

“could be kind,” though she was strong-minded, difficult, nasty and sharp-tongued. “Ettie wouldn’t accept my instructions, but she could hand them out,” says Solomon. He relates the story of a senior partner in his law firm who was one of several men who courted Ettie. “God forbid if they ever got married!” the partner commented about the three sisters.

They like a woman  
to have a mind.  
They are of  
Greater  
interest they  
find.  
They are not  
very young,  
women of that  
kind.

So wrote Florine, who in nearly all of her self-portraits depicts herself wearing pants and a beret and holding paintbrushes and palette. This clear vision of herself, with a healthy dash of humor, earned her many followers at the Whitney solo exhibit.

Perhaps Ettie realized the inevitability of the world finding Florine and Carrie. She appears to have felt a moral obligation to preserve her siblings’ artworks, although professional jealousies got in the way when she came to actively promoting Florine’s reputation.

Professional jealousies are also what may have motivated her to cut out page after page from Florine’s diaries before donating them to Yale University’s Beinecke Library. Still, we have Ettie to thank for saving the vol-



RIGHT: Florine Stettheimer, circa 1917-1920.  
✻ ✻

ume of paintings that Florine ordered Joseph Solomon to destroy—and for assuring that Carrie’s dollhouse world would never be lost. Within its rooms, and on Florine’s canvases, the three graces remain—their remarkable lives frozen in what Van Vechten called “those strange years after the First World War.”

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## ✻ The Great Florine Revival ✻

THE REVIVAL OF Florine’s paintings can be attributed partly to the women’s movement and corresponding women’s studies programs. Her popularity might also be attributed to the emergence of Pop art, which shares a lot of the characteristics found in her work. Pop artist Andy Warhol was a big fan: He identified with the campy artificiality and eccentricity of her work.

The curator of the Florine Stettheimer show at the Whitney, Elisabeth Sussman, considers Stettheimer’s paintings “some of the best-kept secrets of American modernism.”

Best-kept secret is right. Although Florine produced more than 150 paintings, they hardly saw the light of day until recently.

Florine’s paintings may have been too much of a departure from the social realism of contemporaries like painter Edward Hopper. She had only one exhibition during her lifetime, at the Knoedler Gallery in 1916.

“The Knoedler exhibit was a flop,” says the

family’s lawyer and personal friend, Joseph Solomon. “She never showed her paintings to an art dealer after that.”

Although disappointed that her paintings did not sell in 1916, later in life she refused to part with them—no matter what price was offered. She considered her oeuvre a unified body which would be ruined if any of the pieces were separated from the whole. Because of this, she instructed Solomon to destroy her paintings after her death.

Luckily, Solomon, who was charged with carrying out Florine’s request, could not bring himself to do this. He and Florine’s younger sister, Ettie, gave Florine’s paintings to museums and universities across the country. Columbia University received the lion’s share—70 paintings. Ironically, the Whitney, the museum responsible for the great Florine revival, was the only museum to decline a Stettheimer painting when Solomon offered to donate one.

One of Florine’s most intriguing—and suc-

cessful—projects was an opera, “Four Saints in Three Acts.” With words by Gertrude Stein, score by Virgil Thomson, and sets and costumes by Stettheimer, the opera opened in 1934 under the auspices of the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music. It was the longest-running opera of the day, and more was written about it than any other cultural event in 1934.

Florine was a remarkable colorist, and because she was unsure about how the colors would look next to the varying skin tones of the black cast (the cast was drawn from Harlem church choirs and from Vaudeville), she wanted the black cast members painted white. Luckily, she did not get her way, and the visual effect made by the all-black cast in jewel-like colors in some scenes and in all-white costumes in others was a show-stopper.

Having avoided the spotlight all her life, Florine’s curtain call at the end of this performance was, quite literally, her first real public appearance.—M.B.