**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.

**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

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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
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 Luk’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 Luk’s drawing, *Coachman* (1900).

### 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. Luk’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 Luk’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.

**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.
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.

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
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.


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.
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

George Luks (1867 – 1933)
*Boy with Dice*, ca. 1923-1924
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Comparing and Contrasting

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

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?
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 cityscapes 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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*Boy with Dice*, ca. 1923-1924

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