

WHAT'S IN FASHION FOR A FASHION DESIGNER

FAVORITE

**ISAAC MIZRAHI**

Designer and entertainer

Photo: Jason Frank Rothenberg

*A Portrait of My Sister,
Carrie W. Stettheimer*
FLORINE STETTHEIMER (1871–1944)
1923, oil on canvas, mounted on
hardboard, 37 7/8 x 26 in.
Avery Architectural and Fine Arts
Library, Columbia University in the
City of New York, Gift of the Estate of
Ettie Stettheimer, 1967
Photo courtesy of the Jewish
Museum, New York

“Let me get right to it,” says Isaac Mizrahi when asked why he responds so viscerally to the paintings of Florine Stettheimer (1871–1944). “Color! It’s the first thing I’m drawn to in her canvases. Her intensive use of color pulls me in. They are like candy or ice cream — colors that are delicious.”

Mizrahi — a fashion designer, actor, cabaret singer, writer, comedian, filmmaker, and entertainer — does not shy from expressing his passions, in private or in public. “When I was looking at her paintings at the Jewish Museum, I was losing my mind in the galleries, I was so excited,” he says, referring to a major exhibition there of the artist’s works, *Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry*. It runs through September 24 before traveling on to Toronto’s Art Gallery of Ontario (October 21, 2017–January 28, 2018). He continues, “I was running through there and Claudia Gould [the museum’s director], a good friend of mine, was made immediately aware of my passion for Florine’s works.” (Mizrahi himself was the subject of an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 2016.) Of the 50 Stettheimer paintings and drawings on display, Mizrahi kept returning to *A Portrait of My Sister, Carrie W. Stettheimer* (1923), in which one of the artist’s two sisters is entranced by a dollhouse, while guests at a table await her.

Not surprisingly, the fashion designer side of Mizrahi was taken with the chic evening gown that figure wears, over which she has draped a lace shawl. “Here she is wearing a crazy hat with what look like antennae, yet she has such dignity. She’s standing there with a wonderful confidence, wearing a bemused look. What I love about the character in the painting is that there’s a kind of sparseness, indicating she’s a good editor of herself, knows what to wear, how to wear it, and how to wear an expression.”

Stettheimer often used her sisters, Carrie and Ettie, and her mother, Rosetta, as subjects in her paintings, as well as herself and fellow members of the literary and artistic elite, including Marcel Duchamp, Georgia O’Keeffe, Elie Nadelman, Carl Van Vechten, and Gaston Lachaise. For many years, Florine and her sisters, none of whom married, shared a luxurious apartment with their mother in New York City’s Alwyn Court, where they fostered an artistic salon composed of the leading figures in American modernism. Her paintings often combine elements of realism with decidedly surrealistic motifs and scale. In the portrait of her sister, Mizrahi is especially taken with the intrinsic respect Stettheimer shows for women. “She tells us so much about her sister, paints a real portrait of her, without having to show us a whole lot,” he says.

Mizrahi continues to be intrigued by the fact that Stettheimer remained single in a time when it was expected that women, especially those from wealthy, socially connected families, would marry. “For women in that milieu in that part of the 20th century, it was difficult not to give it all up for a man,” he says.

Mizrahi first came upon Stettheimer’s works 30 years ago when he was smitten with Virgil Thomson’s opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, for which she was commissioned to design costumes and set designs. “Her work makes you want to faint. When I learned about her work on the opera, I got into Florine Stettheimer right away and have loved her ever since.”