

### JOSEPH STELLA (1877-1946)

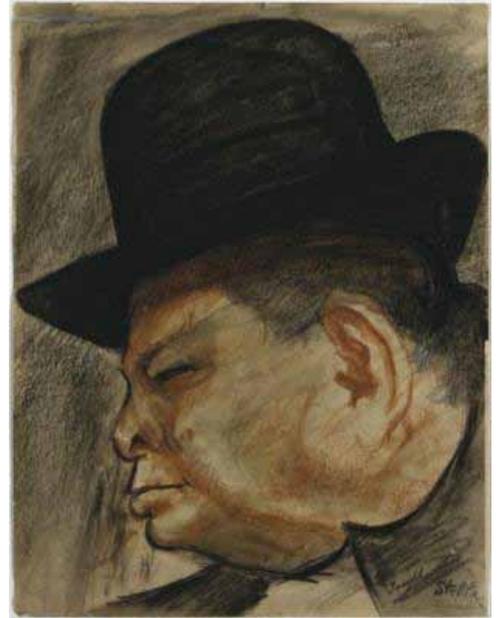
Italian-born Joseph Stella is hailed as America's first Futurist painter and is best remembered for his dynamic paintings of New York monuments such as Coney Island and the Brooklyn Bridge. As an important American Modernist, Stella had enormous influence over subsequent generations of Modernist artists like Knud Merrild, Edgar Ewing, Lyla Harcoff, and Anya Fisher, who helped bring Modernism to the West Coast.

He was born Giuseppe Michele Stella on June 13, 1877, to Michele Stella and his wife Vincenza, née Cerone, in Muro Lucano, a mountain village not far from Naples, Italy. He was the fourth of five brothers and was called "Beppino," a family nickname that lasted until his thirties. In 1896, he immigrated to the United States and joined his brother Antonio, a doctor, who two years earlier had set up his medical practice in lower Manhattan's Little Italy, in New York City.

Stella initially studied medicine and pharmacology; however, after a year at medical school, followed by another year at pharmacy school, he found his true passion—the arts. While enrolled at the College of Pharmacy, he attended the antique class at the Art Students League in New York. He left the League after several months in 1898 because they would not allow him to focus on drawing the flowers he preferred to figures. By this time he had given up on his family's hopes of him becoming a physician. Instead, he sought after his own dream, and enrolled at the New York School of Art (now Parsons, the New School for Design) for more formal training. There, he studied with William Merritt Chase for three years until 1901. Chase considered the floral still life to be not just an admirable theme but also the most complex form of still life. Under Chase's guidance, he became proficient in emulating his mentor's style of swiftly applied brushstrokes. Also, under the influence of Chase's lectures, Stella began to admire the works of Dutch, German and Flemish masters that were on view at the nearby Metropolitan Museum of Art. Chase called his student the "American Manet" and said that one of his portrait studies was the equivalent of the French master.

In 1903, artist Robert Henri became an instructor at the New York School of Art. After hearing Henri's belief that no subject was too mundane for art, the young Stella soon turned to illustrating subjects of New York's immigrant population to which he, himself, belonged. In 1905, Stella's drawings of immigrants were included in the popular social reform weekly *The Outlook*. Soon after, Stella became involved in the immigration issues that were sweeping the nation. Arguing for the equal treatment of fellow immigrants, he completed commissions for more social reform weeklies, such as the widely distributed *Charities* and *The Commons*.

While working as an illustrator for these publications, Stella was also making a name for himself as a painter. In 1906, his first exhibited work, "The Old Man," a portrait of a poor old man in the Bowery that was a study in various shades of black, was hung in the Vanderbilt Gallery in New York at an exhibition of the Society of American Artists. However, despite success in America, Stella grew homesick for his small hometown of Muro Lucano in Italy. In 1909, he sailed for Europe, visiting Rome, Florence, Naples, Muro Lucano, and Paris. During his extended stay in Paris, he was a participant in the salon of Gertrude Stein where he met and interacted with other famous American expatriate artists and writers who met regularly in her home. He also witnessed, for the first time, Cubist and Futurist works at the annual Salon des Independants and the Section d'Or ex-



*Joseph Stella, Self-portrait*

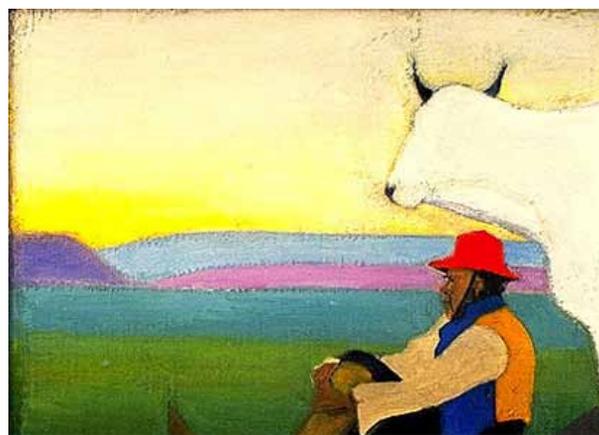
hibition. Also, while in Paris, he attended the first exhibition of Italian Futurist paintings at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in 1912. Influenced by the Italian Futurists, Stella adopted the group's claims that the modern artist should not look to the past for material; instead, the modern artist must endeavor to express the civilization of his or her own era.

With this new rhetoric in mind, Stella returned to New York in the fall of 1912. Upon his arrival, he broke away from the traditional styles he had been taught years earlier. As if to highlight his schism from tradition even more poignantly, two of his paintings were included in the landmark, modern art Armory Show of 1913. Soon afterwards, he produced his first grand Futurist painting, "Battle of Lights, Mardi Gras, Coney Island" (1913-14), which is a colorful and swirling interpretation of Brooklyn's famous amusement park. It is a large, multifaceted, conceptual work that was among the first and only American paintings to display an understanding of the Italian Modernist style that he had observed at the Italian Futurist exhibit at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris. Since its display at the Montross Gallery in the fall of 1913, it has been hailed as the first American Futurist painting.

Throughout the next decade, Stella created romantic, partially abstract, interpretations of parts of New York, in particular the Brooklyn Bridge, which he viewed as the quintessence of American culture. In addition, he painted colorful, purely abstract works, and he never lost his love of painting flowers, looking to 14th- and 15th-century Italian and Flemish painters for inspiration. By 1916, Stella had begun to produce stylistically diverse paintings of nature and symbolic abstractions infused with his own interpretation and symbolism.



*Palm Tree and Bird*



*The Red Hat*

produce stylistically diverse paintings of nature and symbolic abstractions infused with his own interpretation and symbolism. The pastel "Nativity" (1917-18) and watercolor "Spring" are beautiful examples. In 1919, he began the silverpoint and wax-crayon sketches of flowers, vegetables, butterflies, and birds that would captivate him for the rest of his career. In 1919-20, he painted two of his most important works, "Brooklyn Bridge" and "The Tree of My Life," which was sold at Christie's in 1986 for \$2.2 million, a record price for the artist at the time.

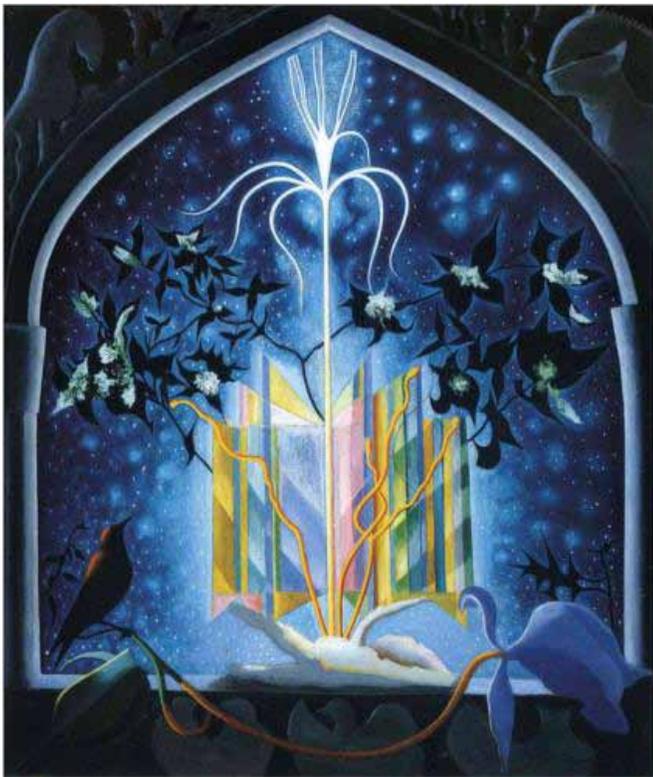
During the early 1920s, Stella earned a reputation as an important figure in American modern art. In 1921, he published his first of many lectures on art in the popular magazine *Broom*. He acted as a director of the Society of Independent Artists and also of Salons of America. After years as an immigrant in a country that prized him as an artist of its own, Stella finally became a citizen of the United States in 1923. However, despite his new citizenship, Stella was unable to shake feelings of displacement and homesickness. During the next ten years of his life, he lived mainly in Europe, only visiting the United States to help plan exhibitions of his work. Finally, in 1934, he permanently settled in the Bronx with his wife Mary French Stella. Over the next decade, his health deteriorated rapidly, and in turn, his

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reputation as a prolific painter suffered.

At times during his last years, his art was inspired by a 1938 visit to Barbados, which he called “the magic island.” Following this visit, he sometimes used tropical subject matter with an opulent decorative style in his paintings, while at other times he demonstrated awe for Renaissance art. His works during this period also included several figural studies saturated with religious meaning.

At the age of 60, he developed heart disease, and was eventually confined to his bed in 1942. In the years following, Stella underwent an unsuccessful surgery for thrombosis in his left eye, and he suffered a serious injury from falling down an open elevator shaft. Despite numerous near-fatal circumstances, Stella’s life ended with a heart attack on November 5, 1946.



*Serenade, A Christmas Fantasy*



*Knight of Roses*