

An Introduction to Zelda

By Kirk Curnutt

Painting was the third art form Zelda Fitzgerald attempted to express herself through, and the only one that no one could take away from her.

Beginning in 1927 she threw herself into ballet hoping to establish herself as a professional dancer. Whether the intensity of her practice was a symptom or the cause of the 1930 breakdown that left her intermittently hospitalized for the rest of her life is unclear, but from the onset of mental illness, her doctors insisted she had to give up her training to live a functional life. When that dream was gone she wrote a novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, but it sparked a massive conflict with her novelist-husband, who insisted that he owned the rights to their shared story because he was the established artist. As with these two other media, Zelda had dabbled in painting since childhood. Early in her marriage, she sketched a [proposed cover](#) for F. Scott Fitzgerald's second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), that was far racier and truer to the spirit of the Jazz Age than the eventual jacket. But she didn't truly devote herself to the visual arts until her tentative recovery from her second breakdown in 1932. The canvases that survive reveal a talent crying out to be heard amid an avalanche of celebrity, insanity, and marital despair.

As with so many women's lives before the era of equality, Zelda's is a case study in struggling to be taken seriously, on her own terms. She entered the public eye celebrated as her husband's irrepressible muse and passed away vilified as the anchor that weighed him down. The iconicity she has enjoyed in popular culture for a century now swings between two poles, between admiration for her theatrical spunk and flirtatious wit and pity for her psychological shattering. Very rarely do fans, much less critics, try to find the craft in her work. We're too invested in our image of her as a force of nature, a "whirlwind," as Scott once described her, rather than as a genuine if unschooled talent dedicated to realizing her vision, to getting it right.

Just to cite one admittedly frivolous example, over the thirty years I've lived and taught in Zelda's hometown of Montgomery, I've had any number of women tell me they've climbed into our Court Square Fountain in tribute to her legend, a prank inspired by the overhyped story of how she jumped into the spurting waters of New York City's Washington Square shortly after her April 3, 1920, marriage. Only one artist—and it's significant that it was a woman, not a man—has ever told me Zelda's work inspired her to paint.

Even her mental illness gets in the way of appreciating what survives of her canvases and sketches. When in 1934 she titled an exhibition of her art "Parfois La Folie Est La Sagesse," borrowing a French aphorism meaning "Sometimes Madness is Wisdom," Zelda wanted the public not to infantilize her by feeling sorry for her. In her mind, she was finding her line of sight, and thus her stability, through her travails. Instead, that

phrase has become something of an albatross. It binds Zelda to a whole Western tradition that glamorizes schizophrenia or bipolar disorder or whatever specific medical condition we diagnose her as suffering from (the jury is still out) as the generic, cool sort of “crazy” that allows us to revere our tragic, dysfunctional heroes as symbols of untamable individuality. This type of madness makes Zelda a fractured savant instead of a deliberate technician, all intuition and no elbow grease.

In this regard, whenever I study Zelda’s output I find the best way to appreciate it is to cordon it off from her life story. This is almost impossible to do with *Save Me the Waltz*, which offers a thinly veiled version of the Fitzgeralds’ marriage on all the familiar terrain, from Montgomery to Paris. It’s a little easier in her short stories; whether the piece she published in the 1918 Sidney Lanier literary magazine (“[The Iceberg](#)”) that Thomas Upchurch pointed me to before he and his wife, Cheryl, shuttered Capitol News and Books a few years back or the series of “Girl” stories Fitzgerald helped Zelda publish in the months before her crack-up, her heroines rarely resemble herself. Nor do their beaux seem like transcriptions of her husband.

It’s in her paintings, though, she seems most confident and most self-possessed. Maybe it’s the affinities with Picasso’s stretched bodies or the echoes of surrealist hallucinations. Maybe it’s the fact she drew inspiration from *Alice in Wonderland* or was possessed by Biblical deliriums. Whatever the reason, her paintings let us see Zelda on her own, as something other than “the wife of...”

Among the various traditions in which she painted, I would even say it’s her still lifes where we find her most free of the prison-house of legend. The very inanimacy of the flowers and fruit she painted seems to have offered her a respite from the gust everyone expected her to kick up, a silence in which the strain and pressure might dissipate. There’s something wonderfully anonymous, too, about still life; the artist records everyday objects, making them either dreamy or hyper-realistic through lines and curves, angles and shades and backdrops. Still lifes let us escape from the sturm and drang of personality and emotion: they just recreate the thing as it’s seen, without the hustle and bustle of a storyline.

I want to believe that’s what comforted Zelda most when she painted: that within a brushstroke she could dissolve into pure technique and find some semblance of peace.

About Kirk Curnutt

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