In the years during and following World War I, Italian-born American artist Joseph Stella began to experiment with a range of avant-garde artistic strategies clearly adapted from Cubism, Futurism, and New York Dada. At the center of Stella’s early experiments was a largely unknown work entitled *Man in Elevated (Train)*, likely completed around 1918.¹ In this work, Stella combined the emerging techniques of collage and reverse painting on glass, and paired it with his continued artistic exploration of urban technological themes. While his early paintings on glass have been predominately framed in terms of the direct influence of Dada artist Marcel Duchamp’s experimental use of the medium during this period, Stella’s unique transatlantic identity as an Italian expatriate, as art historian Wanda Corn argues, should not be overlooked.² This essay aims to further enrich the study of Stella’s *Man in Elevated (Train)* by reexamining the work within the context of Italian Futurist aesthetics.

*Man in Elevated (Train)* depicts a man from the shoulders up as viewed through the window of an urban commuter train. Stella created it by first outlining the forms with lead wire on the reverse side of the glass and then filling them in with oil paint and collage fragments. The viewer is quickly drawn to the sharp vertical and horizontal lines that may suggest the iron window posts of the train, indicating the rhythm of movement as they recede into the upper right-hand side of the composition. By interweaving the man’s head in front of and behind these rapidly repeated vertical lines, Stella attempts to convey a sense of movement through space and time. The artist’s distorting

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² Stella’s relationship to Duchamp and the link between Stella’s paintings on glass and Duchamp’s *Large Glass: Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23) are discussed at length in Bohan, “Joseph Stella’s *Man in Elevated (Train)*.” In addition to Duchamp, several artists at this time were also experimenting with the medium of glass, including Marsden Hartley, Rockwell Kent, Franz Marc, August Macke, Paul Klee, and Jean Crotti. In fact, Crotti also used lead wire to outline some of his forms and then covered the entire surface of the glass with oil paint, as in his 1916 construction *The Mechanical Forces of Love in Movement*. Between 1916 and 1926, Stella completed more than a dozen glass paintings. In terms of Stella’s Italian expatriate identity, see Wanda Corn, *Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 135–90. Corn notes that studies of early-twentieth-century art in the United States often present Stella as a New York modernist, with little notice of his being an Italian expatriate, which she considers to be an important aspect of his work.
geometric visual vocabulary fragments the view of this figure, further emphasizing motion and speed in the composition. Through his application of paint and collage materials, Stella specifically draws attention to the surface of the glass. The transparency of the glass is retained only in areas where Stella used thick, stippled brushwork as well as very small areas where there is no paint at all—most noticeably in the ellipsoid at the upper edge of the newspaper clipping. In this lower left area of the work, Stella applied actual pieces of newspaper and wallpaper in two areas loosely outlined by lead wire. These fragments literally depict the newspaper or book that the man is reading, conflating the real with the illusionistic.

Stella’s *Man in Elevated (Train)* clearly expresses a dynamic sense of movement and simultaneity, ideas that were central to Italian Futurist aesthetics. Even prior to his experiments with either collage or glass, Stella’s work already evinced a great degree of abstraction and dynamism. In works such as *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913–14), the geometric shapes, agitated lines, and intense kaleidoscopic colors recall the work of the Futurists. Like many other European and American artists working in New York during the first decades of the twentieth century, Stella was drawn to capturing the sights and sensations of the surrounding urban environment, especially the modern bridges and transportation systems that feature prominently in other works of his from this period. In his *Autobiographical Notes*, Stella described the energy and modernity of New York City as he imagined it during these early years:

> Steel and electricity had created a new world. A new drama had surged from the unmerciful violation of darkness at night, by the violent blaze of electricity and a new polyphony was ringing all around with the scintillating, highly colored lights. The steel…with the skyscrapers and with bridges made for the conjunction of worlds. A new architecture was created, a new perspective.

While Stella tended to resist direct associations with the Futurist movement due to its radical politics, he was increasingly involved with Futurist aesthetics during trips to Italy and Europe and through the growing exposure of the Italian style in New York during this period. After immigrating to New York in 1896 from his family’s home in a small village near Naples, Stella studied at the Art Students League under William Merritt Chase and spent much of his time drawing immigrant and working-class figures. From 1909 to 1912, Stella’s brother supported his extended trip back to Europe, first in Italy and then in Paris. During this time, Stella sharply departed from his more realist style to adopt the radical aesthetics of his Italian countrymen. In 1912, he attended the first major Futurist exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim in Paris and met a

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3 Founded by poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, Futurism was an artistic movement originating in Italy that rejected traditional culture and embraced an idea of aesthetics generated by technology, modern machines, warfare, and speed. After publishing his manifesto, Marinetti was joined by the painters Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, who proclaimed their allegiance to the movement in 1910. The Futurist style drew on a number of sources, including Cubism, and favored faceted forms, multiple viewpoints, and a sense of movement and dynamism. Especially after 1913, Futurist artists became involved in radical and controversial politics, embracing aspects of war and violence in their art. Although the movement lingered on in Italy until the 1930s, it had faded from prominence around 1918 with the end of World War I.

4 Stella’s best-known paintings at the time—and still today—include *Brooklyn Bridge* (1919–20, Yale University Art Gallery) and the large-scale five panel work *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted* (1920–22, The Newark Museum, New Jersey), which depicts scenes of Manhattan’s factories, theatres, multicolored bright lights, skyscrapers, subway tunnels, and the Brooklyn Bridge in a distinctly Cubo-Futurist visual vocabulary.


number of artists from the group, befriending artist Gino Severini. Stella was drawn to Futurist theory and aesthetic practice for its embrace of what was new in modern life: speed, dynamism, and the mechanistic aspects of the contemporary urban and technological environment. However, he was never drawn to the provocative political implications that led many Futurists to depict subjects of violence and war.

In *Man in Elevated (Train)*, space and motion are fused through Stella’s deliberate use of sharp lines and angles—a key structural and expressive concept of Italian Futurism. Referring to these lines as “force-lines” in their theoretical writings from this period, Futurist artists such as Umberto Boccioni believed that these forms were the principal means to artistically convey a sense of implied movement and dynamic tension in objects. The development of this concept of “force-lines” and the interrelationship of space and time relied upon the ideas of French philosopher Henri Bergson, who suggested that the simultaneous combination of multiple perceptions and memories was one of the essential characteristics of modern life. In the catalog to the Futurists’ 1912 exhibition, Boccioni described these lines as “fleeting, rapid and jerky, brutally cutting into half lost profiles of faces or crumbling and rebounding fragments of landscape.” In Stella’s painting, the lines of force similarly pierce the man’s profile and serve to energize the space by symbolizing the implied movement of the urban commuter train.

Stella’s decision during this period to experiment with nontraditional materials such as glass and collage may have also been influenced by Boccioni and his “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture” (1912). In this pivotal text, he called for modern artists to use the everyday materials around them—glass, cardboard, cloth, mirrors—in creating works that would integrate art and modern life. One pivotal sculpture of Boccioni’s, *Fusion of a Head and a Window* (1912), exhibited in the 1912 Paris exhibition, exemplifies the fusion of the figure with the elements of the surrounding environment. As scholar Christine Poggi describes this now-destroyed work, “the frame and glass of the real window seem to impale a horribly grimacing head, while other bits of reality…remain discrete and isolated.” Although departing from the suggested violence in Boccioni’s sculpture, Stella similarly establishes a dynamic interpenetration of the figure of a man with the surrounding environment of the train’s window. Not only do the newspaper fragments interject elements of reality into the work, but, unlike any of Stella’s other glass paintings, the use of glass here is analogous to the physical properties of the window depicted in the painting.

Strong similarities also exist between Stella’s early collages and the work of Futurist Gino Severini, to whom Stella may have gravitated the most—perhaps due in part to their friendship, but also to Severini’s rejection of the subject matter of war by 1916. In Severini’s collages from 1912 to around 1915, pasted clippings of newspaper served as actual bits of reality within the works as well as a pictorial contrast to the abstract elements and force-lines of his compositions. He later explained his early use of collage: “the contrast of a realistic element…and other elements brought

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9 Umberto Boccioni et al., “The Exhibitors to the Public” (Paris: Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, 1912), as cited in Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 170. Boccioni created two portraits using collage in 1914, including his *Dynamism of a Man’s Head* (Civico Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, Milan) which depicts a geometric, straight-edged profile of a man’s head infused with a series of curving, fragmented planes.
to a level of absolute abstraction generates, like all contrasts, dynamism and life.”11 Severini’s *Still Life: Bottle, Vase, and Newspaper on a Table* (1914–15) bears a striking formal resemblance to Stella’s initial study for *Man in Elevated (Train)*, contrasting the fragments of newspaper clippings within a monochromatic, abstract charcoal drawing. Similar to both Boccioni and Severini, Stella adopted a rather literal use of materials in his work to enhance their expressive properties.

With *Man in Elevated (Train)*, Stella struggled with the problem of communicating the perception of high-speed travel through the city, applying new materials in ways that both embraced and challenged the parameters of Futurist aesthetics. Much of the theory and visual language that Stella adapted from the Italian Futurists was certainly further reinforced and questioned through his close friendship with Marcel Duchamp in New York. *Man in Elevated (Train)* presents a moment in Stella’s career when he is actively intersecting a range of artistic styles pulled from his transatlantic encounters with Futurism, Cubism, and Dadaism. Stella’s experiments with glass and collage were undoubtedly influenced by Duchamp’s own work in glass and his experiments in the static representation of movement and four-dimensional geometry, yet Stella’s continued engagement with Italian artistic styles is worthy of further exploration.

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11 Gino Severini, *Tutta la vita di un pittore*, vol. 1 (Rome: Garzanti, 1946), 89, as cited in Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting*, 172. As Poggi states, through their emphasis on this contrast of elements, Severini’s collages were quite different from those produced by his Cubist contemporaries (ibid., 172–77).