

Voice of the City: Joseph Stella and the Jazz Age

Basic Information

Grade Level: 9–12

Subject Area: Visual Arts, Architecture, Art History, U.S. History

Time Required: 4 sessions

Student Skills Developed: Making inferences and drawing conclusions, comparison and contrast, interpreting written information

Artworks

Newark Museum Collection

Joseph Stella

The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted, 1920–22

oil and tempera on canvas, 99 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 270 in.

Newark Museum

National Endowment for the Humanities, *Picturing America Collection*

Joseph Stella

Brooklyn Bridge, ca. 1919–20

oil on canvas, 84 x 76 in.

Yale University Art Gallery (14-B, Picturing America Gallery)

Walker Evans

Brooklyn Bridge, New York, 1929

Gelatin silver print, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (13-A, Picturing America Gallery)

Introduction

What was the voice of New York City in the early twentieth century? Italian immigrant Joseph Stella painted and O. Henry wrote their impressions of the essence, or voice, of this mighty city. New York dazzled and overwhelmed newcomers with its bright lights, towering skyscrapers, omnipresent sounds, and crush of humanity. In this lesson, students view Walker Evans's photograph *Brooklyn Bridge* and Joseph Stella's paintings *Brooklyn Bridge* and *Voice of the City Interpreted*. They read O. Henry's short story "The Voice of the City." Then, they create an artwork interpreting the voice of their community and write a comparison of their community's voice to that of early twentieth-century New York City. Four worksheets to stimulate thinking are included.

Guiding Questions

- + How do the artist and the writer describe the essence of a city in a certain time period?
- + What was New York City like during the early twentieth century?
- + How is a student's local community different from and similar to an early twentieth-century big city?

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- + Describe New York City during the early twentieth century.
- + Describe art styles that influenced artists Joseph Stella and Walker Evans.
- + Analyze the composition of Joseph Stella's paintings and Walker Evans's photograph of the Brooklyn Bridge.
- + Explain how Joseph Stella and Walker Evans utilized composition to create their interpretations of New York City.
- + Interpret O. Henry's quest for the voice of the city.
- + Create an artwork that interprets the voice of their own community, and then write about it.

Background Information for the Teacher

New York in the Roaring Twenties

New York City prospered during the exuberant 1920s as the wealth of the United States almost doubled. Manufacturing increased by sixty percent. As European immigrants and migrants from the rural South flooded New York, it became a city of ethnic villages. In 1900, New York City's population was just under three and a half million, but by 1920 it was home to more than five and a half million people.

Manhattan hummed with assembly-line produced automobiles, the rumble of underground subway trains, and harbor horns and whistles. By 1900, New York's electric lights and cinemas were dazzling newcomers.

To view the bustle of 1920 New York City, watch Ray Foster's nine-minute [film of New York City](#) in 1920

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQjrk35I2Ro>

Learn about the music of the early twentieth century from Ken Burns's film [Jazz](#)

<http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>

The Brooklyn Bridge

In 1883, when traffic first began crossing New York's East River, the Brooklyn Bridge was the longest suspension bridge in the world. The bridge connects the boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn. German immigrant John Augustus Roebling and his son Washington Roebling designed it. After thirteen years of construction, its neo-Gothic stone towers became the tallest structures in the Western Hemisphere.

Learn more about the history and design of the Brooklyn Bridge from Ken Burns's *American Stories*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, and PBS's *Building Big*.

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/brooklynbridge/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/buildingbig/wonder/structure/brooklyn.html>

Walker Evans (1903–75)

Walker Evans turned his childhood photography hobby into a profession. After a 1927 trip to Paris, where he was inspired by modern abstract art, Walker began photographing the Brooklyn Bridge. By 1929, the bridge was no longer new or awe-inspiring, but Walker viewed it from unusual angles and viewpoints, turning his images into almost nonobjective, dynamic forms.

Learn more about Walker Evans and his Brooklyn Bridge photograph in Picturing America's Teacher Resource Book, Chapter 13A. Read this page online or make paper copies for students.

<http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/>

Walker Evans also documented American life in photographs for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fachap04.html>

Joseph Stella (1877–1946)

Giuseppe Michele Stella was born near Naples, Italy, in 1877. When he was eighteen, he immigrated to the United States and adopted the English version of his first name, Joseph. He attended medical school and then pharmacy school before enrolling in the New York School of Art (now Parsons The New School for Design), studying under William Merritt Chase.

Seeing New York through the eyes of an immigrant, Stella wrote of feeling closed in among the buildings: With "the sky and the countryside blocked off, we are beset from morning to night by the multifarious crowd that weighs down on us." During three years of art study in Europe, he was inspired by Italian Futurism. This style featured futuristic themes associated with movement, speed, and technology. In his *Voice of the City*, Stella depicts a fanciful future for New York.

Learn more about Joseph Stella and his painting *Brooklyn Bridge* in Picturing America's Teacher Resource Book, Chapter 14B. Read this page online or make paper copies for students.

<http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/>

O. Henry (1862–1910)

William Sidney Porter was born in 1862 near Greensboro, North Carolina. When he was twenty he moved to Texas, where he herded sheep on a ranch for two years before moving to Austin. There, he married, worked as a draftsman at the Texas General Land Office, and eventually became a bank teller.

Porter was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to five years in federal prison in Columbus, Ohio, when in 1894 a federal bank examiner discovered inconsistencies in Porter's records. While in prison, Porter began writing under his pen name, O. Henry. Magazine readers enjoyed his adventure stories set in the southwest U.S. and Central America. After his release from prison, he relocated to New York City, where he wrote short stories that were often humorous descriptions of ordinary New Yorkers' lives. "The Gift of the Magi" and "The Ransom of Red Chief" are among his most famous short stories.

Preparing to Teach This Lesson

- + Review the lesson plan and the websites used throughout.
- + Locate and bookmark suggested materials and websites.
- + Download and print out documents you will use, and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.
- + Students can access the primary source materials and some of the activity materials via the EDSITEment LaunchPad.

Lesson Plan Activities

1. Look and Think Worksheet—Joseph Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge* and Walker Evans's *Brooklyn Bridge*.
2. Stella's *Voice of the City of New York Interpreted*.
3. Read and respond to O. Henry's "The Voice of the City."

Assessment: Create an artwork about the voice of your community. Write a comparison of 1920s New York to your community today.

Lesson Activity 1

Look and Think Activity

Show students Ray Foster's nine-minute film of actual scenes from New York in 1920, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQjrk35I2Ro>

After viewing the short film, explain that they will see how two artists interpret New York City.

- + Have students look at Walker Evans's *Brooklyn Bridge, New York, 1929*, silently for a few minutes and write random words that come to mind as they study this photograph. Ask each student to share one of their words with the class. Use the teaching activity on page fifty-nine in the Picturing America Teachers Resource Book to structure a discussion about this photograph.
- + Students should have a good view of a large color reproduction or projection of Stella's painting of the Brooklyn Bridge as they answer the questions on Worksheet 1 Look and Think. Use students' answers to this worksheet and the teaching activity on page sixty-five in the Picturing America Teachers Resource Book to structure a discussion about this painting, <http://picturingamerica.neh.gov>.

Have students complete the Look and Think Worksheet below

Compare the size of Evans's 6¼ x 4¼ in. photograph (about the size of a woman's hand) to Stella's 84 x 76 in. painting (about the height of a professional basketball player).

- + Ask: How does the scale or size of these artworks affect how they are viewed?

Modern European art styles of Abstraction and Cubism influenced both Joseph Stella and Walker Evans. Both artists simplify and abstract or distort their forms. Tell students that Joseph Stella was inspired to create Futurist art after encountering it when he traveled through Europe studying art. Futurist artists were interested in modern technology, machines, and movement. Show how Stella suggested movement and modern inventions in his painting.

Review the central message of the lesson: What was each artist saying about this bridge and the city?

JOSEPH STELLA'S *BROOKLYN BRIDGE*

LOOK AND THINK

Name: _____ Date: _____

Spend a few minutes looking at Joseph Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge*, completed in 1920.

Answer the following questions about the artwork

Joseph Stella
Brooklyn Bridge, ca. 1919–20
oil on canvas, 84 x 76 in.
Yale University Art Gallery



1. Find the objects listed below in the artwork. Draw a line connecting the word to the part of the artwork it matches.
 - a. Towers of Brooklyn Bridge
 - b. A traffic signal
 - c. Bridge cables
 - d. Tunnels
2. What time of day is it? Why do you think so?
3. Which objects seem close and which ones seem far away?
4. What are some adjectives you would use to describe the city that is depicted in this artwork?
5. What sounds do you think Stella heard as he stood on this busy bridge?
6. What do you think Stella found fascinating about this bridge?

Lesson Activity 2

Voice of the City Analysis

Show students the entire view of Joseph Stella's *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted*, 1920–22.

Divide the class into five groups. Provide each group with images of one of the panels. They are labeled from left to right:

- + Panel 1: *Port*—Joseph Stella, *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: The Port*, 1920–1922. Oil and tempera on canvas, 88 ½ x 54 in.
- + Panel 2: *White Way I*—Joseph Stella, *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: The White Way I*, 1920–22. Oil and tempera on canvas, 88 ½ x 54 in.
- + Panel 3: *Skyscrapers*—Joseph Stella, *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: The Skyscrapers*, 1920–22. Oil and tempera on canvas, 99 ¾ x 54 in.
- + Panel 4: *White Way II*—Joseph Stella, *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: The White Way II*, 1920–22. Oil and tempera on canvas, 88 ½ x 54 in.
- + Panel 5: *Bridge*—Joseph Stella, *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: The Bridge*, 1920–22. Oil and tempera on canvas, 88 1/2 x 54 in.

Students can view these artworks on their computers, projections, or paper copies. Students can answer the questions on Worksheet 2 Joseph Stella, *Voice of the City* individually or cooperatively in groups.

Have students share what they learned about their panel with the whole class.

Return to the entire view of *Voice of the City*. Stella arranged these panels like an altarpiece, suggesting his awe or reverence for this great city.

Why do students think that Stella placed *The Skyscrapers* in the center?

GROUP OBSERVATIONS

VOICE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Name: _____

Date: _____

Circle the name of the panel that you will study. Answer the following questions about your assigned panel from Joseph Stella's *Voice of the City Interpreted*.



The Port

The White Way I

The Skyscrapers

The White Way II

The Bridge

1. What is this painting about? What is going on in this painting?
2. What objects do you see in this painting?
3. What suggests light in this painting?
4. Locate some of the main lines. Describe these with words such as horizontal, vertical, diagonal.
5. Where do the most number of lines come together or point?

Lesson Activity 3

O. Henry's "Voice of the City"

Have students read O. Henry's 1909 search for the essence of New York City in his short story "The Voice of the City." Students may read ["The Voice of the City"](#) online or on paper printouts. An online [audio recording of this story](#) is also available. This story could be read outside of class.

O. Henry is narrating this story set in New York City in 1909. In his search for the voice of New York, he questions Aurelia (probably his girlfriend or wife), bartender Billy Magnus, a policeman, magazine poet Bill, and a newsboy.

Before beginning his quest, he describes the voice of a big city as "the composite vocal message of massed humanity." By the end of his story, he seems to have discovered that it is all those human voices and attitudes melded with the actual urban sounds. Reread the poet's description of these sounds.

To check for understanding, facilitate a class discussion with the following questions:

- + Who is telling this story?
- + What is the setting for this story?
- + What is the author's quest?
- + List two people whom the author questions in this story.
- + What is the voice of the city according to O. Henry? (He's not explicit, so you must surmise what he thinks from clues in the story.)
- + Compare O. Henry's "The Voice of the City" to Joseph Stella's *Voice of the City*. How are they alike? How are they different?

As students compare Stella's and O. Henry's *The Voice of the City*, they will note that although both have the same subject, Stella's painted description is abstract and O. Henry's written description is so focused on small details that it seems abstract. O. Henry emphasized people and their relationships, while Stella is dazzled by movement, rhythms, lights, and technology.

Lesson Activity 3

The Voice of *MY* City

Have students create an artwork that suggests the voice of their city or hometown. This could be a painting or a photo collage. They may use topics listed in the graph below to help them brainstorm. Remind them that they may choose to abstract their subjects as Stella and Evans did in their art.

Students should write a description of their art and their community's voice, explaining how the essence of their community is both different from and similar to New York City in the 1920s. They should consider various inventions, technology, and means of transportation then and now. Students may use [Worksheet 4](#) to help them organize these similarities and differences before they begin their artwork.

Topic	New York City 1900–1930	Your Community
Sounds (listen)		
Buildings (both new and historical)		
Major structures (bridges, monuments, towers, dams, etc.)		
Lights, signs		
Transportation		
Distinctive water and/or land features, such as rivers, lakes, oceans, mountains		
Main colors (Which colors come to mind when you think of this community?)		
What music do you think of when you think of this community or city?		
People (Who would you interview to find the voice of your community? What voices and accents would you hear in New York in 1920?)		
Adjectives to describe a city or community		

Extending the Lesson

- + Students may view today's Times Square and compare it to Joseph Stella's impression of *The White Way I and II*
<http://www.timessquarenyc.org/index.aspx>
- + Have students photograph or draw a distinctive structure on their school campus. Encourage them to experiment with a variety of viewpoints so that, like Walker Evans, they can create an almost abstract image of this structure.
- + Students can learn how New York City became electrified and illuminated by reading a brief history of Con Edison
[<http://www.coned.com/history/electricity.asp>] and watching Tesla—Master of Lighting, www.pbs.org/tesla/

Resources

Selected NEH EDSITEment Websites

- + Building Big
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/buildingbig/wonder/structure/brooklyn.html>
- + Newcomers to New York Museum at Eldridge Street—History of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, <http://www.eldridgestreet.org/history/history>
- + Library of Congress
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/italian5.html>
Immigration, Italian—A classroom presentation

Walker Evans photographs

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fachap04.html>

American Memory, Documenting America

New York City Block, Photographer: Walker Evans, New York, New York, and 1938 Farm Security Administration

New York Subway System Opened for Business

October 27, 1904, America's Story, The Progressive Era

http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/progress/jb_progress_subway_1.html

- + PBS
<http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>
Jazz: A Ken Burns Film
This highly interactive site offers many ways to introduce jazz as a musical genre and cultural tradition.

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/brooklynbridge/>

Ken Burns American Stories, *Brooklyn Bridge*

Tesla—Master of Lighting , A Life and Legacy—Harnessing Niagara
http://www.pbs.org/tesla/II/II_niagara.html

- + Picturing America Teacher Resource Book
Walker Evans, *Brooklyn Bridge* photograph, Chapter 13A
Joseph Stella, *Brooklyn Bridge*, Chapter 14B
<http://picturingamerica.neh.gov>
- + Picturing America on Screen
Brooklyn Bridge
http://www.thirteen.org/picturing-america/brooklyn-bridge/#.Uhq9mBZu_A4
- + Online Books Page
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/books/>
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1444/1444-h/1444-h.htm#1>
"The Voice of the City," O. Henry—Chapter 1

Selected EDSITEment Lesson Plans

Lesson 1: Understanding the Context of Modernist Poetry

Carl Sandburg's "Chicago": Bringing a Great City Alive

Thomas Edison's Inventions in the 1900s and Today: From "New" to You!

Cultural Change

Having Fun: Leisure and Entertainment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

The "Secret Society" and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

An Introduction to the Relationship Between Composition and Content in the Visual Arts, http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=647

What's in a Picture? An Introduction to Subject in the Visual Arts
http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=621

Everything in its right place: An Introduction to Composition in Painting

Lesson 1: Shaping the View: Composition Basics

Lesson 2: Shaping the View: Symmetry and Balance

Lesson 3: Repeat After Me: Repetition in the Visual Arts

Lesson 4: Follow the Leader: Line in the Visual Arts

Standards Alignment

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.7 Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic media, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.9 Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Common Core

Grades 9–12 Visual Arts Standard 4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Students analyze relationships of works of art to one another in terms of history, aesthetics, and culture, justifying conclusions made in the analysis and using such conclusions to inform their own art making.

Grades 9–12 Visual Arts Standard 6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

Students compare characteristics of visual arts within a particular historical period or style with ideas, issues, or themes in the humanities or sciences.

Joseph Stella

*The Voice of the City of New York
Interpreted, 1920–1922*

oil and tempera on canvas, 99¾ x
270 in.

Newark Museum



Walker Evans

Brooklyn Bridge, New York,
1929

Gelatin silver print, 6¼ x 4¼ in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
13-A, Picturing America Gallery

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MUSEUM
always new.



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

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Joseph Stella

Brooklyn Bridge, ca. 1919–20
oil on canvas, 84 x 76 in.
Yale University Art Gallery.
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