



35: Jerome Myers *Sunday Morning* (1907)

Grant Holcomb

Sunday Morning immediately shows why Jerome Myers has been called the “gentle poet of the slums”¹ for his compassionate portrayals of immigrant life on New York’s Lower East Side. His entire body of work underscores a long-held tenet within the American experience, recalling Emerson’s admonition to American artists to explore “the near, the low, the common” while, at the same time, echoing Whitman’s optimism of spirit and the elevation of the common man.

Born in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1867, Myers grew up in poverty, which perhaps explains his affinity for the unpretentious lives of the urban poor.² When he moved to New York City with his family in 1886, he gravitated to the Lower East Side and immediately recognized that it “would furnish the material for his life’s work” as an artist.³ “My song in my work,” he wrote, “is a simple song of the poor far from any annals of the rich.”⁴

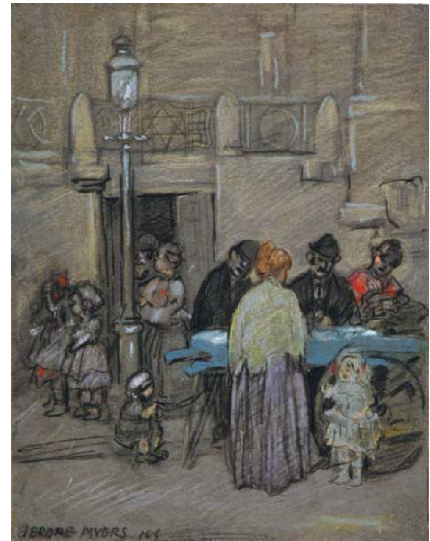
Myers’s artistic vision, however, precluded any sense of the grinding poverty, the squalor, and deprivation often found and documented on the Lower East Side. “I went to the gutter for my subject,” he admitted, “but they were poetic gutters.”⁵ His was not a world of sweatshops and street urchins but rather one where people gathered to gossip and barter in the marketplace, rest in city parks or at the end of East River piers, participate in the many religious festivals or attend the theater and outdoor concerts. Myers cherished, above all, the playful, colorful lives of the children he observed on the Lower East Side. He referred to these young boys and girls as the “little jewels who sprinkled my pictures.”⁶ Always clean and well-dressed, they bear no resemblance to the street urchins that haunt the photographs of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis or paintings by George Luks. “Why catch humanity by the shirt-tail,” Myers wrote, “when I could...see more pleasant things?”⁷

Myers painted *Sunday Morning* in 1907 when he, his wife Ethel, and one-year-old daughter Virginia lived on West Twenty-third Street. In that same year his friend John Sloan painted his boisterous up-to-the-minute *Election Night*. By contrast, Myers’s scene seems almost nostalgic in its peacefulness. In his autobiography, the artist recalls a quieter Manhattan as he describes the scene a couple of dozen blocks south of his studio apartment:

*It is Sunday morning in the Italian quarter of the city....Here are life-loving men strolling with their wives and children, all unhampered by traffic rules...no traffic signs, no safety zones, no automobile peril.*⁸

Little Italy, with its narrow streets and vibrant street life, ran from around Bleecker Street south to Canal Street in Lower Manhattan. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, many American artists captured the drama, vitality, and spirit of this section of the city but, perhaps, none more frequently than Jerome Myers.

Sunday Morning is a compendium of Myers’s major motifs: tenement life on the Lower East Side where adults converse, children play, and the public nature of private lives is revealed in family laundry drying outside tenement



(Facing page)
Jerome Myers,
1867–1940
Sunday Morning, 1907
Oil on canvas, 29 x 36 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
98.74

ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

Jerome Myers,
1867–1940

In Rivington Street, ca. 1921

Pastel on paper, 19½ x 15½ in.

Gift of Gertrude Herdle

Moore, 64.95



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
Jerome Myers,
1867–1940
The Little Family, ca. 1910
Drypoint, 5 $\frac{7}{16}$ × 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
Gift of the Estate of Emily and
James Sibley Watson, 51.97

windows. The stage-like setting is a familiar compositional device that reflects Myers's early training as a scene painter in New York theaters. Typical, also, are the clean, well-dressed children in Myers's compositions. For Myers, childhood was a period of joy and enchantment. Indeed, he wrote that "the happiness of children, their number and their well being amply made up for the parents' privation."⁹ Whether playing in city parks or walking on city sidewalks, they were, in John Sloan's words, always dressed "in pinafores and pantaloons."¹⁰ In this respect, Myers's paintings may have directly inspired the illustrations for Sydney Taylor's popular children's classic *All-of-a-Kind Family*. Published in 1951, the novel depicts an Orthodox Jewish family living, as Taylor herself did, on the Lower East Side during the early years of the twentieth century. Mary Stevens's illustrations of the five daughters certainly call to mind the images of children in paintings like *Sunday Morning*. Clean and alert, the young girls sparkle in

pinafores, pigtailed, and colorful ribbons and, indeed, seem close visual counterparts to Myers's paintings of youthful exuberance and joy.

Myers was at the height of his career when he painted *Sunday Morning* in 1907, and it is a mystery why he wasn't selected to participate in the historic exhibition of The Eight the following year at the Macbeth Gallery. The exhibition of The Eight was organized by Robert Henri, who personally selected the artists. That Myers was a friend of Henri's and that his work reflected, both in style and content, the basic principles of the other city realists in the exhibition makes his exclusion questionable. Indeed, ten months before the show opened, an article in *Harper's Weekly* referred to Myers as one of the strongest members of "The school of Robert Henri."¹¹

Perhaps the fact that Myers had his first one-person exhibition at Macbeth's a month prior to the opening of The Eight is explanation enough. Others, however, interpret his exclusion as a deliberate rejection. William I. Homer, in his seminal study of Henri, felt that the artist found Myers's work too sentimental and, thus, excluded him on aesthetic grounds.¹² John Sloan, a close friend of both Henri and Myers, stated that Jerome "would and should have been a member [of The Eight]." But "he was too much Henri's age to adopt the position of disciple that Henri demanded" from his friends.¹³ Whatever the true reason, Myers himself remained puzzled. As his wife, Ethel, later wrote, "I do know that Jerome never knew why he wasn't included."¹⁴

Myers, however, remained active in the New York art world. In 1910, for example, he participated in the Exhibition of Independent Artists, the first open, nonjuried exhibition ever held in America. The following year he helped organize the Armory Show, arguably the single most important art exhibition ever held in America. In fact, the very first discussions of such an exhibition were held in his studio on West Forty-second Street. Myers later called this extraordinary exhibition "the great American betrayal" as he felt that the introduction of European modern art dramatically shifted the original focus away from American realist painting. Certainly, any progressive aspects of American urban realism paled in comparison to the work of the postimpressionists, cubists, and futurists, and, after visiting the exhibition, Myers realized that "more than ever before we had become provincials."¹⁵

Though a disappointed Myers refrained from further active participation in the New York art world, he never abandoned his commitment to painting the Lower East Side. Friend and fellow-artist Harry Wickey wrote that this particular section of the city "struck a responsive chord in his nature and he recognized at once that here was the city whose subject matter could furnish the material for his life's work."¹⁶ As Myers himself wrote at the end of his career, "Others saw ugliness and degradation there, I saw poetry and beauty."¹⁷ From the time he first moved to New York in 1886 to his death in 1940, Myers never wavered from this compassionate and humane vision as an artist.

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