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.
Florine Stettheimer

_The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue_

oil on canvas, 1931

An affluent, artistically trained 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. 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.”

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, Tappe’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. Everything is garishly ebullient, each detail a parody—and celebration?—of consumer excess and elite self-promotion.

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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.
