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Stettheimer, Florine. *The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue*. 1931.

The 1931 painting *The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* by Florine Stettheimer, a wealthy influence in New York society, illustrates high-class society and culture in early 20th century America. First looking at the painting, the audience is exposed to bright colors which serve to set an upbeat tone of the work. By using light colors and incorporating clouds, Stettheimer articulates the desirability of upper-class life. The scene shows a newlywed couple walking from a Cathedral and down a red carpet, surrounded by their wedding party, all of whom seem to be in good spirits. Along with the use of color, incorporating a bride and groom further adds to the upbeat tone of the painting, as weddings are most commonly associated with celebration and content. Above the scene Stettheimer paints whimsical names of luxury brands such as Tiffany’s jewelry and Altman’s department store. The theme of the painting can be deducted to the desirability and comfort of high-class culture and its ease of living.

Stettheimer uses symbolism to demonstrate the theme, incorporating prominent figures to further define the desirability of the scene. Seen next to the wedding party is herself and her family, placing herself in the middle of high-class society and functionality. By incorporating herself, Stettheimer demonstrates her position on wealthy culture and its significance in society. Along with herself, Stettheimer incorporates other prominent modernists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, demonstrating the importance of societal progression and conversation, occurring even within wealthy society. The inclusion of other artists of the modernist movement further demonstrate the theme of luxury as a progression of society and culture rather than an opposition, as the previous Victorian period would define. Other prominent figures included in *The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* include Charles Lindbergh heading a parade in the left-hand corner. The inclusion of Charles Lindbergh can be seen as commentary on the hasty societal progressions which trademarked the beginning of the 20th century. Taking the first solo flight across the Atlantic, Lindbergh is seen by modernists as an important figure in the progression and ease of transportation, pushing society into a state of quick transportation and increasingly hasty societal tempo. This societal transformation is also seen through the incorporation of a Rolls Royce car, a symbol of luxury and wealth in the 20th century, in the bottom right corner of the Stettheimer’s piece. Stettheimer paints her initials into the car, resembling a dollar sign; identifying herself as a multi-dimensional member of society, both enjoying luxuries and being capable to conduct intellectual conversation.

The culture and enjoyments in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” are recounted through Nick’s biased view of high-class society, limiting a complete perspective on character dynamics and decisions. Using *The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* as a tool demonstrating the desirability of high living, character motives become thoroughly understood with respect to their cultural environment. By looking at Stettheimer’s painting, the cultural atmosphere of the early 20th century can be examined through the perspective of a participant of wealthy society, providing a broader understanding of the actions and relationships in “The Great Gatsby”. While Nick speaks about the disservices material society does for individual relationships, Stettheimer’s painting allows the audience to see the appeal of a life devoted to luxury and the atmosphere living in it. The enjoyment of these luxuries are described as unnecessary by Nick as he criticizes excess wealth and its effect on social climate. The inclusion of personal figures in Stettheimer’s work show interconnectivity of community, rather than a life of modest ambivalence as Nick suggests. By including social context from the perspective of a participant, the luxury which Gatsby displays is more than him flaunting his money, but a commentary on the culture he is included in.

With the early 20th century marked with socio-economic progression and promise of luxury as a reward for hard work, competition became increasingly stiff among Americans trying to live a life of comfort. For those like Gatsby with the afforded luxuries, the presence of money was an exclusive community. This community brought artistic and philosophical movements such as the modernist movement, which Stettheimer identified, and attributed more to American social society than an influx of money.  In explaining the daily life of Gatsby and others within his same social circle, Nick writes, “There was music from my neighbor’s house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens, men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars [...] At high tide in the afternoon I watched his guests diving from the tower of his raft, or taking the sun on the hot sand of his beach while his motor-boats slid the waters of the Sound,” (43). The incorporation of color both in *The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* and “The Great Gatsby” show an enticing scene of rich living. Along with the bright colors, Nick’s quote also portrays material possessions associated with luxurious society. Although Fitzgerald constructs “The Great Gatsby” to comment on the emptiness which accompanies a life of excess, the telling of New York society through Stettheimer shows that extravagance is not exclusive to other emotions or values.