

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008

November 20, 2015–March 13, 2016

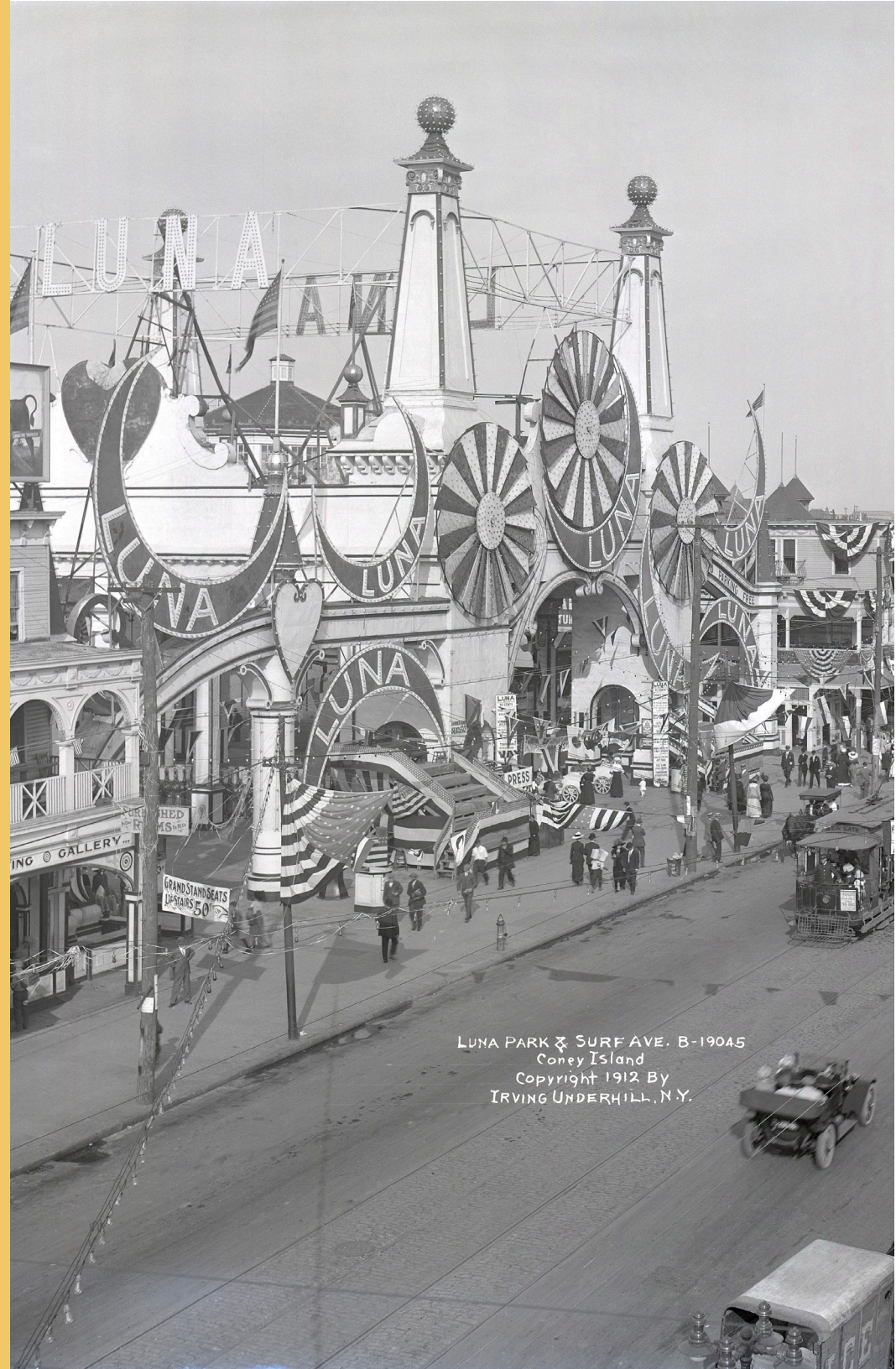


ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

For 150 years, Coney Island has lured artists as a microcosm and icon of American culture. *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008* is the first major exhibition to explore the kaleidoscopic visual record they created, documenting the historic destination's beginnings as a watering hole for the wealthy, its transformation into a popular beach resort and amusement mecca, its decades of urban decline, and its recent revival.

This exhibition charts shifts in artistic styles and national moods through approximately 140 objects. Included are paintings of the Coney Island shore in the 1870s by William Merritt Chase and John Henry Twachtman; modernist depictions of the resort's amusement parks by Joseph Stella; Depression-era scenes of cheap thrills by Reginald Marsh; photographs by Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, Weegee, and Bruce Davidson; Coney Island carousel animals and sideshow ephemera; and contemporary works by Daze and Swoon.

This teaching resource focuses on the artist Joseph Stella and his painting *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*.



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Coney Island
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Joseph Stella (American, 1877–1946)
Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras, 1913–14
Oil on canvas, 77 x 84³/₄ in. (195.6 x 215.3 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut;
Gift of Collection Société Anonyme, 1941.689

ABOUT THE ARTIST

When Joseph Stella (born Italy, 1877–1946) first came to the United States, it was to New York City to study medicine. He quickly gave up that plan and shifted his focus to studying art. Aiming to document the immigrant experience in New York, he concentrated on making drawings, which were published by several magazines. His homesickness for Italy took him back to Europe in 1909, just in time to meet up with some leading artists of the growing modern art movements of the time. These artists were focused on finding new ways of using their materials to show the modern world around them, moving away from traditional ideas of when subjects (history, religion, landscapes, etc.) were considered suitable for a painting.

Stella embraced these new techniques of the modern era and developed the style he is famous for—Futurism, which includes bright colors, fractured segments of images, and swirling compositions that communicate a sense of vitality and speed. When he returned to the United States in 1913, he was embraced by a circle of New York City–based artists like Alfred Stieglitz and Marcel Duchamp, who were exploring modern art techniques in their own work. Stella's paintings from the 1920s brought him the most attention, and while he continued to travel and experiment with his style for several more decades, he never quite fit into the box of any one particular style or artistic movement. When he died of heart disease in 1946, he was buried at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, where you can visit his mausoleum to this day.



DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTWORK

Stella's *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, a large painting (approximately six and a half by eight feet, roughly the same as a king-size bed), is a complex composition of many small brightly-colored slivers, curves, and geometric shapes that overlap and intersect with one another. While the overall painting is abstract, there are recognizable elements scattered around the canvas, including letters that form words or parts of words, and converging lines of the type found in metal building frameworks.

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Joseph Stella himself wrote that he made the painting “to convey in a hectic mood the surging crowd and the revolving machines generating for the first time, not anguish and pain, but violent, dangerous pleasures.”¹ These principles were exactly what Stella wanted his art to explore. Stella is considered a Futurist, which puts him in company with artists who wanted to make art that conveyed the rush, excitement, and mechanization of the modern world. Coney Island in 1913 was one of the ultimate representations of that chaotic, whirling overload to the senses. Its mass of electric lights (then still a new technology) and structures built around visible metal skeletons were considered impressive achievements of modern technical expertise. In this painting, Stella represented Coney Island's Luna Park—nicknamed the Electric Eden for its 250,000 light bulbs—as a symbol of that modern urban world, which was growing in importance as waves of immigrants (mainly from southern and eastern Europe) arrived in New York City around the turn of the twentieth century. Stella himself was one of those immigrants, and his painting gives viewers a hint of the dazzling spectacle that must have met Coney Island visitors, many of whom had been born across the ocean in small rural villages.

Stella's painting certainly doesn't show the viewer an exact replica of the view to be found at Luna Park, but he did include some representations of actual landmarks. The tower rising at the center of the painting is based on towers that rose above Luna Park and lit up at night, some with rotating searchlights to illuminate the scene. The metal frameworks Stella painted are also visible as parts of Ferris wheels and rides in photographs of Coney Island from the same time period. Similarly, the swooping swirls at the right of the painting are much like the Loop-the-Loop ride, one of the first roller coasters. The small black silhouetted shapes along the bottom of the painting are meant to represent the heads of park visitors taking part in the festivities.

Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras is a painting whose very title builds up layers of vibrancy and frenzy. The Mardi Gras celebration at Coney Island was a festive occasion, but not all Stella's contemporaries appreciated how well he captured it. The painting received mixed reviews when it was first shown in 1914, with one critic snidely remarking that “There is probably not a single Coney Island light that did not get into the picture.”² Another, however, applauded how “Mr. Stella has succeeded admirably in transferring this idea [of Coney Island's Mardi Gras confusion] to the canvas. He has created a real riot. It makes your brain reel to look at it. It's a great painting.”³

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

When you first look at this painting, where do your eyes land? Where do they go next? Let your eyes move around the painting as long as they want to, and share your observations about what you notice as you keep looking.

Find parts of this painting that contrast with one another. Why might Joseph Stella have included such contrasts in his artwork?

Stella wanted this painting to convey movement and energy. How did he accomplish that?

In their founding set of beliefs, the Italian Futurists who inspired Joseph Stella wrote, “We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot.”¹⁴ How do you see that statement reflected in this painting?

ACTIVITIES

We Need a Manifesto (English Language Arts/Art-Making)

Joseph Stella’s friends and colleagues, the Futurist artists, were a collective who shared certain values and wanted to represent those values in their art. Form a group and decide on some collective values you all agree on. Create a manifesto document (in digital or paper format) that outlines those values and a visual representation of your manifesto.

Futurize It (Art-Making/Geometry)

Stella’s art from the twentieth century’s second decade used a combination of representing objects the way they actually looked and abstracting them to create a sense of energy and modernity. Find or make an image of a place you know well. This could be a photograph, a painting, or a page clipped from a magazine. Using scissors, glue, and whatever other collaging tools you want, alter your image to make it express the feeling you have when you’re in that place. For example: to convey a sense of excitement like Stella, you might cut your image into geometric shapes and reassemble it to make a more fractured version of the place.

Our Stories Are Ourselves (Social Studies)

Stella’s painting of Coney Island represents it during a time when many European immigrants were coming to New York City. Identify and research a New York immigration story from a place of your choosing. Share that story in writing and/or visual formats.

RESOURCES

Frank, Robin Jaffee, *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, 2015. The comprehensive and informative exhibition catalogue, which includes essays on several different aspects of Coney Island's history.

1913 Armory Show: The Story in Primary Sources

<http://armoryshow.si.edu/>

The Smithsonian Institution's interactive online collection of primary source documents covering the preparation for and reaction to the landmark 1913 Armory Show, which is largely credited with introducing modern art to the United States.

Coney Island History Project

www.coneyislandhistory.org

An organization dedicated to documenting the history and present of Coney Island by collecting personal stories, photographs, events, artifacts, and more.

Coney Island, Luna Park at Night 1905

<https://youtu.be/gHSiOmjBE8k>

An early Thomas Edison film showing panoramic views of Coney Island lit up at night with electric lights.

Futurist Manifesto

www.italianfuturism.org/manifestos/foundingmanifesto/

The founding credo document of the Italian Futurists, which inspired Stella's artistic style.

Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008 is organized by Robin Jaffee Frank, Chief Curator, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut. The Brooklyn presentation is organized by Connie H. Choi, Assistant Curator of American Art, Brooklyn Museum.

Generous support for this exhibition is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities: Celebrating 50 Years of Excellence, the Henry Luce Foundation, and The Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for the Arts, Inc.



The Brooklyn Museum presentation is sponsored by Oscar Insurance Corporation.

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Additional support for the Brooklyn Museum presentation is provided by Clark R. Green, Constance and Henry Christensen III, Ron and Barbara Cordover, Lizanne Fontaine and Bob Buckholz, the Norman and Arline Feinberg Exhibition Fund, the Martha A. and Robert S. Rubin Exhibition Fund, and Friends of the Boardwalk.

Notes

1. Joseph Stella, "Discovery of America: Autobiographical Notes," *Art News*, Nov. 1960, 65.
2. "Guides Are Needed at Cubist Art Show," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1914, 7.
3. "Pictures Puzzle and Colors Riot at Art Museum," *Detroit News*, Feb. 28, 1914, 2.
4. "Manifesto of Futurism," F.T. Marinetti, *Le Figaro*, Feb. 20, 1909. Translation from French: Apollonio, Umbro, ed. *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. Brain, Robert, R.W. Flint, J.C. Higgitt, and Caroline Tisdall, trans. New York: Viking Press, 1973. 19–24.

Illustrations

Pages 1, 3, 4, and 8: Joseph Stella (American, 1877–1946). *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, 1913–14. Oil on canvas, 77 x 84 ³/₄ in. (195.6 x 215.3 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut; Gift of Collection Société Anonyme, 1941.689

Pages 2 and 7: Irving Underhill (American, 1872–1960). *Luna Park and Surf Avenue, Coney Island*, 1912. Gelatin dry glass plate negative. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Museum/ Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Collection, 1996.164.8– B19045

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