

PLASTIC DYNAMISM IN PASTEL MODERNISM:

JOSEPH STELLA'S *FUTURIST COMPOSITION*

by

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For me abstraction is purity of painting itself.

My firm “credo” is that the true modern artist must express the civilization he belongs to in his own time. . . . To my mind at present America offers more than any other country a wealth of material to the true modern artist, because nowhere else what we call modern civilization reaches the same climax.

-- Joseph Stella

In the canon of American art history, scholars have generally positioned Joseph Stella as the premiere proponent of Futurism in the United States in the early twentieth century. However, Stella’s body of work is so diverse and his personal history so inscrutable that attempts to label or classify him prove problematic. Throughout his life, he transitioned easily from representational draftsmanship rivaling that of the Old Masters to innovative explorations in abstraction. An intensely introspective and mystical person, Stella shifted between modes of representation according to the demands of each subject. The period from roughly 1913 to 1918 marks a watershed in his stylistic development, referred to as the Coney Island period. This designation refers to his discovery of the electric amusements of Coney Island that led to the acclaimed painting, *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, 1913 (Fig. 1). During this period, Stella pushed the boundaries of abstraction farther than he had ever done, or would do in his career. Stella created a number of works – oils, pastels, and watercolors – that demonstrate his artistic development and mark his place as an active member of the avant-garde.

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*Notes:*

The epigraphs for this paper come from Joseph Stella, *Notes (June 1923)*, printed in Barbara Haskell, *Joseph Stella* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1994), 205.

This paper will examine Stella's involvement with the modernist, specifically Futurist, aesthetic through the lens of his 1914 pastel *Futurist Composition* (Fig. 2), in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. This work is one of many experimental pastels produced by the artist during the Coney Island period. While his pastels vary stylistically, this particular composition employs shapes and angles unique to this period. Stella's early works on paper reveal various degrees of abstraction, but this work provides one of the earliest virtually non-representational works executed by an American artist. Only a handful of artists experimented with abstraction to this degree until well after the 1913 Armory Show and other contemporary exhibitions had introduced modernism to an American audience.

When Stella created this pastel, Italian Futurism was receiving international attention from the press, both positive and negative, due to its sensational character. The Italian movement developed an aesthetic language that aggressively championed modernism and exulted in rendering the dynamics of speed and mechanics. The impact of this movement on Stella's aesthetic has prompted scholars such as Innis Shoemaker to deem Stella responsible for the "development of a uniquely American brand of Futurism."<sup>1</sup> Historians have asserted this for years without deeply exploring, qualifying, or defining American Futurism. Is there really such a thing? If so, are there identifiable characteristics that differentiate this American variant from its Italian counterpart?

While the term "Futurism" crosses borders and disciplines, the question of international distinctions in Futurist art has been often raised, but seldom addressed by historians. Rather than appropriating the radical social aims of their European contemporaries, American artists working in the Futurist mode concentrated on two major themes: dynamism and urbanity. A number of

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<sup>1</sup> Innis H. Shoemaker, *Adventures in Modern Art: The Charles K. Williams II Collection* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009), 276.



American artists, including Arthur G. Dove, John Marin, and Max Weber, assimilated Futurist ideologies and formal characteristics in the formative years of modernism, thus prompting scholars to associate them with the Futurist movement. However, Stella's works mark the first true foray into Futurism from an American perspective. In all media, Stella depicts the American urban landscape through the lens of Futurism, pointing to the influence of European modernism while not blindly duplicating the aesthetic. His pastel works in particular use the vehicle of Futurism as a means of pushing the boundaries of abstraction. Through an examination of the origins of the movement and its subsequent appropriation by artists in America, I will argue that Joseph Stella's *Futurist Composition* fuses the tenets of Italian Futurism with a buoyant view of urban America to become the quintessential paradigm of American Futurism.

The title *Futurist Composition* was most likely given to the pastel posthumously. The sheet, along with a number of other works on paper, was discovered in 1988 in a trunk in the former home of the artist's brother, Dr. Giovanni Stella. Though Stella signed and dated the work at the lower left, he did not record a title.<sup>2</sup> Stella in fact rarely titled his pastels, usually exhibiting them in unnumbered groups under simple designations such as "pastels," with no individual description.<sup>3</sup> Thus the title should not be the primary basis for interpreting the work, except to highlight the historical perception of Stella's position within the American modernist art historical canon. That being said, the visual qualities of pastels of this period show distinct connections to avant-garde work from across the Atlantic. Because Stella has become the best

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<sup>2</sup> At times, Stella would return to works many years later and assign dates to them, usually in pen. That this work is signed and dated in pencil, a medium used in the work itself, provides strong evidence that the date on the work is correct. Alan Pensler, Stella family representative and owner of the Pensler Galleries in Washington D.C., phone conversation with author, February 1, 2010, and Amon Carter Museum, object file, Joseph Stella's *Futurist Composition* (accessed September 11, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Donald E. Gordon, *Modern Art Exhibitions: 1900-1916* (Munich: Prestel, 1974), 813.

known exemplar of Futurism in America, the actual connection of this artist to the movement at large must be explored and validated. *Futurist Composition* raises questions of Stella's connection with the Futurist movement and its manifestation on American soil in the early 1910s.

In this exuberant work, Stella employs abstraction to convey the psychological and physiological response to the vitality of modern entertainment as epitomized by the Coney Island amusement park. Stylistically similar to *Battle of Lights*, *Futurist Composition* shares the intense color palette and angular forms found in his widely known interpretation of the newly popular entertainment venue. Though *Futurist Composition* does not directly depict the location, its vivid colors arrayed in fragmented planes evoke Stella's sensorial experience there:

And then one night I went on a bus ride to Coney Island during Mardi Gras. That incident was what started me on the road to success. Arriving at the Island I was instantly struck by the dazzling array of lights. It seemed as if they were in conflict. I was struck with the thought that here was what I had been unconsciously seeking for many years. The electrical display was magnificent.<sup>4</sup>

The frenzied crowds, constructions, cacophony of noise, and electric atmosphere of the venue provided Stella with a contemporary subject for interpretation and exploration of the modernist aesthetics introduced to him in Europe.

The use of pure pigment and intersecting planes creates a lively and energetic composition, drawing heavily on the influence of the Italian Futurists. A sense of movement pervades the work, accentuated by the vivid color and the playful exploration of form. Irregular

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Stella, "I Knew Him When," *Daily Mirror*, July 8, 1924.

planes shift and intersect throughout the entire composition, and the undulating lines and colors create a dynamic cadence to the composition. The image consists of mostly angular shapes, occasionally broken by a sweeping curve or elongated stroke of pigment. At first glance, this pastel seems to be quickly executed due to the varied treatments of the medium. Some areas are filled with thick, tactile applications of pigment, while Stella applied color more sparsely in others, allowing the tooth of the paper to remain visible through the chalk. Closer inspection of such areas reveals traces of graphite line, which may then be discerned throughout the entire drawing. The artist created a carefully organized composition, with *pentimenti* evident in areas where the lighter pigments such as yellow and light blue cannot hide the graphite marks. Stella reworked the picture, simplifying aspects of greater detail so as not to distract from the motion and dynamism of the piece. The visible drawing reveals the methodical creation of the composition, the final product being achieved through the careful layering of triangular planes, diagonal lines, and oblique curves.

Close observation of the artist's arrangement alters the initial sense of spontaneity. The juxtaposition of color and the mirroring of form heighten the energy of the work. Planes jut against one another in a careful asymmetrical balance, while warm yellows and oranges contrast cool blues and violets throughout the image. Black shapes intersperse the central and lower portions of the work, adding intensity and depth to the otherwise brightly colored, kaleidoscopic composition. Elongated red, green, and violet vertical forms on either side of the page halt the centrifugal movement, encasing the composition.

A large, deep green shape in the top left corner enters the arrangement, pointing down to the central fray of color. The focal point of the drawing sits slightly above center, a tight arrangement of black, blue and violet shapes intersected by an orange triangle. Beams of light-

colored pigments, such as the shaft rising from the bottom left corner, intersect the deep-colored planes like spotlights against the night sky, also directing the viewer's attention back to the center. Shapes decrease in size from the perimeter to the compact formation of this central area, framed on each side by elongated curved edges. The light yellow, orange, and green triangles all seem to radiate from this point. In this cacophony of broken form and color, this small grouping dominates all major elements in the top of the composition.

With the exception of the ray emanating from the bottom left corner, the lower portion of the pastel has an arrangement of forms quite different from that of the upper. Large areas of violet, blue, and black contrast the fractured and prismatic lighter tonality seen above, generating tension along the diagonal axis of the composition. A large, dominant arrow shape in modulated hues of light blue emerges amidst the deep violet surrounding it, pressing toward the right edge of the drawing. Angles and triangles within the shape itself, as well as surrounding linear arrangements echo this arrow-like form, with small bursts of bright whites, oranges and yellows dotting the larger, coolly colored fragments. Indeed, almost every triangular shape of the drawing's lower portion point in the same general direction. This repetition emphasizes the sense of motion.

Only the oblique grouping of shapes traveling toward the left edge of the picture frame diverges from the rightward current. Triangles of deep red and orange, together with small sections of pale green and black, combine to balance the lower part of the composition in color and in movement. A curved smear of color projecting from the bottom of the paper to this little cluster appears to be the trail left by this shape, obfuscating the delineation between the yellow, orange, and lavender hues in its wake. Areas of obvious modification such as this one, as well as the light blue triangle, highlight the experimental qualities of the medium. The nature of pastel

lends itself to color exploration, revealing the artist's stroke while simultaneously allowing for the thick application of pigment to establish a visceral tactility.

Stella produced this work in a period of great experimentation with pastel. *Futurist Composition* is one of many pastels executed in the years surrounding the completion of his famous painting, *Battle of Lights*, *Coney Island*, *Mardi Gras*. While it is tempting to consider this pastel as a study for the more prominent creation, this work should be considered a finished product, a signed and dated autonomous work of art. Pastel held a position of prominence as a medium at the time. Stella featured a number of pastels with *Battle of Lights* at the Montross Galleries in February of 1914.<sup>5</sup> He would continue to exhibit pastels as independent works throughout his career, including in his 1920 retrospective at the Bourgeois Galleries in New York.<sup>6</sup> At this time some of these pastels were grouped under the term "Abstraction."<sup>7</sup> Stella's pastels were clearly integral to his explorations of the possibilities of abstraction during his Coney Island period.

These early years constitute the only time in his career when Stella's art was associated with the Futurist aesthetic. After this period, his style was alternatively abstract and representational. Throughout his career, Stella professed the autonomy of his art and an aversion to it being labeled stylistically. For example, he later denied any direct association with Italian Futurism. Despite this, Stella recognized his journey to Europe from 1909 to 1912 as a defining moment in his artistic development. His production in the years directly following the European experience, and specifically his works in pastel, show a marked confidence and newfound sense

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon, *Modern Art Exhibitions*, 813.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Haskell, *Joseph Stella* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1994), 226.

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Bolger, ed., "Joseph Stella," in *American Pastels in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1989), 105.

of exploration. Short-lived though the period may have been, Stella's artistic production in the second decade of the twentieth century remains the most critically acclaimed phase of his career.

Joseph Stella provides a crucial case in the study of American Futurism because of his distinctly international biography. Born in Muro Lucano, Italy on June 13, 1877, Stella grew up as the fourth of five sons in a provincial Italian family. He followed his oldest brother to New York when he was eighteen years old. Stella became an American citizen, but never fully disassociated himself from his Italian roots.<sup>8</sup> He often reminisced to his friend Carlo de Fornaro about "the free, easy and sunny life of Naples."<sup>9</sup> His Italian heritage was vital to him, as was the invigorating American urban environment. In the early years of his artistic education in New York under William Merritt Chase, Stella learned to appreciate the variety of sights and people of the American city, laying the groundwork for his interest in the subject of Coney Island. Throughout his life he traveled between the two countries, seeking inspiration in both locations.

A pivotal experience for his artistic career occurred on his first trip back to Europe since he had left at age eighteen. He arrived in Italy in 1909 for what would become a four-year excursion between his home country and France. On the recommendation of his friend Walter Pach, Stella traveled to Paris in early 1911 and was immediately immersed in the vibrant artistic community of the city.<sup>10</sup> He describes the array of artists he befriended:

By that time anyone in Paris could meet and know the most prominent artists right in their studios. . . . I took full advantage of this great chance. I met and conversed with Matisse. . . . I had the pleasure to tell Picasso in company with the poet Max Jacob how much I admired his blue period.

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Pensler, phone conversation with author, February 1, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Jaffe, *Joseph Stella*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Stella, "The New Art" *The Trend* 5 (June 1913): 394.

Every Friday I went to the Closerie des Lilas at Montparnasse, near the Observatoire, crowded with the leading painters and writers led by the prince of poets, Paul Fort. I became the friend of many promising young men: Gromaire, Pasin, Dubreuil, the Futurists Boccioni, Carrà, Severini.

Modigliani was painting at the Imapsse Falguière, in a studio near mine.<sup>11</sup>

These artists, and others, introduced Stella to innovative ideas and aesthetic languages that would revolutionize his conception of color and space.<sup>12</sup> While concurrent movements such as Orphism and Synchronism undoubtedly affected him, Stella indicated that his interaction with the Futurist painters would affect his artistic aims in particular. It is known that he attended their first Parisian exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in February of 1912. He would have seen the exhibition catalogue, which not only reprinted their manifestoes, but also included statements by the artists explaining aspects of their work. Umberto Boccioni sent Stella a copy of his 1914 publication *Pittura Scultura Futurista*. Stella responded that it “greatly impressed” him.<sup>13</sup> He also corresponded with both Carlo Carrà and Gino Severini late into his lifetime.<sup>14</sup> Amidst the clamor of the Parisian avant-garde, his Italian heritage undoubtedly facilitated Stella’s identification with the Futurists. To determine the aspects of Futurism within Joseph Stella’s work and differentiate American production from Italian, we must examine the original Futurist aesthetic.

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Stella “Discovery of America,” as quoted in Jaffe, *Joseph Stella*, 33-35.

<sup>12</sup> Some scholars note the possibility of a Russian influence on this phase of Stella’s career. While distinct stylistic similarities occur between the work of Stella and the Russian Rayonist movement, no specific documentation of his meeting or interacting with those artists in Paris exists. I do not rule out the possibility of a Rayonist influence in following years, but as Stella returned to the United States before the first Rayonist exhibition and does not distinctly refer to the movement in his writings of the time, the influence of the Russian ideology of light on his work remains conjecture.

<sup>13</sup> Günter Berghaus, *International Futurism in Arts and Literature* (New York: de Gruyter, 2000), 231.

<sup>14</sup> Jaffe, *Joseph Stella*, 30, 34.

The Italian Futurist movement began as the brainchild of radical Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. As a young man, Marinetti had quickly established himself in the Parisian literary avant-garde community. Acutely aware of his country's lagging embrace of modernism, Marinetti published his Futurist manifesto on February 20, 1909 in the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*.<sup>15</sup> This incendiary declaration demanded the demolition of entrenched tradition, which to Marinetti, barred Italy from modern progress. Futurism called for the total revitalization of Italy in all areas of life, not only through art, music, literature, and theater, but also politics, lust, war, and cooking, to name a few. Following Marinetti's example, associates of the movement published over thirty-five manifestoes covering a variety of topics throughout the active years of Futurism.<sup>16</sup>

The manifesto was the ideal vehicle to publicize Marinetti's new movement. Not only did it cost little to disseminate but the polemical wording ensured an excited and agitated response. The bombastics of the manifesto and its publication in *Le Figaro* made it appear as though Futurism was a large, dynamic movement, when in reality it hardly existed in 1909 beyond Marinetti's imagination. Ever conscious of the power of publicity, Marinetti published this and later manifestoes in multiple languages and countries. For example, the April-July 1909 issue of *Poesia*, Marinetti's own magazine that was published internationally, contained an English translation of the first manifesto.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, a large number of American publications printed excerpts of the manifesto, including the *New York Times* and the *New York Sun*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Marianne W. Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory: 1909-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestoes* (Boston: D.A.P publishers, 2001), 7.

<sup>17</sup> John Oliver Hand, "Futurism in America: 1909-14," *Art Journal* 41, no. 4 (1981): 337.

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous. "Detective Tales Interest Paris," *The New York Times*, April 24, 1909. Berghaus, *International Futurism*, 226.



Each manifesto basically reiterated or expounded upon ideas introduced in Marinetti's founding manifesto. The main tenets asserted the need for emancipation from the torpidity of Italian culture, while proclaiming modernist possibilities due to industrial and mechanical innovation. Marinetti charged that the stagnancy of culture was the source of the tension within Italy. Too long reliant on Renaissance and classical ideals, Italy needed to embrace modern urbanism and mechanization. Futurism demeaned Italy's Renaissance identity, believing this historic association hindered the country from future prosperity and success. Art suffered from its historical attachments by being visually dependent on preexisting, unchanging forms. He equated museums and libraries with cemeteries as locations to be visited annually in memoriam rather than daily sources of inspiration.<sup>19</sup>

Recent industrial innovations excited and inspired Marinetti and his fellow modernists. In an especially radical message of the manifesto, he proclaimed: "We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath . . . a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace."<sup>20</sup> Though he does not address artistic production specifically, the representation of beauty through movement and mechanization offered new opportunities for artists to develop an aesthetic sensibility radically different from that of the past.

His call for cultural progress in Italy quickly drew a group of sympathetic Italian artists, including Boccioni, Severini, and Carrà, as well as Giacomo Balla and Luigi Russolo. Under Marinetti's guidance, the artists published a painting manifesto on February 11, 1910. This

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<sup>19</sup> F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," in *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909. Translated and published in Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestoes* (Boston: D.A.P publishers, 2001), 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

manifesto provided little clarification on achieving specific goals, instead echoing Marinetti's original proclamation: "Living art draws its life from the surrounding environment. Our forebears drew their artistic inspiration from a religious atmosphere which fed their souls; in the same way we must breathe in the tangible miracles of contemporary life."<sup>21</sup> Futurists expounded on their concern with the emotive expression of modernity with more practical pronouncements in their April 11, 1910 "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painters," which asserts, "painting cannot exist today without Divisionism. This is no process that can be learned and applied at will. Divisionism, for the modern painter, must be an innate complementariness which we declare to be essential and necessary."<sup>22</sup> Essentially, Divisionism played such a key role in Futurism because it abolished the compositional unity and formal solidity so long sought in traditional art. Divisionism, under the guidance of Georges Seurat's scientific theory, advocated innovative use of "pure" color, line, and form, culminating in the idea of the temporal blending of the elements.<sup>23</sup> This necessitated an active viewer, in whose eye the picture would come together as a sensorial whole. Seurat and his fellow Divisionists, including Italians Gaetano Previati and Giovanni Segantini, expressed a profound interest in the symbolic value of both color and linear patterns while encouraging the study of new scientific discoveries to achieve such aesthetic aims, both tenets that would pervade the Futurist mentality.

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<sup>21</sup> Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, and Luigi Russolo, "The Manifesto of the Futurist Painters," in *Poesia*, February 11, 1910. Translated and published in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestoes*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, and Luigi Russolo, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting," in *Poesia*, April 11, 1910. Translated and published in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestoes*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Holt, "Georges Seurat" in *From the Classicists to the Impressionists: Art and Architecture in the Nineteenth Century, Volume III* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1966): 468-469.

The development of a cohesive, dynamic Futurist style would not occur until the Futurists traveled to Paris at the bidding of Severini, in October of 1911.<sup>24</sup> Once there, the Italian artists virtually exploded with creativity due to their participation in the city's modernist circles. They would hold their first major exhibition as a group in Paris less than four months later at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune. While historians may overemphasize the immediate impact of this exhibition on the art world of the time, the exhibition represented the group's cohesive purpose and aesthetic. In the exhibition catalogue, the artists elucidated their driving concept: "In order to make the spectator live in the centre of the picture, as we express it in our manifesto, the picture must be the synthesis of *what one remembers* and *what one sees*."<sup>25</sup> To convey an entire sensorial experience, or to truly synthesize memory with sight, the paintings must include the ideas of sounds, smells, and movements. Viewers would then temporally combine these individual aspects to complete the picture. The mantra of the movement is "that all subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed. . . . That universal dynamism must be rendered in painting as a dynamic sensation."<sup>26</sup>

This universal dynamism became the driving force of the Futurist aesthetic, which relied heavily on the theories of French philosopher Henri Bergson concerning the interrelationship of time and space.<sup>27</sup> The essential experience of modern life comprised of multiple perceptions and memories combining simultaneously, and these temporal images were constantly in flux. Artists used various compositional elements to convey this sensation. Bergson suggested "the idea of a

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<sup>24</sup> Giovanni Lista, *Futurism* (Paris: Terrail, 2001), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, and Luigi Russolo, "The exhibitors to the public 1912," in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestoes*, 47-48.

<sup>26</sup> Boccioni, et al., "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting," 29.

<sup>27</sup> Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory*, 45.

reality which endures inwardly, which is duration itself.”<sup>28</sup> Bergsonian ideas worked in combination with the concept of the fourth dimension, a popular idea circulating European, and specifically Parisian intelligentsia in the early twentieth century. The fourth dimension represented a higher realm that may hold truth invisible to the naked eye.<sup>29</sup> These two theories freed artists from traditional three-dimensional illusionism, allowing them to experiment with increasing abstraction in their work.

One of the most dynamic expressive devices within Futurist painting and drawing is the force line, adapted from Bergson’s theory that “the lines of force emitted in every direction from every centre bring to bear upon each the influences of the whole material world.”<sup>30</sup> The force line appears usually as a series of arrow-like forms indicating movement of an object’s “plastic forces.” To Boccioni, these force lines reveal how an object can be decomposed “according to the characteristic personality of the object and the emotion of the one who looks at it.”<sup>31</sup> Force lines emerge in Futurist artworks as a direct expression of an object’s movement as conceived by the artist, whether in one direction or many. These elements occur in Futurist works throughout the course of the movement, but they are most prevalent in their purest form in the period around the time of the Bernheim-Jeune show. They dominate Boccioni’s *The Forces of the Street* (Fig. 3) and Luigi Russolo’s *The Revolt* (Fig. 4), both completed in 1911 and shown in the Paris exhibition.

Alongside the all-important force line, Futurist theory placed emphasis on forms that evoked emotional responses to the sensations of imbalance and motion. In the year following the

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<sup>28</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York, Random House, 1944), 395.

<sup>29</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Italian Futurism and ‘The Fourth Dimension,’” *Art Journal* 41, no. 4 (1981): 317.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), 31.

<sup>31</sup> Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory*, 111.

Bernheim-Jeune exhibition, Carlo Carrà penned the manifesto “The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells,” or, in other words, the painting of complete sensorial experience. Even more than “The Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painters,” this manifesto specifically listed aesthetic features aligned with Futurist ideals, including:

The dynamic arabesque, which is the sole reality created by the artist in the depths of his feeling.

The clash of all the acute angles, which we have already called the angles of will.

Oblique lines which fall on the observer like so many bolts from the blue, along with lines of depth.

Perspective obtained not as the objectivity of distances but as a subjective interpenetration of hard and soft, sharp and dull forms.

Abstract plastic wholes, corresponding not to our sight but to the sensations which derive from sounds, noises, smells and all the unknown forces that surround us.<sup>32</sup>

All of these characteristics served to express movement in compositions rendered in varying degrees of abstraction.

The Italian Futurists also depended on color to energize their compositions. The Futurist painters lambasted the patinas and varnishes of Old Master works for their deadening effect, and dismissed browns and other muted tones as harkening back to outmoded conceptions of aesthetic value. Instead, “The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells,” called for:

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<sup>32</sup> Carlo Carrà, “The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells,” August 11, 1913 in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestoes*, 113-4.

Reds, rrrrrreds, the rrrrrreddest rrrrrreds that shouuuuuuut. Greens, that can never be greener, greeeeeeeeeeens that screeeeeeeam, yellows, as violent as can be: polenta yellows, saffron yellows, brass yellows. All the colors of speed, of joy, of carousings and fantastic carnivals, of fireworks, cafe-chantants and music-halls; all colors seen in movement, colors experienced in time and not in space.<sup>33</sup>

The key phrase here is “all colors seen in movement,” which summarizes Futurist color theory and its influence on artists such as Joseph Stella.

The energy of color and dynamics of movement requisite to Futurist compositions signify their enthusiasm for technology and speed in modern society. Works such as *The Forces of the Street* and *The Revolt* also demonstrate the aggressiveness and angst present in the Italian Futurist movement. The bright colors and force lines evoke the intensity of strong emotion and physical action. Marinetti and his fellow Futurists championed war and violence as a cleansing means of establishing a new and powerful Italian state. In the founding manifesto, Marinetti pronounces, “We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, [and] beautiful ideas worth dying for.”<sup>34</sup> Marinetti’s revolutionary rhetoric signals his dream to rip Italy from its Renaissance-bound stagnation. Violent ideas and actions are needed to bring modernity to his homeland. The aggressive words of this manifesto and reports of the riotous acts at Futurist evenings soon spread throughout the world, making the name of the Italian movement a sign of violence and societal upheaval, or, for those who did not take it seriously, the absurd.

Even prior to the Italian movement, “futurism” carried political connotations. Used in the language of Karl Marx and the left-wing Hegelians, the word signified a radical break with

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<sup>33</sup> Carrà, “The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells,” 115.

<sup>34</sup> Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” 22.

tradition and the past.<sup>35</sup> Marinetti undoubtedly knew of this significance and exploited the idea of revolution in the formation of his group's ideologies. His Futurist revolution, though advocating war on one level, focused on culture and employed the analogies to violence to call for a perennial regeneration, and thus continual cleansing, of culture. The European political left had associated itself with the word for a few years before Marinetti wrote the 1909 manifesto. However, the word's etymology dates, even in America, to the nineteenth century.

The term "futurism" had been in the American vocabulary for decades before the Italian movement appeared, which compounded and confused the word's meaning to American ears. The word originated in Christian theology, but colloquially grew to mean one who is forward-looking or finds meaning in the future, rather than the past or present.<sup>36</sup> This particular view is seen in "American Female Literature" in the *New York Daily-Times* printed on June 5, 1854, in which the author states: "If any shrewd Futurist had told our grandmothers that two or three generations from their girlhood, women would become a literary power in America, he would have been set down as a fortune-teller." The word had public currency well before Marinetti's avant-garde movement entered American consciousness.

After the formation of the Italian group, the word "Futurism" was employed by American critics and writers to mean both the provocative Italian Futurist movement and abstract art in general, without clarification. In all probability, many of the writers did not truly understand the distinction. The 1913 Armory Show compounded this confusion, because its pre-opening press release listed Futurist works. For reasons unclear, however, no galleries displayed actual Italian

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<sup>35</sup> Lista, *Futurism*, 29.

<sup>36</sup> A number of articles in nineteenth-century American periodicals demonstrate the religious meaning of the term in writings of the time: Charles Lane, "The True Life," *The Present*, March 1, 1844; "New Publications," *New York Times*, March 17, 1884; and Talbot W. Chambers, "Use of the Book of Revelation" *The New York Observer and Chronicle*, March 2, 1876.

Futurist work when the show opened. In fact, no Futurist work would cross the Atlantic until San Francisco's Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915.<sup>37</sup> "Futurism" emerged as shorthand for modern art. Whether describing the Futurist movement or the future-looking aspects of new art forms, writers recognized the sensationalist quality of the word and employed it to increase the appeal of their articles.

The Futurist movement gained a tremendous amount of notoriety in the United States with the arrival of the first manifesto from across the Atlantic. Few articles describe the American public's reception of Futurism in terms other than sheer bewilderment. Futurism appeared in both urban and rural newspapers, and became ubiquitous in popular culture. It was even promoted by the actress Sarah Bernhardt (seemingly as a way to still appear current in her later years): "Incidentally, while she was here, Mme. Bernhardt declared herself for woman's suffrage, cubism, post-impressionism, futurism, universal peace, eugenics and everything under the sun that is being talked about at the moment in the United States."<sup>38</sup> Exploiting its sensational appeal, newspapers, public figures, and critics began to see the need to address the movement in order to stay relevant. An article from January 1, 1911 in the *Billings Gazette*, entitled "British Admiralty Decides to Send Many Submarine Boats to Chinese Waters," suddenly moves from reporting on the Chinese Revolution to introducing the author's interview with Marinetti.<sup>39</sup> Though the *non sequitur* quality is radical and shocking in the context of the article, it demonstrates an interest in Marinetti and the Futurist movement to the degree in which it would be deemed equally as newsworthy as international conflict. The interviewer offers no opinion of

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<sup>37</sup> Hand, "Futurism in America," 337.

<sup>38</sup> Beau Rialto, "'Certainly Not!,' Says Divine Sarah When Asked If This Is Her Farewell Tour," *Des Moines Press*, May 17, 1913.

<sup>39</sup> Phillip Everett, "British Admiralty Decides to Send Many Submarine Boats to Chinese Waters," *Billings Gazette*, January 1, 1911.



Futurism, but merely introduces Marinetti and notes the poet's desire to eradicate tradition. Some literary critics, such as André Tridon, attempted to explain Futurism to the newspaper-reading American public as early as 1910.<sup>40</sup> The American press reprinted reviews of the Bernheim-Jeune exhibition before it had ended its run. Futurism as a movement, therefore, had achieved notoriety even before the art appeared in this country.

Articles appearing in the years before the Armory Show, such as "The New Cult of Futurism is Here" in the December 24, 1911 edition of the *New York Herald*, and "The Futurist, Latest Comers in the World of Art" in the *New York Sun* on February 25, 1912, posit the movement as the harbinger of a new modern era. Some even included small reproductions of paintings, though unclear and not in color. In these writings, Americans read of Futurism's theoretical basis, specifically in regard to painting, in excerpts from various manifestoes. Writers such as Tridon reassuringly encouraged their readers to empathize with the goals of the Futurists in spite of the difficulty of visual interpretation. "Because [they] are working from an entirely original conception of 'dynamism' and perspective their paintings will necessarily confuse and distress the layman."<sup>41</sup> Some particularly prescient writers, such as the artist Birge Harrison, recognized the impact that Futurism would have on the art world: "We can at least be sure that such outbursts as the Post-Impressionist and Futurist movements are but the froth upon the crest of a great wave."<sup>42</sup>

While these articles represented the responses of those particularly receptive to the movement, Futurism met shocked resistance from its opponents. Because Futurism appeared in a variety of publications, even the most reactionary critics felt that they could not avoid addressing

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<sup>40</sup> Hand, "Futurism in America," 337.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>42</sup> Birge Harrison, "The Field of Art – The New Art in America," *Scribner's Magazine* 37 (March 1915): 392.

the movement. During the Armory Show of 1913, numerous articles and cartoons masked bewilderment over Futurism with humor and derision. The article, “Nobody Who Has Been Drinking Is Let In To See This Show,” pairs text with five cartoons that poke fun at the form, content, and creators of the “Futurist Art Exhibition” by insinuating adverse physical reactions from viewing such incomprehensible art (Fig. 5). In 1918, Allan McLane Hamilton voiced the continuing befuddlement of the public and press: “It is not my purpose hastily to condemn the good faith of all cubists and futurists, but only to say that I believe most of them may be divided into three classes, viz., the ignorant, the dishonest or disingenuous, and the insane.”<sup>43</sup> Along with mocking Futurist imagery, many writers highlighted Futurism’s advocacy of violence and war. “War on the Past, New Creed’s Cry,” from a 1910 *New York Times* article, in slightly appalled undertones, presents Marinetti’s rash call for the abolishment of museums and academies.<sup>44</sup> For many critics, the incendiary statements and rebellious antics of the movement’s members connected modernism with anarchy. Labeling an artist a “Futurist,” around the time Stella worked on *Futurist Composition* denigrated and/or spoofed that artist’s work. The title of “Futurist” for artists was not necessarily a complement, even if it guaranteed public attention.

The ubiquity of the Futurist appellation in the American press resulted in the public’s familiarity with the term in the artistic arena, whether or not they understood its origin or aesthetics. Such confusion led, in all probability, to indistinctness in the characterization of the Futurist movement. Historians often simplify the Italian movement as the depiction of speed and the connection to Fascism (which occurred after World War I), while the movement obviously

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<sup>43</sup> Allan McLane Hamilton, “Insane Art,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 63 (April 1918): 488.

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous, “War on the Past, New Creed’s Cry,” in the *New York Times*, December 25, 1910.

encompassed much more. What, then, distinguished the American Futurists from their European counterparts? As “the modern city,” New York was certainly one distinguishing factor.

Futurism’s championing of industry, speed, and technology in its art made it a perfect vehicle for rendering the urban landscape. American artists who had seen the works of European modernism in person, both abroad and at the Armory Show, began to employ the new art forms as vehicles to interpret their industrial and urbanized environment. European artists, particularly Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, touted America’s modernity more loudly perhaps than Americans. In an interview in 1915 with the *New York Tribune*, Picabia recalls, “Almost immediately upon coming to America it flashed on me that the genius of the modern world is machinery, and that machinery ought to find a most vivid expression.”<sup>45</sup> Due to an expansive industrialism and urbanity, America, and specifically New York City, had become a beacon of modernity.

The early twentieth century witnessed great technological innovation and prosperity in the United States. Nowhere was this more evident than in New York. Symbolizing the city as the leader in modern transportation, Grand Central Terminal, the world’s largest railroad station of the day, opened in 1913.<sup>46</sup> The city also possessed a network of subways and elevated metro lines. The city skyline gained notoriety for its skyscrapers, becoming the quintessential modern city made possible by this American architectural innovation. Notable structures, such as the Woolworth Building (1910), soared upward.<sup>47</sup> The ideal modern cityscape designs of Italian Futurist architect Antonio Sant’Elia drew heavily on the American skyscrapers and industrial

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<sup>45</sup> Anonymous, “French Artists Spur on an American Art,” *New York Tribune*, Oct. 24, 1915.

<sup>46</sup> Loretta Britten and Paul Mathless, *End of Innocence: 1910-1920* (Richmond, VA: Time-Life Books, 1998), 22.

<sup>47</sup> Kevin Matthews, “History of New York Architecture,” <http://www.greatbuildings.com/times/types/skyscraper.html>.

buildings (Fig. 6). The verticality and vibrancy of New York City became a muse for many artists, both American and international.

New York promoted itself as a modern cultural entertainment center. Fueled by electricity, the lights of Broadway and the movies attracted eager crowds. The city also saw the growth of the amusement park as an entertainment venue. In 1894, just south of Manhattan, Coney Island debuted the world's first roller coaster.<sup>48</sup> The brightly lit and fun-filled island became a major entertainment venue of the day. The abundance of sights and sounds marked the abandonment of conservative Victorian standards of propriety and inhibition, and the population wholeheartedly embraced these thoroughly modern attractions. A number of articles from the 1913 issues of the *New York Times* describe the anticipation and high attendance of new Coney Island attractions. The May 4 edition announced "Carnival to Open Coney Island's 1913 Season," while the July 13 issue noted "Summertime Amusements." Coney Island owed its appeal and success to industrial and technological innovations of the time that transformed the place into part of the modern spectacle of New York City.

This spectacular modernity struck Joseph Stella upon returning to New York from Europe in 1912: "Steel and electricity had created a new world. A new drama had surged from the violation of darkness at night, by the violent blaze of electricity and a new polyphony was ringing all around with the scintillating, highly colored lights."<sup>49</sup> The language used by Stella in his description is strikingly similar to that employed by the Futurists. The novelty of the sight expressed in Stella's thrice repetition of the word "new," and the sensorial, dynamic, and violent nature of the description recall the language of the Futurist manifestoes.

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Immerso, *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 96.

<sup>49</sup> Stella, "Autobiographical Notes," 213.

Though Stella had enjoyed moderate success prior to his European sojourn, the works he produced directly after his return to New York established his position in the American modernist art world. Stella published an article in the June 1913 issue of *The Trend* magazine, titled “The New Art.” At a time when the confusion over the term “Futurism” was at its highest, he distinguishes Futurism from Cubism by elucidating the notion of cultural regeneration as central to Futurism:

Cubism is static. Futurism is dynamic. . . . Futurism strives to be absolutely free of any tradition: its effort chiefly lies in creating a new sort of language apt to express the feelings and emotions of the modern artist. . . . The futurists and the cubists try to find a new sort of language and it is logical that this language at the start should be chaotic. Our epoch is the transitional but perhaps the more vital and important because all of the seeds of a gigantic futurist achievement are now being put in the soil.<sup>50</sup>

Importantly, Stella recognizes the possibilities of the further development of Futurism. The movement, being inherently dynamic, possessed the ability to adapt to the advancements of progressive, American modern culture. It is no small wonder, then, that Stella regarded the vitality of the American city as a perfectly suited subject matter for Futurist art.

Stella admired especially the technological and industrial achievements of New York, including Brooklyn Bridge, the lights of Broadway, and Coney Island. In the next few years, he was particularly drawn to Coney Island as the ideal American subject to depict from a Futurist perspective. A sense of chaotic, hedonistic enjoyment characterized the entertainment venue,

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<sup>50</sup> Stella, “The New Art,” 394.

which seemed to encapsulate the dynamic New York urban environment at large. The Futurist emphases on speed, dynamism, and machinery came together in the carnival atmosphere of Coney Island. To capture this, Stella created a series of pastels and paintings that garnered much attention from the press. In 1914, the Montross Galleries held the first exhibition of American modernist paintings after the Armory Show, featuring Stella's groundbreaking canvas, *Battle of Lights*, as well as several of his pastels.<sup>51</sup> Although documentation is lacking, it is highly probable that Stella included *Futurist Composition* in the show. The work's stylistic elements date it convincingly to this moment, and it displays a more finished quality than many of his other extant pastels from the year.<sup>52</sup>

The Montross show caused a stir, with Stella's work at the center of the commotion. Articles in the *New York Times* debated his exhibited work and attempted to make sense of it, stating, "there is harmony in his complicated composition. There are no empty spots, and the detail is rather astonishing than moving."<sup>53</sup> Willard Huntington Wright even declared Stella as having "no apparent ability to construct or organize," while also noting his Italian roots and by implication "futurist" identity.<sup>54</sup> In his cartoon, "Seeing New York with Fornaro," Carlo de Fornaro highlighted the work and placed Stella next to the harbingers of modernism, the organizers of the Armory Show (Fig. 7). Fornaro identifies the painting with Futurism, as evidenced by the caption, finally connecting art that the public could see with the title of the movement that had circulated in the press for so long.

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<sup>51</sup> Montross Galleries, *Miscellaneous Art Exhibition Catalog Collection, 1813-1950*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>52</sup> Alan Pensler, phone conversation with author, February 1, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, "Art at Home and Abroad," *New York Times*, February 8, 1914.

<sup>54</sup> Willard Huntington Wright, "Modern American Painters – and Winslow Homer," in *Forum* (Dec. 1915): 661.

The infamous work of the Montross exhibition, Stella's *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, is an effusion of sight, and implied sound and motion emanating from the central Luna Park tower. The Severini-like patchwork of abstract and figurative elements swirl around a stable central point, the Luna Park tower. Compelled by *horror vacui*, darting fragments of color and arabesques running frenetically throughout the composition, swirling and colliding, create varying representations of lights, rides, and the general Coney Island atmosphere. Suggestive details such as Ferris wheels and roller coasters emerge at various points, symbols of a modern entertainment form made possible by American engineering. The energetic crowds form the most tightly compacted configuration at the bottom, consisting of small fragments of dark greens, blues, and blacks. Occasionally full figures appear, presumably performers, illuminated and elevated above the throngs. Other human forms appear sporadically higher in the composition, but the majority of this area is reserved for the dazzling array of lights. This tight arrangement of tiny chips of color at the bottom of the picture contrasts the larger swirls of blue, green, and yellow shapes drifting at the top of the canvas. The night sky, pierced by the spotlights, banners, and tent tops, balances the wild chaos of the lower half of the scene. Triangular elements jut out from the chaos, interpreted by the art historian Irma Jaffe as Stella's Futurist force-lines.<sup>55</sup>

Each element of the composition conveys a sensation of movement; the painting is a celebration of dynamism. An aura of surging exuberance permeates the whole painting, with the bright and, at times, garish colors advocated by the Futurists as capable of conveying joy and speed simultaneously. Each aspect of the painting recreated the sensations of the venue. Stella recalls,

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<sup>55</sup> Jaffe, *Joseph Stella*, 40.

I built the most intense dynamic arabesque that I could imagine in order to convey in a hectic mood the surging crowd and the revolving machines generating for the first time, not anguish and pain, but violent dangerous pleasures. I used the intact purity of the vermillion to accentuate the carnal frenzy of the new bacchanal and all the acidity of the lemon yellow for the dazzling lights storming all around.<sup>56</sup>

As evident from this excerpt, Stella desired to produce a work that encompassed the locale in its entirety, recalling Carlo Carrà's aims delineated in his manifesto, "The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells." However, Stella also noted the difference between the American appreciation of machinery and that of the Italian Futurists. The phrase, "revolving machines generating for the first time, not anguish and pain," refers to the Italian notion that machines would facilitate destruction and war, allowing for the construction of a new culture out of the annihilation of the old. Stella focuses on machines as instruments of entertainment and pleasure, although he emphasizes the pleasures as "violent" and "dangerous."

The American press quickly singled out Stella as a Futurist amidst the American avant-garde artists.<sup>57</sup> If his decidedly Italian persona alone did not align him with the group in the eyes of the public, his work in particular coincided with the aesthetic delineated in the various Italian manifestoes seen in American newspapers. Many of the details of Stella's painting relate directly to Italian Futurist precedents and specifically, the work of Gino Severini. Severini often took the Parisian dancehall scene for his subject matter, as in paintings *The Dance of the "Pan-Pan" at the Monaco*, 1909-11 (Fig. 8) and *Yellow Dancers*, 1911-12 (Fig. 9). Stella would have seen

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<sup>56</sup> Stella, "Autobiographical Notes," 213.

<sup>57</sup> See Anonymous, "An Italian Painter of America's Melting Pot," *The Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, July 6, 1918.



these works at the Futurists' Paris exhibition.<sup>58</sup> Similarities between the two artists' work extend beyond their subject matter. Visual fragmentation due to movement and light characterizing Severini's work is also found in Stella's compositions. Stella's work emulates the dissolution of form and use of vivid color found in Severini's work. In both Severini paintings, light becomes a physical presence within the atmosphere of the room, represented by shafts of bright colors radiating from above. Even the most rounded figures are altered to angular geometric form, creating a prismatic composition that reflects the animated atmosphere. In the later painting of the two, *Yellow Dancers*, Severini reduces the two dancers to almost unrecognizable amalgamations of colored shapes, emphasizing the current theory of simultaneity. Increasingly in Severini's work of this period, the viewer must temporally synthesize the fragments of visual perception, sensation, and memory to understand the action taking place within the composition. Severini's paintings offered inspiration and models for Stella's Coney Island works.

Stella's *Battle of Lights* and *Futurist Composition* evince the influence of Severini's paintings and the American's works are even more dynamically abstract, especially *Futurist Composition*. While Stella's two works share a similar aesthetic language, *Futurist Composition* is in no way a preparatory work for *Battle of Lights*. Both *Battle of Lights* and *Futurist Composition* utilize the same color palette, yet the latter eliminates the representational features within the larger canvas. Stella's interest in the Italian Futurists' fragmentation of form drove his own exploration of the modernist idiom throughout the second decade of the twentieth century. In fact, his next large painting, *Spring* (ca. 1914), is comprised almost entirely of the colored chips seen in *Battle of Lights* and *Futurist Composition*, but in softer and cooler hues. The vigorous application of color in prismatic form furthers the principles found in the early Futurist

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<sup>58</sup> Gordon, *Modern Art Exhibitions*, 553.

works seen in the Bernheim-Jeune exhibition. While Italian Futurist works employ fragmentation, dissolution, and distortion, each retain recognizable elements. Stella's exploration pushed Futurist tenets to a degree of abstraction not seen in the Parisian exhibition.

Stella worked freely and quickly in the pastel medium, exhibiting an assured stroke. His joy in the chromatic wealth of the pure pigment is evident in *Futurist Composition*, as he plays with the density of application throughout the composition. He filled some areas vigorously with intense color, while others have an airy quality, superimposed over other colors or exposing the texture of the paper. Because Stella began his artistic career drawing rather than painting, it is easy to comprehend that the medium of pastel would be a comfortable means with which to explore, and even further the modernist idiom. Intriguingly, other early American modernists whose work relates to Futurism also turned to pastel.

It seems surprising that modernists would find pastel appealing. Pastel had fallen in and out of favor with American artists since its earliest known use in the first decade of the eighteenth century.<sup>59</sup> Negatively believed to be fragile, impermanent, and even feminine, "serious" artists avoided pastel even as a secondary medium for quite some time. However, in 1882, a group of Americans formed to advocate the use of pastel.<sup>60</sup> The Society of American Painters in Pastel expressed a renewed interest in the medium, due in part to its qualities of spontaneity and intimacy. Also, its easy portability encouraged working *en plein air*. Pastel served as a tool for modern artistic exploration.

William Merritt Chase, one of the founders of the Society of the American Painters in Pastel, is an important figure in this study because of his influence on the next generation of

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<sup>59</sup> Dianne H. Pilgrim, "The Revival of Pastels in Nineteenth-Century America: The Society of Painters in Pastel," *American Art Journal* 10 (November 1978): 43.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

artists. A number of significant modernist artists studied with Chase, including Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Scheeler, Charles Demuth, Alfred Maurer, and Joseph Stella. Stella enrolled in Chase's school in 1898 and attended until 1900.<sup>61</sup> Along with a general appreciation of work of the Old Masters, Chase encouraged individuality and experimentation, two essential characteristics of Stella's art throughout his career. Chase undoubtedly imbued his students with an appreciation for pastel, too.

The next generation further elevated pastel. Pastel societies appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, and the medium flourished especially in the States.<sup>62</sup> A group entitled the Pastellists actively held exhibitions and promoted the medium from the years 1910 to 1915.<sup>63</sup> Pastel became a valid medium in the modernist oeuvre, appreciated not only for its low cost and portability, but also because its innate intimacy encouraged abstract exploration. Pastel naturally encourages expression of spontaneous gestural line, while allowing such a variety of application techniques similar to those of oil paint. Additionally, the chromatic purity of the medium and the development of new hues ideally suited non-mimetic and emotionally charged color.

Stella's prolific experimentation with pastel exemplifies modern art's democratization of artistic media. Many American artists began to use pastel consistently in the 1910s, showing these works on paper alongside the larger canvases in many exhibitions. Pastels appeared not only as studies and sketches, but also as independent, finished works. In this modern age, the hierarchy of mediums was dissolving, as evidenced by Alfred Stieglitz's remark: "I can not see why one should differentiate between so-called 'major' and 'minor' media. I have refused so to differentiate in all the exhibitions that I have ever held . . . It is the spirit of the thing that is

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<sup>61</sup> Joann Moser, *Visual Poetry* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>62</sup> Anonymous, "10,000 Pictures a Year. What becomes of acres of Painted Canvas?" *London Daily Mail*, November 12, 1907.

<sup>63</sup> Bolger, *American Pastels in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 21.

important.”<sup>64</sup> Stieglitz’s gallery, “291,” encouraged modernism through a plethora of artistic media. John Marin, Max Weber, and Arthur Dove included pastels in their solo exhibitions at the gallery from 1910 to 1912.<sup>65</sup> As an artist who began his career drawing with charcoal, for Stella the medium was natural. He would exhibit pastel works with his paintings throughout his entire career. Significantly, along with Stella, these artists who worked with the medium as a means of exploration of new formal languages also were stylistically linked at some time with the Futurist movement. In order to understand the advent of American Futurism, we must consider the place of these other artists ascribed by historians as participating in the Futurist movement.

Arthur Dove worked predominantly in the pastel medium between 1911 and 1917 and then sporadically throughout his career.<sup>66</sup> He traveled to Paris in 1908, absorbing the innovations in modern art occurring there, before returning the same year.<sup>67</sup> Though in Paris before Futurism appeared, Dove nevertheless is an important figure in the study of the development of its movement in America. The Futurist aesthetic repeatedly published in the press would have been available to him almost contemporaneously with his return to America. Dove’s early compositions, especially *Team of Horses*, 1910-11 (Fig. 10), though not explicitly Futurist, exhibit his efforts to depict motion through abstraction, an aesthetic sensibility akin to that of the Italian movement. *Team of Horses* was one of ten pastels Dove exhibited in his first solo exhibition, which occurred at “291” in 1912. The medium obviously had great allure for Dove, as he chose to include only works in pastel for his debut exhibition.

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<sup>64</sup> Alfred Stieglitz, “Writings and conversations of Alfred Stieglitz,” in *American Pastels in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Doreen Bolger (1989), 23.

<sup>65</sup> Bolger, *American Pastels in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 23.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Max Weber also employed the pastel medium extensively during the second decade of the twentieth century. Earlier, he had traveled to Europe and studied under Matisse in Paris from 1905 to 1908.<sup>68</sup> He returned to New York in 1908 because he apparently ran out of money, which may also account for his intensive use of pastel at this time.<sup>69</sup> Weber, though first introduced to modernism by the forms of Fauvism and Cubism, became acquainted with the Futurist movement as it acquired increasing amounts of attention from the American press. In contrast to Dove, whose Futurist connection rests on visual evidence, Weber is known to have come into contact with the aims and ideologies of the Italian movement through photographer Langdon Coburn, who notified him of Futurist activities as early as November of 1913.<sup>70</sup> In the painting *Rush Hour, New York*, 1915 (Fig. 11), and the pastel *Slide Lecture at the Metropolitan Museum*, 1916 (Fig. 12), Weber tackles the Futurist ideals of urbanity, dynamism, technology, and simultaneity, while also exploring the psychologically evocative qualities of abstraction. Henry McBride applauded Weber's abstracted depiction of the urban environment, stating, "at last we have an artist who is not afraid of this great big city of New York."<sup>71</sup> Relatively short-lived, Weber's exploration of Futurism lasted roughly until the end of World War I. The Futurist ideologies gave Weber the theoretical basis for the abstracted aesthetic and psychological expression that would persist through his entire artistic career.

Like Weber and Dove, John Marin traveled to Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century, which introduced him to Cubism and Fauvism before returning permanently to the

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<sup>68</sup> Berghaus, *International Futurism*, 235.

<sup>69</sup> Bolger, *American Pastels*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Berghaus, *International Futurism*, 236.

<sup>71</sup> Henry McBride, "Max Weber at Montross," *The Sun*, December 19, 1915, printed in Henry McBride, *The Flow of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975): 94.

States in 1911.<sup>72</sup> As a former Chase student, Marin worked extensively in pastel throughout his career. In his early one-man exhibition at “291” in 1910, he showed twenty pastels, with forty-three watercolors and eight etchings.<sup>73</sup>

Marin became well known through the American press early in the 1910s. Critics acknowledged his role in the American avant-garde as well as the influence of European ideologies on his art. In fact, Royal Cortissoz connected Marin to Futurism in the attempt “to disintegrate things seen into their emotional constituents.”<sup>74</sup> Although a critic who opposed the radical nature of modern art, Cortissoz pardons Marin because he was “not given to a degree of recklessness equal to that of his European counterparts.”<sup>75</sup> Henry McBride, Marin’s friend, declared, “There is frequently in his work a breaking up of outlines and a recomposition of them in the ‘modern art’ fashion, yet I should hate to call Mr. Marin a cubist, a post-impressionist, or any other term except ‘artist.’”<sup>76</sup> Distinct affinities exist between Marin’s work and the aesthetic of the European movements such as Futurism, yet his contemporary critics would not fully align him with any one movement in particular.

In statements regarding his own theoretical approach to art, Marin demonstrates an ideology strikingly similar to that of the Italian Futurists: “I see great forces at work; great movements; the large buildings and the small buildings; the warring of the great and small;

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<sup>72</sup> Tamar Head, “John Marin’s *The Dance*,” *MoMA* 7 (Spring, 1976), 5.

<sup>73</sup> Bolger, *American Pastels in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 23.

<sup>74</sup> Royal Cortissoz, as quoted in Arlene Olson, *Art Critics and the Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980): n. 85 p.33.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>76</sup> Henry McBride, “Marin’s Watercolors,” *The Sun*, January 22, 1916, printed in Henry McBride, *The Flow of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975): 100.

influences of one mass on another greater or smaller mass.”<sup>77</sup> This correlates with the Futurist proclamation, “We have declared in our manifesto that what must be rendered is the dynamic sensation, that is to say, the particular rhythm of each object, its inclination, its movement, or, to put it more exactly, its interior force.”<sup>78</sup> Though Marin did not know Futurism through his European travels, attention given to them in the American press would surely have been known to him by the time he wrote this article.

Marin completed a number of New York cityscapes, many focusing on the Woolworth building as a focus, in the years surrounding the Armory Show (Fig. 13). Possibly in light of all of Marin’s modernist explorations in the early part of the twentieth century, Sheldon Reich asserts, “Marin, not Stella, was the first American Futurist.”<sup>79</sup> While Marin did assimilate some elements of the Futurist aesthetic and theory, considering him the first American Futurist proves problematic. Marin, like Dove and Weber, traveled back to America well before the Italian movement had truly formulated its ideas and style. Without benefitting from direct experience of the movement, these artists were limited by the reception of Futurism through newspaper accounts and small black and white reproductions. Joseph Stella, on the other hand, attended the Bernheim-Jeune show. The experience Stella received in Paris in that pivotal time gave him a firm grasp of the aesthetic principles of Futurism and a foundation on which to build his Futurist interpretation of modern America. Stella, then, was the first to bring the vitality of the Futurist movement in its truest form across the Atlantic. *Futurist Composition* is the quintessential example of Stella’s American Futurism.

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<sup>77</sup> John Marin, published first in *Camera Work*, Nos. 42-43 (April-July 1913): 18, reprinted in Sheldon Reich, “John Marin: Paintings of New York, 1912,” *American Art Journal* 1 (Spring, 1969): 43-44.

<sup>78</sup> Umberto Boccioni, et al., “The Exhibitors to the Public 1912,” 47-48.

<sup>79</sup> Reich, “John Marin: Paintings of New York, 1912,” 49.

In this work, Stella adheres to the Futurists' direction to render "colors of speed, of joy, of carousings and fantastic carnivals, of fireworks, cafe-chantants and music-halls."<sup>80</sup> This pastel is undoubtedly expressive of his sensorial experiences at Coney Island, an evocative rather than representational image.<sup>81</sup> While containing ample amounts of blue and violet hues, the bright yellows, oranges, and reds punctuate and enliven the chromatic explosion of this composition. In conveying an experience in its totality, the colors of this composition abstract not only the visual elements of their inspiration, Coney Island, but also the general overwhelming exuberance that one would expect to find there.

Perhaps even more aligned with the Italian movement, are the blatant force lines in the forefront of the pastel. These major compositional features refer directly to the dynamic elements described in Futurist manifestoes and recurrent in Futurist painting. Even the color scheme of the most prominent force line in the lower central portion seems to refer directly to those used by Boccioni vertically in *The Forces of the Street*. This acute angle, mirrored in the smaller shapes throughout the composition, signals an understanding of the Futurist idiom. Stella's modification of the second major force line, positioned slightly above the first, demonstrates a willingness to adapt these concepts to realize his own aesthetic goals. Shards of orange and yellow interrupt the continuity of the blue of this second form, dematerializing even the recognizable abstract elements. The beams of light so clearly delineated in *Battle of Lights* are here broken into separate planes though still distinguishable because colored in a lighter hue than the surrounding shapes. The interpenetrating planes making up the entire composition are also consistent with

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<sup>80</sup> Carrà, "The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells," 115.

<sup>81</sup> Not everyone necessarily agrees that the pastel is a non-representational work. Some scholars see this as depicting the Coney Island landscape, but after long and intense study of the work, I believe that it is an abstract expression of Stella's combined observed and remembered sensorial experiences of the entertainment venue.



Futurist ideology. In conjunction with the use of color, the hard and soft edges of these planes give a sense of depth to the drawing without relying on conventional representational means. Stella's *Futurist Composition* answers the Italian group's call for compositions consisting of "abstract plastic wholes, corresponding not to our sight but to the sensations which derive from sounds, noises, smells and all the unknown forces that surround us," and does so perhaps more completely than any work created by an American or Italian Futurist up to that time.<sup>82</sup>

The introduction of Futurism in the United States gave artists a new vocabulary with which to describe the modern American experience. Rather than emerging as a group to fight political crisis and social stagnation, as in the case of the Italian Futurist movement, American modernists appreciated the newness of their own culture and searched for a style of contemporary expression. The aesthetic language of Futurism provided artists a framework from which to start. American Futurism assimilated the Italian movement's aesthetic foci of dynamism, urbanity, and machinery, while eschewing its social and cultural violence. American Futurism distinctly depoliticized the tenets of the original Italian ideologies by removing the emphasis on violence and war. Futurism in the United States attempted to glorify its popular culture and technological achievements, rather than opposing or destroying them. American culture was the embodiment of modernity and American modern artists believed that the enthusiasm and fervor of the new culture could be expressed through Futurist terms. They found their artistic direction through the entertainments, attractions, industry, and spectacle of the city. The dynamism of Futurist compositions celebrated the newfound speed, technology, and vitality of American urban existence.

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<sup>82</sup> Carrà, "The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells," 114.

Joseph Stella's pastel composition exemplifies his American adaptation of Italian Futurism. The vibrant work captures the essence of its theory of dynamism and modernity. Though abstract, Stella's own memory and experience of Coney Island and its vitality emerge due to the striking colors and luminous energy of the piece. *Futurist Composition*, though undeniably drawing on the tenets of Italian Futurism, also demonstrates individuality and exploration on the part of Stella. More directly than his contemporaries Dove, Weber, and Marin, Stella embraced and accepted Futurism and the American scene.

The concepts of dynamism and speed so intrinsic to the movement translated easily into what would become the American modern aesthetic. Stella's *Futurist Composition* demonstrates the application of the style and dynamism of Italian Futurism, and employs its abstract language in making his own response to modernist culture. This adaptation mirrors his own biography, as he deeply appreciated his Italian roots, yet prized the modernity of the American culture in which he lived. *Futurist Composition* celebrates the frenetic and electric experience of Coney Island, the paradigm of modern American entertainment in totality, translating the cacophony of noises and plethora of sights into a fragmented color composition. The artist remarked in 1913, "true art is always more or less the reflection of everything that is going on during its epoch, and therefore cannot live on the crumbs of the past."<sup>83</sup> This statement reveals the influence of the Futurist ideology on Stella's artistic production. In *Futurist Composition*, Joseph Stella offers his celebration of an intensely dynamic America.

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<sup>83</sup> Stella, "The New Art," 394.



Figure 1  
Joseph Stella  
*Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, 1913-14  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven



Figure 2  
Joseph Stella  
*Futurist Composition*, 1914  
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth





Figure 3  
Umberto Boccioni  
*The Forces of the Street*, 1911  
Osaka City Museum of Modern Art, Osaka  
Reprinted in Didier Ottinger, *Futurism* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009), 137.



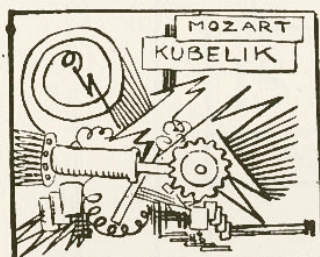
Figure 4  
Luigi Russolo  
*The Revolt*, 1911  
Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague  
Reprinted in Didier Ottinger, *Futurism* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009), 161.



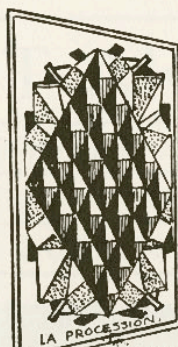
Feb. 17, 1913

THE WORLD: MONDAY

# NOBODY WHO HAS BEEN DRINKING IS LET IN TO SEE THIS SHOW.



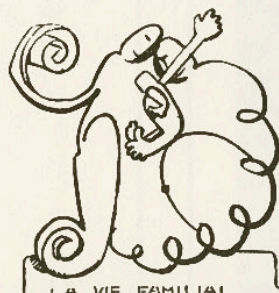
THIS POST-IMPRESSION PORTRAIT  
OF KUBELIK PLAYING MOZARTIAN  
RAG-TIME IMPRESSED US MOST.



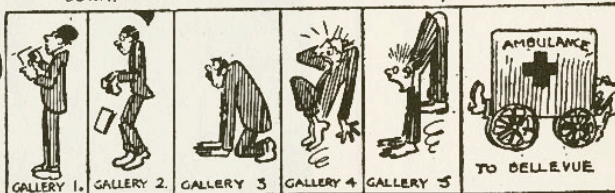
TRAGEDY  
"AH! MON DIEU! THEY  
HAVE HUNG THEM, MY  
MASTERPIECE, UPSIDE  
DOWN."



PEASANT WOMAN RESTING,  
OR VENUS LISTENING.



LA VIE FAMILIAL  
SCULPTURE AS SHE IS DID



THE UNSUSPECTING CRITIC DOES THE SHOW.

## He'd Have Bellevue for Next Stop After Futurist Art Ex- hibition, Scoffers Assert.

The preponderance of French gray in the otherwise magnificent mezzotints and dry-points to be seen at the International Exhibition of Modern Art in the Sixty-ninth Regiment armory from tomorrow until March 15 induces an expert to assert that, but for this crass error in craftsmanship, the monotonous would be three laps ahead of the Futurists, whose productions on canvas show realistically why some persons drink.

A private view of the canvases and sculptures was permitted to newspaper men yesterday afternoon. Until one has seen this exhibition, one's patronage of theatres and study of books will never give one a comprehensive knowledge of art and what art means and of what some artists are thinking when

they act in what seems to the untutored a peculiar manner.

The aquarelles of the Futurists are to the connoisseur the most engrossing of the exhibits, and, if there were no limit on the space allotted to this critique, it would be possible to go into such intimate detail regarding them that, after reading it, the general public would be on its hind feet.

Particularly does painting No. 241 interest. It is labelled "Nu Descendant un Escalier." A reporter for a newspaper that cares nothing about art surveyed the picture. He saw nothing but what resembled a fearful explosion in a lumber yard. Had he known French the inscription would have informed him that the painting was of a nude person descending a ladder.

One of the Futurist works that attracted yesterday was by John Marin. This, with others, was reproduced in the Sunday World Magazine. It is entitled, "Effect of the 'Warring, Pushing, Pulling Forces.'" It not only beggars description—it leaves description flat in the almshouse.

An elderly man, clad in frock coat, trousers, &c., approached the painting. He gazed, stared, riveted his eyes on

it. He began to worry. He removed his glasses and polished the lenses, then looked again. He felt awfully sorry for himself, for other persons came up to the picture and, after backing away exclaimed, "Wonderful! Marvellous! Stamps him as a genius!"

The man in the frock coat became very red in the face. He was certainly disgusted with himself. Suddenly he withdrew about a yard, placed his high silk hat on the floor, bent over and surveyed the picture backward through his legs.

The light of understanding was in his eyes when he resumed an erect position. "Show me," he half-shouted to an attendant, "show me what the Cubists have here. I am now Frank H. Omniscience himself."

A search was instituted unofficially for two paintings by T. E. Powers, a vegetable producer of Norwalk, Conn. The catalogue alleged the works to be landscapes. They were not apparent. Rumor insisted that as the pictures were of New Haven Railroad trains dashing along they were not to be hung until room could be found for them in the Futurist's ward.

Figure 5

Alek Sass

"Nobody Who Has Been Drinking Is Let In To See This Show"

New York World World, Feb. 17, 1913

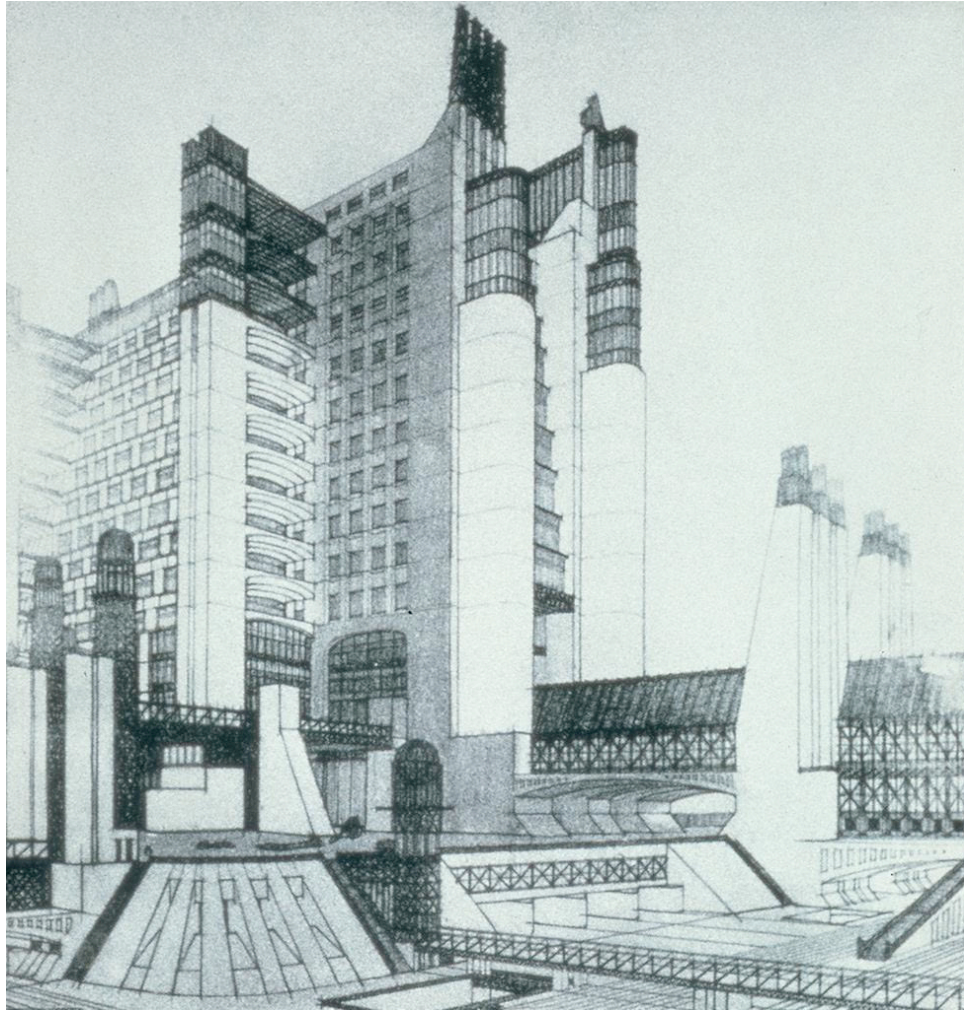


Figure 8  
Antonio Sant'Elia  
*The Futurist City*  
*Lacerba*, July 11, 1914





Figure 7  
 Carlo de Fornaro  
*Seeing New York with Fornaro*  
*The Evening Sun*, February 9, 1914



Figure 8

Gino Severini

*The Dance of the "Pan-Pan" at the Monaco, 1909-11 / 1959-60*

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris

Reprinted in Didier Ottinger, *Futurism* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009), 167.





Figure 9  
Gino Severini  
*Yellow Dancers*, 1911-12  
Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge  
Reprinted in Didier Ottinger, *Futurism* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009), 175.

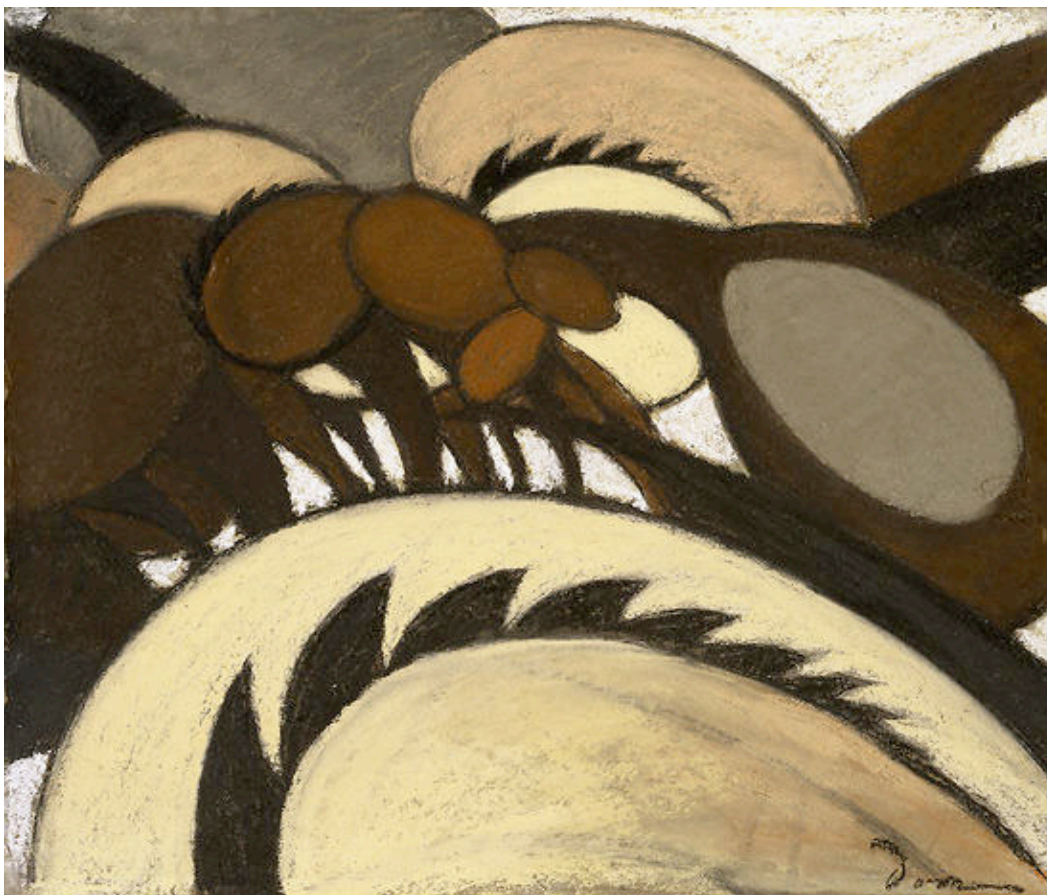


Figure 10  
Arthur G. Dove  
*Team of Horses*, 1911-12  
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth  
Reproduced in Amon Carter Museum of Art Collection, Fort Worth, TX,  
<http://www.cartermuseum.org/works-of-art/1984-29>



Figure 11  
Max Weber  
*Rush Hour, New York*, 1915  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
Reproduced in National Gallery of Art Collections, Washington, D.C.,  
<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=51803+0+none>





Figure 12  
Max Weber  
*Slide Lecture at the Metropolitan Museum*, 1916  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/Works\\_of\\_Art/collection\\_database/modern\\_art/slide\\_lecture\\_at\\_the\\_metropolitan\\_museum\\_max\\_weber/objectview.aspx?OID=210001647&collID=21&dd1=21](http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_of_Art/collection_database/modern_art/slide_lecture_at_the_metropolitan_museum_max_weber/objectview.aspx?OID=210001647&collID=21&dd1=21)



Figure 13  
John Marin  
*Woolworth Building, No. 31*, 1912  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
Reproduced in National Gallery of Art Collections, Washington, D.C.,  
[http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tinfo\\_f?object=50756](http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tinfo_f?object=50756)

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## VITA

Meredith Leigh Massar was born on July 25, 1985, in Houston, Texas, to Michael and Lisa Massar. A 2003 graduate of Robert E. Lee High School in Tyler, Texas, Meredith attended Baylor University in Waco, where she received her Bachelor of Arts in Art History with a minor concentration in Studio Art. She graduated from Baylor in 2007 with university honors. After college, Meredith received a position at the Dallas Museum of Art as a Eugene McDermott Intern, which she held until July of 2008.

Meredith's experiences at Baylor and the DMA inspired her to continue her studies, leading her to pursue a graduate degree in art history. She began her studies at Texas Christian University in August of 2008. Meredith served as a research and teaching assistant to Dr. Lori Diel, Dr. Frances Colpitt, and Dr. Niall Atkinson. She received a graduate tuition fellowship, stipend, and a Kimbell Fellowship during her studies at TCU. While pursuing her graduate degree, Meredith also received two Mary Jane and Robert Sunkel Travel Endowment awards, two graduate student travel grants, and a research award from the Institute of Women and Gender. Anticipating a Master of Arts in Art History in May of 2010, she plans to pursue a career in the art world.

## ABSTRACT

For years, scholars have posited Joseph Stella as responsible for the creation of a particularly American brand of Futurism without actually qualifying or defining the appellation. This thesis looks at Stella's involvement with, and distinction from the Italian Futurist movement through the lens of his pastel, *Futurist Composition*, 1914, in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum. More than even *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, 1913, Stella's *Futurist Composition* is a celebration of the Futurist aesthetic and innovative exploration of abstraction.

In order to understand the differences between the Italian and American Futurism, this paper examines the tenets of the former and the highly charged atmosphere in which they developed. The political crisis and social stagnation of Italy necessitated violent and revolutionary measures to be taken by its cultural leaders. Italian Futurism championed speed, dynamism, and modernity as the driving forces behind its energetic style. These three concepts that were so intrinsic to the movement translated easily into what would become the American modern aesthetic.

Through my investigation of all of these elements, I illuminate how Stella's *Futurist Composition* demonstrates the application of the style and dynamism of the Futurist influence, while avoiding its inflammatory political implications. Stella's work, while obviously indebted to the Italian movement, draws on the burgeoning urban culture of New York City and Coney Island to create an idiosyncratic American interpretation of Futurism.