

14_b Brooklyn Bridge, c. 1919–1920

To Joseph Stella and other progressive artists of the early twentieth century, the timeworn conventions of European painting seemed powerless to convey the dynamism of modern life. An Italian immigrant, Stella arrived in New York City at a time of unprecedented urban growth and social change in America. He first encountered the new approaches of modernist painting on a trip to Paris and took particular interest in Futurism, an Italian movement that claimed to be “violently revolutionary” in its opposition to the traditions that had prevailed in art ever since the Renaissance. Upon returning to the United States, Stella himself converted to Futurism, convinced that only its new vision of reality could capture the complexities of the machine age.

In the Brooklyn Bridge, Stella found a subject that impressed him, he said, “as the shrine containing all the efforts of the new civilization of America.” *Brooklyn Bridge*, his signature image, addressed the two aesthetic currents of his time — representation and abstraction — to suggest the deeper significance of this modern architectural icon. Stella photographed its various components — the maze of wires and cables, the granite piers and Gothic arches, the pedestrian walkway and subway tunnels, the thrilling prospect of Manhattan skyscrapers — as an abstract pattern of line, form, and color that evokes an idea of the bridge rather than faithfully describing it. Yet, as one critic observed,



14-B Joseph Stella (1877–1946), *Brooklyn Bridge*, c. 1919–1920. Oil on canvas, 84 x 76 in. (213.36 x 193.04 cm.). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn. Gift of Collection Société Anonyme.

Stella’s interpretation seemed “more real, more true than a literal transcription of the bridge could be.” A “literal transcription” would have represented only its appearance, the impression it left upon Stella’s retina. A Futurist rendition could also account for more subjective impressions, the physical and psychological sensations it produced on the artist.

Stella had been inspired to paint the Brooklyn Bridge by his own intense experience of it late one night as he stood alone on the promenade, listening to the noises peculiar to the modern city: “the underground tumult of the trains in perpetual motion,” “the shrill sulphurous voice of the trolley wires,” “the strange moanings of appeal from tug boats.” With its thrusting diagonals and pulsating colors, *Brooklyn Bridge* is a visual translation of that urban atonality and the artist’s sense of claustrophobia. The taut cable lines tying the complex composition together seem to represent the psychological tension of the artist’s conflicting emotional states. Stella felt terrified, “a defenseless prey to the surrounding swarming darkness — crushed by the mountainous black impenetrability of the skyscrapers”; at the same time, he felt spiritually uplifted, “as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the presence of a new divinity.” In this Futurist interpretation, the pointed arches of the bridge are open to the sky like the ruins of a Gothic cathedral, and the allusions to stained-glass windows suggest his spiritual epiphany.

More subtly, *Brooklyn Bridge* recalls a touchstone of Stella’s native culture: the medieval Italian poet Dante’s spiritual journey from hell to heaven in *The Divine Comedy*. “To render more pungent the mystery of my metallic apparition,” Stella explained, “. . . I excavated here and there caves as subterranean passages to infernal recesses.” The rounded arch of a subway tunnel, red with the hellish glare of a signal light, occupies the *inferno* in the center of the painting. Just above it, a foreshortened view of the promenade where Stella stood makes a comparatively short link between the terrors of the underworld and the radiance of the heavens. The forces of movement in the painting converge at the top “in a superb assertion of their powers” to the status of divinity. A third tower (in reality, the bridge has only two) stands at the pinnacle of the pyramid, lit up like a movie marquee by the rushing cables, “the dynamic pillars,” as Stella described them, of the composition. For Stella, the Brooklyn Bridge — with its noises and tremors and terrors and comforts — represented a spiritual passage to redemption, a visual way of showing transcendence in a secular world.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to study this painting closely and see if they recognize any objects.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE **E | M | S**

Have students find these objects.

Towers of the Brooklyn Bridge: *They are at top, center.*

Traffic signal light: *It is at the lower center.*

Bridge cables: *They run from the edges to the center of the composition. Note in particular the two curving pieces connected to the bridge tower.*

E | M | S

What time of day is it?

It is night. The sky is dark; there are deep dark shadows and shining lights.

Are there any cars on the bridge? *Perhaps. Some of the lights look like headlights.*

E | M | S

Turn the painting upside down. Does the picture seem top heavy or bottom heavy?

It appears top heavy.

Why?

The shapes are larger on the top and the forms are thinner on the bottom. The cable lines also are directed to the bottom center and seem to disappear.

Turn the painting right side up again. What are the thin upright forms at the top?

They are tall buildings; a city skyline.

Do some objects seem close and others far away? Why?

The thin white buildings seem farther away because they are placed higher in the painting and are smaller than the traffic light at the bottom. The cables also get smaller and several angle toward each other as though they were parallel lines converging in the distance.

S

How does Stella suggest the complexity of the modern machine era? How has he indicated its dynamic movement?

He jumbles the thick and thin lines, showing bits and pieces of forms as though they are glimpsed only briefly; he blurs the colors and adds diagonal and curving lines that suggest movement.

Have students identify some vertical lines in this painting. How do they affect the dynamics of the composition?

They give some order to the chaos.

INTERPRET **E | M | S**

Encourage students to imagine what Stella heard as he stood on this bridge at night.

The bridge is over a river. He might have heard tugboat horns, sirens, subway trains, and cars and trucks rumbling over the bridge.

M | S

What do you think Stella found fascinating about the bridge?

He was intrigued by its huge scale, the complexity of the cable lines, and its dizzying angles. When you drive over the bridge, things are seen as fragments; headlights flash here and there, and you hear traffic in the water and on the bridge. For Stella the experience was urban, modern, and a bit frightening.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: industrialism; the rise of the city; the immigrant experience; Ellis Island

Historical Figures: John and Washington Roebling

Science: civil engineering

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Walt Whitman (secondary); *The Bridge*, Hart Crane (middle, secondary); *The Brooklyn Bridge (A Page in My Life)*, Joseph Stella (secondary); *The Breadgivers*,

Anzia Yezierska (middle); *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan (secondary); *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather (middle, secondary); "The New Colossus," Emma Lazarus (secondary); *East Goes West*, Younghill Kang (secondary)

Arts: Futurism