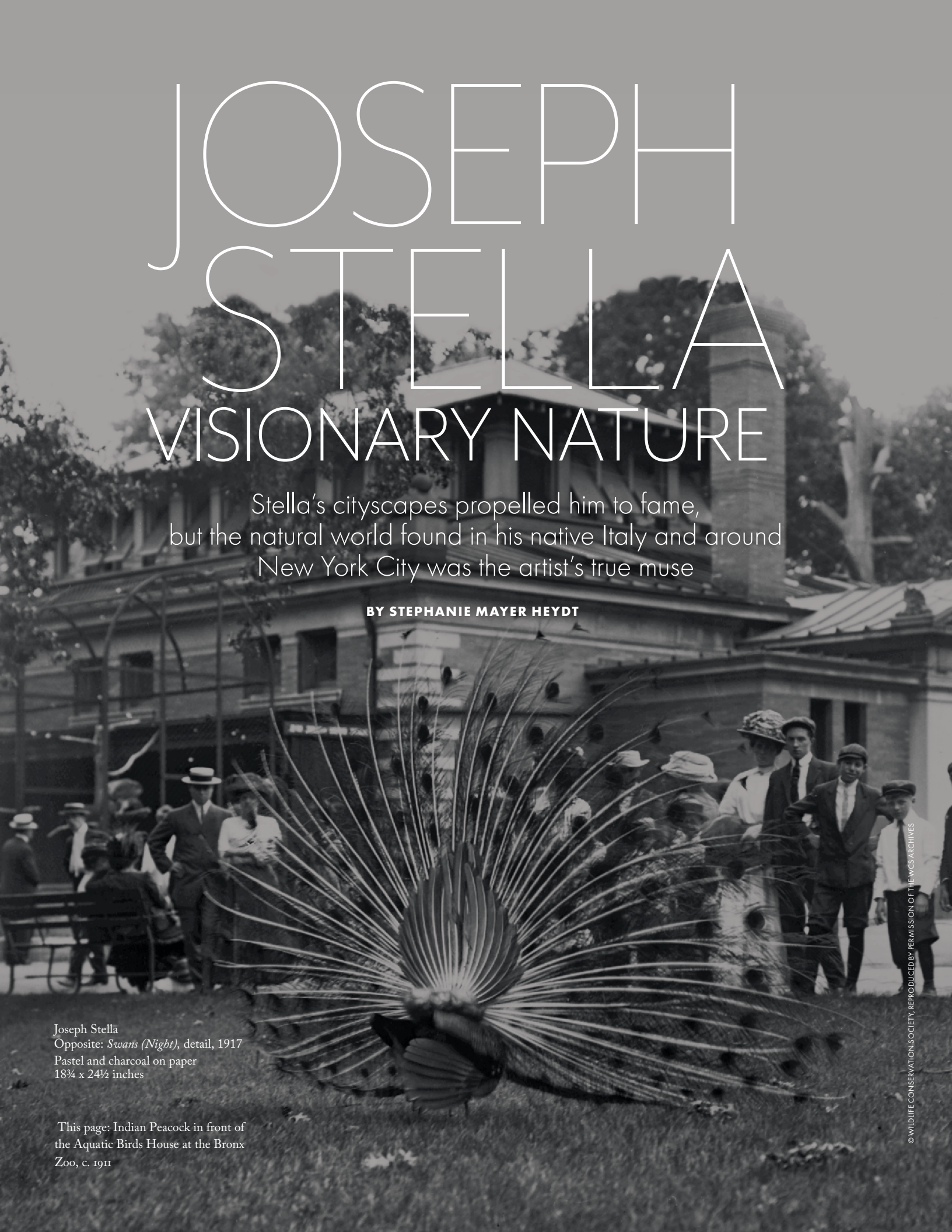
JOSEPH STELLA
VISIONARY NATURE

Stella's cityscapes propelled him to fame, but the natural world found in his native Italy and around New York City was the artist's true muse

BY STEPHANIE MAYER HEYDT



Joseph Stella
Opposite: *Swans (Night)*, detail, 1917
Pastel and charcoal on paper
18¾ x 24½ inches

This page: Indian Peacock in front of the Aquatic Birds House at the Bronx Zoo, c. 1911

Postcard view of Muro Lucano, c. 1909

An immigrant from a small southern Italian hill town, Joseph Stella arrived in New York at age nineteen enamored by the energy of the city but also ambivalent toward its oppressive power. He described the city as a "monstrous dream . . . the skyscrapers like bandages covering the sky, stifling our breath." His nature subjects counteracted these anxieties, harking back to the joy he felt in the light and open space of the Italian countryside. He would chase this feeling for his entire career.

Bridges, factories, tunnels, and towers signaled the energy and promise of the young American nation, and Stella's modern interpretations of these subjects propelled him to international fame. Yet it was in nature, not the city, that he found his greatest inspiration. Over the course of his four-decade career, flora, fauna, and lush landscapes of an imagined world became his most passionately pursued subject. If Stella's cityscapes became symbols of a modern era, his pictures of flowers, plants, and birds were rooted in another, more ancient, primal, and Arcadian world. Inspired by archaic, folk, and classical precedents and his own brand of spirituality, these lyrical and exuberant works are also his least understood.

Stella's breakthrough to nature subjects occurred organically over time, spurred on by his perpetual longing for Italy and conflicted feelings about life in New York City. For the first decade following his arrival in 1896, he focused on figural work, fulfilling commissions documenting immigrant and working communities for progressive journals and sharpening his skills as a draftsman. Brief exposure to art school training repelled Stella and led him "to try to forget the stupid language that the men of the schools impose upon one." Instead, he decided "to leave the modern and go to the masters of old," exploring techniques he associated with his own heritage, the Italian Renaissance.

Stella's initial turn to a self-directed study of the technical achievements and styles of the Renaissance also anchored him to an Italian heritage—an identity he would later associate with the exploration of nature in his art. A much-anticipated return to Italy in 1909 enabled Stella to seek out inspiration from the Old Masters, and he studied them voraciously. An excursion to Paris in 1911–12, however, awakened him to new styles of painting. As he explained in a 1913 essay, "The New Art," "for the first time, I realized that there was such a thing as modern art . . . and as true and great as the old one." He soon launched into his first efforts in abstraction.

Back in New York by the end of 1912, Stella returned not only to a rousingly modern city, but also with the will to paint it. These efforts began with the artist's newly-energized exploration of the city around him—first a series dedicated to the electrified thrill of Coney Island's Luna Park (*Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, 1913–14; Yale University Art Gallery) and then his most famous paintings of that icon of American engineering, the Brooklyn Bridge. Yet even as he blazed a trail for this new American subject matter, his fascination with the natural world—

JOSEPH STELLA *Old Brooklyn Houses*, 1914, Pastel on paper, 19½ x 27 inches

JOSEPH STELLA
LEFT: *Abstraction*, c. 1918
Pastel on paper, 23¼ x 18 inches
RIGHT: Joseph Stella, c. 1940

and his devotion to the art of the past—evolved along with it. The Coney Island series culminates with a painting in a tondo format (*Coney Island*, 1914; The Metropolitan Museum of Art) popular in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, and curiously adorned not with clusters of electric lights and roller coasters but a Madonna-like figure set amidst a tree-filled landscape.

As Stella painted his operatic *Brooklyn Bridge*, an equally epic pendant painting also began to take shape, this one featuring an Edenic dreamscape based on his memories of Italy. The idea for *Tree of My Life* came to Stella as an epiphany, following his discovery of a little tree he found growing in the shadow of a Brooklyn factory. Thriving, despite the city, like Stella himself, the tree signaled what Stella called "a propitious omen." In style and palette the two paintings seem at first diametrically opposed—with one nocturnal and hard-edged and the other organic and infused with light. Compositionally, however, the two paintings are more similar than not, sharing dimensions and a dominating central axis. The massive Gothic-style piers in *Brooklyn Bridge* are matched in *Tree of My Life* by the gnarly old olive tree, often thought to be a whimsical portrait of Stella himself.

With *Tree of My Life*—his first major work composed entirely of nature themes and which he debuted alongside *Brooklyn Bridge* in 1920—Stella announced, "the dawn of a NEW ERA." Details referencing Stella's personal world nestle around the perimeter of the tree—a distant view of his hometown in southern Italy, and a lush bounty of birds, butterflies, flowers, and plants fill up every imaginable space. Atop the tree a celestial orb hovers like the halo of a divine creature—a suggestion of spirituality that would appear in many of Stella's nature-based works from this moment forward. Yet the white filigree of the sphere also takes on an architectural aspect, reminiscent of the glass enclosure of the conservatory at the New York Botanical Garden, where he spent many of his days beginning in 1918.

RIGHT: JOSEPH STELLA PAPERS, 1905-1970, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

JOSEPH STELLA *The Heron*, 1925, Oil on canvas, 48 x 29 inches

JOSEPH STELLA
Photo of Joseph Stella's *Swan (with Rainbow)* in the window of The Cooperative Gallery, 120 Washington Street, Newark, New Jersey, January 1938, with gallery proprietors Nathan Krueger and Bernard Rabin, photo courtesy of Michelle Rabin

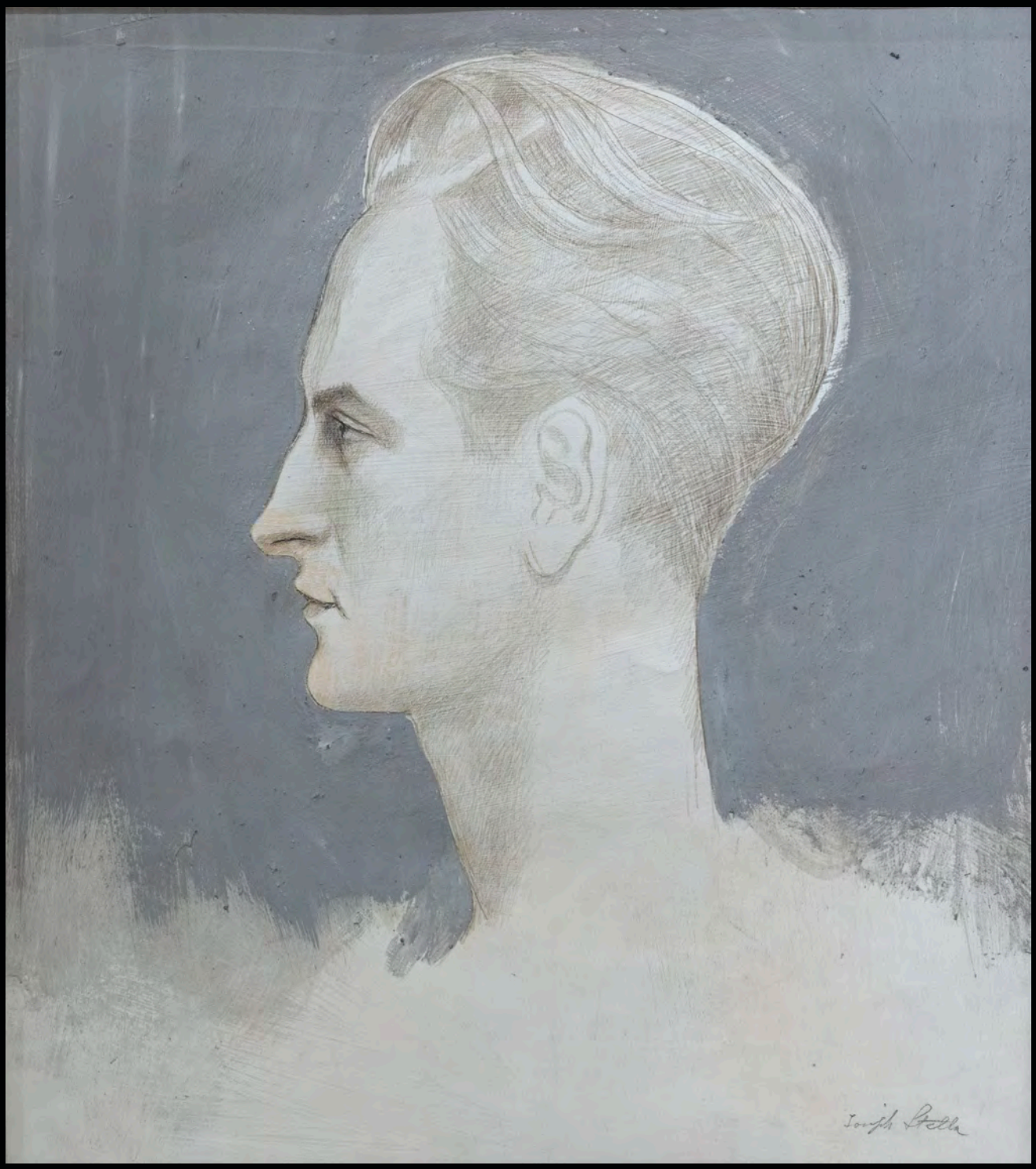
MAN RAY
Joseph Stella and Marcel Duchamp, 1920, photographic print, 10¼ × 8¼ inches, Rudi Blesh papers c. 1900–83, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

At least a year before he started painting *Brooklyn Bridge*, Stella sought relief from city life at the gardens in the Bronx, and the influence of his frequent visits there would profoundly shape the direction of his work. Under the protection of the glass dome of the conservatory, he wandered between the climes of the desert and the tropics enjoying the display of exotic plants. The drawings he made there—many featuring hybrid versions of multiple specimens from a range of ecosystems—provided models for the eccentric flowers and plants featured in his paintings over the next two decades.

Stella also regularly visited the Bronx Zoo where, like the Botanical Garden across the street, visitors could wander between displays spanning diverse ecosystems of the world. Stella would have seen a range of animals in naturalistic habitats. The birds, in particular, must have fascinated Stella, and much like his hybrid flowers, bizarre, feathered animals began to appear in his pictures—from the fantastical to the real. In *The Peacock* from 1919, the pastel's namesake is unexpectedly camouflaged within the picture's complex, colorful composition. Two birds nestle among a jungle of cacti and tropical plants, easily identifiable as white herons—but the centerpiece of the picture appears at first to be not a bird, but an exotic flower in bloom. A second look reveals a view of the peacock from behind, feathers splayed and head peeking out to one side. Stella's whimsical rule-breaking approach to representation would remain a feature of his artistic expression throughout his career.

If Stella's embrace of nature subjects took root in New York, it fully blossomed on his 1922 visit to Italy. Unlike in New York, where Stella encountered nature largely in contained gardens, the natural world was ever present in rural Italy. The familiar landmarks of Mt. Vesuvius, the Bay of Naples, and Capri provided the backdrop for his evolving visual language. Seized by a "mystical rapture" and stirred by a landscape alive with history, he adopted a crisp, archaic style for these works. In some, Stella offered a hint of the mystical, such as in the extraordinary *Swan (With Rainbow)*—a technicolor homage to the stately bird set unexpectedly within the tondo format that Sandro Botticelli and other fifteenth-century artists often reserved for depictions of the Madonna and Child. The Italian pictures confused American

JOSEPH STELLA
Portrait of Marcel Duchamp, c. 1923-24
Silverpoint and oil on paper, 18½ x 16½ inches



JOSEPH STELLA
RIGHT: *Red Flower*, 1929
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12¾ inches
BELOW: Joseph Stella (second from left) in Rome, c. 1909

critics, who had come to know Stella for his paintings of the modern American city. Nevertheless, even at a moment of rising anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment in America, he proudly aligned with his Italian identity. His shift announced a direct lineage to medieval and early Renaissance Italian art, which he admired for its pure and uncomplicated style.

Stella's Italy was about color, light, and simplicity of expression. Folk traditions inspired this series, not just the studied perfection of artists like Michelangelo and others of the High Renaissance. Nature is the true subject of Stella's Italy paintings, and nowhere does Stella so fully announce the association between Italy and nature in his works as in the epic floral composition *Flowers, Italy*. Order and symmetry are in constant tension with the whimsy of organic ornamentation. The canvas overflows with colorful depictions of flowers and birds within a setting evoking Gothic architecture. Pillars of gnarled tree trunks extend outward from the center, as if aisles of a cathedral. Lupine, gladiolas, and birds-of-paradise fill the

LEFT: JOSEPH STELLA PAPERS, 1905-1970, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

"My devout wish: that my every waking day might begin and end—as a good omen—with the light gay painting of a flower." —Joseph Stella

JOSEPH STELLA *Fountain*, 1929, Oil on canvas, 49 x 40 inches

JOSEPH STELLA

BELOW: *Flower*, c. 1930,
Oil on canvas, 18 x 15 inches
RIGHT: Joseph Stella in
Morocco, c. 1930

vertical spaces with a spectrum of colors simulating stained glass windows. Like a congregation in the pews, a host of smaller flowers and plants are gathered below. While the church-like composition and title allude to Italy, the flowers themselves are from all over the world. Stella culled elements of the composition from a range of sources, from drawings made in the New York Botanical Garden to other nature-themed works that reflect his travels.

Flowers provided a profound source of joy for Stella. Although he rarely noted the symbolism of his floral subjects, they must have carried personal meaning for him, appearing as a leitmotif throughout his work, such as the lily, the lotus, or the variegated leaves of a tropical plant. He often arranged his botanical compositions in unexpected ways—as larger-than-life close-ups or in ambiguous, unlikely settings. Yet, he also painted traditional tabletop still lifes of flowers or fruit set in his studio. Regardless of how conventional the format, he approached even the most quotidian subject with personal flair, adding a dimension of emotion to a composition through his unexpected use of color, setting, or scale.

In the final years of his life, flowers assumed an even more central role for Stella, who continued to view nature as a metaphor for his own existence and death. "I may ask one simple thing," he said in a 1929 interview, "to be left free to face the Sun." In his early days, he had buoyed himself with

RIGHT: JOSEPH STELLA PAPERS, 1905-1970, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

frequent trips to the New York Botanical Garden to enjoy the warmth and color under the protection of the glass conservatory. When his health began to suffer around 1940, he turned inward to the small and modest renderings of flowers created in his studio. That year, he was diagnosed with heart disease, and although he actively exhibited and painted, his pace slowed. In 1945, suffering from a blood clot that impaired his vision, he fell down an elevator shaft and afterward was largely confined to his studio.

Yet he had already begun to retreat a few years earlier. Following the lukewarm critical reception of his first major retrospective in 1939 at the Newark Museum in New Jersey, Stella scaled back. He was drawn toward smaller works and most often to the familiar subject of flowers. Around this time, his friend, the artist Charmion von Wiegand, remarked, "A visit to Stella's studio is an event . . . In the center of the room, serenely unconscious of confusion, sits the painter at a small easel, putting the last touches on the svelte curves of a tulip. Flower studies of all kinds litter the floor and turn it into a growing garden."

While Stella achieved celebrity and acclaim for his innovative spirit, what many praised as the uniqueness and range of his vision also became Stella's greatest obstacle to enduring success. As one observant critic, Hilton Kramer for *The New York Times,* explained in a largely positive review of a Stella retrospective at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in 1977, the artist's "untidy" and "contradictory career" confounded his legacy. "Stella was at once a modernist and a traditionalist," Kramer observed, "a Futurist who still worshipped at the shrine of the old Masters, an artist with a passion for the romance of industrial America who constantly fled to . . . exotic locales . . . to renew his inspiration."

Making sense of Stella requires a disregard of conventional categories, as he fits into none of them neatly. Yet precisely because his art transcends categorization, it achieves something else entirely: universality. In his visionary pursuit to find something new to say about the world around him, he invites us all to see our own world anew.

JOSEPH STELLA
The artist in front of his easel with *Apotheosis of the Rose,* 1925

Joseph Stella: Visionary Nature is co-organized by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Brandywine River Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. On view in Atlanta from June 17 to September 24, 2023, this exhibition is the first to feature this lesser known, though significant body of nature-based work by the artist.