Jerome Myers’s *Sunday Morning* is a glimpse at a New York immigrant neighborhood in the early 20th century, but also a poetic expression of the artist’s love of his adopted city. These classroom materials complement the Jerome Myers essay by Grant Holcomb in *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (2006). This catalogue is available in the Gallery Store.

**Curriculum Connections: American Art and American Culture and History**

**The Art:**
Jerome Myers wrote at the end of his career, “Others saw ugliness and degradation there, I saw poetry and beauty….” The composition of *Sunday Morning* resembles a stage setting with a horizontal row of houses forming the background for groups of people strolling and conversing in the street. There is a suggestion of other streets with homes and shops as children emerge and disappear along the adjoining street. The vitality of city life is seen in the details. Myers has chosen to include hanging clothes, the green grocery, children’s street play, flourishing plants and decorative facades of the buildings. The bright clothing suggests a time of relaxation or celebration, perhaps christening day for the baby dressed in a long white dress. Closer look at the people and their distinctive attire also suggests an ethnically diverse neighborhood as Myers is painting at the time when the Lower East Side was becoming home to the newly arrived Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Myers’s careful attention to these many details suggests a realistic portrayal of the New York neighborhood, but Myers has not included many other features of urban life: there are no dark corners, no dirt or disarray, no strangers on the street. Even the black doors and iron work shine and the dark clothing only accentuate the brilliant colors of the women’s dresses. Myers’s palette is light, no shadows or darkness. Like the Impressionists, Myers is interested in the play of light on the many surfaces and in the vitality of a lively “Sunday Morning” moment in a beautiful New York City location.
The Artist:

Jerome Myers was known as the “gentle poet of the slums.” Like the New York realists of the Ashcan school, he depicted the people and places of everyday urban life. He is most well known for his scenes of tenement life. Myers was personally familiar with poverty. At 12, he dropped out of school to help support his family by working in a fruit market and as a sign painter; later he designed advertising in a brother's business and as a scene designer. Only after moving to New York in 1886 did he return to school and formal art classes at Cooper Union and the Art Students League.

Myers's view of New York was not the sweatshop and dangerous street world 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 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 at the height of his career when he painted Sunday Morning in 1907. He was among the progressive artists concerned about the state of the exhibition of contemporary art, and whose energies resulted in the 1913 Armory Show, a large exhibition held at the Armory of the National Guard's Sixty-Ninth Regiment in Manhattan. This exhibit was a daring presentation of new and controversial contemporary American and European art. Ironically, the European modern abstract art introduced at this exhibition overshadowed the work of the American realists and led to a decline in their popularity. Despite such setbacks, Jerome Myers continued to paint his beloved Lower East Side neighborhood until his death.

America:

New York City was the destination of generations of immigrants to America; Germans, Scandinavians, English and Irish passed the Statue of Liberty and arrived in New York. Many moved on, others settled in neighborhoods throughout the city. After 1890, the northern Europeans were outnumbered by the many thousands of Italians, Russians and Austro-Hungarians leaving Europe for America. Between 1900 and 1920, 14.5 million persons immigrated to 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. Little Italy flourished in New York's Lower East Side neighborhood.

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 chose to document 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, immigration increased as people fled war-devastated Europe. 800,000 came in 1920-1921, about two-thirds of them from southern and eastern Europe. During the 1920s, Congress tightened the regulations and the Immigration Act of 1929 cut immigration in half; applicants from countries other than northern and western Europe were virtually excluded.

**Learning to Look: Observation and Description**

- Who are these people? What are they doing? Do they all know each other? What are they saying to each other? What is going to happen next?
- What is happening behind the doors and around the block?
- Can you tell where the artist is when he painted *Sunday Morning*? What is your evidence? Are the people paying any attention to him?
- What clues in the painting tell the season or time of day?
- What details does the artist emphasize? How has he made sure you would see them?
- Can you imagine some details he has chosen to not include in the painting?

**Looking to learn: Questions and Interpretation**

- Jerome Myers wrote, “Others saw ugliness and degradation there, I saw poetry and beauty….” How has Myers made a scene of poetry and beauty? How has he used color, composition, subject matter and the other elements of art? Is the role of the artist to paint what is actually there or to make the scene pleasing to the viewer?
- What do you think Myers wants us to think about when we look at *Sunday Morning*? What clues tell you about his point of view? How does knowing the title, *Sunday Morning*, shape the meaning you see in the painting?
- What words describe what you see or what you feel when looking at this work of art? What title would you give the painting and how would that affect or direct the viewer’s focus on the artwork?
- How has Myers created the illusion of a real city neighborhood on the canvas?
- Was *Sunday Morning* meant to be an historical or documentary painting or something more personal? Cite details to support your conclusion.
- What would this New York City street scene look like today?
Ideas for Discussion and Activities

- Compare Myers’s view of life in New York City with that of other early 20th century American artists.

- As America changed during the 20th century, so did the artists’ view of New York City. How do these artists reflect the changing ethnic demographics and technology of America?

Explore how each used line, color, composition and choice of subject matter to tell a story.

(NYS Standards: Art 3; Social Studies)
• Compare and contrast the view of an artist, Jerome Myers, with that of photographers and social activists Jacob Riis and Lewis W. Hine.

How The Other Half Lives by Jacob Riis, 1890

Playground in tenement alley, 1909
Lewis Hine

gelatin silver print, 11.7 x 16.7 cm.
Collection of the George Eastman House
Gift of the Photo League, New York:
ex-collection Lewis Wickes Hine
GEH NEG: 36506 78:1028:0057

A virtual tour of a restoration 1903 New York City tenement apartments can be found at Lower Eastside Tenement Museum. (http://www.tenement.org/Virtual_Tour/index_virtual.html)

(NYS Standards: Art 2; Social Studies)

• Many of the Ashcan School artists began their careers as newspaper illustrators; what is the relationship between their realistic views of New York City and that of the literary muckrakers?
(NYS Standards: Art 2, 4; ELA 1; Social Studies)

• Myers painted the beauty of everyday life. Explore poets who have chosen similar subject matter. Compare and contrast the use of visual and verbal imagery.
(NYS Standards: Art 2; ELA 2)

• Explore the culture of America and the role of art in documenting the early 20th century. An excellent resource is American Visions, vol. 5, A Wave from the Atlantic.
(NYS Standards: Art 4; Social Studies)

Materials Available in the Teacher Resource Center

American Visions
8 videocassettes

Ellis Island

New York Life at the Turn of the Century in Photographs
Jerome Myers (1867 - 1940)
Sunday Morning, 1907

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