Review: Florine Stettheimer: A Biography


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This ambitious volume recounts the life and work of artist, Florine Stettheimer. Barbara J. Bloemink introduces the artist as a socially progressive visionary whose work and character were harshly misjudged during her lifetime. Stettheimer was considered subversive for openly championing homosexuality and racial equality, while her paintings, expressing her views on feminism, marriage, gender fluidity, and family, were initially regarded as little more than the efforts of a wealthy spinster. Despite relentless pushback from her family and critics, Stettheimer took her work seriously and was determined to have her art seen in public. Bloemink provides ample evidence to break apart the previous narratives surrounding the artist and her work. The author reconstructs, in painstaking detail, Stettheimer’s upper-class German-Jewish family and her complicated relationship with her two her sisters, with whom she lived until the last decade of her life. Stettheimer’s diary entries and poems, along with many full-page plates of her paintings, photos, and illustrations of her set and costume designs are smartly placed throughout the book’s eleven chapters, providing reference points to specific eras and anecdotes.

The social and technical significance of numerous works in Stettheimer’s oeuvre are reexamined at length. Nude self-portrait, for example, painted in 1915-16, remained controversial long after Stettheimer’s death, but her advanced level of skill was overlooked.
While the act of an older unmarried woman painting herself posing nude was outrageous, Bloemink points out the work clearly depicts Stettheimer’s views on feminism and sexuality. Inspired by Titian’s Venus of Urbino, Edouard Manet’s Olympia, and Francisco Goya’s Nude Maja, Stettheimer situates herself gazing directly at the viewer, but with the intention of altering the meaning of the reclining nude woman, shifting from the experience of the male voyeur to a female perspective.

The bulk of the text is concerned with recognizing Stettheimer as a pioneer of the avant-garde. Stettheimer’s exhibition history spans three decades, and she was accomplished working in different mediums. She designed the sets and costumes for the first avant-garde opera, Four Saints in Three Acts. Stettheimer also moved within various artistic social circles throughout her life, enjoying friendships with Carl Van Vechten, Alfred Stieglitz, and Marcel Duchamp, among others.

This book would be appropriate for undergraduate and graduate audiences. The writing is crisp and accessible, with a uniquely engaging style. The color plates, photographs, and illustrations are well-placed within each chapter to enhance the text. The font is a comfortable size, and the paper is thick and glossy. The hardcover binding is durable and flexible. An exhibition history, endnotes, an index, and a selected bibliography are included. Bloemink’s well-researched and thoughtful volume would be a welcome addition to academic and museum libraries.