

Continue



The brooklyn bridge variation on an old theme

Joseph Stella's career left an indelible mark on American modernism, marked by turmoil and change both personally and professionally. Following the groundbreaking Armory Show in 1913, he became a leading figure in New York City's art scene, with his style and subject matter shifting frequently as he searched for meaning and identity amidst the city's rapid transformation. His outsider status may have contributed to his success in capturing industrial America through powerful images, particularly his depictions of iconic New York landmarks like the Brooklyn Bridge. Despite fame for his American scenes, Stella never fully felt at home in his adopted country; instead, he spent considerable time traveling and working in Europe before returning to New York when necessary. As a key figure in the Futurist movement's introduction to the United States and a leading proponent of the Precisionist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, Stella's artistic style varied while his Precisionist interest in distinct lines and colors remained consistent throughout his career. His work also reflected the influence of European historical art movements, from the stained glass quality reminiscent of Renaissance altarpieces to Gothic architecture, which informed his artistic heritage and had a lasting impact on his works. Newark Museum 1923-26 Stella's "world" is represented by bold, colorful panels that evoke Manhattan's iconic skyline. The panels feature distinct city areas, from the port to Broadway and Times Square, with a musical quality reminiscent of theatrical spotlights. Geometric lines draw the eye upward, reflecting Italian Futurism's influence on Stella's work. The artist also depicts factories extracting ammonia, tar, and light oils from coal combustion, fascinated by mechanical processes. The painting features imposing buildings, tanks, and chimneys alongside radiant beams of light, giving it an eerie quality that hints at complex chemical processes. Spotlights create a sense of expectation for something wondrous to occur. This work represents the Precisionist movement, celebrating industrial landscapes through geometric depictions of factories, bridges, and skyscrapers. The composition's bold colors, movement, and contrast between light and shadow reveal Stella's debt to Futurism. The Art Institute of Chicago 1926 During his time in Europe, Stella was drawn back to the US for exhibitions, but his heart remained in Italy. His fascination with American architecture, particularly New York City, continued, as did his connection to Italian traditions. The painting "The Virgin" by Stella showcases a dramatic shift away from his industrial and urban subjects, embracing traditional representational art in a highly expressive manner. Influenced by Carlo Carrà's Futurist style and the early Renaissance movement, Stella infused his work with vibrant colors and intricate details, creating a sense of beauty and fertility. The composition, featuring a serene Virgin Mary surrounded by flowers and fruit, exudes a unique blend of medieval and modern elements. This new direction in Stella's art highlights America's ties to European cultural heritage and marks the culmination of his career, which had long explored themes of religion and spirituality. Joseph Stella's early work in Europe during the late 1920s and early 1930s was characterised by religious undertones and vibrant colours. His paintings often depicted bridges as modern-day altars, imbuing them with spiritual significance. The artist used sharp lines to convey dynamism and solidity, drawing inspiration from Gothic architecture's soaring pointed arches. A rich colour palette reminiscent of stained glass added depth to his compositions. This style evolution showcased Stella's more personal approach to art by the end of his life. Born in Muro Lucano, Italy, Joseph Stella grew up in a small mountain village surrounded by a ravine. As a child, he was introverted and showed little interest in pursuing a career in law like his father and grandfather. However, he demonstrated a natural talent for drawing from an early age and developed a passion for art. After moving to New York City at 19, Stella initially studied medicine but soon switched to the Art Students League, where he discovered his true calling as an artist. Influenced by American impressionist painter William Merritt Chase and Ashcan School leader Robert Henri, Stella began creating works inspired by the city's immigrant population, advocating for their rights and fair treatment. His marriage to Mary French was complicated, with long periods of separation and extramarital affairs on his part. As a magazine illustrator from 1905 to 1909, Stella focused on realist drawing, often depicting immigrants and miners in his work. Giovanni Maria Sacco Stella was a renowned Italian-American artist who made significant contributions to the development of modern art in the early 20th century. He first gained recognition at the Society of American Artists' 1906 exhibition, where he received praise for his work. In 1909, Stella traveled to Europe, where he befriended influential artists such as Gino Severini and Umberto Boccioni, and writers like Gertrude Stein. His time in Europe had a lasting impact on him, introducing him to the Futurist and Cubist movements. Upon returning to New York, Stella became an integral part of the city's avant-garde scene, participating in the Armory Show of 1913 and befriending artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Georgia O'Keeffe. He was also associated with Duchamp's famous work, Fountain. Stella continued to explore various artistic styles throughout his career, including Futurism, Cubism, and collage. His renderings of the Brooklyn Bridge were highly successful, and inspired Hart Crane's poem, The Bridge. In the 1920s, Stella began creating collages, drawing inspiration from artists like Kurt Schwitters and the Dada movement. These works consisted of paper scraps, wrappers, and other ephemera, often featuring bold strokes of paint. Despite his success, Stella struggled with feelings of homesickness and displacement. He maintained strong ties to both Paris and Italy, traveling frequently between the two cities until his death. Joseph Stella's journey was fueled by inspiration, leading him to explore the Caribbean and North Africa, where he captured the essence of their natural environments through vibrant still lifes and bold landscapes. His approach to painting was diverse during this period, oscillating between realism, abstraction, and surrealism. In 1934, Stella returned to New York, settling in the Bronx with his wife Mary, but his popularity had begun to wane, and his challenging personality had estranged him from former friends. He found employment with the Works Project Administration, which provided government funding for the arts, although he was not sympathetic to the organization's populist ethos. In 1938, Stella traveled to Barbados with Mary, who was ill, and was captivated by the island's magic, which inspired much of his later work, including tropical plants and exotic flowers reminiscent of Gauguin's Tahitian landscapes. Unfortunately, Mary passed away during their visit. Stella's creativity was revitalized by the new environment, and he later commented on the renewal of his energy and passion for art. Despite his renewed inspiration, Stella's health began to decline in the early 1940s, and he was diagnosed with heart disease, leading to increased anxiety and fretfulness. He suffered a series of medical setbacks, including a failed surgery and a serious injury from a fall, and was eventually forced to move to Queens, where family members could care for him. Stella passed away in 1946 due to heart failure and is buried in the Bronx's historic Woodlawn Cemetery. As a major figure in the Precisionist movement, Stella's depictions of New York's cityscapes and industrial architecture paved the way for a new era in American modern art, alongside artists such as Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler. His earlier, more abstract pieces, like Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras, can be seen as precursors to Abstract Expressionism and the Action Paintings of Jackson Pollock. Joseph Stella's dynamic style significantly influenced later artists, such as Helen Frankenthaler's Color Field paintings, Edgar Ewing's post-Cubist works, and De Hirsh Margules' Abstract Realist urban scenes. For Stella and his contemporaries, the Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883, was a powerful symbol of American cultural achievement. He first painted the bridge in 1918 and continued to depict it throughout his career, viewing it as a sacred representation of America's new civilization. In his 1939 work, Brooklyn Bridge: Variation on an Old Theme, Stella portrayed the bridge as a modern altar, emphasizing its cables and arches with a palette of blues, reds, and blacks that evoked the effect of light passing through stained glass.