



Jerome Myers
American, 1867 - 1940

Life on the East Side

1931

oil on canvas

overall: 76.2 × 101.6 cm (30 × 40 in.)

framed: 92.39 × 118.75 × 8.26 cm (36 3/8 × 46 3/4 × 3 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Jerome Myers / N. Y. 1931

Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund) 2015.19.55

ENTRY

Jerome Myers is well known to enthusiasts of early 20th-century American painting for his sympathetic depictions of Manhattan's Lower East Side immigrant neighborhoods. During a career that spanned almost 50 years, he recorded the daily activities and special rituals of those who, having recently arrived in the United States, congregated in communities that fostered the culture, religion, and traditions of their homelands. Myers was particularly drawn to the animation, energy, and color of ethnic neighborhoods' kaleidoscopic marketplaces. *Life on the East Side* depicts an open-air market in the Jewish quarter of the Lower East Side. Vendors' mobile carts and freestanding stalls display comestibles to an assembly of predominantly female customers. The impression is of a pleasant scene of neighborhood life captured spontaneously by a serendipitous observer. Myers's brushwork is loose, which gives the feeling of perfunctory or speedy application, and the perspective is slightly off in a casual, unstudied way. He painted similar scenes in Paris but observed that when immigrants "merge here with New York, something happens that gives vibrancy I didn't get in any other place." [1]

Between 1881 and 1910, more than 1.5 million Jews immigrated to the United States, many settling in the Lower East Side. Here, they formed the world’s largest Jewish community, which stretched from the Bowery to the East River between Division and Houston Streets. [2] Writing in 1915, Lillian Wald, nurse, social worker, and author, remembered how two decades earlier the East Side aroused a “vague and alarming picture of something strange and alien: a vast crowded area, a foreign city within our own for whose condition we had no concern.” [3] Gradually, artists, social workers, and authors explored and publicized the East Side’s densely packed foreign communities, and this formerly ignored region of the city became a subject of fascination, debate, and anxiety.

Some argued that it posed a threat to Americans’ physical well-being and the nation’s social health; the *WPA Guide to New York City*, for instance, characterized the “crowded, noisy, squalid” neighborhood as a “slum” and a “ghetto.” [4] Prevalent early 20th-century visual and literary descriptions of the Lower East Side reinforced this impression. They tended to focus on overpopulated and ramshackle tenement buildings; crisscrossing laundry lines; narrow streets and alleyways; and dense crowds of the malnourished, dirty, and even criminal inhabitants (see, for instance, *George Bellows’s Forty-two Kids* or *Cliff Dwellers* [fig. 1]). But Myers offered a more romantic view. As he noted in his autobiography: “My love was my witness in recording these earnest, simple lives, these visions of the slums clothed in dignity, never to me mere slums but the habitations of a people who were rich in spirit and effort.” [5]

Open-air markets such as the one in *Life on the East Side* were regarded as both picturesque and alarming. Myers saw encapsulated in their barter, gossip, and humor the “symphonic freedom” of New York’s East Side, a favorable view reflected in the painting. [6] Unlike *George Luks’s Street Scene (Hester Street)* [fig. 2], for example, which also depicts a teeming open-air market in the Jewish quarter, *Life on the East Side* allows the viewer to easily access the market: the urban square is spacious, the pavement opens invitingly from the center of the canvas’s lower edge, and an expanse of pale sky is visible overhead. Luks’s congested bottleneck of an avenue, by contrast, is overwhelming, claustrophobic, and virtually impenetrable; it is more a mob scene than a place to go shopping.

Many declared such open-air markets a “menace to sanitation,” and they were earmarked for eradication in the 1930s. Their relocation to more hygienic indoor venues was part of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia’s aggressive campaign to sanitize,

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revitalize, and modernize the Lower East Side. [7] Myers acknowledged that “daily existence” for East Side immigrants “mingles the old and the new,” [8] but *Life on the East Side*, with its quaint pushcarts, old-fashioned costumes, and idyllic mood, indicates a resistance to, if not an outright rejection of, modernization in favor of tradition. Indeed, Myers’s market reads as a village-like enclave surrounded on all sides by an ominous and intrusively modern New York City. In the background looms Manhattan’s skyline, an emblem of Machine Age technological progress. In fact, the year Myers painted *Life on the East Side* witnessed the completion of the Empire State Building, which surpassed the Chrysler Building as the world’s tallest skyscraper. [9]

The idea that Myers’s market might be read as a besieged refuge or beleaguered sanctuary is underscored by the expression on the face of the old man standing just to the right of center. His bright white hair and beard form an arresting halo against the drab palette of the architectural background above his stooped, black-clad shoulders. His gaze is direct and hovers somewhere between keen suspicion and outright confrontation. Striking a distinctly disquieting note in the ostensibly harmonious scene, his full-frontal posture acts as a barrier blocking easy passage into the scene; we viewers are apparently not as welcome in the protective confines of the market as we might initially have thought.

Life on the East Side subtly testifies to the threat of disruption to which these tight-knit communities—financially poor, perhaps, but culturally and spiritually rich, in Myers’s assessment—were subjected during the 1930s. Myers appears to have been conflicted about the systematic eradication of colorful scenes of urban immigrant life like the open-air marketplaces when he wrote in his 1940 autobiography, “It is not for me to say that conditions are not better in the beautified and sanitary New York of today.” His conclusion, “To me the human drama seems to have been diluted, to have become thin and respectable,” voices a nostalgic lament visualized in subtly melancholic paintings like *Life on the East Side*. [10]

Adam Greenhalgh

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 George Bellows, *Cliff Dwellers*, 1913, oil on canvas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Fund



fig. 2 George Luks, *Street Scene (Hester Street)*, 1905, oil on canvas, Brooklyn Museum, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 40.339

NOTES

- [1] Morris Gilbert, "Portrait of an Artist," *New York World Telegram*, Feb. 22, 1940, quoted in Grant Holcomb, "The Forgotten Legacy of Jerome Myers, (1867–1940): Painter of New York's Lower East Side," *American Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (May 1977): 90.
- [2] *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (1939; New York, 1982), 109.
- [3] Lillian Wald, "The House on Henry Street: A Chronicle of Hope," *Atlantic Monthly* (Mar. 1915): 289.
- [4] *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (1939; New York, 1982), 108.
- [5] Jerome Myers, *Artist in Manhattan* (New York, 1940), 48.
- [6] Jerome Myers, *Artist in Manhattan* (New York, 1940), 166.
- [7] "La Guardia Renews War on Pushcarts," *New York Times*, May 22, 1938, 39. See also "Changes Are Noted in Lower East Side; Indoor Markets

Eliminating Pushcarts,” *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1939, 40.

[8] Jerome Myers, *Artist in Manhattan* (New York, 1940), 220.

[9] Describing a drawing of midtown Manhattan, Myers (*Artist in Manhattan* [New York, 1940], 194) notes that “scornfully the skyscraper looks down on” First Avenue.

[10] Jerome Myers, *Artist in Manhattan* (New York, 1940), 57.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas that has many thread irregularities and is mounted on a replacement stretcher. It has been lined with a glue/paste adhesive to an auxiliary support. A smooth, off-white/gray ground was applied to the canvas as a preparation for painting. We know it was commercially applied since the ground extends onto the tacking margins, which are still intact even though the painting is lined. The intact tacking margins indicate that the painting is still very near its original dimensions. The moderately rich oil paint is generally applied in an opaque manner in applications ranging from low-impastoed relief to full-bodied daubs of paint in short strokes. In general Myers first blocked his forms in thin, translucent paint before building up these layers of thicker paint. Dark brushstrokes were then used linearly to describe the details of the figures' dress, facial features, and the architectural elements of the figures in the background. There is no evidence of underdrawing in normal light examination. There are many changes evident throughout the composition where brushstrokes visible on the surface do not correspond to compositional elements in the painting. These are found most prominently along the entire left edge and left corner, in the produce at the lower right, around the lamppost at the upper right, and all through the sky. The sky seems to have initially been painted a dark blue, over which a lighter sky was painted with off-white and ocher-colored clouds.

Examination under ultraviolet light indicates that Myers brought the painting to a high level of finish and then applied a natural varnish layer. He continued to work on top of this varnish, adding details and reinforcing outlines, which are visible as dark lines on top of a fluorescing varnish layer. Ultraviolet light examination also seems to indicate that Myers selectively varnished some passages, most notably as a buildup of fluorescence in the produce at the lower right. Finally, he seems to have signed his name on top of the varnish layer and then varnished the painting again. The varnish is now very discolored.

PROVENANCE

The artist; purchased December 1932 by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2015 by the National Gallery of Art.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1932 Thirteenth Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 4 December 1932 - 15 January 1933, no. 120.

1941 Jerome Myers Memorial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 22 April - 19 May 1941, no. 20.

1957 Twenty-Fifth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art, 1957, no. 41.

1961 The Eight, Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, 1961, unpublished checklist.

1967 Jerome Myers: An Artist in Manhattan, Delaware Art Center, Wilmington; Montclair Art Museum, 1967, no. 23.

1976 The American Genius: W.W. Corcoran, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 24 January - 4 April 1976, unpublished checklist.

1980 Guy Pène du Bois: Artists About Town, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha; Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, 1980-1981, no. 102.

1981 Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Cincinnati Art Museum; San Diego Museum of Art; University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington; Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga; Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Des Moines Art Center; Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1981-1983, no. 45.

1985 Henri's Circle, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 April - 16 June 1985, unnumbered checklist.

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1998 *The Forty-Fifth Biennial: The Corcoran Collects, 1907-1998*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 17 July - 29 September 1998, unnumbered catalogue.

2004 *Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art, 1770-1950*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2004-2005, unpublished checklist.

2013 *American Journeys: Visions of Place*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

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- 1936 Burroughs, Alan. *Limners and Likenesses: Three Centuries of American Painting*. New York, 1936: 158, repro. (2nd ed., 1965: 158).
- 1940 Myers, Jerome. *Artist in Manhattan*. New York, 1940: 221.
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- 1941 "Works of Jerome Myers Are Shown at Corcoran." *The Washington Star* (14 December 1941): E6.
- 1942 "Art Exhibits." *This Week in the Nation's Capital* 20, no. 27 (28 June 1942): 6, repro.
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