

STRAWBRIDGE GALLERY

JOSEPH STELLA: VISIONARY NATURE

"LIGHT, GAY PAINTING OF A FLOWER": STILL LIVES AND BOTANICAL COMPOSITIONS

Stella once wrote of his wish "that my every working day might begin and end, as a good omen, with the light, gay painting of a flower." Flowers provided a profound source of joy for Stella. Although he rarely noted the symbolism of his floral subjects, they must have carried personal meaning for him, appearing as a leitmotif throughout his work.

He often arranged his botanical compositions in unexpected ways—as larger-than-life close-ups or in ambiguous, unlikely settings. His arrangements are expressive, full of pattern and color, at times relying on convention but also defying expectation with specimens united in unusual combinations. He featured exotic hothouse species alongside flowers inspired by his travels across Europe, North Africa, and Barbados, as well as plants and fruits easily found at a neighborhood store, often returning to a selection of familiar subjects that carried personal association or meaning for him.

Thistle and Other Flowers, undated

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty



Single Stem Flower Vine, 1919

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Mixed Flowers, ca. 1920

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
the Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Cactus, 1919

Silverpoint and pencil on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Three Flowers, 1919

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New
York



Red and Yellow Dahlia, ca. 1919

Crayon and silverpoint on cream wove paper

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Gene Arum



Lotus and Water Lily, ca. 1920

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



White Water Lily, 1944

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Lotus Leaves, ca. 1920

Silverpoint on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Three Yellow Roses, ca. 1920-1925

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Flower Studies, 1919

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Gene Arum



Untitled (Still Life with Peaches), undated

Pastel on paper

Private Collection



Untitled (Geraniums), 1938

Pastel on paper

Private collection



Zucchini Fantasy, ca. 1918

Pastel on paper

Private collection



Stella's artistic whimsy is perhaps best expressed in a series of zoomorphic interpretations of plant forms—especially in his renderings of flowers and gourds that resemble snakes, swans, and other animals. In Italy, the long and curvaceous zucchini

(also known as cucuzza squash) is used in cooking and as decoration. These common gourds appear often in Stella's work, embellished with birds and flowers or positioned to appear as an animal.

Sometimes described in Italian as *a collo di cigno*, or "swan-necked," the squash offers fodder for Stella's playful fantasy compositions.

Two Wood Ducks on a Flowering Branch,
1920-1925

Pencil, crayon, and colored pencil on paper
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New
York



Lilies and Water, ca. 1929

Watercolor and gouache on paper

Collection of Erica R. and Eric S. Schwartz



Anthuriums in a Blue Glass Vase, ca. 1935

Oil on canvas

Collection of Samuel G. Rose



This painting includes both modernist approaches to still life and traditional aspects that link it to the Catholicism of Stella's southern Italian homeland. In churches throughout Italy, floral-patterned altar cloths

would have been surrounded by vases of real flowers, creating a dialogue between nature and representation, which he explores in this painting.

Red Amaryllis, 1928

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty



Sunflower, ca. 1919

Crayon on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Nocturne, undated

Pastel on paper

Private collection



For Stella, pastel offered an ideal medium to achieve the pensive mood in his nighttime scenes. Characteristic of these “nocturnes,” a title evoking musical compositions, are the hidden sources of light that relay the visual experience of the transition between daytime and darkness. Here, the gable, trees, and clouded sky are silhouetted against the soft glow of twilight. A distant cross of a telephone pole—a detail also present in many of Stella’s works featuring the American industrial landscape—takes on a spiritual status, pitched against the blue sky and the ethereal forms of the trees and clouds.

Nocturne, ca. 1925

Oil on board

Collection of Alan Pensler



Landscape in the Bronx, ca. 1935

Pastel on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Landscape, 1934

Pastel on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Stella likely rendered this landscape and *Landscape in the Bronx* (displayed nearby) in or around the New York Botanical Garden, which offered extensive and dense parkland forest on its grounds. The urban setting of these two compositions belies their bucolic

subject. Upon his return from his longest European sojourn between 1928 and 1934, Stella settled in an apartment across the street from the Garden. His proximity to the park enabled his retreat from the bustle of the city, and though he typically was drawn to botanical specimens, these works were inspired by his rambles through the grounds.

“LEFT FREE TO FACE THE SUN”: STELLA IN HIS FINAL YEARS

In the final years of his life, flowers assumed an even more central role for Stella, who continued to view nature as a metaphor for his own existence and death: “I may ask

one simple thing," he once wrote, "to be left free to face the Sun." In his early days, he had buoyed himself with frequent trips to the New York Botanical Garden, but in 1940 when he was diagnosed with heart disease, his pace slowed considerably.

Yet he had already begun to retreat in 1939. Following the lukewarm critical reception of his first major retrospective, at the Newark Museum in New Jersey, Stella scaled back. He tended toward smaller works and most often to the familiar subject of flowers. Around this time, his friend, the artist Charmion von Wiegand, remarked, "A visit to Stella's studio is an event. [. . .] In the center of the room, serenely unconscious

of confusion, sits the painter at a small easel, putting the last touches on the svelte curves of a tulip. Flower studies of all kinds litter the floor and turn it into a growing garden."

Pink and Yellow Roses, undated

Crayon and pencil on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Yellow Rose, undated

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Pink Water Lily, 1940

Charcoal and pastel on textured paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



*Pink Water Lily with Green and Black
Background, 1940*

Crayon and colored pencil on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty, courtesy of
Schoelkopf Gallery, New York



Two Pink Water Lilies, 1943

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of B. Dirr



The Banyan Tree, 1943

Pastel and crayon on paper

Private collection

*** No image available ***