Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage* (1907)

Regarded as a central figure in the history of early twentieth-century art, Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) championed photography as a fine art in its own right, on par with the pictorial expressions of modern painting and printmaking, and yet unique in its craft and processes.

In 1883, Stieglitz’s family relocated from New York to Berlin, Germany, where the young man began his studies of photography. A perfectionist by nature, Stieglitz absorbed all he could to become a master of the technical and pictorial aspects of this craft. He declared that photography “fascinated me, first as a passion, then as an obsession.”

In 1890, Stieglitz returned to New York and soon became an influential voice among many of the most prominent American artists, photographers, and art critics. However, where many other master photographers, such as Lewis Hine or Jacob Riis, were concerned with documentary photography, Stieglitz focused primarily on the pictorial qualities of an image through the fundamentals and design principles of art. This “art for art’s sake” attitude grew out of the Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth century which had witnessed a shift from art with a narrative subject toward the pictorial language of a composition as an end in itself.

In 1902, Stieglitz formed the Photo-Secession Group to promote and support the idea that photographers, like painters and printmakers, could manipulate their images to achieve desired pictorial effects. Photographers were encouraged to push their craft in new aesthetic directions by altering light and focus; using special filters and lens coatings; or by making endless darkroom adjustments, such as cropping, burning, or alternative printing processes.

*The Steerage* reflects these new aesthetic ideas of Stieglitz. Whereas a documentary photographer might have showcased a poignant image of rejected immigrants heading back to Europe in the steerage compartment of a passenger ship, Stieglitz concentrated on a Cubist-like exploration and redistribution of shapes, tonal values, and textures. Steiglitz notes, “You may call this a crowd of immigrants… To me
it is a study in mathematical lines, in balance, in a pattern of light and shade. I saw a picture of shapes.” Although one might certainly understand this image as a social commentary, set against the artist’s description, this image is a premier example of Steiglitz’s commitment to the pictorial qualities of a composition.
Questions to Consider

1. What was the first object you noticed in this image? How did the artist draw your attention to this feature?
2. Look closely and describe the clothing, postures, gestures, actions, and ages of the different people in this image.
3. Select an individual in the photograph and interpret their thoughts or feelings through their posture, gesture, and/or action.
4. What basic shapes define this composition? Which shapes are repeated throughout the composition?
5. What is the general emotion of this image?
6. How has the artist contrasted the groups of people on the upper and lower floors?

Connections

Arts: Cubism, Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis.
Historical Connections: Early 20th Century American history.
Science: Ocean liners, boating.

Further Reading

Teachers’ Extensions

Work: The Steerage (1907)

Artist: Alfred Stieglitz

Location of work: Indiana University Art Museum (IUAM)

Vocabulary/Key Concept(s):

Steerage (Steerage Class) Steerage refers to the lowest decks of a ship. This area of the ship was once used to accommodate passengers traveling on the cheapest class of ticket, and offered only the most basic amenities, typically with limited toilet use, no privacy, and poor food. The name “steerage” came from the fact that the control strings of the rudder ran on this level of the ship.

Immigrant People who leave one country to go live in another country.

Art Connection(s):

Photogravure is an intaglio printmaking process which photographic images are printed using forms of mechanized etching plates.

Intaglio – a general term covering engraving and related printing techniques, in which ink that yields to the image is held by recessed lines incised into a matrix (plate). Such a hollow–cut design is the opposite of relief.

Photo-Secession Group was an early 20th century movement that promoted photography as a fine art in general and photographic pictorialism in general.

Cubism a style of art that ‘shattered’ naturalistic forms and space, attempting to represent on a flat surface all aspects of what existed in three dimensions. Analytic cubism presented different views of an object simultaneously and stressed geometric forms and neutral tones. Synthetic cubism, a later stage, reintroduced color and elements of collage.

Geography Connection(s):

Cross-Atlantic voyage

Time Line Connection:

1907

Resources:


Connect to web links below by clicking on individual address or access through the NEH site for Additional Resources at: http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/about.php?subPage=about_ad_res
http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=634
National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITEment, *Everything in Its Right Place*, a curriculum overview to a four-part lesson on the structural elements of a painting, featuring Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, for Grades 9-12.

http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/building_lessons/
Getty Museum Education department Web site, *Teachers’ Programs and Resources*, is designed for K-12 teachers who wish to introduce art and art history into their classrooms. The site uses works form the museum’s collection along with pages A Grade-by-Grade Guide, *The Elements of Art* (teaching the formal components of art such as line and color) and a PDF file, *Lesson Template*. Also included are pages for the National Standards in the Visual Arts. *Lesson Plans for Grade 9-12* use the photography of Dorothea Lange.

Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) Bloomington, Indiana University
(812) 349-3050 – To Reserve Resource Materials

**Alfred Steiglitz**

*American Photographers: Capturing an Image* by Ann Graham Gaines  
Call Number: J920 Ga (Children’s Collection)

*American Masters: The Artists* American Masters DVD Video Series  
Call Number: DVD 759.13 Ame

*Alfred Steiglitz’s Camera Notes* by Christian A. Peterson  
Call Number: 779 Al

*Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography* by Sue Davidson Lowe  
Call Number: 770.924 Sti

*Alfred Steiglitz: An Aperture Biography*  
Call Number: 770.924 Sti

*Stieglitz: A beginning Light* by Katherine Hoffman  
Call Number: 770.92 Sti

*An American Lens: Scenes from Alfred Stieglitz’s New York Secession* by Jay Bochner  
Call Number: 700.904 Bo

**Web sites:**

Steerage  
http://www.history.com/content/titanic  
Images of steerage accommodations and passengers  
Images of steerage accommodations and passengers

Definition of steerage, additional references  
http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=69296  
The Getty Museum – information regarding steerage and steerage passengers and image  
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/stgp/ho_33.43.419.htm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art – information regarding steerage and steerage passengers and image
Alfred Stieglitz
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Stieglitz
Biographical information, images, additional references

Photogravure
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photogravure
History, qualities and technique of the process, and additional information and references.
http://www.photogravure.com/process/process.html
Images depicting the photogravure process.

Photo-Secession
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photo-Secession
Description/definition, history and additional references.
http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/photo_se.htm
Description/definition and history of the Photo-Secession movement

Indiana Academic Standards – Visual Arts Grade/Level 5
RESPONDING TO ART: History
Standard 1
Students understand the significance of visual art in relation to historical, social, political, spiritual, environmental, technological, and economic issues.
5.1.1 Identify the relationship between a work of art and the geography and characteristics of the culture, and identify where, when, why, and by whom the work was made (Focus: North America).
5.1.2 Identify and compare works of art and artifacts with similar functions.
5.1.3 Identify themes and symbols used in works of art and artifacts throughout history that portray universal ideas and beliefs.

Standard 2
Students recognize significant works of Western and non-Western art and understand the chronological development of art movements.
5.2.1 Identify and be familiar with a range of selected works of art identifying artists, culture, style, and period.
5.2.2 Identify distinguishing characteristics of style in individual artists work and art movements.

RESPONDING TO ART: Aesthetics
Standard 5
Students reflect on and discuss art theories and aesthetic issues concerning the meaning and significance of art.
5.5.1 Identify problems or puzzles in a work of art or aesthetic issue, construct a hypothesis, and evaluate alternate hypotheses.
5.5.2 Identify and analyze a variety of well reasoned points of view on aesthetic issues (censorship, plagiarism) and develop a personal point of view.

Standard 6
Students theorize about art and make informed judgments.
5.6.1 Identify artwork made from the artist’s philosophy that art is at its best when it moves people to act for the betterment of society (instrumentalism).
5.6.2 Understand that personal preference is one of many criteria used in making judgments
INTEGRATED STUDIES
Standard 13

Students identify and make connections between knowledge and skill in art and all other subject areas such as humanities, sciences, and technology.

5.13.1 Compare characteristics of a theme, historical period, or event through the multiple perspectives of different disciplines.

National Academic Standards – Visual Arts – Level 5

Content Standard #3: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

Achievement Standard:
Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks

Content Standard #4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Achievement Standard:
Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art

Content Standard #5: Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Achievement Standard:
Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and to artworks from various eras and cultures

Content Standard #6: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Achievement Standard:
Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts