

JOSEPH STELLA: VISIONARY NATURE

An immigrant from the small southern Italian hill town of Muro Lucano, Joseph Stella (1877–1946) arrived in New York at eighteen enamored by the energy of the city but also ambivalent toward its dark power. He described the city as a “monstrous dream [. . .] the skyscrapers like bandages covering the sky, stifling our breath.” His nature subjects counteracted these anxieties, harking back to the joy he felt in the light and open space of the Italian countryside. He would chase this feeling for his entire career.

Bridges, factories, tunnels, and towers signaled the power and promise of the young American nation, and Stella's modern interpretations of these subjects propelled him to international fame. Yet it was in nature, not in the city, that he found his greatest inspiration, and most of his work over four decades features themes drawn from nature.

If Stella's cityscapes became symbols of a modern era, his pictures of flowers, plants, birds, and trees were rooted in another, more ancient, primal, and paradisaical world. Inspired by classical precedents and his own brand of spirituality, these lyrical and exuberant works are also his least

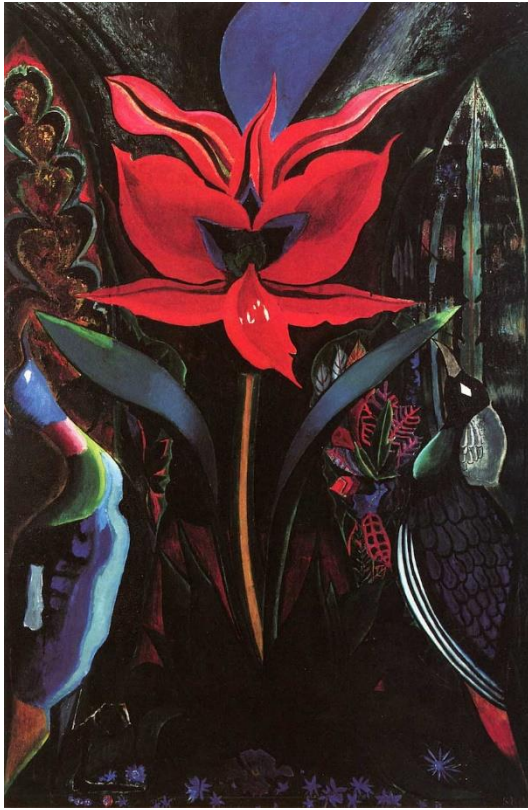
understood. Stella's close affiliation with nature shaped a body of work that ranges from vividly realistic to poetically transcendent and visionary in its unique expression.

A prolific writer as well as an artist, Stella composed poetry and prose throughout his career. His words are interspersed throughout this exhibition.

Red Flower, 1929

Oil on canvas

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art,
Bentonville, Arkansas, 2006.102



Red Flower is one of a group of works Stella made in Paris in 1929 that take on an overall darker tone. *New York Times* critic Edward

Alden Jewell characterized the picture as “eerie,” noting, “the artist mixes his paint with mysterious ingredients known only to alchemists. He has learned how to make color glow through dark, opaque forms.” The amaryllis in *Red Flower* materializes out of the blackness as if by magic, with leaves and petals splayed and two birds framing the central form, evoking religious paintings of apostles flanking Christ on the cross.

Self-Portrait, 1920s

Metalpoint with graphite pencil on wove paper. Prepared with white ground on paper.
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Purchased with the Alice Newton Osborn Fund, the Katharine Levin Farrell Fund, the Margaretta S. Hinchman Fund, the Joseph E. Temple Fund, and with funds contributed by Marion Boulton Stroud and Jay R. Massey,
1988-21-1



Stella made many self-portraits throughout his career. Here, inspired especially by his Italian heritage, he adapted the tradition of the profile portrait, a practice that extended through the Renaissance back to Ancient Rome. His self-portraits often incorporated nature motifs and symbols associated with his art. Trees held a special significance. He once wrote: "The artist is like a tree: growing older, bent under the weight of its fruit, it presses always closer to the maternal womb that gave it birth."

Untitled (The Croton), undated

Pastel on paper

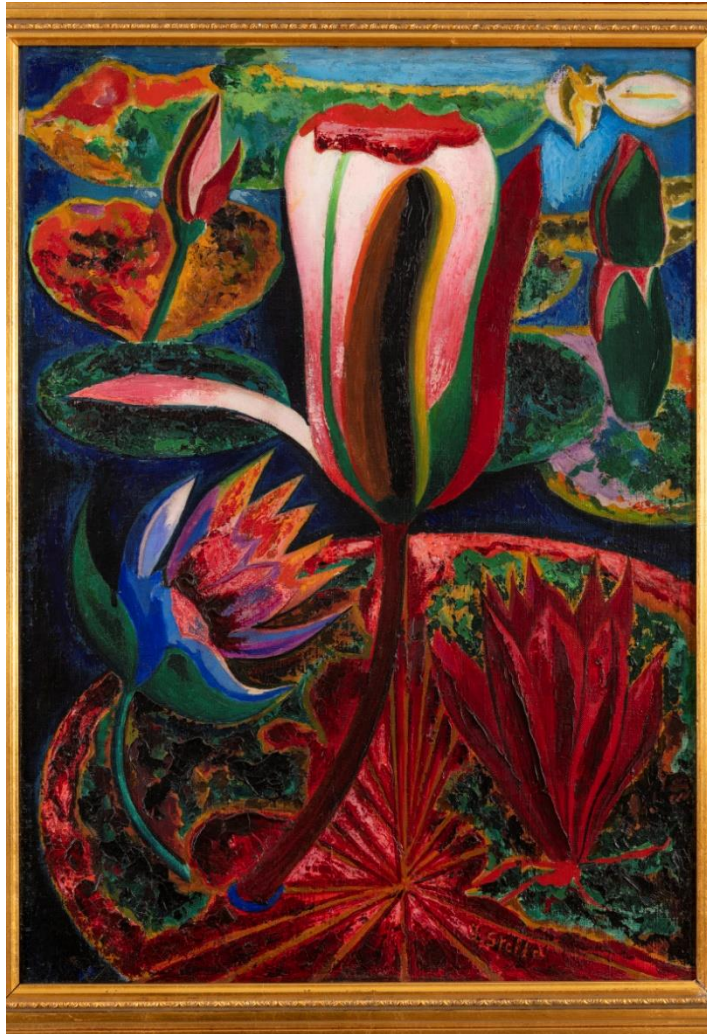
Collection of C.K. Williams II



Untitled (Lilies), undated

Oil on canvas

Private collection



Water Lily, ca. 1944

Pastel on paper

The Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington,
New York, gift of the Baker/Pisano Collection,
2001.9.231



Self-Portrait, ca. 1900-1910

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Thomas H. and Diane DeMell

Jacobsen PhD Foundation



Expected to follow in the footsteps of his older brother Antonio, a successful doctor in New York's Italian immigrant community,

Stella briefly attended medical and pharmacy school before pursuing art. Between 1898 and 1901, he received formal training at the New York School of Art. There he studied under William Merritt Chase, who encouraged students toward fluid brushstrokes and technical virtuosity. Stella initially emulated the style, evident in this early self-portrait with its dramatic lighting and loose handling of paint.

Bark, 1900

Oil on paper

Courtesy of Thomas Colville Fine Art



The small details of nature held great interest for Stella from the earliest moments of his career. This exquisite rendering of a tree bark fragment reveals the artist's intuitive interest in the humble subject and his skill for painting with exceptional precision.

“THE NEW ART”

It took eleven years after Stella first arrived in New York before he was able to return to Italy. Writing of this journey in 1909, he recalled that “with ever-heightening eagerness during my long period of exile, I awaited this return to my native land [. . .] the waiting tore my tormented soul completely to shreds.”

Stella spent nearly four-years in Europe, returning to his hometown of Muro Lucano in 1909 and eventually making his way to Paris. The trip proved determinative for his artistic career, awakening him to the artistic strategies of Cubism, Futurism, and Dadaism.

As Stella explained in a 1913 essay, "The New Art," "for the first time, I realized that there was such a thing as modern art [. . .] as true and great as the old one."

When he returned to New York in 1912, Stella forged new connections with the European avant-garde displaced by World War I. His closest affiliate was the French artist Marcel Duchamp, already famous for shocking audiences with the unexpected. Stella also became more experimental, incorporating nontraditional media such as glass and found objects into his work.

Untitled, ca. 1918

Collage (leaf and paper) on paper

Courtesy of Kraushaar Galleries, New York



Stella made some sixty-five collages over the course of three decades, though he never exhibited his them publicly. He referred to the collection of largely untitled compositions in Italian as *macchine naturali*—or “natural

machines.” In them, he combined two concepts, the manmade and the natural, into a single composition. Assembled of found objects, many include botanical elements such as branches or leaves.

Untitled (Tree and Leaf), undated
Collage (branch and leaf) on paper
Private collection



In nature, Stella found useful metaphors for explaining his transition to this “new effort in art.” He mused that inspiration might “appear in a sudden flash” but required time to “mature and be ready to pick from the tree.” The New Art, he wrote, “dawns, like the promise of morning over the tree of our hopes [. . .] and one fine morning [. . .] to our great surprise the flower becomes mature fruit, pouring out, breaking into the open, luminous.”

The Water Lily, ca. 1924

Oil on glass

Collection of Samuel G. Rose



Stella created about a dozen reverse glass paintings, applying paint to one side of a sheet of glass to be viewed from the other side. He may have been inspired to experiment in this medium by his friend

Marcel Duchamp, who was also using glass in his work at this time. Stella depicts a water lily viewed from above, a flower he likely saw on his frequent trips to the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. In the 1920s, the Botanical Garden was renowned for its experiments with the cross-hybridization of water lilies, which produced exceptionally colorful plants.

Tropical Sonata, 1920-1921

Oil on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
purchase, 63.63



Rising from a gnarled trunk to a swirl of
pointy leaves radiating from a central core,

the viewer's eye moves through dramatic passages like the progression of movements in a musical score. The title of this work reflects Stella's desire to translate the experience of music into a visual language—an interest that persisted throughout his career. Yet the fiery sky and angular forms in this picture recall the colors and shapes of his industrial pictures, such as *The Quencher (Night Fires)*, below. Though Stella often kept the worlds of nature and industry distinct, in works such as *Tropical Sonata*, visual overlaps appear.

Aquatic Life (Goldfish), ca. 1919-1922

Pastel on paper

American University Museum, Washington,
DC, gift from the Trustees of the Corcoran
Gallery of Art (Katherine S. Dreier Bequest),
1952.2.3



By the mid-1910s, Stella began working in pastel, a medium favored by the French Symbolist artists whose work he had encountered in Paris. If Duchamp and the Surrealists unleashed Stella's playful experimentation, the Symbolists, who explored the powers of the imagination, inspired his turn inward to the spiritual. Ethereal and awash with color, his pastels feature dreamlike subjects and express his emerging interest in the poetic potential of the visual arts.

The Peacock, 1919

Pastel on paper

Norton Museum of Art. Purchase, Friends of American Art, 2022.32.



Stella incorporated both plants and animals into his work by the mid-1910s, and the rich, fluid medium of pastel became an early

favorite of his for exploring nature-based fantasy. In this lyrical composition, a peacock, with its trademark fan of feathers, is shown from behind, revealing the onion shape of its lower tail feathers. The bird is flanked on either side by waterbirds and framed by an unusual combination of reedy bushes and cactus-like plants. Stella would have encountered peacocks at the Bronx Zoo, not far from the New York Botanical Garden.

Swans (Night), ca. 1917

Pastel on paper

Courtesy of Adelson Galleries



In this peaceful scene, two swans linger beneath a bridge. Soaring buildings in the distance suggest Stella set the birds in New York; yet the fantasy may have been partly

inspired by memories of Italy, suggested by the cypress tree at far right. Stella penned a poem on the subject, "Nocturne," describing, "The emotions, incense-misty with the memories of / his native land . . . They pervade with fragrance the velvety depths of / the waters; / Rippling with the silent rustle of the SWANS."

Calla Lily, undated

Pastel on paper

Collections of Lisa Stella McCarty



French Lilies, 1920s

Oil on canvas

The Newark Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. John C. Thompson in memory of John C.

Thompson, a Trustee of The Newark Museum, 1967, 67.53



“DAWN OF A NEW ERA”: TREE OF MY LIFE

New York became Stella's muse after 1913. He was initially inspired by Coney Island, describing it as his first American subject. Captivated by the stunning medley of colors in the electric lights, the excitement of the throngs of people, and the steel beams of the roller coaster and Ferris wheel, he embraced the chaos and fragmentation of form that was so integral to Italian Futurism—a movement he had been exposed to during his recent trip to Europe. Stella's most enduring acclaim, however, came with the distinct body of work associated with the

Brooklyn Bridge. Inspired again by the dynamism of Italian Futurism, Stella captured the soaring height and awesome scale of the engineering marvel through a series of fractured views of the massive cables and stone masonry against the shadowy colors of the night sky. These pictures express both the awe and anxiety the city provoked in him. His 1919 operatic prismatic abstraction of the bridge (see image below) established him as a leading painter of American modernity. Yet he found the city claustrophobic, chaotic, dark, and cavernous. A nostalgia for what he recalled as “blue distances of my youth in Italy” inspired his turn to themes of nature that connected him to his homeland.

Stella conceived *Tree of My Life* as a pendant to his seven-foot-tall *Brooklyn Bridge*. It is an equally epic painting—a paradisaical dreamscape based on his memories of Italy. The idea for the painting came to him as an epiphany, following his discovery of a little tree he found growing in the shadow of a Brooklyn factory. Thriving despite the city, like Stella himself, the tree signaled “a propitious omen.” With this self-referential painting—his first major work composed entirely of nature themes and which he notably exhibited alongside *Brooklyn Bridge*, Stella announced, “the dawn of a NEW ERA” and “the baptism of my new art, the birds and the flowers already

bejeweling the tender foliage of the new-born tree of my hopes, 'The Tree of My Life.'"

"SHEER DELIGHT": STELLA'S BOTANICAL DRAWINGS

"With sheer delight I was roaming [. . .] through the luxuriant botanical garden of the Bronx [. . .] Innumerable visions of pictures were storming around like chimeric butterflies." —Joseph Stella, 1946

As early as 1918, Stella began visiting the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, seeking respite from city life. The drawings on view in this section were inspired by his

visits to this all-season garden. Some provided models for the flowers and plants featured in his paintings. Others highlight a new creativity aroused by the gardens, visible in his fantasy compositions and in his studies in color, form, texture, or shape.

Stella began working in silverpoint about 1918, the centuries-old technique in which silver-tipped tools are pulled across treated paper. The indelible mark rendered by the silver makes the technique especially unforgiving as the lines are irreversible.

Stella was committed to preparing his own paper following fifteenth-century methods. He enjoyed the rigor and precision of silverpoint and chose this technique for his

botanical drawings throughout the rest of his career. In some works, the strokes he used to apply the underlayer are visible on the paper's surface. It was "sheer delight," he would later recall of his visits to the botanical garden in the Bronx. "I was seized with a sensual thrill in cutting with the sharpness of my silverpoint the terse purity of the lotus leaves or the matchless stem of a strange tropical plant."

Lily and Bird, ca. 1919

Silverpoint and colored pencil on paper

Private collection



While Stella's works resemble botanical illustrations in the way the subjects float on the page, they are more fanciful and romantic than scientific. Here he combines one of his favored subjects, a lily stalk, with a sparrow, the national bird of Italy.

Lupine, ca. 1919

Silverpoint, crayon, and gouache on paper

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Gene Arum



The lupine, a wildflower common to both American and Europe, frequently appears in Stella's work. In this drawing, perhaps one of his first to feature this subject, the flower is rendered both with near scientific accuracy and as total fantasy. Arm-like tendrils sprawl

from the midpoint of the plant, not a typical feature of the lupine; a blooming orchid spike sprouts from a ball of mix-and-match flowers, the entire ensemble suspended as if in midair.

Red Flower on Blue Ground, 1940

Crayon and silverpoint on off-white wove paper

The Newark Museum of Art, gift of Katherine Coffey, 1943, 43.233



Flower Study, undated

Crayon and silverpoint on paper

The Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington,
New York, gift of Madeleine and Jeffrey

Grant, 2002.7.13



Frangipani, ca. 1920

Silverpoint and colored crayon over off-white
ground on gray card stock

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art,
Hartford, Connecticut, The Ella Gallup
Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection
Fund, 1969.127



Yellow Lotus, ca. 1923-1925

Silverpoint and crayon on paper

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Eric P. Widing,
New York



Gardenia, ca. 1919

Silverpoint and colored pencil on paper

Collection of Alan Pensler



On occasion, Stella imagined some flowers to be infused with life, such as a gardenia he describes with its leaves protruding: “like wings poised, ready for flight. One has

almost the feeling that, touching it, it would fly away.” Here he floats it in a shallow bowl, a common presentation for the delicate blooms that fade upon handling.

ITALY: “MY ONLY TRUE INSPIRATION”

*“Italy is my only true inspiration. [. . .]
Despite everything, thirty years and more of
America have succeeded only in making more
solid and firm the Latin structure of my
nature.” —Joseph Stella, 1928*

With the eruption of World War I, Stella’s second visit back to Italy would not be until 1922, but thereafter, his trips became

frequent, and the constant travel redirected the trajectory of his art. In rural Italy, the natural world was ever present, unlike in New York, where Stella encountered nature largely in contained gardens. The Italian landscapes familiar and dear to him became his most regular subject. The smoldering Mount Vesuvius, the blue Bay of Naples, and the recognizable profile of Capri appear throughout his work. He incorporated these iconic landmarks into his evolving visual language, imagining the ancient volcano or sparkling waters as instruments of spiritual transformation.

Stella's returns to Italy also inspired him to embark upon a new body of work that

featured the mythical and religious traditions of his Italian heritage. Seized by a “mystical rapture” and stirred by a landscape alive with history, he adopted a crisp, archaic style for these works. The Italian pictures confused critics, who had come to know Stella for his paintings of the modern American city. His engagement with religious subjects was singular among American modernists at a time when anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment was rising in America. In creating this body of work, he was proudly aligning himself with his Italian identity. His shift announced a direct connection to early Italian art, which he admired for its purity of expression. His Italy was about color, light,

and simplicity of expression. Folk traditions inspired this series, not the studied perfection of artists like Michelangelo and others of the High Renaissance.

Neapolitan Song, 1929

Oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Washington, DC, gift of Francoise and Harvey
Rambach, 2000.11



Mount Vesuvius is the backdrop for this lyrical homage to Naples. Viewed through splayed palmetto leaves and framed by a fanciful arrangement of plants and animals Stella associated with the region, the location of this volcanic landmark is further noted in the title, *Neapolitan Song (la canzone napoletana* in Italian), the genre of folk music of the region. Stella often incorporated references to music in his work, and many of his Italian pictures were inspired by his reminiscences of the traditional songs of his upbringing not far from Naples.

Palm Tree and Bird, 1927-1928

Oil on canvas

Collection of C.K. Williams II



Nature is the true subject of Stella's Italy paintings. Blue seas and skies, palms and trees appear in these works, as do many

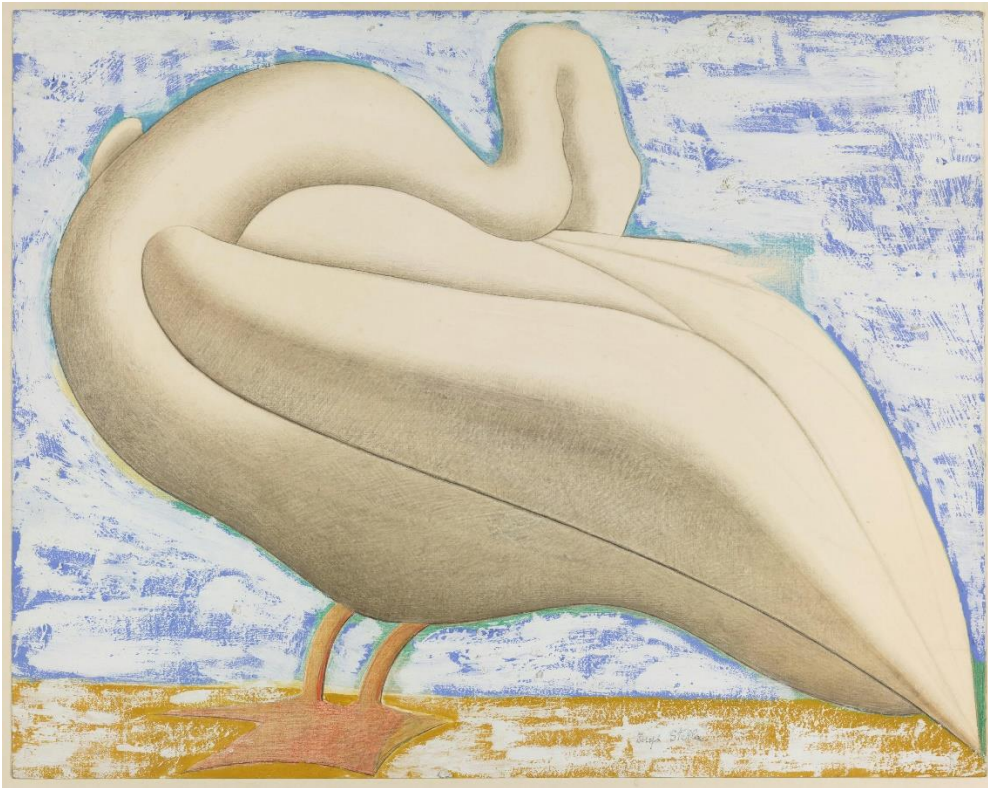
birds—swans, white herons, and the sparrow, the national bird of Italy. Flora of all manner—lilies, lotuses, roses, lupine, chrysanthemums, magnolia, gardenia, and hibiscus—abound, becoming the architecture of these paintings. Rising and bending to form the spaces of an imagined world, they create a shrine to the past constructed of the ephemeral and ever-fading flower, like the fleeting memories of Stella's Italy.

White Swan, c. 1935

Gouache, crayon, and crayon on paper

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Gift of C.K. Williams II, 2016



The Heron, 1925

Oil on canvas

Collection of Samuel G. Rose



The heron appears in many of Stella's works, but as the central feature in this painting, the elegant bird takes on a mythical status.

Presented with an unlikely combination of

floral accompaniments—lilies, lotuses, a hyacinth, and a curvaceous Italian cucuzza gourd—the composition reads as if an ethereal dream. Stella draws inspiration from the azure blue of the Italian sea and sky and the array of recurring botanical specimens he may have previously sketched on his many visits to the New York Botanical Garden.

Purissima, 1927

Oil on canvas

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchased with funds from Harriet and Elliott Goldstein and High Museum of Art Enhancement Fund, 2000.206



Purissima is among Stella's most striking religious paintings. Standing nearly life size, like an altarpiece, the figure recalls spiritual paintings found in churches across Italy as well as sculptural effigies of the Madonna (as seen in the illustration below), often adorned with flowers and fruit and paraded through the streets in religious processions. Here the Madonna is part Christian icon and part goddess of nature—the soaring stems of the pink lilies delineate a celestial throne, a common feature in traditional imagery, while the stamen of the central flower suggests the Virgin's crown. Flanking her on either side are Mount Vesuvius and the outline of Capri, landmarks of the Bay of Naples.

The Virgin, 1926

Oil on canvas

Brooklyn Museum, gift of Adolph Lewisohn,
28.207



Eyes downcast and hands folded in a traditional Christian gesture of spiritual humility, Stella's Madonna is set against the distinctive topography of Naples. Visible in

the background is Mount Vesuvius, the smoldering volcano that erupted in AD 79 and a landmark of Southern Italy. The halo-like orb surrounding the Virgin's head, seemingly nestled into the profiles of the mountains, transforms the modern Naples into a site of religiosity. Stella described, "the Virgin praying [. . .] protected, on both sides, by almond blossoms, crowned above by the wreath of the deep and clear gold of the orange and lemon trees."

The Virgin (Virgin of the Rose and Lily), 1926

Oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy of Collisart, LLC,
New York



Apple, ca. 1925

Watercolor and gouache with pencil on paper

Jones and Wajahat Family Collection



Capri, ca. 1926-1929

Oil on canvas

Collection of Samuel G. Rose



Following his trip to Naples in 1926, Stella produced several compositions prominently featuring the landmarks of the region. Here,

Mount Vesuvius dominates the skyline. Stella orients the view through a stylized cypress tree to reveal the distinctive topography of the still-active volcano across the water.

Undine, ca. 1924-1925

Oil on canvas

Collection of Nadia Zilkha



The ill-fated mythical water nymph Undine transforms into a human when she falls in love with a man—the price of which is death. Stella's *Undine*, depicting the moment of the nymph's transformation, stands out as one of the most elegant of his mythically themed paintings. The inspiration for this work came to him while on the Isle of Capri in the Bay of Naples, a site he retreated to on several occasions. "Undine was appearing in front of me with the matchless purity of her form reclining upon corals, a lily among lilies," he recalled.

Swan (with Rainbow), ca. 1924

Oil on canvas

Collection of C.K. Williams II



The swan—often associated with the Greek god Zeus and the form he took in his passionate pursuit of Leda in classical mythology—conjures notions of sensuality, beauty, purity, and power. The animal

appears as detail in several of Stella's works inspired by Italy. Yet in this monumental presentation, the bird takes center stage, filling the composition. With its round format, common among religious paintings of the Renaissance, *Swan* assumes near spiritual status. Stella kept the painting in his studio collection but exhibited it prominently in the window at a 1938 exhibition in Newark, New Jersey.

Lyre Bird, ca. 1925

Oil on canvas

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips
Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, gift of
Stephen C. Clark, 1954.21



Although the subject of this painting appears to be a mythical specimen, the exquisite lyre bird depicted in this painting is a songbird native to Australia. Under threat of extinction, the exotic bird aroused great interest in the early 1900s and was widely visible in scientific publications and popular songs alike. Stella may have encountered it through illustrations and taxidermized specimens in natural history museums. Although his attraction to this unusual creature may have been its fascinating plume, the bird was also capable of remarkable vocal mimicry, a characteristic that—as an artist inspired by all the senses—must also have intrigued Stella.

Fountain, 1929

Oil on canvas

Collection of Michelle Rabin and Sandy
Bushberg



Stella's *Fountain* combines familiar elements from his nature-based works, like the swan and lotus, with his penchant for assembling his paintings out of stacked forms. Despite the painting's ambiguity and mysterious symbolism, the image of a fountain layered on top of a treelike silhouette highlights Stella's view of nature as a rejuvenating source of inspiration.

The Little Lake, 1928

Oil on canvas

Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey

Gift of Bernard Rabin in memory of Nathan

Krueger, 1962.53



The Little Lake may refer to the Lago Nitti, an artificial lake near Stella's hometown of Muro Lucano created in the 1910s as part of a modern hydroelectric power complex. Stella

captures the rocky cliffs near the lake as well as the precariously perched buildings and sweeping vistas typical of the region.

Church In Italy, ca. 1927-1928

Watercolor on paper

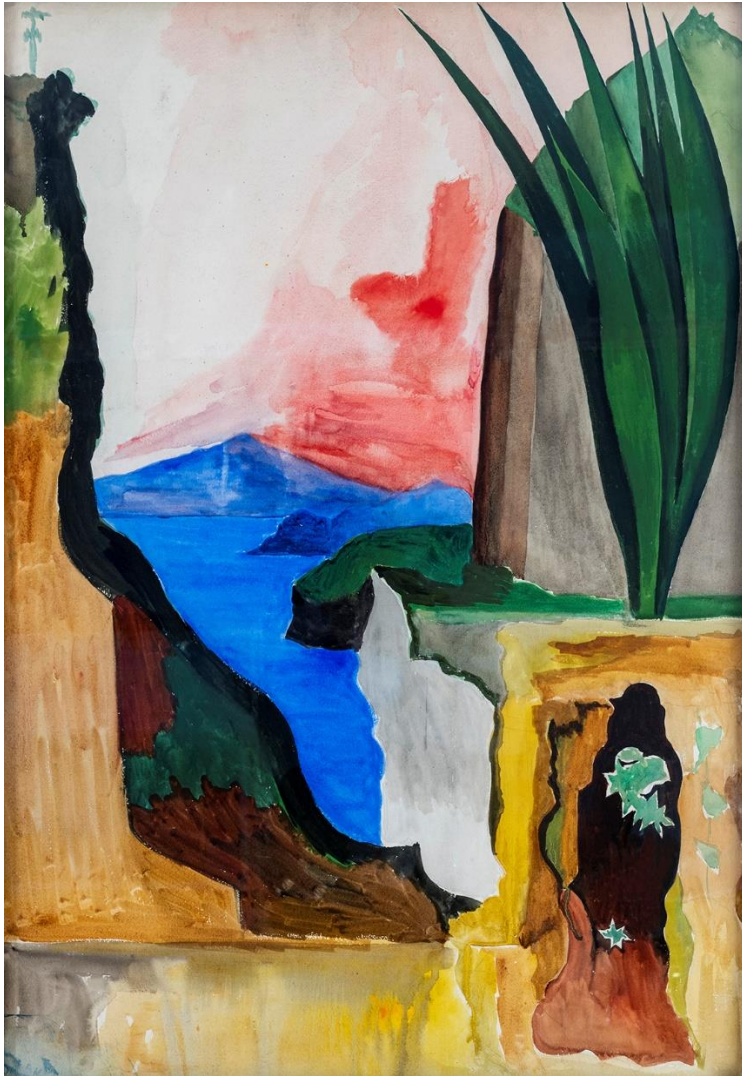
Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty



Series on Little Lake, ca. 1927-1928

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty



Tree, Cactus, Moon, ca. 1928

Gouache on paper

Reynolda House Museum of American Art,
Winston-Salem, North Carolina, affiliated with
Wake Forest University, gift of Betsy Main
Babcock, 1979.2.1



"CHROMATIC VISION": *FLOWERS,* *ITALY*

"To refresh and rebuild my chromatic vision I went to the flowers to learn the secret of the vibration of their colors." —Joseph Stella, The Birth of Venus, 1941

Nowhere does Stella so fully announce the association between Italy and nature in his works as in the epic floral composition *Flowers, Italy*. Order and symmetry are in constant tension with the whimsy of organic ornamentation. The canvas overflows with colorful depictions of flowers and birds within a setting evoking Gothic architecture. Pillars

of gnarled tree trunks extend outward from the center, as if aisles of a cathedral. Lupine, gladiolas, and birds-of-paradise fill the vertical spaces with a spectrum of colors simulating stained glass windows. Like a congregation in the pews, a host of smaller flowers and plants are gathered below.

While the church-like composition and title allude to Italy, the flowers themselves are from all over the world. Stella culled elements of the composition from a range of sources, from drawings made in the New York Botanical Garden to other nature-themed works that reflect his travels.

Although not identified specifically as studies for *Flowers, Italy*, the other paintings

on view nearby relate in form to the many details within the massive composition. The recurrence of specific flowers in this and other works by Stella over the decades speaks to the personal meaning some floral themes held for him.

Flowers, Italy, 1931

Oil on canvas

Phoenix Art Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs.

Jonathan Marshall, 1964.20



The Lotus, ca. 1930

Oil on canvas

Delaware Art Museum, gift of Dr. and Mrs.

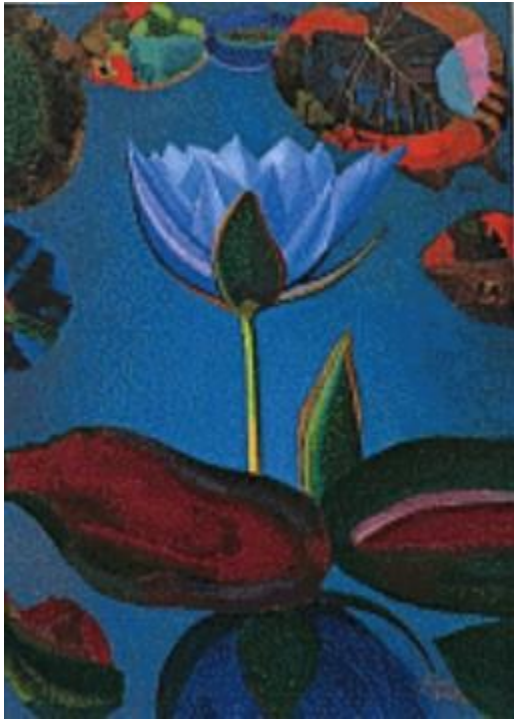
Hollon W. Farr, 1983-162



Tropical Floral, ca. 1928

Oil on canvas

Collection of C.K. Williams II



Set against a heavenly backdrop of cerulean blue, this lotus stands alert among fantastical botanical forms that appear to float through the atmosphere. By the early 1920s, the lotus had become a recurring subject for Stella,

visible in stand-alone compositions such as this one. A similar flower, too, can be found in the lower-left quadrant of the nearby *Flowers, Italy*, suggesting that he revisited and repurposed compositional elements as both singular features and as details in part of a larger whole.

Dance of Spring (Song of Birds), 1924

Oil on canvas

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art,
Kansas City, Missouri, Bebe and Crosby
Kemper Collection, gift of the Enid and
Crosby Kemper Foundation, 2003.03.01



As opposed to the Gothic cathedral of
Flowers, Italy (on view nearby) here Stella

assembles a classical temple of flora and fauna—in his own words, culled “from the elysian lyricism of the Italian spring.” Flowers rise from a pink lotus at the base of a central column, culminating in the curious combination of a lupine and a longhorn steer’s head flower, a floral form that resembles a bull’s skull. Below perch three sparrows, the national bird of Italy and a favorite of Stella’s. He may have worked out this group separately in a silverpoint composition (on view adjacently) featuring the birds set among the branches of a winterberry tree rather than within a floral temple.

Study for *Song of Birds*, ca. 1924

Silverpoint and crayon

Private collection, courtesy of Gerald Peters
Gallery, New York



Tropical Flower, 1920s

Oil on canvas

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



Early in his career, Stella enjoyed studying the tropical plants he encountered on his visits to the New York Botanical Garden. References to these plants appear in several

of his earliest nature-based works. Always eager to experiment with composition and palette, Stella transformed simple still life subjects such as this red bromeliad into complex visual symphonies of color, texture, and form.

Apple, Acorn Squash, and Leaf, ca. 1930

Pastel on paper

Private collection



In many of his still lives and floral pictures, Stella featured tropical specimens or fruits and animals that conjured memories of Italy. In this pastel, the subject is distinctly American. An acorn squash, an apple, and yellowing maple leaves suggest a fall theme.

Still Life, undated

Oil on linen

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
gift of Mr. and Mrs. N.E. Waldman, 58.52



Red Flower, 1929

Oil on canvas

Collection of Lynne and David Anderson



Although humble in theme, Stella thought enough of his still life compositions to offer them as gifts. *Red Flower*, for example, was in his friend Marcel Duchamp's collection. On the back of the canvas, Stella inscribed the

location where he made it—Paris, 1929. The two friends would have overlapped there that year, though their affiliation dated back a decade when they worked alongside each other in New York. Dark and tenebrous in tone, *Red Flower's* palette suggests Stella's urban locale, far from the bright blue skies of Italy.

"HOPE AND JOY": BARBADOS

*"For the daring, adventurous painter
Barbados is a magic island." —Stella,
Barbados, 1941*

The short time Stella spent in Barbados in 1937–1938 reinvigorated him following a trying few years in New York. The effects of the Great Depression and political instability in Europe flattened the art market, and Stella produced and sold little during these years. After reconnecting with his estranged wife, May Geraldine French they traveled together to her childhood home in Barbados.

Although a respite for Stella, Barbados had recently experienced social and political unrest. Only months before Stella arrived, a labor uprising of the island's predominantly Black workforce had been violently suppressed by the ruling British colonial regime. Stella made no reference to the

events, directing his attention, instead, to the island's people and tropical flora. Welcomed as a celebrity of the art world, he appeared on the front page of the local newspaper, where he mused about the beauty of the island and proposed making it his permanent home.

His colorful paintings and writings from this period reflect a return of optimism and upliftment. As he approached the island by sea, he recorded in his notes made shipboard, "There resounds once more the song of Hope and Joy. [. . .] our artistic powers rise, magically awakened in the presence of unexpected natural wonders, ready for the highest flights."

Banyan Tree, ca. 1938

Oil on canvas

Myron Kunin Collection of American Art,
Minneapolis, Minnesota



Stella produced images of tightly-cropped tree trunks throughout his career, including this example of one he likely encountered in Barbados. He reduces our view of the tree to

its massive trunk and impressive display of sturdy branches, reflecting the rejuvenation and strength he reclaimed for himself on that island.

Palms, 1938

Oil on canvas

Collection of Samuel G. Rose

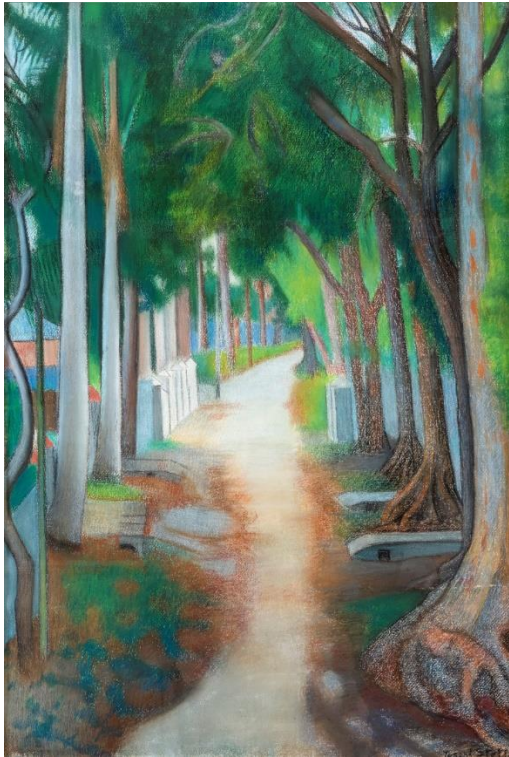


Stella made numerous sketches in pastel, colored pencil, and oil capturing Barbados' bright tropical colors. During his time there, he explored new styles, especially in his landscapes. Feathery textures animating buildings and sites around the island replace the long horizons of his Italian pictures. In *Palms*, the ubiquitous palm trees set against a clear blue sky fill the composition from edge to edge with the island's lush tropical landscape.

Path in Barbados, ca. 1938

Pastel on paper

Collection of Lisa Stella McCarty



“Mr. Stella has been busy painting the fauna and flora peculiar to our little island,” read an article that appeared on the front page of the *Barbados Advocate* on March 1, 1938. In the extended interview, Stella—described as a

“genial, rather carelessly dressed, big-hearted man”—is said to have spent much time wandering through Bridgetown, recording the places he saw and depicting the people he encountered. Among the most postcard-worthy sites in the capital were the city’s many tree-lined avenues, captured here in this pastel.

Barbados, ca. 1938

Pastel on paper

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Gene Arum



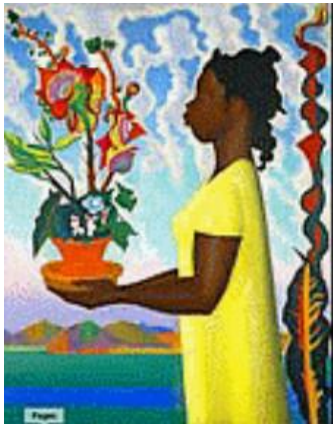
Joy of Living, 1940

Oil on canvas

Vero Beach Museum of Art, museum

purchase with funds provided by the Athena

Society, 2018.4



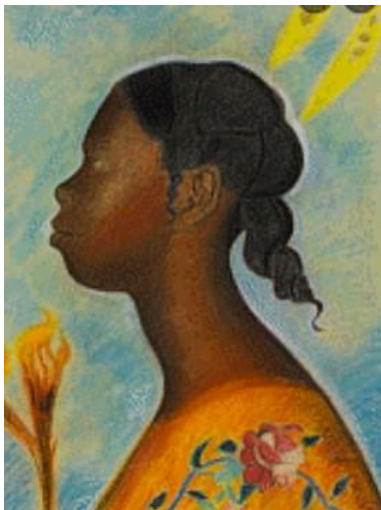
Stella applied his profile portrait style to Barbados subjects. The side view and elongated neck of this figure and the nearby *Barbados Girl* recall examples of early Renaissance female portraiture and scores of similarly fashioned portraits by Stella over

the decades. Typical of these works, his sitters, unknown to us now, are rendered as decorative elements amid tropical flowers. Stella, like many White artists at that time, relied upon exoticizing conventions for depicting people of color, a mode now criticized and rejected for its stereotyping.

Barbados Girl, ca. 1938

Pastel on paper

Collection of Catherine and Michael Podell



Barbados, 1938

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Thomas H. and Diane DeMell

Jacobsen PhD Foundation

