

SEEING AMERICA: George Luks's *Boy with Dice*, 1923-24

Boy with Dice conveys George Luks's affection for New York City's working-class children.



George Luks (1867 – 1933)

Boy with Dice, ca. 1923-1924

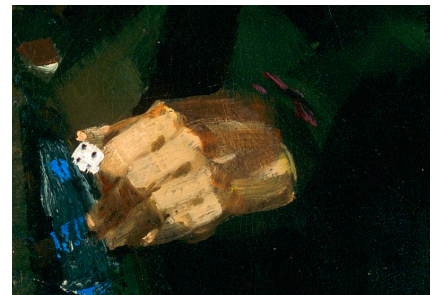
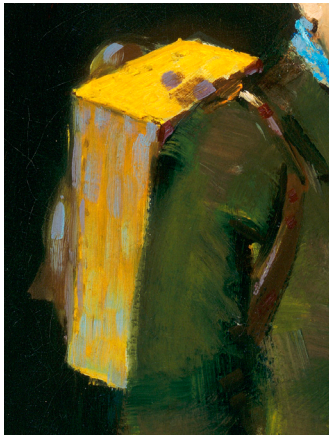
Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas H. Hawks, in honor of
Harris K. Prior, 74.103

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester

The Art

“A child of the slums,” George Luks said, “[made] a better painting than a drawing-room lady gone over by a beauty shop” (*Seeing America*, 231). A studied informality, rather new to portraiture in the twentieth century, is created by the young boy’s cigarette, disheveled jacket, and the shoeshine kit on his back, which carries his rags and brushes. In one hand he holds dice for the interludes that the “boot-blacks” found time for between customers. The nondescript dark background allows our attention to focus on the personality of the boy, which is illuminated in the bright, vivid colors used for his face, hand, scarf, and shoeshine kit. There is warmth, a sense of humor, and dignity in this boy.



George Luks applies the paint in bold, loose brushstrokes. Its deliberate lack of refinement is well suited to the street-life subjects Luks was fond of depicting. Detail is sacrificed to the overall image, although the effect of realism is not lost. Capturing the vitality of his model quickly, perhaps in just one sitting, Luks

employed energetic, forceful, spontaneous techniques. The dramatic contrast of light and dark of the **chiaroscuro** heightens the emotional experience, and permits the psychological investigation. This boy is at once vulnerable, and bold. The painting has, for all its informality, solidity; the shapes are strong and the color is emphatic.

The consistency of Luks's distinctive style can be seen in two earlier works in the Gallery's collection. The use of blocks of color and dramatic contrast is evident in *London Bus Driver* (1889), and in the spontaneity of Luks's drawing, *Coachman* (1900).



George Luks (1867 – 1933)

London Bus Driver, 1889

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.9

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

The Artist



George Luks, born in 1866 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, was the son of an eastern European immigrant who had become a public health doctor and apothecary. Luks's mother was of upper-class Bavarian heritage, and had been schooled in France and Switzerland, so Luks and his five siblings had a far more educated and cultured upbringing than the subjects of many of his paintings. His father's work exposed Luks to the working-class people of the Pennsylvania lumber industry and coal mines. This empathy for the poor laid the foundation for his interest in the lives of those who struggled.

Luks had minimal formal art training, but was inspired by the works of Rembrandt and Frans Hals that he had seen on his visits to European museums. A position with the *Philadelphia Press* in 1894 as a newspaper artist trained Luks in the accurate and quick perception he needed for his future development as a painter of canvases. Portraying the psychological personalities of his subjects would become his hallmark.

In 1895 he was sent as a correspondent to cover the Cuban insurrection against Spain. In 1896 he was hired by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* to recreate R. F. Outcault's popular comic strip *The Yellow Kid*. This work further developed Luks's sensitivity to the harsh lives of the working-class and immigrant populations of the city.

Luks contributed six works to the famous **Armory Show** in 1913, painted patriotic works during World War I, and experimented with landscapes and seascapes. But his strongest interest remained in capturing the human personality.



George Luks (1867 – 1933) (attributed to)

Coachman, ca. 1900

Charcoal on wove paper

Estates of Maurice R. and Maxine B. Forman, 96.46

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

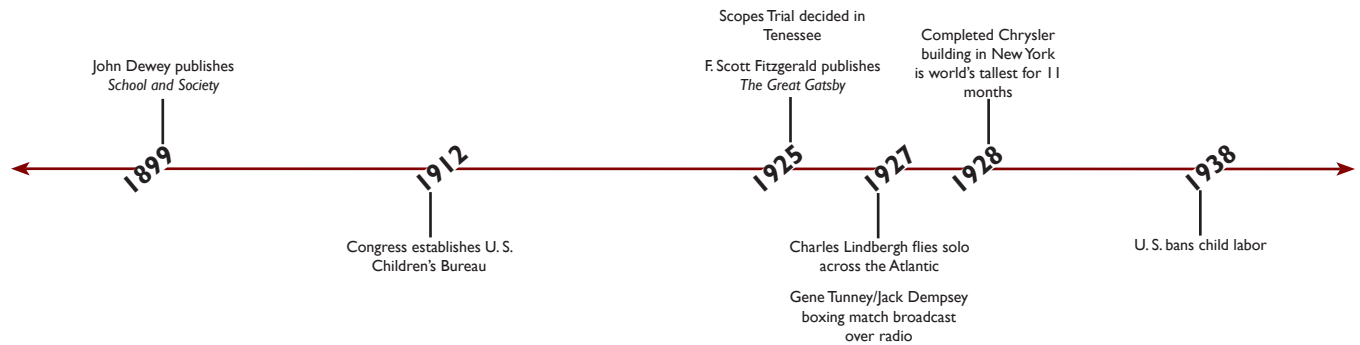
Glossary

chiaroscuro: Art term meaning great contrasts between light and dark.

Armory Show: Held in 1913, the Armory Show was the first major international exhibition of modern art held in the United States.

At the time of Luks's death in 1933, the *New York Times* wrote that "his versatility was astonishing, and he painted as he lived—contemptuous of conventionalities, impatient with snobbishness and full of the joy of life that so many of his paintings reflected."¹

America



Luks's life (1866 – 1933) encompassed a turbulent period in the social and economic history of America. The Industrial Revolution and late nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism created unprecedented wealth, but also a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Social reformers like Jacob Riis investigated and publicized the deplorable working and housing conditions of immigrant populations—the rampant crime, child labor, and squalid, overcrowded tenements—and pressured the standard institutions of American government, religion, and education to correct conspicuous injustices.



Thomas Nast
"The "Brains"
The Boss. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"
Wood engraving published in *Harper's Weekly*, October 21, 1871

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century an increasingly literate population could read the newspapers, and reformers had found a popular way to tell their stories. The competition for newspaper readership between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst led to the sensationalism of **yellow journalism**. By this time protest art had become an effective means for provoking reform. For instance, Thomas Nast's drawings in *Harper's Weekly* famously exposed the political corruption in New York City and contributed to the downfall of Democratic Tammany Hall leader Boss Tweed in 1871.

Muckrakers captured audiences by publishing in magazines their exposés of capitalism's injustices, with details coming out week-by-week. Some reformers grew adept as photographers, recording conditions crying out for improvement. The photographs of Lewis Hine were used by the National Child Labor Committee, formed in 1904, to document evidence of children



Lewis W. Hine
American (1874-1940)
Poor home. New York City tenement 1910
gelatin silver print
Courtesy of George Eastman House,
International Museum of Photography and Film

Glossary

yellow journalism: Term developed and used from 1895-1898 to describe news that was exaggerated or sensationalized in order to attract more readers.

muckrakers: Journalists and writers who sought to expose corruption in society.

working in horrendous settings, leading Congress to establish the Children's Bureau in 1912. Nevertheless, working and housing conditions for poor and immigrant families continued to be atrocious well into the "Roaring Twenties" and beyond.

¹Judith Hansen O'Toole, *George Luks: An Artistic Legacy* (New York: Owen Gallery, 1997).

See also Bruce Weber, "George Luks: Boy with Dice," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 200–202.

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you where and when this is?

George Luks said, "A child of the slum [made] a better painting than a drawing-room lady gone over by a beauty shop." What do you think he meant by that sentence?

How does knowing the title, *Boy with Dice*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

George Luks was among a group of newspaper illustrators who admired artist and teacher Robert Henri. Compare Luks's and Henri's portraits of two young boys. While there are many similarities between them, there are also interesting distinctions. Compare these works of the two artists.



George Luks (1867 – 1933)

Boy with Dice, ca. 1923-1924

Oil on canvas

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Robert Henri (1865 – 1929)

Tom Cafferty, 1924

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Granger A. Hollister, 26.1
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester

Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Compare George Luks's view of life in New York City with that of other early 20th century American artists.



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Chinese Restaurant, 1909

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.12

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Election Night, 1907

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 41.33

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Everett Shinn (1876 – 1953)

Sullivan Street, 1900-1905

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 45.45

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



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Comparing and Contrasting

Compare the work of the Ashcan artist George Luks with that of photographer Lewis Hine.



Lewis W. Hine (1874 – 1940)

Playground in tenement alley, 1909

gelatin silver print

Courtesy of George Eastman House,

International Museum of Photography and Film



Lewis W. Hine (1874 – 1940)

Poor home. New York City tenement, 1910

gelatin silver print

Courtesy of George Eastman House,

International Museum of Photography and Film

Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Shining shoes was perhaps one of the easiest ways for poor boys to enter the business world as entrepreneurs in the early 20th century. Photographer Lewis W. Hine has documented the life of these young boys. What features has the artist George Luks included in his portrait *Boy with Dice*? What is the difference between the purpose of the photographs and the painting?



Lewis W. Hine (1874 – 1940)

Boy shining shoes, ca. 1912

gelatin silver print

Gift of the Photo League, New York: ex-collection Lewis Wickes Hine

Courtesy of George Eastman House,

International Museum of Photography and Film



Lewis W. Hine (1874 – 1940)

Newsies and Bootblacks shooting craps, 1910

gelatin silver print

Gift of the Photo League, New York: ex-collection Lewis Wickes Hine

Courtesy of George Eastman House,

International Museum of Photography and Film

Making Connections

Knowing that many of the artists of New York City befriended and supported each other's work, imagine that George Luks might have chosen to place the boy with his dice in the setting of one of his fellow artist's paintings. Choose one of the city-scapes and imagine the boy in it. Where would you situate the boy? What would he be doing? What other people or details would you add? What would the boy be thinking or saying?

Exploring the Context

George Luks, like fellow artists John Sloan and Everett Shinn, began their careers at newspapers covering and illustrating the daily life of the cities. Compare their views and objectives with the literary muckrakers.

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

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