

Background information

Walter Evans – Brooklyn Bridge, New York / Joseph Stella – Brooklyn Bridge

WALKER EVANS [1903–1975]

13 a

Brooklyn Bridge, New York, 1929

When the Brooklyn Bridge opened to traffic in 1883, it was the largest suspension bridge in the world, and its towers were the tallest structures in the Western Hemisphere. As the years went by, that triumph of engineering and architecture began to lose its power to inspire awe. By 1929, when Walker Evans began to photograph it, the bridge had become merely the unexciting link between the New York boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan; it was hardly even noticed by the harried commuters who crossed it every day. Evans's gift was to perceive something familiar as if it had never been seen before and therefore to restore the Brooklyn Bridge's original wonder.

Evans became interested in photography as a child, when he collected penny postcards and took pictures of his friends and family with an inexpensive Kodak camera. As a young man, he developed a passion for literature, and he spent 1927 in Paris as an aspiring writer. Upon his return, he began to revisit his childhood hobby, hoping to apply literary concepts such as irony and lyricism to photography. As the technical possibilities of the medium had expanded, photography had grown from its original

documentary and commercial functions (and its function as a popular pastime) into a form of fine art. It was still an art that had not entirely freed itself from the rules of nineteenth-century Western painting. Evans's European experience, however, had converted him to the strict geometries of modernist art. He disliked the preciousness of "art photography," and endeavored to capture the sincerity of a snapshot in his own work.

From the windows of the rooms he rented in Brooklyn Heights, Evans had a fine view of the Brooklyn Bridge. Inspired to take a closer look, he recorded his impressions with the simple camera he habitually carried in his pocket. The resulting series of photographs captures the bold forms of the bridge in stark, arresting, geometric designs. These images helped to establish the Brooklyn Bridge as an emblem of modernity, and to popularize its use as a motif among modern American artists.

Previous photographers had focused on a lateral view of the bridge, taking in the bold shapes and sweeping scallops of the structure as a whole, and keeping the Manhattan skyline visible in the distance. Evans takes an altogether different perspective, shocking the viewer out of complacency. In this photograph, the enormous piers and arches are shown through a web of steel cables. The only immediately identifiable element in the composition is the lamppost on the right, which gives the picture a sense of scale, yet appears strangely separate from its setting. At first, the pattern of radiating lines is disorienting, but once our eyes grow accustomed to the photographer's point of view, we discover we are on the central pedestrian walkway of the Brooklyn Bridge. The composition is slightly asymmetrical, which suggests that Evans had taken his picture standing just off-center of the bridge's walkway. The sharp angle of perspective, emphasized by the quickly receding lines of the cables, suggests that he set the camera low, perhaps even on the ground.

This clever calculation includes no sign that the Brooklyn Bridge serves any practical purpose. Normally vibrant with the commotion of twentieth-century transportation, the thoroughfare here appears quiet and eerily depopulated, an object meant to be appreciated only as a work of art. The unusual vantage point also eliminates the expected views of city and river, so that the bridge appears to float in an empty sky. Because Evans has detached it from its urban context, the Brooklyn Bridge also appears removed from its own time: the heavy forms and medieval-style piers and arches recall the gates of an ancient fortress, while the pattern of steel cables hints at some untried, futuristic technology. In this remarkably compact image (the print is no larger than the vest pocket that held his camera), Evans presents us with two new and substantial concepts that would forever alter our perception of the Brooklyn Bridge: as an icon of modernity and as a monument that already belongs to history.



13-A Walker Evans (1903–1975), *Brooklyn Bridge, New York*, 1929, printed c. 1970. Gelatin silver print, 6¼ x 4½ in. (17.2 x 12.2 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Arnold H. Crane, 1972 (1972.742.3). © The Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

JOSEPH STELLA [1877–1946]

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.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Walter Evans – Brooklyn Bridge, New York / Joseph Stella – Brooklyn Bridge

1. Ask students if they would recognize these images as a bridge if they were not titled. Is this the shape they visualize when they think of a bridge? Why or why not? When most artists create a picture of a bridge, what view do they show of it? Most artists show a side view. From what view do we see these bridges?
2. Have students locate the point to which all the cable lines seem to lead. Is it the same in each picture? Is this point centered in the photograph? In the painting?
3. Ask students if they have ever seen windows that were shaped like the arches on this bridge. Where did they see these? These pointed arches resemble Gothic arches usually found in medieval churches and architecture. The reference to Gothic architecture might have symbolized that the Brooklyn Bridge was an American marvel of engineering, equivalent to the Gothic cathedrals of Europe.
4. Evans wanted his photographs to show the national character of America. How does this photograph satisfy his aim? The Brooklyn Bridge, in America's largest city, was a structure that Americans were proud of. It was a modern feat of engineering and architecture. Evans's photograph shows the beauty of a structure that thousands of Americans used every day.
5. Have students find these objects. Towers of the Brooklyn Bridge: top, center. Traffic signal light: lower center. Bridge cables: They run from the edges to the center of the composition. Note the two curving pieces connected to the bridge tower.
6. What time of day is it? Do some of the lights look like headlights?
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. How are these pieces similar? How are they different? Which piece do you like the most?

SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

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1. Photograph vs Abstract Art

Materials: photographs of iconic structures; paper; chalks, crayons, or paints

Have students study the black and white photographs. Discuss briefly what they are if students aren't sure. Have students create their own interpretation of the structure in the style of Joseph Stella. Encourage them to be as creative as possible, imagining the sounds and smells as well as the sights.