

Florine Stettheimer's Family Portrait II: Cathedrals of the Elite Family

Cara Zampino

Excerpt 1

Florine Stettheimer's 1915 painting *Family Portrait I* marks the beginning of her series of portraits featuring family members and friends. On the whole, the scene portrayed is quite mundane. In the painting, the Stettheimer family, which consisted of Florine, Carrie, Ettie, and their mother, is depicted gathered around a small table. Two of the sisters engage in discussion, another fixes a small bouquet of flowers, and the mother reads a book. The three sisters sport similar dresses, all of which are simple and lack ornate details, and the mother dons a plain black outfit.¹ Over a decade after her initial portrayal of her family in *Family Portrait I*, Florine Stettheimer recreated and updated the image of the Stettheimers through her 1933 painting *Family Portrait II*, which depicts the same figures gathered in an extremely unusual setting that is a far cry from the quotidian table scene of the first portrait. As a whole, the women are living in a world with various fantastical elements. A bouquet of three flowers that are larger than the ladies themselves surround them; a striking red and yellow carpet borders a body of water; and various New York landmarks, such as the Chrysler Building and Statue of Liberty, float in the sky. Yet, the family unit is also divided—they gaze in separate directions, wear distinct, expensive-looking clothing, and hold objects that appear to be representative of their different personalities, including a painter's palette, a book, and a cigarette. Additionally, the larger-than-life bouquet of flowers physically separates two of the women from the others.² On the whole, the entire scene is a stark divergence from *Family Portrait I*, in which the Stettheimers are closely gathered at a small table. This raises an interesting question: why did Florine

¹ Florine Stettheimer, *Family Portrait I*, 1915, oil on canvas, photo: Elisabeth Sussman, Barbara Bloemink and Linda Nochlin, *Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995), 44.

² Florine Stettheimer, *Family Portrait II*, 1933, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Stettheimer decide to create a new, very different family portrait? Moreover, why, in this new portrait, is her family simultaneously united and separated in this fantasy world?

Oddly, the scholarly conversation about Stettheimer glosses over this particular painting and focuses on her other, better-known works of the 1930s. According to art historian H. Alexander Rich in his article in the Fall/Winter 2011 edition of *Woman's Art Journal* titled "Rediscovering Florine Stettheimer (Again): The Strange Presence and Absence of a New York Art World Mainstay," the scholarly discussion of Stettheimer falls into two main categories: how her works *other than* her family portraits satirize the elite class or comment on society, and why Stettheimer continues to be discussed by art historians.³ In terms of the first category, as explained in *Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica*, Barbara Bloemink, Elisabeth Sussman, and Linda Nochlin, who organized an exhibit on Florine Stettheimer at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1995, argue that Stettheimer acted as both a "historian" and "critic" of her time. These scholars explain that she did this by combining her personal story with historical events to provide social commentary and critique through her non-portrait works.⁴ Yet, prominent scholars of the first camp interpret *Family Portrait II* as merely a personal painting that was created in the midst of works that tackled societal issues, such as the *Cathedrals* series. These works are a collection of four paintings (*Cathedrals of Art*, *Cathedrals of Broadway*, *Cathedrals of Wall Street*, and *Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue*) that depict various facets of the New York elite world in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵ According to art historian Elisabeth Sussman, the *Cathedrals* series reveals and critiques the religious-like devotion of the urban American upper class to the pillars of elite society in New York: art, entertainment, finance, and consumerism⁶ Amidst the great discussion of this series, scholars of the first camp typically fail to take the interpretation of *Family Portrait II* past the obvious implications of its title.

³ H. Alexander Rich, "Rediscovering Florine Stettheimer (Again): The Strange Presence and Absence of a New York Art World Mainstay," *Woman's Art Journal* 32, no. 2 (2011), 22-29.

⁴ Sussman et al., *Florine Stettheimer*, 41-110.

⁵ Barbara Bloemink, *Friends and Family: Portraiture in the World of Florine Stettheimer* (Katonah, New York: Katonah Museum of Art, 1993) 16-17.

⁶ Sussman et al., *Florine Stettheimer*, 50.

Notably, scholars of the second category also tend to ignore *Family Portrait II* when examining Stettheimer's oeuvre. The scholars of the second camp, such as Jed Perl, a prominent art critic for *The New Republic*, believe that Stettheimer continues to be discussed by art historians because her paintings typically have larger resonances and depict an ideal world without financial struggle or hardship.⁷ Rich adds that many of her paintings reveal nostalgia for a better time and are not as highly personal as they initially seem.⁸ Yet, neither camp provides an interpretation of *Family Portrait II* that goes beyond its personal meaning for the Stettheimer family.

Considering the time in Stettheimer's career in which she created this painting (during a period in which she regularly created social commentary works) and the nature of the work itself, including its fantastical setting and its divergence from the original family portrait, it seems necessary to explore both the personal themes and historic concepts addressed by Stettheimer's *Family Portrait II*, an approach that the current analysis of the work lacks. Therefore, this method will establish a relationship between Stettheimer's personal interests and her social criticism. While I will generally follow Perl and Rich's model of analyzing both personal and cultural themes in my discussion of Stettheimer's *Family Portrait II*, a painting not analyzed in-depth by either scholar, I will argue that this work does not reveal nostalgia for a better time. Instead, just as Bloemink, Nochlin, and Sussman claim that her non-portrait works criticize an aspect of society, I will reason that this family portrait is similarly reproachful.

Thus, I will argue that Florine Stettheimer's *Family Portrait II* is not merely a "personal painting" in the midst of her series of works that deal with societal issues. Rather, through the portrayal of her family's simultaneous unity in a world of artificiality and separation by each woman's individual pursuits, Stettheimer suggests that the individualistic and materialistic interests that unify the elite family are also those responsible for the misery of those outside of it. In this sense, *Family Portrait II* acts as a fifth *Cathedrals* work that could be titled

⁷ Jed Perl, "Jazz Age Pastoral," *The New Republic* 213, no. 14 (1995), 39-42.

⁸ Rich, "Rediscovering Florine Stettheimer (Again)," 22-29.

“Cathedrals of the Elite Family,” in which Stettheimer critiques the pillars of the wealthy family of the 1920s and early 1930s: superficiality and self-indulgence. In this sense, the painting suggests that the indulgence in the very pillars that hold up the elite family is also the cause of the decay of the rest of society.

Excerpt 2: The next two paragraphs come from the body of the paper. In this section, Cara looks closely at the massive flowers in Family Portrait II, one of the elements of the painting that set the work apart from Stettheimer’s first family portrait and helped to create her internal motive. Here, Cara explores how the flowers also relate to her larger motive and argument about the portrait’s social commentary.

Upon first inspection, the painting immediately calls attention to the rampant artificiality in the world of the elite. Most noticeably, the women gather around a larger-than-life bouquet of three flowers. While flowers may be viewed as elements of the “natural” world, in this painting, they are unmistakably used in an artificial sense—the flowers are larger than the humans in the scene, and they are artificially placed in the middle of a sitting area. The dominance and centrality of the flowers makes the painting appear to be a portrait of the flowers, with the women as objects of secondary interest. This consequently implies the supremacy of artificiality in the world of elite families. Moreover, other man-made elements of the painting also speak to this notion. In particular, Stettheimer’s inclusion of the Chrysler Building evokes what Will Jones, a writer specializing in architecture, describes in his book *How to Read New York* (about New York architecture) as “the race for the skies,” which deals with wealthy Americans’ preoccupation with creating the tallest, most glamorous buildings possible in cities such as New York. Jones also makes the connection between this particular skyscraper and the Chrysler car company.⁹ In the context of this painting, the connection to Chrysler adds in another element of artificiality (in the sense of the man-made) through the automobile industry. While the women gaze in separate directions and wear distinct outfits, they are all united in this superficial world. Thus, through *Family Portrait II*, Stettheimer alludes to the elite’s obsession with artificiality and the overall materialistic nature of New York.

⁹ Will Jones, *How to Read New York* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications 2012), 150.

When analyzed alongside Stettheimer's poetry, it becomes evident that despite the fact that she contributed to this world of materialism, she did not view it in a positive light. Considering the prominence of the bouquet in this work, it is logical to relate this painting to one of Stettheimer's poems on flowers. In her poem "Revolt of the Violet," Stettheimer criticizes mankind's treatment of natural elements as "symbols," "attributes," and material objects that are dragged into people's "silly lives."¹⁰ In this sense, the inclusion of the bouquet criticizes the culture of materialism. Moreover, the absence of the color violet from her work, which includes the rest of the secondary color spectrum, may relate to the sentiments of disgust and rebellion evident in the title and meaning of "Revolt of the Violet." Accordingly, the painting may suggest that "violet" is rebelling against the materialism of the elite's world through its absence. Taken as a whole, the "symbols" of artificiality reveal the elite's obsession with the man-made—to the extent where these aspects become the focal point of the Stettheimer family portrait. Thus, the manner in which Stettheimer portrays the elite family's (in this case, her own family's) fixation with the artificial implies her disapproval of this facet of society. The societal implications derived from this ostensibly personal work seem especially plausible considering that Stettheimer created this during a time in which she also painted her *Cathedrals* series, which historians interpret as works of social commentary.

Bibliography

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¹⁰ Florine Stettheimer, *The Crystal Flowers of Florine Stettheimer*, ed. Ettie Stettheimer (New York: Ettie Stettheimer, 1949), 15.

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Author Commentary

Cara Zampino

My paper focuses on the historical context and personal narrative behind American artist Florine Stettheimer’s 1933 painting *Family Portrait II*. I started the process by comparing this family portrait to her first family portrait, which she painted about a decade earlier. From this visual analysis, I came up with an initial interpretation and an “internal motive,” which ended up having two main components: Why did Stettheimer create a second, drastically different family portrait? And why (in the new painting) do the Stettheimer women not seem so united or familial?

From this point, I dove into the research process. I started by using key terms from my internal motive, such as “individuality” and “decadence,” to explain aspects of the work that I found interesting. At first my research subjects seemed somewhat unrelated (they ranged from New York architecture to the social context of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novels), but parsing through a variety of different sources eventually led to a more developed explanation of the painting.

Next, I examined scholars’ arguments about *Family Portrait II* to determine exactly how my interpretation fit into the current conversation. Another layer of motive, my “external motive,” came from the analysis of the scholarly conversation of Stettheimer and her works. *Family Portrait II* had only been analyzed alongside Stettheimer’s personal life, and no one had explored its possible relationship to her other works of the time period—namely, her *Cathedrals* series, which deals with societal issues.

So, after analyzing the portrait, researching topics related to my visual analysis, and finally unpacking the scholarly conversation, I found that my overall approach to this work intervened into the existing literature on Stettheimer by relating her personal interests/family life to the social context of the time period. I combined my internal motive (why are the two family portrait paintings different?) and external motive (why has no one talked about this painting as social commentary?) to motivate my thesis.

The paper as a whole argues that the isolation of the individual Stettheimer women within the context of *Family Portrait II* represents and criticizes the self-indulgence of the elite American family during the Jazz Age, suggesting that the materialistic interests of the elite caused misery to the rest of society. This component of my thesis directly answers my internal motive about why Stettheimer may have created a second portrait at the end of the Jazz Age, as well as why the Stettheimer women seem to be divided within the painting. The broader implications of my thesis deal with answering my external motive—placing the painting alongside the works of her *Cathedrals* series, a sequence of paintings that present and criticize the “pillars” of the elite American lifestyle. This part of my thesis helps connect Stettheimer’s personal interests to the cultural moment of the painting by situating the work into its social context—that is, as a critique of the “cathedrals of the elite family.”

Fellow Commentary

Heather Russo

I worked with Cara on an early draft of this paper. In this draft, she had focused primarily on the historical context of Florine Stettheimer's 1933 painting *Family Portrait II*. A single sentence in the paper made a strong but unsupported claim: namely, that *Family Portrait II* should be seen as the next painting in Stettheimer's *Cathedrals* series. However, the *Cathedrals* series received only a passing mention with no context or definition and this idea was not developed any further in the draft.

When I asked if this was a commonly accepted view in the scholarship, Cara explained that this was her own new insight. We determined that the connection between *Family Portrait II* and the *Cathedrals* series could provide a motive for the rest of her research and should be introduced much earlier in the paper.

The revised version of this paper draws the reader in with a good, clear formal analysis of *Family Portrait I* right at the beginning and then smoothly transitions to *Family Portrait II*, its marked differences from the first painting, and the idea that it is best understood as being in dialogue not only with *Family Portrait I*, but also with Stettheimer's *Cathedrals* series. The straightforward art historical analysis, the well-crafted organizational structure, and the paper title itself all work together to establish motive clearly and efficiently at the start of the paper.