The Advent of Social Realism

The Great Depression of the 1930s categorically altered the lives of the American people. As the stock market fell to unprecedented lows, citizens struggled to live and to provide for their families. Amid this atmosphere of panic, hopelessness, and uncertainty, artists responded by capturing the harsh realities of life in New York City as well as the leisure and entertainment activities that provided some means of escape. This artistic movement came to be known as Social Realism. While there were regional styles of Social Realism, the works almost always question the social structures that created and maintained the marginalization of the lower classes and simultaneously reference the vitality and resiliency of the people.

Social Realism emerged from the complementary work of the proceeding Ashcan School. Those artists sought to realistically capture the gritty conditions of New York City’s crowded tenements, alleys, subways, and slums and such social outsiders as street urchins, alcoholics, and prostitutes. Many Ashcan School artists were former newspaper illustrators who transformed their art into a form of visual journalism that established an American identity during the era’s...
economic crisis. They documented the lives of the working and middle classes in predominantly dark *palettes* featuring *gestural* brushwork. Challenging more *academic* styles, these artists showcased modern urban life and its changing social and cultural norms.

**About the Artist: Reginald Marsh (American, 1898–1954)**

The work of Reginald Marsh provided an escape from the effects of the Great Depression and its associated political actualities. Unlike his fellow Social Realists, who depicted the injustices of American society, Marsh was drawn to tawdry subjects of everyday life in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s—from seedy burlesque theaters, dancehalls, and subways to the charismatic characters that formed the bustling crowds of urban life. His realistic and often satirical approach enlivened the interactions between city dwellers of all ages, social classes, genders, and races, whose divisions had been minimized by the stock-market crash.

Marsh was born to American parents living and studying art in Paris during the late 1800s. His artistic career began at Yale University, where he served as art editor and cartoonist for the campus humor journal the *Yale Record*. In 1920 he moved to New York City to study at the *Art Students League* with such Ashcan School artists as George Luks (1867–1933), Kenneth Hayes Miller (1876–1952), and John Sloan (1871–1951). Under their tutelage and in association with the *Fourteenth Street School*, Marsh honed his technical abilities and developed his penchant for portraying a particular female “type,” usually blond and voluptuous, based on urban salesgirls, shoppers, and dancers. As a freelance illustrator at the *New York Daily News* and the *New Yorker*, Marsh acquainted himself with the underbelly of downtown society, which helped define his preferred subject matter.

In 1925 Marsh returned to Paris, where he observed the energetic, sketch-like brushstrokes of the *Renaissance* and *Baroque* Old Masters. In turn, his paintings took on a newly animated, *rhythmic* quality. With Marsh’s rise to fame in the early 1930s, his distinctive style—marked by the use of garish colors, precise detail, exaggerated forms, grotesquely realistic characters, and overt sexuality—drew the attention of his contemporaries.

Marsh continued to experiment with various *media* and techniques throughout his career. He later turned his attention toward academia, holding several prominent teaching positions. From 1935 until his untimely death in 1954, he taught at the Art Students League and was a professor at the Moore Institute of Art, Science, and Industry in Philadelphia. A talented draftsman, painter, and printmaker, Reginald Marsh and his satirical, realistic approach to chronicling New York City street life holds a vital place in the social and urban realist movements of the early twentieth century.

**About the Painting: Wooden Horses, 1936**

“I've been going out [to Coney Island] every summer, sometimes three or four days a week. . . . I like to go there because of the sea, the open air, and the crowds—crowds of people in all directions, in all positions.”  
—Reginald Marsh
Reginald Marsh frequently painted the wide cast of characters that roamed Coney Island’s avenues of amusement. His first excursion to “America’s Playground” in the early 1920s came at the behest of the editor of *Vanity Fair*, who commissioned the artist to employ his talents in capturing the vibrant atmosphere and unique social encounters found at this entertainment mecca. Scholars suggest that Marsh’s greatest paintings of Coney Island date between 1930 and 1938, during its heyday as the “Nickel Empire.” Throughout this era, for a nickel fare, one could ride the subway to Coney Island’s gates, enjoy the longest boardwalk in the world, and find thrills in its inexpensive rides and attractions.

*Wooden Horses* depicts the Racing Derby merry-go-round in Steeplechase Park. This mechanical ride and many of the others were emblematic of America’s ingenuity and technological innovations. Designed to mimic live horse races, riders sat four abreast along a set of six-foot-long tracks that moved forward and backward, controlled by cables beneath a rotating platform. Whipping around the circular course at speeds reaching nearly twenty-five miles per hour, riders jockeyed to be the first to cross the finish line, a feat that would win them a complimentary ride.

Capturing the dynamic movement and physical liveliness of this spectacle are three lifelike horses featured prominently in the foreground. With heads restlessly tossed at exaggerated angles and mouths gaping wide, they vary their gaits as they gallop toward the finish line. The clothing of the central figures billows in the breeze, indicating the riders’ accelerated pace. Marsh accentuated this rush of circular motion through the use of quick gestural and calligraphic brushstrokes. His strategic layering of primary colors creates a nearly dizzying interplay of hue and line that further emphasizes the speed of the ride.

Want to see the Racing Derby merry-go-round in action? Visit Web Resources for Deeper Exploration for a link to the film *The Crowd*. The ride can be seen from minute 3:13 to 3:21.

**Consider the Medium: Egg Tempera**

Throughout his career, Reginald Marsh worked in a variety of media, from printmaking and oil painting to drawing with pen and ink. In 1929 fellow artist Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) introduced him to egg tempera, which would become his preferred medium until 1940.

Egg tempera is made by combining a powdered pigment with an egg yolk and a small amount of water. This translucent medium requires both technical proficiency and careful planning due to the rapidity with which it dries. Marsh appreciated this quality of egg tempera, which allowed him to apply brushstrokes one on top of the other without delay. He later said that the medium “opened up a new world to me.”

Marsh began the composition of *Wooden Horses* by creating a bold underdrawing in charcoal and pencil, with possible additions in ink. Traces of these sketched lines remain visible beneath the subsequent layers of egg tempera, which were applied in thin, overlapping washes of individual primary colors. Throughout this process, Marsh used the back of his brush to create numerous scored lines and added touches of blue paint to outline the figures. The result is
a painting brimming with dynamic immediacy and luminosity. The transparency of the medium, coupled with the strong lines of the drawing, gives dimension and movement to the composition, enabling the viewer to experience the excitement and energy of this stimulating ride.

Classroom Activities

Quick Curriculum Connections

History and Social Sciences
- The Great Depression and Its Socioeconomic Effects
- Leisure in Early Twentieth-Century America
- Coney Island as an Historic American Landmark
- Immigration

Science and Mathematics: Technological Innovations in Early Twentieth-Century America

Visual Arts
- Artistic Movements: Ashcan School and Social Realism
- Artistic Media and Techniques: Egg Tempera
- Elements of Art: **Color** and **Line**
- Principles of Design: **Movement**, **Pattern**, **Repetition**, and Rhythm

Questions for Guided Looking

*Investigate this work of art through a classroom dialogue. Begin by asking students questions that elicit objective and descriptive observations. Move toward more subjective and abstract questions that develop students’ critical thinking skills as they seek to interpret the painting. Be sure that students cite visual evidence for their responses. Always encourage them to explore the painting visually before you reveal any information about it.*

Adapt the following questions to your students’ level of comprehension.

**CONVERSATION STARTERS**

Where are these figures? What clues has the artist provided to indicate their location?

Have you ever been to an amusement park or ridden on a carousel? What emotions did you feel during that experience? Describe the feelings of the figures in the painting based on their facial expressions and body language. How do their feelings compare to yours?

Does this ride look like one you have seen or gone on? If so, how are they similar? How are they different?

Describe the colors the artist used. What **mood** do they convey? Where do these colors draw your attention?

How do you know the ride is moving? How fast are the riders going?

Who is winning the race? What will happen when they cross the finish line?

Where are you in relation to the scene? Are you a spectator or a participant? How has the artist brought the viewer into the painting? How does that affect your viewing experience?
DIGGING DEEPER
What message(s) does the artist convey by choosing to paint the scene in this particular style? What might he be saying about leisure and the qualities or circumstances of human interactions?

In Wooden Horses, Marsh depicts himself as the central male figure, his arms wrapped around a woman thought to be his second wife, Felicia. Why do you think the artist included himself and his wife in this work? What might this inclusion suggest about Marsh and his connection to Coney Island?

Marsh carried pocket-sized sketchbooks wherever he went to document his immediate surroundings. His tendency to draw incessantly was noted by friends and colleagues. How do you think this practice affected the art he produced?

During Marsh’s artistic career, the populations of cities like New York grew exponentially. As individuals left the comfort of small-town American life, they experienced the anxiety of fast-paced urban living, where everyone was a stranger. How does Wooden Horses reflect the excitement and the anxiety of this cultural shift? What does it communicate about modern life?

The design of the Racing Derby merry-go-round was propelled by innovative technology. Many saw such mechanical feats as representative of America’s ingenuity. What does the exclusion of the ride’s operating mechanism reveal about Marsh’s interest in portraying this scene?

Writing Activities
Many of the skills acquired through the process of closely looking at works of art are those needed by thoughtful writers. In fact, observation forms the foundation of good writing. Before beginning these activities, be sure to take time to look at the painting with students. Then use the exercises below to explore how art can serve as a catalyst for the development of students’ writing skills in the areas of description, persuasion, and creative expression.

GETTING INTO CHARACTER
Reginald Marsh often inserted his likeness into his paintings, placing himself amid the urban scenes he created. In the case of Wooden Horses, he is featured as the central figure and is accompanied by a woman thought to be his second wife, Felicia, who is seated in front of him. In so doing, Marsh is no longer simply an artist capturing the world and people that surround him but is an active participant in the painting’s narrative, at once transcending the boundary between art and life, fiction and reality.
Ask students to take on the role of the artist by pretending they are the man or woman riding on the Racing Derby merry-go-round. Use the following questions to guide them as they imagine the sights, sounds, and smells of this carnival-like atmosphere.

Where are you seated on the ride?
Who are you competing against?
How fast are you going? How quickly are your competitors moving?
How much farther until the finish line? Who is winning the race?
What does the ride feel like? How does your body move as you race? What emotions are you experiencing?
What sounds do you hear? What smells fill the air?
What passes by you as you spin around the track?
How will you react if you win the race? If you lose?

After considering these questions, students will use their answers to compose a descriptive essay. Students’ writings should seek to illustrate the scene with precise detail. This prompt can also be adapted to other forms of writing, including a script for a play, an advertisement, or a free verse poem.

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS
Between 1895 and 1929 Coney Island grew into an extravagant complex of four amusement parks along a five-mile strip in Brooklyn, New York. Considered to be the “City of Tomorrow,” it became a laboratory for innovation and testing social, commercial, and technological ideas. Fanciful architecture resonated with the contemporary interest in New York skyscrapers; mechanical rides reflected and fueled experimental technology; and nocturnal illumination captured popular imagination. Through sheer grit and inventiveness, Coney Island emerged as the new man-made symbol of America.

Ask students to contribute to this legacy by writing a proposal for a new ride to be installed at Coney Island, using the Racing Derby merry-go-round as inspiration. Proposals should be written as though students are presenting their ride to a board of investors that will fund the creation of their attraction. Students must consider their target audience (children, teenagers, adults, families) before determining what type of ride they will construct. Their persuasive prose should include a title and full description of the ride, specifics on how the ride will appeal to their target audience, and reasons why this ride would be beneficial for Coney Island and the surrounding community.

After students have completed their assignment, choose a few volunteers to present their proposals to the class. Several students may be selected to act as the board of investors. This board will determine if the presented proposals are convincing enough to be approved for funding.

Extension Activity
Students will create a visual of their ride to strengthen their written proposals. It may take the form of a sketch or three-dimensional model. Students should consider the ideal setting for their ride at Coney Island and add this element to their visual presentations.
The Artist’s Hand: The Urban Diarist
You have just explored this painting with your eyes. Take a moment to respond with your hands.

Throughout his career, Reginald Marsh recorded his most immediate surroundings in custom-made sketchbooks he carried in his pocket. Drawing inspiration from modern urban life, he drew the people, places, and activities he encountered in New York, including riding the subway, walking the streets, and watching the bustling crowds that filled Coney Island. Scholars suggest that these drawings form the foundation of his art and reveal his strength as an insightful documentarian of the human condition.

Before beginning this activity, share the following quote with students while summarizing the points made in the previous paragraph:

“Stare at Michelangelo casts. Go out into the street. Stare at the people. Go into the subway. Stare at the people. Stare, stare, keep on staring. Go into your studio; stare at your pictures, yourself, everything.”

—Reginald Marsh

Take students outdoors to sketch their surroundings. Their drawings should reflect the specific location of their school—rural, suburban, or urban. Alternatively, sketching may take place in school hallways. Encourage students to pay close attention to the movements and sounds of their environment. Once the sketches are completed, they will select one to develop into a finished painting. Employing watercolors, they will overlay their observational drawings with thin washes of primary colors to mirror Marsh’s working methods. Students should consider how rhythm, movement, and energy are conveyed through their use of color and line.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY
Provide students with supplies to create their own portable sketchbooks like those the artist was known to produce.

ALTERNATE ACTIVITY
In the early 1930s Marsh took up photography as another means of note taking. Rather than creating drawings of their surroundings, students will use cameras to produce a similar effect.

Off-site Experience: Bushnell Park Carousel
When visiting the Wadsworth Atheneum, enjoy a six-minute walk to the Bushnell Park Carousel, featuring forty-eight hand-carved wooden horses and two chariots. After a ride, discuss your experience with students. How did the ride make them feel? Ask them about the sensation of the carousel and its spinning motion. Encourage students to describe the sights and sounds they witnessed on the ride, including what people, objects, and behaviors they observed. Compare their experience to what Reginald Marsh depicted in Wooden Horses. How are they similar? Different? Consider pairing this activity with the Getting into Character writing prompt described above.

For more information about Bushnell Park Carousel, visit http://www.bushnellpark.org/attractions/carousel-rides.
CAROUSEL ART AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Like the carousel animals depicted in *Wooden Horses*, those on the Bushnell Park Carousel exemplify the craftsmanship of Eastern European immigrants in the early twentieth century. The Bushnell Park Carousel was created in 1914 and is one of only three remaining by Russian immigrants Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein, who operated out of Brooklyn, New York.

During Coney Island’s heyday as an entertainment mecca for the masses, most wood carvers in America were of Jewish descent. Escaping persecution in their homeland, they brought with them a tradition of carving symbolic animal imagery for synagogues. Their talents soon found new expression in the carousel industry, where their art bridged the transition between the Old and the New Worlds. Marsh considered such carousel animals the best sculpture of his day.

**Just Jargon**

**Abstract Art:** An artistic style that departs from **realistic** representation. Abstract art often expresses feelings and ideas through colors, lines, shapes, and textures rather than showing people, places, and things as they appear in real life.

**Academic:** Having to do with the established, traditional ways of artistic academies. Academic art was influenced by specific conventions and aesthetic doctrines for the manufacture of artworks.

**Art Students League:** An art school founded by and for artists in New York City, many of whom were women. It opened in 1875 in response to student dissatisfaction with the conservative practices of the National Academy of Design, which was the principal school of art instruction at the end of the nineteenth century. The league’s innovative teaching protocols continue to provide increased variety and flexibility in art education through a collection of autonomous studios operated by individual instructors without administrative oversight. Many famous artists have been instructors, lecturers, and students at the league, including Reginald Marsh.

**Ashcan School:** A group of early twentieth-century artists known for their realistic depictions of everyday life in urban settings, particularly the impoverished neighborhoods of New York City. Although never an organized movement, artists of this school were unified in their desire to tell truths about the city and modern life that were ignored by art-historical traditions and stylistic trends. Artists of this school include William Glackens (1870–1938), Robert Henri (1865–1929), George Luks (1867–1933), Everett Shinn (1876–1953), and John Sloan (1871–1951).

**Baroque:** An artistic style prominent in Europe during the seventeenth century that promoted the use of dramatic subject matter, striking movement, and intense lighting to arouse emotions. Marsh’s frequent use of animated figural masses in his dense compositions reflected this stylistic influence. In *Wooden Horses*, the artist references the Baroque tradition through the placement of its central figures at the very edge of the foreground, creating a heightened sense of the impending approach of the riders into the viewer’s space.

**Commission:** To hire an artist to create a certain work of art or body of artworks (see **Patron**).

**Composition:** The arrangement or placement of objects in a work of art or the work of art itself.

**Egg Tempera:** An artistic medium dating back to the **Renaissance**. Tempera enjoyed a revival in America in the early twentieth century, mostly due to its resurgence in England and the translation of Cennino Cennini’s *Il libro dell’arte* (*The Craftsman’s Handbook*) into English, which provided crucial knowledge of the process of egg tempera creation and application.
The word *tempera*, derived from the Latin *temperare*, means blending or mixing.

**Elements of Art:** The basic building blocks for creating a work of art and expressing ideas and feelings through visual symbols such as color, line, shape, and texture; the language of artists.

**COLOR:** The name of a color is a **hue**. Color communicates various messages to the viewer, including mood, emotion, and symbolic meaning. It assists in arranging a composition, identifying key elements of an image, and creating movement and depth, among other roles.

- **Primary:** Colors that are mixed to create all other hues: red, yellow, and blue.
- **Secondary:** Colors that are created by equally mixing two primary colors: orange, green, and purple. Together with the primary colors, secondary colors complete the color wheel.
- **Complementary:** Colors that are opposites on the color wheel: red and green, orange and blue, yellow and purple. When complementary colors are placed side by side, they accentuate one another.

- **Warm:** Colors that remind you of warmth: red, orange, and yellow. These colors appear to jump out of the picture plane. Warm colors can communicate a sense of energy and excitement as well as a feeling of happiness.
- **Cool:** Colors that remind you of coolness: green, blue, and purple. These colors tend to recede into space, creating depth. Cool colors can communicate a range of feelings from sadness and pessimism to peace and calm.

**Monochromatic:** Having only one color.

**LINE:** The path of a dot as it moves through space. The outer edge of a shape is a line. Lines can be straight, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curvy, or jagged.

**SHAPE:** A two-dimensional (flat) area that is made by beginning and ending a line at the same point. Common **geometric** shapes include circles, triangles, rectangles, squares, and trapezoids. **Organic** shapes are irregular and mimic what is found in nature rather than being mathematically based like geometric shapes.

**TEXTURE:** How a surface feels (**tactile**) or looks like it would feel (**implied**). Common textures include smooth, rough, wet, dry, hard, soft, jagged, and slippery.

**Foreground:** The part of a painting that appears closest to the viewer. Objects appear larger in the foreground than in the rest of the composition.

**Fourteenth Street School:** A group of New York artists in the 1920s and 1930s whose work realistically documented everyday urban life, reflecting the artistic sensibilities of the **Ashcan School**. These artists selected their subjects from the lively spectacle of New York City and imbued their canvases with messages of celebration, satire, and social concern. Famous members of this group include Isabel Bishop (1902–1988), Reginald Marsh (1898–1954), Kenneth Hayes Miller (1876–1952), and Raphael Soyer (1899–1987).

**Gestural:** Having to do with the lines or shapes that show evidence of the movement of a painter's hand or brush.

**Medium (pl. media):** The material used by an artist to create a work. Common media include pen and ink, paint, stone, wood, and glass. Marsh employed a variety of media throughout his career, including oil paint, pen and ink, and **egg tempera**.

**Mood:** The overall feeling or emotion in a work of art. Artists create mood through the use of specific colors, lines, shapes, textures, and brushstrokes, among other devices.
Movement: The visual sense of motion created by the arrangement of the elements of art in a composition. The implied spinning movement in Wooden Horses is achieved through the artist’s use of rhythmic and repetitive lines, gestural brushwork, energetic curving contours, and layered application of vibrant hues.

Palette: The selection of colors that comprises a visual style or composition.

Patron: An individual or institution that commissions a work of art or body of artworks from a specific artist.

Pattern: A design feature that is repeated several times.

Realistic Art: A style of art using recognizable imagery to show things as they appear in real life. Realistic art is also known as representational and is the opposite of abstract art.

Renaissance Art: Art produced from roughly the fourteenth through the seventeenth century, beginning in Italy and spreading outward to other parts of Europe. Renaissance artists emphasized an increased awareness of nature, a revival of classical learning as found in ancient Greece and Rome, and a more individualistic view of man. Marsh’s mastery of illusionistic depth and perspective reflects the influence of this stylistic period.

The term renaissance means rebirth or revival.

Repetition: A technique for creating rhythm and unity in which a motif or a single element appears again and again.

Rhythm: Visual movement that is created by repeating elements in an artwork.

Underdrawing: A preliminary outlining of a composition made on a drawing surface. Underdrawings provide a guide for the artist prior to the application of additional media and can remain visible upon completion of the artwork, as is seen in Wooden Horses.
**Book Resources for Deeper Exploration**


**Web Resources for Deeper Exploration**

Ashcan School
http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/the-ashcan-school.html
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ashc/hd_ashc.htm

Bushnell Park Carousel
http://www.bushnellpark.org/attractions/carousel-rides

Coney Island
http://www.coneyisland.com/
http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/

Egg Tempera
http://www.webexhibits.org/pigments/intro/tempera.html
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUmzLewk5dk

Racing Derby Merry-Go-Round
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeZ3OsjRtLI (minute 3:13–3:21)

Reginald Marsh
http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/reginald-marsh-papers-9072/more

Social Realism
References


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