



Florine Stettheimer (American, 1871-1944)

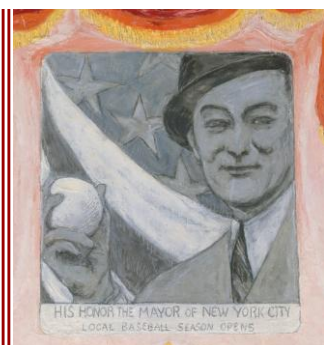
***The Cathedrals of Broadway***, oil on canvas, 1929

60 1/8 x 50 1/8 in. (152.7 x 127.3 cm.)

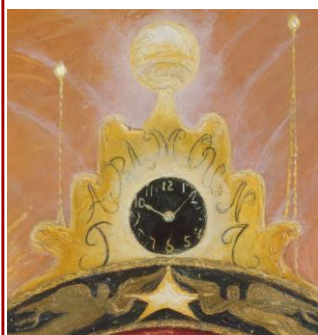
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Gift of Ettie Stettheimer, 1953. 53.24.3.

Image: Art Resource, NY. Reproduced by permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.





HIS HONOR THE MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY / LOCAL BASEBALL SEASON OPENS



Paramount Bldg. clock and globe Wally Gobetz

## Florine Stettheimer *The Cathedrals of Broadway* oil on canvas, 1929

In a personal style unique among the American modernists, Florine Stettheimer created her *Cathedrals* series between 1929 and 1944 to showcase, and whimsically satirize, New York

City's pre-eminence in entertainment, consumerism, finance, and art. The four large paintings—each five feet by four feet—are flamboyant, witty, unapologetically busy, and incontestably eye-catching.<sup>1</sup> Each unfurls from a central arch, the “cathedral altar,” and is constructed like an “elaborate stage design for an over-the-top Broadway musical production number.”<sup>2</sup>

In the first of the series, the “cathedrals of Broadway” are the lavish theaters of the Broadway district that featured movies and live stage performances for decades until most were closed and demolished. Five theaters are enshrined in Stettheimer's canvas, two of which opened just as “talkies” arrived to displace the silent film.

The opening night of the **Paramount Building Theater** on Nov. 19, 1926, is the centerpiece of *Broadway*. All is aglow with nighttime Manhattan splendor. Neon signs, theater lights, searchlights, and street reflections make the light appear to ricochet across the canvas. Affluent New Yorkers arrive in a limousine (bottom left), and middle class patrons line up at the box office (lower right) while the throngs awaiting entrance are held back by an usher. Six costumed ushers await the arrivals, and two yellow-garbed valets, one black and one white, greet the arriving public.

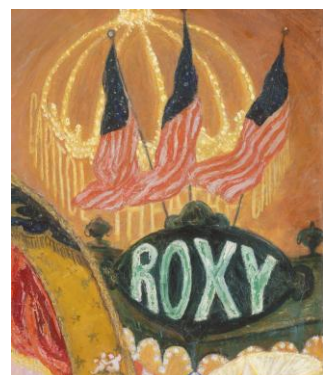
We are led into a “movie palace” of superlatives, modeled after the ornate Paris Opera House. With its unique arched auditorium walled in imported marble, furnished with elegant red carpet and red velvet drapes, an elaborately frescoed ceiling, a massive chandelier, and wall niches for classical statuary, all anchored by a giant Wurlitzer pipe organ, the Paramount was lauded as a “Paradise of luxury, color, and enchantment.”<sup>3</sup> The Paramount Building itself is topped by four clocks (with the Paramount stars marking the hours) and an illuminated glass globe (that flashed the time in white and red lights), both crowning the central arch in *Broadway*.

And how were patrons entertained on this opening night? The extravaganza was titled *Cavalcade of Motion Pictures* and presented, after introductory festivities, several musical stage

numbers, the 1812 Overture performed by Paramount Symphony, a short newsreel, and the silent film *God Gave Me Twenty Cents*.<sup>4</sup> In the newsreel, pivotally placed by Stettheimer as the only black and white image in the color-splashed canvas, Mayor Jimmy Walker throws out the first baseball of the season (see a [newsreel clip](#) of Walker's 1920 first pitch).<sup>5</sup>

Flashing above the Paramount are the signature marquees of the **Mark Strand Theater** (1914), the **Rialto Theater** (1916), the **Capitol Theater** (1919), and the **Roxy Theater** (1927). “House of talkies” and “all talking” they beam into the nighttime sky, heralding the transition from silent to sound films. In contrast appears the word “Silence” at the bottom center of the painting, inscribed in the lobby carpet under an art-deco piece in which a figure gestures “shhhh.” Silence in movie palaces, other than the accompanying organ or piano, would soon be a thing of the past.

An artistically trained free-spirited New Yorker, Stettheimer hosted, with her mother and two sisters, a premier “salon” of the city's intellectuals and artists. She was working on the fourth canvas of the *Cathedrals* series when she died in 1944.



Roxy Theater, ca. 1930s

<sup>1</sup> View the full Cathedral series (as small images) at the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City: [The Cathedrals of Broadway](#), 1929; [The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue](#), 1931 [also in *Becoming Modern*]; [The Cathedrals of Wall Street](#), 1939; [The Cathedrals of Art](#), 1942.

<sup>2</sup> H. Alexander Rich, “Rediscovering Florine Stettheimer (Again): The Strange Presence and Absence of a New York Art World Mainstay,” *Woman's Art Journal*, 32.2 (Fall-Winter 2011), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *The New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1926; quoted in Ken Bloom, *Broadway: Its History, People, and Places: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 400.

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, p. 400.

<sup>5</sup> BBC Motion Gallery at [www.bbcmotiongallery.com/gallery/clip/524C127\\_042.do](http://www.bbcmotiongallery.com/gallery/clip/524C127_042.do).