



Florine Stettheimer (American, 1871-1944), *The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue*, oil on canvas, 1931

60 x 50 in. (152.4 x 127 cm.) Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Gift of Ettie Stettheimer, 1953. 53.24.4.

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Florine Stettheimer *The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* oil on canvas, 1931

An affluent, artistically trained free-spirited New Yorker, Florine Stettheimer hosted, with her mother and sisters, a premier “salon” of the city’s intellectuals and artists. In a

personal style unique among the American modernists, she 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.¹ 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.”²

In the second of the series, Stettheimer focused her satirical gaze on the luxury that she and her urban peers relished. The “cathedrals” are the secular temples of consumers’ worship—the shops, department stores, and restaurants on Fifth Avenue that catered to the very rich. Their names are emblazoned in the sky: Tiffany’s jewelers, Altman’s department store, Hudnut’s cosmetics, Tappé’s and Bendel’s women’s fashions, Thorley’s flowers, Maillard’s sweets, and Delmonico’s and Sherry’s restaurants (with Pommery Drapeau Américain [American flag] champagne in an ice bucket). Centering the painting is an “altar” modeled on the main entrance to St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic cathedral on Fifth Avenue. Blessed by a cardinal and a monk, a lavish society wedding party exits the cathedral into the avenue’s luxury-laden extravaganza. Unobserved by the crowd, it seems, is the ticker-tape parade for a visiting dignitary (far left). The golden statuary (gilded bronze) represents works in Central Park on Fifth Avenue—at right Saint-Gaudens’s General Sherman monument and, at left, perhaps the eagle in the doorway entrance of the Arsenal. Stettheimer and her sisters, most likely friends of the newly married pair, are pictured at right (Florine at far right). The dollar sign on the Rolls Royce grill forms Stettheimer’s initials as a monogram, and her name and the painting’s date comprise the license plate. The painting’s title is written with golden flourish in the central red carpet.³ Everything is garishly ebullient, each detail a parody—and celebration?—of consumer excess and elite self-promotion.

My attitude is one of love
is all adoration
for all the fringes
all the color
all tinsel creation

I like slippers gold
I like oysters cold
and my garden of mixed flowers
and the sky full of towers
and traffic in the streets
and Maillard’s sweets
and Bendel’s clothes
and Nat Lewis hose
and Tappé’s window arrays
and crystal fixtures
and my pictures
and Walt Disney cartoons.
and colored balloons.

—Florine Stettheimer³



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Looking down Fifth Ave. from E. 63rd St., 1922 (detail)

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ Florine Stettheimer, *Crystal Flowers: Poems and a Libretto*, eds. Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo (Toronto: BookThug, 2010), p. 68; permission request in process.