
to ELIZABETH

# 49: George Luks *Boy with Dice* (ca. 1923–24)

Bruce Weber

George Luks depicted children throughout his career. His interest in the subject began in earnest in 1896, when, after moving to New York from Philadelphia and joining the staff of the *New York World*, he temporarily took over drawing the comic strip *The Yellow Kid* from its originator Richard F. Outcault (1863–1928). *The Yellow Kid* was set in an Irish slum on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and dealt with the devilish adventures of the scrawny, toothless urchin Mickey Duggan and his Irish, Jewish, Italian, African American, and Chinese cronies. In keeping with his new assignment, Luks began to frequent the Lower East Side and, in 1899, he commenced painting the immigrant Jewish and Italian children who flooded the streets of the neighborhood—as well as the children of the longer-established Irish and Germans. Luks portrayed the children of this lively but impoverished area with tenderness, warmth, dignity, and humor. He believed that a "child of the slums [made] a better painting than a drawing-room lady gone over by a beauty shop."[1]

*The Spielers* (1905, Addison Gallery of American Art) is the best known of Luks's early paintings of children. The work was originally titled *Hand Organ Music* and ranks as his most jubilant celebration of childhood. The canvas, which portrays a German girl and an Irish girl whirling about the pavement to the tune of an Italian organ grinder, captures one of the most popular forms of entertainment on the Lower East Side. Many writers of the day commented on the type of scene pictured here. In 1904, Columbia University graduate student Bella Mead wrote a study about Lower East Side social life in which she related that

> *No pleasure…is more generally indulged in than that of dancing. From the children to the mothers, it is enjoyed according to the individual capacity. The sound of the hurdy-gurdy on a warm spring evening is the signal for all the children in the neighborhood to assemble and to turn the side-walk into an impromptu dance-hall.*[2]

George Luks,
1867–1933
*The Spielers*, 1905
Oil on canvas,
36 1/16 x 26 1/8 in.
1931.9
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts.


In style, the painting reflects the influence of Robert Henri. Under Henri's influence in the 1890s, Luks began to create works in a dark earth-toned palette with a dramatic chiaroscuro technique, and developed an interest in the art of the seventeenth-century Dutch and Spanish Old Masters. Over the course of his career the artist enjoyed painting quickly, liked to combine house paint with conventional oils, and adopted his own unorthodox methods of applying pigment—including using his fingers.

Luks also painted pictures that suggest the harsher side of life on the Lower East Side. In *The Little Madonna* (ca. 1907, Addison Gallery of American Art), a child mothers her doll on a dark and dilapidated street. Luks appears to be alluding to a major social problem at the turn of the century: many little girls in the immigrant community were entrusted with the responsibility of looking after their infant brothers and sisters while their mothers were at work. Such girls were referred to as "Little Mothers," and their harrowing predicament led to the formation of the Little Mother's Aid Association and the Little Mother's League.

(Facing page)
George Luks,
1867–1933
*Boy with Dice*, ca. 1923–24
Oil on canvas, 30 5/16 x 26 5/16 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hawks, in honor of Harris K. Prior, 74.103

From 1912 until 1924–25, Luks had a home and studio in upper Manhattan at Edgecomb Road and Jumel Place, one block east of Amsterdam Avenue and West 170th Street. While living there he often painted scenes featuring children of the neighborhood playing in High Bridge Park, a five-minute

walk from his residence. These works mark a major departure from the artist's earlier dark depictions of the downtown slums. They are distinguished by their vivid color, modified impressionist style, and solid compositional structure. While living uptown, Luks often befriended the children of the neighborhood and used them as models. In 1920, the art writer Mary Fanton Roberts recounted a conversation she overheard near Luks's house and studio: "'George Luks ain't a goin' to paint you!' 'Why ain't he goin' to paint me? My mama dressed me all nice.' 'Huh, that's why—he ain't a goin' to paint no kids what's clean.' I passed this group of excited children on my way to talk with George Luks about his work.... You could see at a glance that these children knew and liked George Luks. He was their pal."[3]

In the early and mid-1920s, Luks painted several portraits of working boys, including the Memorial Art Gallery's *Boy with Dice*.[4] This work reveals the artist's greater concern now with form and volume, and his new incorporation of brighter and livelier color. His works of the period are also often distinguished by a broader and more bravura handling of paint than is seen in his earlier pictures. At this point in his career Luks felt that "Color, that's personal. It's something every artist must feel and develop, I like citron colors, pinks and watermelon rind green, blues like velvet to offset the yellows and browns."[5] The young bootblack carries a "kit" on his back with the rags and brushes of his trade, as well as dice for gambling on the streets. Luks, himself, sometimes enjoyed gambling with the children he encountered. The artist Gifford Beal (1879–1956) recounted an overnight stay that he and his sons made to Luks's summer home in Rockport, Massachusetts: "My boys were quite young at the time and he had never seen them before, but when I woke up rather early Luks already had both kids outside of the house pitching pennies on the sidewalk. He had a way with kids."[6]

The ethnic background of the bootblack is difficult to identify. He may be one of the many children of Italian heritage who worked in the shoeshine trade in New York in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the early 1920s, Luks's associate John Sloan pictured young Italian-American bootblacks in several of his etchings of Washington Square Park, a popular area of congregation for the shoeshine boys. As early as 1897 social reformer William I. Hull had noted that becoming a bootblack was often "the easiest entry into the world of business for the poorest boys."[7]

In *Boy with Dice*, Luks conveys the sense of hope and optimism he often felt in the presence of working class children. In 1921 he related:

> *Children seem to have in their eyes a definite glimpse of something, a wonder, a half-awakened expectancy. This is at once one of the most engaging and most elusive things an artist may try to catch.... To paint children is to approach the historical!... I try to pick out children who give signs of meaning something to the community in the future.... Some show the vitality and individuality that are almost certain to take them somewhere. This one may become a pugilist and that one an idealist. It doesn't matter. Each will be worthwhile, a leader, a voice. This little girl may be a madonna, and that a celebrated courtesan. It is not possible to say in what direction the energies of the child will drive it. One can only try to get those who promise to go far or high, whatever their path.*[8]

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