

SEEING AMERICA: Jerome Myers's *Sunday Morning*, 1907



Sunday Morning provides a loving glimpse of a New York immigrant neighborhood in the early twentieth century.



Jerome Myers (1867 – 1940)
Sunday Morning, 1907
Oil on canvas
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 98.74
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery
of the University of Rochester

The Art

Jerome Myers referred to his adopted city of New York, saying, “others saw ugliness and degradation there, I saw poetry and beauty” (*Seeing America*, 148).

The composition of *Sunday Morning* resembles a stage setting: a horizontal row of houses forming the background for individuals gathering in the foreground—strolling, conversing, playing. Other streets, apartments, and shops are glimpsed in back and to the side, with children emerging from the adjoining street.

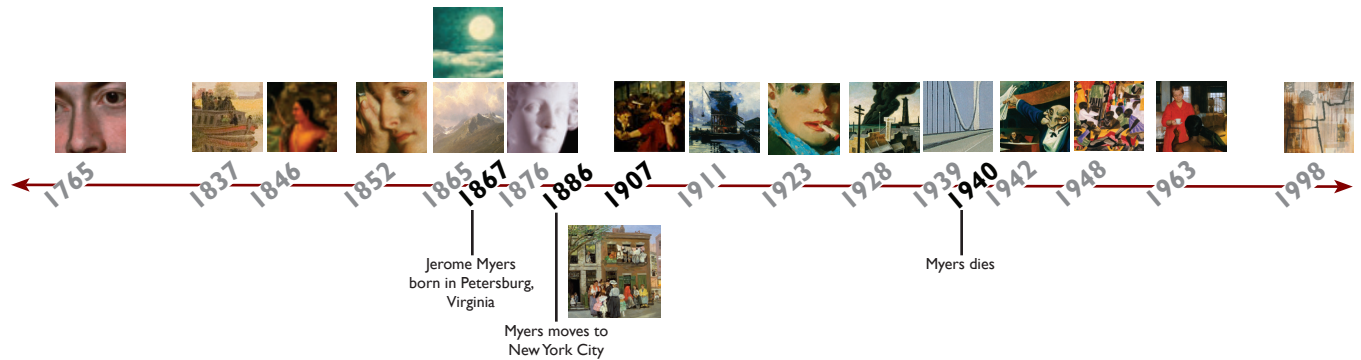
Myers’s cheerfully optimistic view of city life is seen in the details. No grubby, grinding scene of urban poverty here, as many of Myers’s contemporaries in the **Ashcan School** would have seen it, but rather impeccable streets, spotless, colorful clothes, an infusing spirit of communal contentment. “I went to the gutter for my subject,” he said, “but they were poetic gutters” (*Seeing America*, 147). The family laundry hangs from the balconies, the shops display fresh produce, flowers cheerfully thrive in their planters. The bright clothing suggests a time of relaxation or celebration, perhaps christening day for the baby in a long white dress held by the woman on the left. Some may be going to or returning from church, but a closer look at the people and their distinctive attire also suggests an ethnically diverse neighborhood. Myers is painting at the time when the Lower East Side of New York City was becoming home to the newly arrived Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.



Glossary

Ashcan School: Early 20th century group of American painters who portrayed scenes of urban life. Originally used by critics as a negative term, deriding their choice of subject matter.

The Artist



The “gentle poet of the slums,” Jerome Myers became best known for his warmly compassionate scenes of tenement life. Like the New York realists of the Ashcan School, he depicted the people and places of everyday urban life, though unlike many of them he eschewed scenes of squalor and deprivation.



Jerome Myers (1867 – 1940)

Self Portraits

Charcoal, graphite and colored chalk

Thomas H. and Marion Hawks Fund,

2000.29a

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery
of the University of Rochester

Myers was personally familiar with poverty. One of five children in an essentially fatherless household, he dropped out of school at twelve years of age to help support his family by working in a fruit market and later as a sign painter. The family moved from Virginia, to Philadelphia, to New Orleans, to Baltimore in search of steady employment. Finally, in New York City, Myers designed advertising for a brother’s business and worked briefly as a scene designer. In 1886 he began to study art seriously at the Cooper Union and the Art Students League.

Myers’s view of New York was not the world of the sweatshop and dangerous streets portrayed by the photographs of Lewis Hine or the words and images of Jacob Riis. Instead Myers painted the parks, religious festivals, and vibrant street life of the local ethnic communities like Little Italy. The light colors, clean streets, playful children, and charming row houses convey his optimism and pleasure in the life of the Lower East Side neighborhoods.

Myers was among the country’s most progressive artists when he painted *Sunday Morning* in 1907. Though others increasingly turned toward abstract art after the success of the **Armory Show** in 1913, Myers continued to paint his beloved Lower East Side neighborhood in his warm, optimistic style



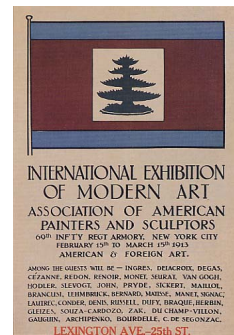
Jerome Myers (1867 – 1940)

In Rivington Street, ca 1921

Pastel on paper

Gift of Gertrude Herdle Moore, 64.95

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery
of the University of Rochester

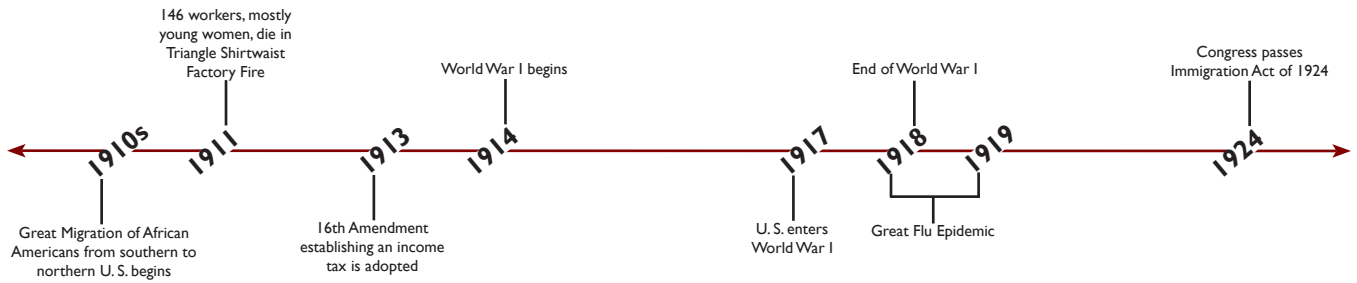


Armory Show poster, 1913

Glossary

Armory Show: Held in 1913, the Armory Show was the first major international exhibition of modern art held in the United States.

America



New York City was the destination of generations of immigrants to America; Germans, Scandinavians, English, and Irish all passed the Statue of Liberty and arrived in New York City. Many moved on; others settled in neighborhoods throughout the City. After 1890, the northern Europeans were outnumbered by the many thousands of Italian, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian immigrants. Between 1900 and 1920, fourteen-and-a-half million persons arrived in the United States, bringing traditional languages, foods, clothing, festivals, and holidays to their new home. America was not a melting pot so much as a collection of tightly knit ethnic neighborhoods such as Little Italy and Chinatown in New York's Lower East Side.

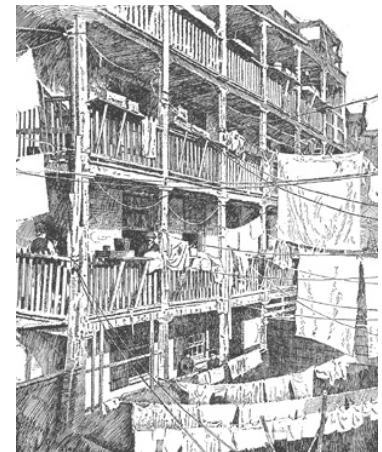


Unknown photographer
Hester Street, New York City, ca.1903
National Archives and
Records Administration
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Immigrants came to America seeking a better life: good jobs, homes of their own, religious freedom, and personal happiness. While Myers chose to portray the many positive qualities of urban life, other artists, photographers, and writers documented the world of crowded tenements, child labor, grinding poverty, dangerous streets, and unsafe factory working conditions. In 1911 the New York Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire drew national attention to city living and working conditions and helped usher in the Progressive Era, the Age of Reform.

After World War I, people fled war-devastated Europe. Eight-hundred thousand came to the United States in 1920–1921, about two-thirds of them from southern and eastern Europe. During the 1920s, Congress tightened entry regulations. The Immigration Act of 1924 cut immigration in half, and applicants from countries other than northern and western Europe were virtually excluded.

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How the Other Half Lives

Jacob Riis

New York, Charles Scribner's sons, 1890



Lewis W. Hine

Poor home. New York City tenement 1910

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of George Eastman House,
International Museum of Photography and Film

See also Grant Holcomb, "Jerome Myers Sunday Morning (1907)," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 146-148.

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you when and where this is?

How does knowing the title, *Sunday Morning*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

The artist Jerome Myers wrote “Others saw ugliness and degradation there, I saw poetry and beauty.” Is *Sunday Morning* an historically accurate view of life in New York City? Compare and contrast the painter Jerome Myers’s view of New York City with that of photographer Lewis W. Hine. How are they similar and how do they differ? What is the purpose – or point of view – of Myers and Hine? How does each man show you his point of view?



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Lewis W. Hine

Playground in tenement alley, 1909

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of George Eastman House,
International Museum of Photography and Film

Reading and Interpreting Visual Language

What was urban life like in the early 20th-century? Compare Jerome Myers's view of life in New York City with that of other American artists. Explore how each used line, color, composition and choice of subject matter to tell the story.



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Chinese Restaurant, 1909

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.12

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
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John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Election Night, 1907

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 41.33

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
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Everett Shinn (1876 – 1953)

Sullivan Street, 1900-1905

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 45.45

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Making Hypotheses/Exploring the Context

Who were the Americans of the early 20th century? Imagine that you could place any of these individuals into the *Sunday Morning* scene; what story could you now tell?

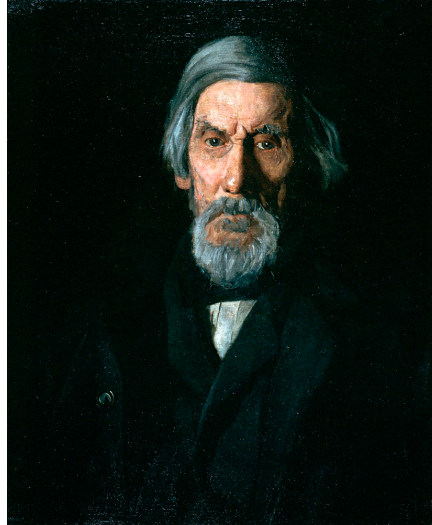


George Luks (1867 – 1933)

Boy with Dice, ca. 1923-1924

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas H. Hawks, in honor of
Harris K. Prior, 74.103
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester



Thomas Eakins (1844 – 1916)

William H. Macdowell, ca. 1904

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 41.26
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester

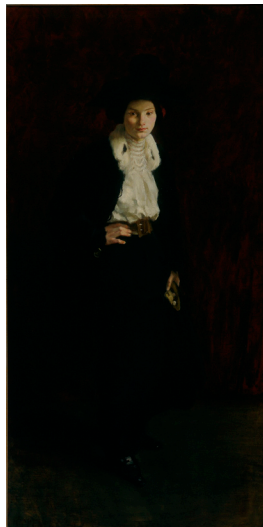


Mary Abastenia St. Leger Eberle (1878 – 1942)

Windy Doorstep, 1910

Bronze

Maurice R. and Maxine B. Forman Fund, 2004.14
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester



Kathleen McEnery Cunningham (1885 – 1971)

Woman in an Ermine Collar, 1909

Oil on canvas

Gift of Joan Cunningham Williams, Peter Cunningham, and Michael McEnery
Cunningham, 83.13
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Chinese Restaurant, 1909

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.12
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

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