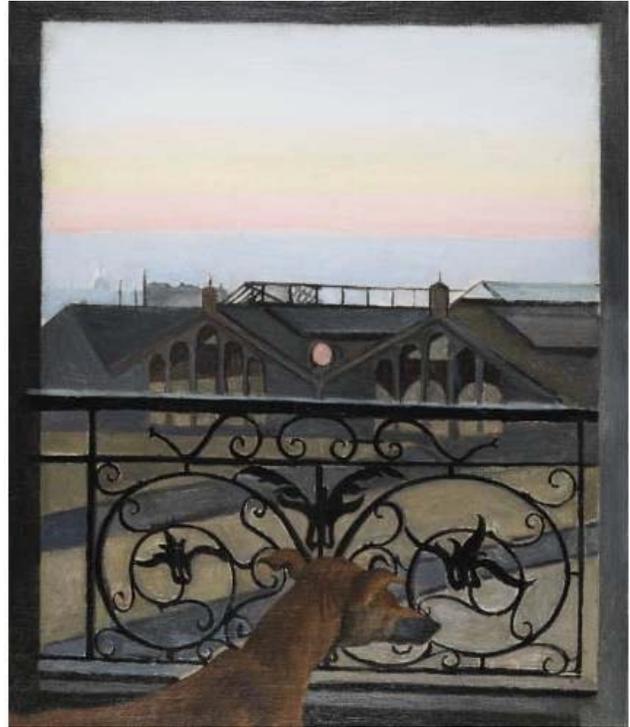


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“Dog on a Balcony, Paris” was painted by Joseph Stella in 1929. The dog in the painting peers out through a balcony enclosure towards a gray industrial building under a colorful sky. The viewer sees the same scene as the dog, as if through a window, which the artist has framed by the balcony floor and surrounding walls of the building on which it is attached. Is the setting actually in Paris, as implied by the title? Just what is the dog observing?

My goals in this discussion are to consider the aesthetics or elements of design in this art, examine background information about the artist and period in history in which he worked, and conclude with some thoughts about what might be going on in the painting.



In my opinion, the painting is artistically pleasing. It is divided into thirds vertically. The upper third consists of sky, painted in soft pastel colors of yellow, orange and pink, as might be seen at sunrise or sunset. There is also a layer of light blue near the horizon, which could be sky or ocean, though the latter is not found in Paris. The small domed church in the background could be found in Paris, but also in any other city.

The middle third shows an industrial type building, either a factory, warehouse, or transportation station. The building consists of straight lines forming rectangles and triangles. There are also some gothic type arches below the rooflines and in the interior shadows, suggesting large windows and open spaces. The building is a dull gray color, and looks empty. This may be related to the time of day, early morning or near sunset, or could mean the building is abandoned. Interestingly placed in the very center of the painting, near the roofline of the building, is a small pale pink circle, which may represent a glass window reflecting sunlight, which has the effect of softening the harshness of the building.

The bottom third of the painting consists of the dog and the balcony. The wrought iron balcony has curves, curlicues and flowering patterns, contrasting with the straight lines of the central building. The dog itself, with its warm camel colored fur, is an interesting focal point and the only living object, as the painting is otherwise devoid of people, trees or foliage. The dog is portrayed in a three-quarter profile view from behind, its gaze looking to the right. It has a somewhat exaggerated neck and snout, and uplifted alert ears. I find it interesting that despite the angle of the head, the artist did not show the dog's right eye, perhaps obscured by the ear or perhaps intentionally unrealistic. Finally, between the balcony and the building, there are two diagonally oriented parallel gray paths on the ground, probably paved roads with surrounding gravel. They are directed to

the right of the building, not into it, and lead the viewer's gaze to the right, in the same direction as the dog's gaze. They also provide a plane of separation between the balcony and the building.

In addition to vertical balance in the painting, there is also right-left symmetry, best seen in the triangular roof lines of the building and in the repeating curvilinear shapes in the front of the balcony. The warm colors of the dog and sky contrast with the gray building and balcony and emphasize the difference between the natural world and the constructed man-made world, yet both worlds coexist, in this painting as in life.

The artist Joseph Stella (1880-1946) was an Italian-American, who lived and traveled between New York City, Paris and his native Italy. He lived abroad between 1926-1934, and likely was living in Paris at the time of this painting (1929). His painting style and subject matter showed considerable variability over his career. He once stated, "From 1921 on, I was swinging on a pendulum from one subject to the opposite one." He was influenced by a modernist movement in the United States known as Precisionism, prevalent about 1915-1930. Technology was changing the world from rural agrarian to urban industrial, causing some artists to focus on skyscrapers and factories, the latter depicted in this painting. Stella's earlier and most well-known pieces, "Brooklyn Bridge" (c.1915) and "New York Interpreted" (c. 1920-22), are characteristic of the American Precisionist movement. His time in Paris introduced him to avant-garde painters such as Picasso and Matisse, as well as Italian futurists. Paris was considered the center of the arts in the 1920s, where new artistic movements flourished. Elements of "art nouveau" can be seen in the curves and flowers of the balcony railing. The fact that this painting was done in 1929 is also significant as this was the beginning of the Great Depression in the United States, precipitated by the stock market crash, and eventually leading to worldwide economic depression and unemployment. Europe was affected a few years later and cities were especially hard hit.

So...what is going on in the painting "Dog on a Balcony, Paris"? Is the building empty because the workers have gone home, or because it is shut down due to economic hard times? Where are the roads leading, and what is off to the right of our field of view? At what is the dog looking, if it even has an eye to see? One could speculate, if the setting is actually 1929 Paris, could the dog be looking towards the Eiffel Tower, which certainly dominated the Parisian skyline then and still does? The tower, completed by 1899 and standing 984 feet high, was the tallest building in the world at the time and the subject of much debate, both loved and hated by artists and citizens. If Stella is contrasting the natural world with the industrialized world, does the beautiful sky and the inclusion of "man's best friend" suggest the possibility of harmonious coexistence...or total disconnect? Or perhaps Stella is simply portraying a quiet moment in the day, a dog enjoying being outside on a balcony, and able to look beyond the scene in front of him.

"The role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them," said the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. This is one of the valuable insights I have come to understand in my own art education. The goal in viewing art is not to arrive at a "right" answer or "correct" interpretation. The viewer is enriched by the process of observation, analysis, questioning, discussion, and in some cases by simply appreciating the beauty of the art and the skill of the artist. And as a goal, that is more than enough.