



City Life in America



George Wesley Bellows (American 1882-1925)

Steaming Streets, 1908

Oil on canvas

SBMA, Gift of Mrs. Sterling Morton for the Preston Morton Collection (1960.50)

Grade Level: Upper Elementary (3-5)

Subject: Art that Tells Stories; American History

Curriculum: Visual Arts, Language Arts, Social Studies

Time Required: One to two class periods

Lesson Plan Overview

- Students learn to **describe** visual and sensory **details**
- Students learn how complementary colors, and lights and darks can be used for expressive effect
- Students learn about life in an America city at the turn of the 20th century.
- Students create a narrative about life in an American city at the turn of the 20th century, that includes a plot, point of view, setting and conflict.
- Students paint a cityscape that shows the illusion of space

Discussion Questions

What do we see? (Overall description of the scene)

In the foreground, at the center of the composition, a man in a black coat and hat pulls at the reins of two horses. Behind the horses is a trolley car. Above the trolley car white

steam rises into the dark sky. At the left a crowd of people, including a little girl, watch the scene. Behind them are some storefronts.

Information for Teachers

Bellows' painting shows the moment when the trolley car has come to the end of its line, and the horses who pull it must be moved from one end of the car to the other so it can reverse direction. What appears like a dramatic near-collision between animal and machine is in fact a regular maneuver, although the slippery streets make it challenging.

Where are we? City or country? City. How do we know? Storefronts, lots of people. Does this look like modern times? Like Santa Barbara?

This scene takes place in New York City's lower eastside in 1908. This was the part of Manhattan where many immigrants lived, in very crowded conditions.

What time of year do you think this is?

Probably winter or early spring. How do we know? People are wearing heavy coats, there is dirty snow on the ground. What about the steam rising from the streets? Steam heat was a new type of heating system; it also tells us that this is winter, and that this is a scene of "modern" urban life.

What **colors** do you see? Mostly blacks, greys and whites.

Can you find the complementary colors? The green dress of the little girl, and the apple she holds. Why do you think the artist put complementary colors in his painting? It draws your eye to the little girl.

What do these colors tell you about life in the city in those days?

In 1908, most people expected a painting to represent a happy subject or tell a cheerful story, and to be well painted (lots of detail), in pretty colors. Paintings like "Steaming Streets" were called "The Ashcan School" of art. Why do you think that was?

Do you think this was meant as a compliment?

How does the artist create a sense of drama and movement?

The strong contrast of blacks and whites, the swirling brushstrokes, the diagonals.

What words would you use to describe the brushstrokes? Smooth, soft, fine? Or broad, thick, heavy? Do they suggest movement and action, or are they still and calm?

What about directional lines? Where are the straight up and down lines (horizontals and verticals) and where are the diagonals? Which are more important? Why?

Sounds and Smells: If you were in this painting, what would the smells and noises be like?

Why do you think all those people are standing there, even though it's so cold?

There was no t.v. or movies in those days. Street life was entertainment.

Writing Activity:

Write a story about this scene from the point of view of:

1. The little girl
2. Her big brother
3. The horse handler

Art Activity: Cityscapes

Create a cityscape that illustrates your original story inspired by *Steaming Streets*. Include details that are important to the main plot and major characters. Optional: Use complementary color combinations to draw attention to people and things.

Tips on creating the illusion of space/basic principles of perspective

- Objects in the foreground are larger than those in the background.
- Details can only be observed in objects that are close.
- Colors are more intense and saturated in the foreground and pale & light in the distance

Content Standards Addressed

Visual Arts Standards

Grade Three

1.0 Artistic Perception

1.5 Identify and describe elements of art in works of art, emphasizing line, color, shape/form, texture, space, and value.

2.0 Creative Expression

2.3 Paint or draw a landscape, seascape, or cityscape that shows the illusion of space.

2.4 Create a work of art based on observation of objects and scenes in daily life, emphasizing value changes.

5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications

5.2 Write a poem or story inspired by their own works of art.

5.3 Look at images in figurative works of art and predict what might happen next, telling what clues in the work support their ideas.

Grade Four

1.0 Artistic Perception

1.1 Perceive and describe contrast and emphasis in works of art and in the environment.

1.3 Identify pairs of complementary colors (e.g. yellow/violet, red/green, orange/blue) and discuss how artists use them to communicate an idea or mood.

1.5 Describe and analyze the elements of art (e.g. color, shape/form, line, texture, space, value, emphasizing form, as they are used in works of art and found in the environment.

2.0 Creative Expression

2.7 Use contrast (light & dark) expressively in an original work of art.

2.8 Use complementary colors in an original composition to show contrast and emphasis.

3.0 Historical and Cultural Context

3.1 Describe how art plays a role in reflecting life

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.1 Identify and describe how a person's own cultural context influences individual responses to works of art.

4.3 Discuss how the subject and selection of media relate to the meaning or purpose of a work of art.

4.5 Describe how the individual experiences of an artist may influence the development of specific works of art.

Grade Five

2.0 Creative Expression

2.6 Use perspective in an original work of art to create a real or imaginary scene.

2.7 Communicate values, opinions, or personal insights through an original work of art.

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.1 Identify how selected principles of design are used in a work of art and how they affect personal responses to and evaluation of the work of art.

Language Arts Standards

Grade Three

2.0 Writing Applications

2.1 Write narratives:

- a. Provide a context with in which an action takes place
- b. Include well-chosen details to develop the plot
- c. Provide insight into why the selected incident is memorable

2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete details to prevent and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.

Grade Four

2.0 Writing Applications

2.1 Write narratives:

- a. Relate ideas, observations, or recollections of an event or experience.
- b. Provide a context to enable the reader to imagine the world of the event of experience.
- c. Use concrete sensory details.
- d. Provide insight into why the selected event or experience is memorable.

Grade Five

2.0 Writing Applications

2.1 Writing Narratives

- a. Establish a plot, point of view, setting, and conflict.
- b. Show, rather than tell, the events of the story.

Background Information for Teachers

George Wesley Bellows was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1904, and raised with what were considered basic American values of conservatism, practicality, and the Methodist church. He was the only child of older parents. His mother dressed him in fussy white knickerbocker suits until he was eight years old, so he had to learn how to fight off jeering classmates. As a result he became a good athlete. In high school he excelled in baseball, and after graduating from college he turned down an offer to play professional baseball for the Cincinnati Reds in order to become a painter. He moved to New York City, where he quickly became associated with the group of painters known as “The Ashcan School” for their dark colors and honest approach to the unpretty reality of urban life.