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STETTHEIMER: A REPLY

BY GLENWAY WESCOTT



Disagreeing with ARTNEWS' review (Nov. 1946) of the late Miss Stettheimer's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Mr. Wescott asked us to publish this article in reply. Because of his distinction as a writer, we are glad, exceptionally, to accede to the request—still reserving for the future, however, the right again to indicate what we consider triviality in an artist through brevity rather than by extended comment.

Background detail (above) from Florine Stettheimer's PORTRAIT OF MY SISTER CARRIE (below).



For Florine Stettheimer painting was a vocation, not a profession. As a woman of some means, with an approving family and artistic friends close to her, she felt no concern to sell her pictures or particular anxiety about their pleasing or displeasing anyone. As to her having a career or making a reputation, doubtless her independence had a handicapping effect; she never entrusted her work to a dealer, to be made known gradually in the usual way. She was shy and lacked the competitive feeling. Previous to this winter's memorial exhibition (which recently closed at the Museum of Modern Art, and will travel to the Arts Club in Chicago, and to the De Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco) no one was given opportunity to respond or react to her art except in her studio, in her presence, or by way of a single example here or there.

Therefore, naturally the talk and the criticism of it, all of a sudden, has been mixed and somewhat extreme—on the one hand, the pride and delight of those whose high opinion of a few works has been borne out by the view of some fifty canvases assembled; on the other hand, the disfavor of a type of critic who only glances and makes his point and goes on to the next thing, like a hit-and-run driver; and as it always has been in modern art a great many people in between, a collective mind not made up, willing to be amused, hesitating to be impressed.

Like it or not, Florine Stettheimer had originality, which in the pictorial art of our country is rare and important. This often entails some solitariness and oddity; it did in her case. Certain of her large canvases seem self-conscious and that is an imperfection. As it were defiantly, she would often exaggerate a characteristic of her principal figure or

a feature of her central design. But in canvas after canvas, passages of still-life and miniature scenes set apart in the background are finer in their way than any twentieth-century work except Bonnard's; and in fact her detailed way was not unlike his.

Even in her early production—as early as 1917, when American art in general was not good, and the painters whom she saw successful all around her went in for either a rich muddy effect or a cheating thinness like sleight-of-hand—her brush was strong and direct, and her choice of colors heart-felt. Truly the paint adorns the canvas, festive and clean. In her paintings of flowers this pure pictorial quality impresses almost everyone.

Her paintings of groups of people, both indoor and outdoor scenes full of small figures, are all a kind of portraiture. As for the spirit of it, you will find the equivalent in literature more often than in pictorial art: the letters of Madame de Sévigné, the journal of Dorothy Wordsworth—vibrant, private, decidedly feminine personalities in whom mind and heart always mingled; the aesthetic sense scarcely distinguishing itself from the more intimate emotions.

Every one of these rather large, bold compositions of Miss Stettheimer's—to her way of thinking, as her inspiration began—was a personal

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matter, something of a secret, a keep-sake. All was a labor of love; a recording of her family affections and of her lively interest in the good creative company she and her mother and sisters frequented; a remembrance of *fêtes galantes*, a keeping of dear anniversaries, some of which must have been heart-breaking as the years passed.

Before long, of course, no one will know or care exactly what the old reality was which haunted her and prompted her. The elements in her art which are most like literature will vanish away out of it; but the rest is lasting, and it appeals to one's imagination, if one has any, and gratifies the sensuality of the eye, if one's eye is sensual. For she derived a particular, seemingly carefree lyricism and happy decorative effect even from strange and mournful reminiscence; *beauty from ashes*.

AT THE WHITNEY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

before the formal discipline introduced by the early abstractionists. But that is precisely the reason why this discipline should be implicit, not explicit, in the modern way of seeing. In this exhibition, those painters who see nature through the maturity of abstraction are the best representatives of the movement whose true advance-guard they constitute. The subjective patterns of Loren MacIver, who still keeps her eyes shyly on the floor; the multi-planed, good-humored expressionism of Hans Moller; the spatially serene if somewhat drably suggestive mood of Kay Sage; the rhythmic tapestry of Stamos, who has the secret of the poet and can paint it—these are the most pleasurable and the most painterly.

Their numerous confrères do little but underscore the qualities of their utmost opposites in this show. They confer a favor, by curious indirection, on a good many mediocre realists, and even so good a piece of pure naturalistic painting as Schnakenberg's *PORTRAIT OF STAMOS* might not loom quite so prominently in one's memory if it were not one of the few tunes that can be carried away from an atonal concert.

When one comes to the five best pictures in the show, they stand out still more emphatically as mature works whose painters have long since distilled the economizing discipline of abstraction: the assured underlying draftsmanship and pervasive tonal construction of George Grosz' *PEACE NO. 2*; the pure painterly lyrics in Edward Hopper's simplification of the simplest of subjects in *SOLITUDE*; the host of associative ideas brought in without a single literary device in the swelling tones and classic serenity of Walt Kuhn's *SANDY*; the assurance of composition and atmosphere, albeit somewhat miniaturishly, in Raphael Soyer's *DANCER IN BLACK TIGHTS*; and the nervous yet deliberately controlled energy and tonal melodies of Max Weber's *THREE LITERARY GENTLEMEN*.

Beside these older lights, another category belongs to the next generation of already arrived talents, whose absorption of abstract vision is more patent in their pictures. One of the

best pictures in this Annual is by the much too long absent Stefan Hirsch, who comes back with a gripping war document that is also a fine picture, his flaming *NUREMBERG* being both a symbol and a curiously fatalistic fruit of the tenets of German expressionism. Vincent Spagna continues his delightfully individual path with an inevitably pleasant still-life that shows how abstract nature can be. David Aronson continues to abstract by way of Byzance in his *ADORATION OF THE MAGI*, though perhaps with a little too much upper-case Intelligence for just a painter. As others return to straight vision via modern experience, younger painters like Walter Stuempfig, Edward Melcarth, Virginia Cutlbert, Hendrik Mayer, Edward Reep, and Gregorio Prestopino deserve a special mention for quality.

More than this is hard to say of any annual so densely populated. Should one single out the bad as well as the good? It would be as easy as it is unkind—and there really are a few about which it is difficult to suppress oneself even at Christmas time. The total, however, makes a provocative long-remaining experience, a show that—to get back to our opening postulation—proves the ideal U. S. salon lies midway between a clinically complete cross-section and a purely qualitative analysis, that it lies actually in what the Whitney Annual really is: a preliminary selection on approval of pictures intended for purchase. This not only avoids the necessity for a pre-announced manifesto or the grammar-school incentive of prize money, it also sets the imponderable yet essential standard of responsibility for the determinative process of invitation. If an individual selects both artists and their specific works with a view toward purchase, no matter how impersonally on behalf of an institution, he cannot escape the responsibility which fades out when it becomes the common burden of a jury of award.

This doctrine of individualism is good to remember in this day of increasing state controls which already begin to reach out their worldwide tentacles for the arts.



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