

Gender Play:

The Subversive Sexual Politics of the Stettheimer Salon, 1915-1935

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From Renaissance-era France to early 20th century New York, the literary salon provided a unique space in which new ideas could be discussed, groundbreaking artistic movements could be formed, and social hierarchies and stereotypes could be broken. My research concerns how women used the salon to assume traditionally masculine positions of power and intellect and to reject the prevailing gender stereotypes of their time. Specifically, I am interested in the subversive gender dynamics of the Stettheimer salon in New York. From 1915 to 1935, the three Stettheimer sisters -- Ettie, Carrie, and Florine -- held a literary salon in Upper West Side New York. The Stettheimer salon had a distinctively feminine feel (Bilski and Braun 126). Its guest list was filled with effeminate habitués like Marcel Duchamp and Carl Van Vechten, who were encouraged to embrace their feminine side whilst in the salon space (Bilski and Braun 134). Even the sisters subverted their socially ascribed gender roles: they were all unmarried, financially independent and ruled over their male habitués (Bilski and Braun 131). This play with gender also manifested itself in the sisters' creative works, namely Ettie's novels, Carrie's dollhouse, and Florine's artworks and poetry. Since both the sisters' salon and their creative work advanced progressive sexual politics, there is room to consider how these two cultural phenomena were mutually constitutive. Thus, I aim to investigate the following research question: How did the Stettheimer sisters' salon and creative oeuvre collectively endorse a playful and subversive attitude towards gender?

A number of scholars have noted the Stettheimer sisters' progressive sexual attitude and its manifestation in their salon. While Bilski and Braun label the Stettheimer salon as a space in which men could act like women (134), Nathan recognizes the Stettheimers as "the very models of 'the new woman'" (A36). Scholars have also uncovered the subversive gender ideals that lie behind the Stettheimers' ultra-feminine creative aesthetic, examining Florine Stettheimer's modernist paintings (Naumann 153; Bloemink, "Crystal" 198; Rich 29; Fillin-Yeh 41-2; Whiting 32; Bloemink, "Becoming Herself" 126; Sussman 56) and her poetry (Graves 25). Others, like Gammel and Zelazo, have explored the intersection of both the visual and verbal in Florine's unique visual poetics ("Wrapped" 15). What has been largely overlooked, however, is the considerable work of Florine's two sisters, such as Ettie Stettheimer's autobiographical fiction and Carrie Stettheimer's dollhouse. My major research paper proposes to advance the investigation of the Stettheimer salon's subversive sexual politics by focusing on the contributions of all three Stettheimer sisters, arguing that a central component to their work was the mutually constitutive relationship between the salon dynamics and the sisters' modes of artistic expression.

My research will be grounded in a three-part theoretical framework. First, I will refer to existing salon theory to posit the salon as a progressive, collaborative, and experimental space. As Bilski and Braun note, the salon maintained a “tradition of egalitarian sociability” (2). Salon attendees exchanged ideas and treated each other with respect, regardless of differences in class, gender, and ethnicity (Bilski and Braun 2). The salon was also a primary site for artistic collaboration and inspiration (Voyce 643) and it constituted “a living theatre” (Lyon 690); all attendees performed unique (gender) identities specific to the salon space. Second, I will employ feminist concepts to measure how the Stettheimer sisters’ salon and creative works rejected gender stereotypes. Specifically, I will refer to Millett’s *Sexual Politics* and Butler and Jones’ theories of gender performativity. While Millett examines how patriarchy positions woman as man’s inferior Other through the categories of sex role, temperament and status (26), Butler and Jones consider gender as a fluid and performative social construct (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 6 & 25; Jones 142-3). Jones specifically notes how the Dada movement, which influenced modernist salons like the Stettheimer salon, was characteristically performative and revealed the fluid character of gender (142-143). Third, Jones and Stephenson’s understanding of textual reception as a type of performance will inform my analysis of the Stettheimer sisters’ creative oeuvre. Jones and Stephenson propose that “the viewing or embodied reception of visual artworks is a *process* that can be engaged as performative” (2). I will highlight the performative nature of interpretation to challenge the authority of “the usually heterosexual, white, Euro-American male art professional” (Jones and Stephenson 2-3). This theoretical lens will challenge the simplistic characterization of the Stettheimer sisters’ work as ultra-feminine and reveal a more complex, socially-grounded interpretation.

I will begin my research paper by establishing the Stettheimer salon as a space for gender play. To do this, I will refer to the aforementioned salon theories of Bilski and Braun, Voyce, Lyon, and others, and I will provide an overview of the Stettheimer salon’s atmosphere and guest list. This critical description will foreground the sociocultural context for the Stettheimer sisters’ creative works. Then, I will analyze the sisters’ creative oeuvre for evidence of the same playful attitude towards gender that characterized their salon. I will focus strictly on those works that were produced during the Stettheimer salon’s existence (1915-1935), as they would bear the salon’s most direct influence. I will also restrict myself to analyzing those works that appear overtly feminine, so as to emphasize just how subversive the Stettheimer sisters’ attitude toward gender could be. These include, but are not limited to: Ettie Stettheimer’s novel *Love Days*; Carrie Stettheimer’s dollhouse; Florine Stettheimer’s paintings *Soirée* (1917-19), *Portrait of Myself* (1923), *Family Portrait #2* (1933), and *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (1923); and Florine Stettheimer’s collection of poetry *Crystal Flowers*. I will gauge how the sisters’ works defy gender conventions by applying feminist concepts of sex role, temperament, status, and performativity to them. I will then connect the Stettheimer sisters’ works to the sociocultural context of their salon in order to reach some conclusion as to how the two objects were influenced by each other. Overall, this research is important because it will: 1) stress the salon’s feminist potential and situate the salon as a possible realm for subversive politics today; and, 2) encourage scholars to revisit other overtly feminine creative works for evidence of alternative gender politics.

My educational background lends itself well to realizing this research program. I have a Bachelor of Arts Honours (with High Distinction) in English Literature and thus can conduct close, theoretical readings of literary texts. I have also engaged with feminist concepts of sexual politics and gender performativity several times over the course of my academic career. In the first year of my Master’s degree in Communication and Culture, I completed Dr. Irene Gammel’s graduate seminar “Modern Literary Circles,” which provided me with an overview of salon theory and culture. For the

course's capstone exhibition project, I created a culinary installation that theorized and visualized the Stettheimer sisters' subversion of the feminine domestic space into a realm of creative expression. I will continue my academic engagement with the Stettheimer sisters in this term's "Visual Culture" class. Using gaze and perspectival theories, I will conduct a feminist analysis of three of Florine Stettheimer's self-portraits in order to reveal their progressive gender dynamics.

Along with this background preparation, I will have the support of my supervisor Dr. Gammel. Dr. Gammel holds the Canada Research Chair in Modern Literature and Culture here at Ryerson University, and possesses a wealth of knowledge in regards to the avant-garde and salon culture. I will have access to her Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre whilst conducting my research and will be encouraged to participate in PUBZ: The MLC Writing and Publication Zone. The overall interdisciplinary quality of the Communication and Culture program also complements my research well. It allows me to adopt concepts from a number of diverse academic fields (literature, feminist theory, visual culture, avant-garde) to address the central research question. Thus, this program serves as the ideal venue for carrying out my research project. I also look forward to disseminating the research findings at appropriate academic conferences.

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