



The Modern Cityscape



George Wesley Bellows (United States, 1882-1925)

Steaming Streets, 1908

Oil on canvas

SBMA, Gift of Mrs. Sterling Morton for the Preston Morton Collection

The setting of this painting is lower Manhattan in the early 1900s. The immediacy of Bellows' energetic, bold brushstrokes matches the action unfolding on the canvas. His choice of subject matter, painting style and palette reflect the "gritty" city. In fact he was part of a group called the Ash can school for just those reasons.

- How do you read this urban drama? What is happening here? What glimpse does it give us of changes underway in transportation, and urban life?
- Choose one of the characters in the painting and write a brief dramatic monologue in the voice of that character- it can be based on the action in the painting or you can make up other elements in the character's life extending beyond what you see on the canvas.

City Life: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

The City and the industry surrounding it that emerged in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, was represented in art and literature as both problem and solution. Cities such as New York depicted in Bellows' *Steaming Streets* were at the heart of a new America emerging from the farmlands into urban streets and factories. It is here that the immigrant story begins of the so-called "great melting pot" of America. This myth of a harmonious diverse population wasn't always upheld in reality. Prejudice and inequality existed then as now. Jacob Riis a photographer, writer who had come to the United States from Denmark wrote in the New York Tribune in 1877, "*When brotherhood is denied on Mulberry Street we shall look vainly for the virtue of good citizenship in America.*" Although he saw himself as a social reformer and is best known for his book exposing

urban blight, *How the Other Half Lives*, even Riis betrays the prejudices of the times when he writes, “one may find for the asking an Italian, a German, a French, African, Spanish, Bohemian, Russian, Scandinavian, Jewish colony...The one thing you shall vainly ask for in the chief city of America is a distinctly American community. There is none. The native born are not here.”

On the other hand, poets like Walt Whitman, so saddened by the Civil War, saw the machine and the engineer of the city as heroic. His 1876 poem “Song of the Exposition” set forth a vision of a new America based on technology and skilled transformations. “Materials here under your eye shall change their shape as if by magic... The photograph, model, watch, pin, nail, shall be created before you.”

- Which of these visions do you think best describes Bellows’ view of the city? Explain.

The Loss of the Wild

The issue of Native American’s and the loss of wilderness is another area of discussion attached to the rise of the city and modern urban life. In the poem below, Sherman Alexie, a Native American writer and film maker describes his sense of loss in 20th century Seattle.

Seattle, 1987 **Sherman Alexie**

This late in the 20th century
I cannot look at a lake
Without wondering what’s beneath it:
Drowned horses snapping turtles cities of protected bones
Yesterday, the sun rose
So quickly on cable television I thought it a new day beginning
But it was just another camera trick

How the heart changes
When this city fills with strange animals
The reservation never predicted
Animals formed by the absence of song

Downtown today, a street magician
So clumsy I fell in love
And threw a dollar bill into his top hat.
There are so many illusions I need to believe.

- What is Alexie saying about what has been lost? What has taken its place? What do you think he means when he says, “there are so many illusions I need to believe?” What do you think those necessary illusions are?