find there-



*Carl van Vechten*

*Florine Stettheimer*

in certain delectable, social and esthetic enjoyment.

It is as if these beings had come to bloom freely and clearly in spite of alien temperature and alien insistence, perhaps chiefly under glass if you will, subjected to special heats, special rays of light, special vapors, but there they are replete in their own beauty, their own hypersensitized charm.

There is, thank heaven, no trace of stolidity in them, they perform their singular effects by means of an almost clairvoyant veracity. A still more expansive form of wit is to be found in the large decorations long since familiar to us, because they

are intended primarily to be expansive travesties, and become lyrical panoramas of the quaintest sort of behavior to be observed along the edges of a various day, such as *Asbury Park*, *Cathedrals of Broadway*, and others of the same exotic, iridescent nature.

It is in the portraits, however, that Florine Stettheimer rises to her own heights, and it is upon these playful images of exceptional people that we have chosen to concentrate.

The comedy of private insistence, and of inevitable private phantasy—this is the keynote to the best that emanates from the art of Florine Stettheimer.