

TEACHERS
NOTES
2018–19

TEACHERS NOTES

2018–19



The United States of America in the early 20th century stood on the edge of unimaginable social and technological change. The next 60 years would see world wars, stock market crashes, the age of automobiles, aeroplanes, and men walking on the moon. In 1912 the country, still relatively young at 135 years old, was taking great strides towards this new era while the rest of the world took notice.

Whether fleeing persecution or enticed by the promise of a better life, immigrants in their thousands flocked to cities like New York seeking accommodation and work. George Bellows was part of a generation of artists documenting this change with their painting, breaking from tradition to capture the competing realities of modern urban life - the excitement, the energy, and the hardship.

Social realism and the Ashcan painters

Bellows was one of a number of artists to be trained in New York by Robert Henri. Henri had lived and painted in Paris and encouraged his students to walk the streets and find subjects for their art in ordinary, everyday scenes.

Bellows and his fellow artists did just that, depicting the reality of the city (energetic, harsh, exciting, and threatening) with a rawness that made the scenes appear immediate and honest. The paintings were not highly finished, the paint often applied thickly in quick, lively strokes. These artists were later referred to as the Ashcan painters. They were not afraid to offend contemporary taste, capturing sides of modern life some might have wanted to ignore. In doing so they gave voices to people who were rarely heard, encouraging viewers to emotionally invest in their stories, to empathise, and to acknowledge them.



Painting style and composition

Bellows's style was different to many established American painters of the time. It was rawer, rougher, and less refined, constructed from a variety of brush marks. On the ice and the figures in the foreground the paint has been applied thickly (he was known to use a palette knife to add paint as well as a brush). The buildings in the background have been constructed with thinner paint, helping to create a sense of distance in the smoky, hazy sunlight.



Look closely at the figures of the men and you can see their faces have been made from just a few strokes of thick paint. They are not finely detailed but their body language shows their expressions: hunched shoulders, hands in pockets, an anxious glance over a shoulder.

Bellows has used bright colours sparingly: the rusty red of the ship, the bright blue of funnel, the deep blue of the worker's sweater. Look again at the ice: it is not just white but also a combination of blues and greys, the thickness and size of the brushstrokes creating a sense of perspective as they get smaller as they get further away. There is no barrier in the foreground; we are placed in the painting with the workers. The allure of the city in the distance is kept away from us, separated by a cold, unforgiving expanse of water.



The city

This painting is set in Brooklyn, the most populous borough of New York, looking across the East River to lower Manhattan. On the right in the distance is the Brooklyn Bridge connecting the two boroughs. By the early 19th century the United States had become a major urban and industrial power, and New York was very much its corporate centre.

Like many major cities, the extremely rich rubbed shoulders with the extremely poor. Lower Manhattan in the distance was home to Wall Street, the city's financial centre, and also the slum tenements of the lower east side. While companies competed with each other to build the tallest and most dazzling skyscrapers, the immigrants and working class Americans who helped construct the city lived in crowded buildings, often in poor conditions. The river that had brought many of them into the city also brought the materials for the industries they worked in.



Ships

The main ship in the painting is a huge steam-powered ocean liner. The blue stripe on the funnel lets us know that it was part of the Liverpool-based Lamport & Holt line.

In 1912 ships were the only way to travel overseas. Crossing from Europe to New York would take two weeks. The liner would have had luxury accommodation for the rich while lower class travellers had separate accommodation further below decks, sometimes hundreds sleeping in bunkbeds in a large communal hold.

Immigrants from across the globe would often arrive on liners like this, those from Europe travelling first to Britain and then on to the US. This painting was made in the same year as the sinking of the Titanic. Ships like these were very much in the minds of the public, not only as huge examples of human ingenuity and progress, but also as reminders of the dangers of the open sea.

Ocean liners would also transport cargo besides people, the loading and unloading of which would be a large job. The small tugboat alongside the liner would have been used to push or pull large vessels in tight spaces, or pull barges up and down river. Large ships couldn't navigate busy ports without these little assistants

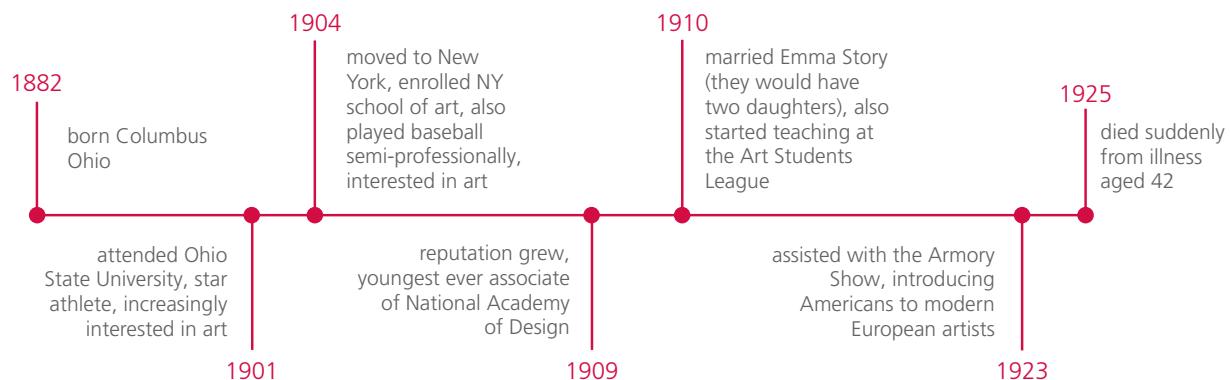
Workers

The men here are waiting to be given work. The man on the left might have been told he will not be needed today. His shoulders are hunched forward against the cold and his head down, giving us a sense of his rejection. Are the others looking at him with sympathy, pity, or relief that it's not them? The horses are fitted with large harnesses, helping us imagine how heavy the loads they pull would be.

These workers were known as longshoremen and they loaded and unloaded cargo. In 1912 they commonly earned around 30 cents an hour, typically taking home between \$10–\$22 a week. Rent for a modest apartment in New York would be around \$10 a week. There was no guarantee of work; they would turn up in the morning and hope that there was something for them to do, and if not they would return home without pay.

All the figures here are men. Women were largely expected to perform domestic duties, although they increasingly worked in stores and factories. Physical roles like dock work or construction were not deemed suitable – is that still the case today? In 1912 women were also unable to vote, but a rise in suffrage movements campaigning for women's rights and equality slowly brought about change.

Timeline



Links

Other artists in the National Gallery's collection offer contrasting depiction of some of the things George Bellows did in *Men of the Docks*:

Ports, docks and waterways

Canaletto's *The Stonemason's Yard*; Turner's *Calais Pier*

Industrial change

Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* and *Rain, Steam, and Speed*; Monet's *The Gare St-Lazare*

Work

Moroni's *The Tailor*; Dou's *Poulterer's Shop*

Winter

Monet's *Snow Scene at Argenteuil* or *Lavacourt under Snow*; Friedrich's *Winter Landscape*

The artist L.S. Lowry also painted scenes from everyday life, showing people at rest and work in and around Salford and Manchester.
thelowry.com/events/l-s-lowry

The Museum of London Docklands
museumoflondon.org.uk/museum-london-docklands

The Merseyside Maritime Museum
liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/

M Shed, Bristol
bristolmuseums.org.uk/m-shed

Discussion points

Journeys

What different journeys do people take, and on which forms of transport? Think about journeys to school, work, going on holiday, or exploring. What would you bring with you on each journey? How might you feel at different stages of it? How much do journeys cost? Which journeys have you, your family, and your class made and why? What is immigration and what are some of the reasons for it happening? Do people make the same kind of journeys today as they did in the past?

Work

Which different jobs do people do? What are the jobs done in your school community? Why do people do jobs? Are jobs the same in different countries? What do you need to do a job? Think about training, skills, and clothing. Which jobs no longer exist today, and what sort of new jobs might you be doing in the future? Do all jobs pay the same amount? Are there such things as a 'men's jobs' and a 'women's job'? Do you have to have a job, and what happens if you don't or can't work?

Change

What is a change, and is it big or small? Which sort of things change, and which stay the same? Which changes have you and your family experienced? How has your school and local area changed in the last 100 years? What changes might you experience as you grow up? Will they be the same for everyone? How might things change in the next 100 years? Are all changes permanent? Think about which are and which aren't, and why.