



A House Without Dolls

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*For the first time in over twenty years, there is no Christmas party at the Stettheimer dollhouse. **NYC** arranged with the Museum of the City of New York to have the house photographed without the party decorations and dolls that were added in the 1970s. With their removal, the focus shifts back to the rooms themselves and their miniature artwork. The fashionable settings—no longer the background to staged vignettes—become the attraction in our photographs. The detail is allowed to delight once again, not having to compete for our attention with late 19th-century, 1950s-style and jeweled Christmas trees added by the museum, removed for **NYC**, and, alas, soon to be reinstalled.—Sharon Brennan*

At first glance, the famous Stettheimer dollhouse seems not to belong in the toy collection of the Museum of the City of New York. The many rooms of this sophisticated folly, furnished in marvelous detail, are displayed between cases of unflinching biogue dolls in Victorian finery and rumples toudys. The imposing colonial facade is hoisted above the house so that we may better view Carrie Stettheimer's doll-size world, the work of her life played out in miniature—every small chair, tea towel, wee goblet, mini taffeta bedspread under her control. What sort of child's play is unmasked in her glamorous stage set?

Carrie Walker Stettheimer was forty-six years old in 1908 when she began the endless and absorbing work on her dollhouse. She was the hostess of a determinedly mannered salon of artists and intellectuals at the Abeyn Court, an apartment house of baroque splendor on West 88th Street. The woman who embroiled the minuscule cover for the hairbrush in the master bedroom, who executed the correct sign on each piece of the mah-jongg set in the library, entertained New York's avant-garde of the twenties and thirties—Virgil Thomson, Elaine de Koonig, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, Edward Steichen, Georgia O'Keeffe. The Stettins were these wealthy sisters who, along with their Mama, arrived back in New York before the First World War after many years in Europe. They might have entered the fantastic lobby of the Abeyn out of the pages of the Brothers Grimm. Carrie, of the dollhouse, was the older sister of Florine who painted bright dreamworlds, eccentric fables of the art world in which their fabulous friends appear as themselves. Carrie, of the dollhouse, was the older sister of Etta who published arch novels and, fully accredited in philosophy at Heidelberg, wrote on the problems of faith in the work of William James. Carrie's role: the care of hearth

The small house has an ornate art collection, including a bronze *Archer* and *Child* by Wilhelm Borch (left), a painting by Clément Lichère (right, visible through the open door) and an oil-on-canvas made by Carole Lachère (opposite page). Marcel Duchamp once painted a miniature version of *Breakfast on the Terrace* for the house. These and other original artworks were created by a coterie of prominent artists, friends of Carrie Stettheimer during the years when she was building her miniature world. The collection is a record of the New York avant-garde between the two world wars.

through the house measures only 49 1/2 inches long, 35 inches wide, and 27 1/2 inches high, it is a detailed representation of the decorating trends of the 1920s and 1930s. The library (right, and following page) is in the Chinese taste of the period, with metallic lacquer wallpaper, Chinese lanterns and lacquered furniture. It is complete down to the mah-jongg set on the gaming table and the *Card Ten Solitaire, Head Wards* (the main de plume of Carter's sister, Elizabeth Stettheimer) and *Theodore Dreiser* books on the shelves.

and home in the theatrical setting of an improbable realm—the Stettin's salon in the glittering, self-conscious city, romps at the estate in Westchester. And to Carrie's lot, the fate of the less adventuresome daughter, fell the care of the matriarchal Grande Dame.

It is no wonder Carrie furnished her small mansion in exquisite detail to the splendid society that frequented her salon would pay attention, partake of her little kingdom. Illustrious painters did enter her self-fulfilling distortions of reality. The ballroom must be considered the prize, a museum in miniature with contributions from Albert Gleizes, the Zorachs, Archipenko, Gaston Lachaise and, its pure wonder for the eye, Duchamp's tiny reproduction of his *Nude Descending a Staircase*. As you circle the house which is open on all sides, you are charmed, as you may be by the Lilliputian scale of any dollhouse, yet big as you are, voyeuristic at heart, you cannot with your greediest gaze possess these rooms. They are so completely Carrie's, each loving detail—names on the books in the library, the crystal chandelier no bigger than an earring in the cream and gilt salon, the snippets of lace, gauze, chints from her workbox that curtain the tiny windows. But Carrie's choices are not mere dross, nor are they a flamboyant pastiche of the artistic high life seen in Florie's paintings. We are viewing an earnest enterprise, the eerie house of Carrie Stettheimer's imagination, the aging girl who stayed at home to make a replica of the home she never had.

Since the mid-1970s dolls have inhabited all the rooms, an addition that the museum deemed appropriate to update the Stettheimer dollhouse, to connect it to Carrie's spectacular everyday world. Mamma and her daughter, Stella Wanger (mother of Walter, the movie producer), the only daughter who married, take tea in the salon. It's amusing to see Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in the chintz bedroom, where a stack of silver Christmas presents lies on the silk carpet, and to see Florie chatting with art critic Henry Mullick on the lower terrace amid silver and gold Christmas decorations. Though the Stettheimers were German Jewish, *ekot Our Crossed*, the Christian holiday was added to Carrie's household by the curator of the toy collection, John Noble, to jolly up the rooms. Like any unlivable house, it was thought the rooms had come on slowly. So, the halls are permanently decked—all wreaths, garlands, gilty trees. The evening is eternal in which Edward Strichen on the upper terrace takes a photo of Elizabeth Durcan, niece of Isadora, while Virgil Thomson tinkles the ivories of the grand piano in the ballroom.

This elaborate attention to detail is a testament to the number of years, from the time until the mid-1930s, that Carrie Stettheimer worked on the dollhouse. After her death in 1944, younger sister Ethel Stettheimer gave it to the Museum of the City of New York. A photograph of the house published in 1948 shows that it has undergone many changes since entering the museum's collection. Other paintings were added by Ethel Stettheimer and sculptures were shifted, and dolls and Christmas decoration were added.



Some rooms like the white bedroom (right), have had few alterations. Others have become fully grounds to the original action taking place. In the nursery, the delightful wallpaper (also covered in a subtle, a large Christmas tree which the Stettheimer's mother and niece are shown decorating. The Stettheimer tree from a prominent New York Jewish family, John Jacob. Creator of Toys of the museum, created the museum-filled and holiday decorations in the real space. He stated that "The house was finished. I was excited to hear this famous museum had been described as 'downright lovely.' The only thing I could do that would not compromise the integrity of the original piece would be to apply the *Wittensburg* principle of interpretation."

Enchanting for a while, the diorama effect of the Stettheimer's gala, but I choose to unpeep the rooms. I prefer to think that only Carrie knew, the way children know, which gentlemen sat on her gift chairs, which lady in a brocade kimono powdered her nose at the dressing table, what stewed in the pot on the iron stove. Though she may have invited the world to see the glistening eye of the cold salmon, the Thinsbellina horn of the Victrola in the nursery, the exquisite views of Venice (Sanstretto?) we cannot drink the magic potion that will allow us to partake of, or tread on, her dreams. Being a hoarse sort of woman, myself, I find that my favorite rooms are those most useful: the kitchen with its coppers, delftware and hanging utensils, the linen room all shipshape, a pink bathroom fitted with a big thermometer (deliciously out of scale) in the tub. My great grandmother was the Irish maid in a grand house, so I'm quite at home below stairs with the crockery and the wash tub, flatter on the stove. I don't fancy myself in the Rose Bedroom lounging on a chaise upholstered in chiffon.

It was said by Ettie, who gave the dollhouse to the museum in 1946 after her sister's death, that Carrie intended her work to be displayed, that she had notes on some notion of who, among the stellar company she counted as her friends, would take their places on her stage. Ettie wrote an introduction to Noble's book on the dollhouse with the honest revelation that "because of many handicaps" the house was never finished...Carrie ran our marriage which was in later years a complicated and difficult one owing to our Mother's prolonged invalidism. I want to mention here that although my sister was an extremely successful and competent housekeeper...she had no liking whatever for this job, and this, I imagine no one suspected."

In *Portrait of My Sister, Carrie Stettheimer*, Flaxino denotes the family background, taking tea in a country setting, while Carrie postures dowdage with her dollhouse. She is stiff, her eyes masked with mascara, assexual as a mannequin in Boudier's window, lace draped across her (el) skinnose gown, isolated, set on an island, a rag with full-blown roses, she presents her house with an attenuated feminine hand as though to say...what would she say, poor little rich girl? That, as a woman, she had rescued her sense of play from the dutiful days of her service. In her alternate world, Miss Carrie had something to show after all.

By the "*Wittensburg* principle," Noble means creating dolls and dollhouses for the museum in the same way that period-dressed gals interpret a scene for visitors at historical *Wittensburg*. Unfortunately, Carrie Stettheimer left no specific information about the intended occupants. She may have also had second thoughts about creating them at all. In response to the question about dolls for the house, she writes, "I am sure hoping they will never be born so that I can keep these houses in custody and enjoy them myself while awaiting their arrival." Perhaps she said "light me to water" occupied the rooms, but in the rooms themselves.





