



HIGH MUSEUM OF ART ATLANTA

## JOSEPH STELLA: VISIONARY NATURE TEACHER RESOURCE

“To refresh and rebuild my chromatic vision I went to the flowers to learn the secret of the vibration of their colors.” —Joseph Stella, *The Birth of Venus*, 1941

### EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Co-organized by the High and the Brandywine River Museum of Art, this is the first major museum exhibition to exclusively examine the nature-based works of pioneering American modernist Joseph Stella (1877–1946). Though Stella is primarily recognized for his dynamic Futurist-inspired paintings of New York, particularly of the Brooklyn Bridge, he was also compelled to express the powerful connection he felt to the natural world, a subject he would pursue persistently throughout his career. *Joseph Stella: Visionary Nature* features more than one hundred paintings and works on paper that reveal the complexity and spirituality that drove Stella’s nature-based works and the breadth of his artistic vision. The exhibition digs deeply into the context of the works, exploring their inspirations, sources, and stylistic influences.

This teacher resource can be used to prepare students for their visit to the exhibition and as a lesson guide to engage them with Joseph Stella’s work.

### ARTIST BIO

Joseph Stella immigrated to New York from a small Italian town in 1896 at age eighteen to join his older brother, a successful doctor. While interested in art from an early age, Stella briefly abided his family’s expectation to study medicine and pharmacology. This pursuit was short lived, as he enrolled in the Art Students League a year later and eventually the New York School of Art. His early career was made possible largely due to his brother’s financial support.

Stella’s first encounters with success were via his documentary drawings of immigrants and steel mill labor conditions, published by periodicals of the time. At first traditional in style, Stella’s body of work became more experimental and modern following his increased exposure to prominent working artists of the time, particularly through visits to Europe and specifically Paris. Through his exposure to various emerging art movements (Futurism, Cubism, Symbolism, Surrealism), Stella was invigorated by the evolution of modern art. He used this momentum to abstract the brusque, industrial cityscape in which he lived while also, through his nature-inspired works, holding a deep nostalgia and reverence for his rural, pastoral homeland in Italy.

### ART-MAKING PROCESS

Joseph Stella is primarily known as a painter, though he was also a master of drawing across various mediums: ink, pastel, and silverpoint being among them. His use of pastels became more prominent following his exposure to the works of French Symbolists in the mid-1910s, and the medium worked well to capture the fluidity and color of his imaginative, nature-based compositions. He frequently pulled artistic inspiration from both observation and from his memories, as seen in his inclusion of both distinctly Italian scenery and flowers he would have seen in his visits to the nearby New York Botanical Garden.

### THEMES

The following themes are explored in this exhibition. Educators can use them as a guideline when introducing Joseph Stella to students.

### Industry and Nature

- In his body of work, we can think of Stella as comparing industry and nature (and, in many ways, industrial America and the pastoral countryside of Italy). In the effusion of his nature-based work, we see an interesting dialogue between order/ornamentation and symmetry/intricacy. There is a delicate tension maintained in these works; often, things are incredibly detail based and almost but not quite symmetrical. This is often in stark contrast to his industry-based works, which monumentalize the stark, sometimes alienating architecture of New York City and highlight both the anxiety and excitement of living there.

### Flora and Fauna

- While captivated by the cityscape of New York, Stella had a special fondness for the abundance of nature that he remembered from his childhood in Italy. Plants and flowers became motifs in his work, rarely with explicit symbolism but rife with personal significance. Some of the floral designs visible on figures (such as *Purissima*) resemble folk Italian designs that he would have seen in his youth. Throughout his work and compositions, he collages together plants and animals native to Italy, those encountered on his travels abroad (Europe, North Africa, Barbados) and in New York City (at the Botanical Garden or around town), and species pulled completely from his imagination. No matter their origin, his arrangements are distinct in their intense detail and vibrant colors.

### Portraits

- Portraiture was of special interest to Stella. He launched his career drawing workers and immigrants in the early 1900s for social justice publications, rendering elegant, detailed figure studies that some compared in quality to the Renaissance masters. In fact, inspired by his Italian heritage, Stella distinctly drew reference with his profile portraits to the typical side-profile conventions of ancient Rome. He drew people everywhere he traveled—friends and strangers alike—as well as several self-portraits! By incorporating floral details into his various portraits—whether through landscapes, props, or clothing—he folded the question of representing human identity into his meditation on the natural world.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Use these questions as appropriate to the age level of your students to help discuss the works of Joseph Stella.

- Stella often engaged in self-portraiture and occasionally relied on symbolism to depict himself. In *The Ox*, Stella painted himself as a white ox in profile. What characteristics do we associate with an ox? Why might Stella have chosen this animal to depict himself? If you were to make a similar self-portrait, what animal would you use to symbolize yourself and why?
- Stella had a special fascination for trees. *Tree of My Life* is a painting in which Stella used a tree as an insert for himself. What can we infer about Stella based both on this tree and what is around it? If you were to draw yourself similarly, what might your tree look like and why?
- Mount Vesuvius is an active volcano near Naples, Italy. This volcano is used as motif throughout many of Stella's works, meaning we see it again and again. How many times can you find it throughout the works on display in this exhibition?
- Compare and contrast one of Stella's New York-inspired works to one of his Italy-inspired works. How are they different? How are they similar? What does that lead us to think about Joseph Stella as an artist? How might the idea of "homeland" and nostalgia influence this discussion?