The Bridge As Icon

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from *The Great East River Bridge, 1883–1983*
(New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1983)

Heralding the dawn of the Technological Age, signifying the linking of East and West, encompassing both Old World tradition and New World innovation in its combination of stone Gothic towers and steel cables, the Brooklyn Bridge has seized the imagination of a multitude of artists as the quintessential American emblem. The painter Joseph Stella put it this way: “Seen for the first time, as a weird metallic Apparition under a metallic sky, out of proportion with the winged lightness of its arch, traced for the conjunction of WORLDS… it impressed me as the shrine containing all the efforts of the new civilization of AMERICA.” [1] In countless icons ranging from the representational to the surrealistic to the abstract, the Bridge has symbolized what the architectural critic Lewis Mumford called “both a fulfillment and a prophecy.”

The elements of this dialectical symbolism are, of course, manifest in the Bridge itself. As Mumford wrote, “The stone plays against the steel: the heavy granite in compression, the spidery steel in tension. In this structure, the architecture of the past, massive and protective, meets the architecture of the future, light, aerial, open to sunlight, an architecture of voids rather than of solids.” [2] Thus, on the one hand, the Bridge’s masonry has suggested to some artists an analogy to the great cathedrals of Europe. (The French painter Albert Gleizes once observed, “the genius who built the Brooklyn Bridge is to be classed alongside the genius who built Notre Dame de Paris.” [3)] On the other hand, the Bridge’s openness and lack of ornamentation has led many to celebrate its machinelike crispness.

The wide range of imagery encouraged by the Bridge’s synthesis of monumentality and ethereality can be seen at a glance in a comparison of the works of two artists who depicted the Bridge at the turn of the century. In a circa 1895 watercolor and tempera of the Bridge at twilight, William Sonntag views the Bridge from the Brooklyn side as the last rays of sunset reflect on the inside of its tower’s pointed arches. Although Manhattan was hardly frontier America, the grandeur of the image suggests that Sonntag saw the Bridge as the apotheosis of America’s westward march.

In contrast, in a somewhat later painting and the direct charcoal study on which it was based, the Impressionist Childe Hassam emphasizes the Bridge’s aerial quality, placing it in the middle ground enshrouded by the winter atmosphere.

Because the painters of Sonntag and Hassam's generation were generally more interested in interiors and suburban landscapes, the Bridge did not become a popular motif until the advent of The Eight, the group of artists around Robert Henri whose rebel exhibition of 1908 led to the formation of the Ashcan School. As Henri's pupil Stuart Davis recalled in his autobiography, the Manhattan scene was a favorite subject of the Ashcan artists. "Enthusiasm for running around and drawing things in the raw ran high," Davis wrote. "In pursuance of this compulsion, Glenn Coleman, Henry Glitenkamp, and myself toured extensively in the metropolitan environs. Chinatown; the Bowery; the burlesque shows; the Brooklyn Bridge..." [4]

Despite their reputation for gritty Realism, the Ashcan artists tended to treat the Bridge at an atmospheric distance. Like Hassam's painting, George Luks's small canvas of 1916 and Ernest Lawson's undated work of the same period are views over the rooftops in overcast weather. The similarity of the paintings by Hassam and Luks—both winter scenes with snow on the tenements—is striking. And yet there is a dramatic change in spatial treatment and tonality. While Hassam's Bridge is engulfed in a blue haze, Luks's Bridge plunges into moist grayness.

Although the Brooklyn Bridge was an inevitable component of the New York scenery the Ashcan artists recorded, it never held the fascination for them that it did for the generation of modern artists that arrived or returned from Europe in the second decade of this century (Lawson, for one, even preferred the High Bridge over the Harlem River). Many of the members of that new generation—including Joseph Stella, Albert Gleizes, John Marin, and Max Weber—dedicated a significant part of their oeuvres to the Bridge's soaring magnificence. Whether it was the contrast with the rustic bridges of the Old World that drew the modernists to the Brooklyn Bridge is not known, but it seems that the pictorial possibilities inherent in the structure were especially suited to the modern movement. Having absorbed the influence of Cubism and Futurism, these artists utilized dynamic fragmentation, overlapping transparencies, and compressed space to imaginatively re-create the Bridge on canvas.

For the architect-turned-artist John Marin, the Bridge became a leitmotif in a synthesis of modernist pictorial structure and the new urban architecture. Seeing it again upon his return from Europe in 1910, Marin was struck by the dignity and dynamism of the span. Over the next three years, he completed some fourteen watercolors and drawings of the Bridge, plus half a dozen related etchings, [5] surveying the Bridge in all its facets, from a rainbow-like arch spanning the entire width of the sheet to a frame for detailed impressions of buildings seen through the grid of its cables. [6] Marin also used the Bridge as a detail in later works, and it was probably the vantage point from which he painted still other cityscapes.

Especially striking are Marin's renditions of the Bridge's pedestrian walkway. In one of these, the 1913 etching *Brooklyn Bridge*, his drypoint technique seems to stitch the building materials together. Emphasizing the majesty of the stone towers, this work exemplifies the revival of cathedral imagery in modern art (a

theme that would be amplified by John Taylor Arms, a depicter of French cathedrals whose 1922 etching *Gates of the City* is probably the strongest expression of the Bridge-as-cathedral).[7] Many of Marin's other promenade scenes are less architectonic in composition, capturing instead a feeling of motion, wind, and light. In a second print from his 1913 series (*Brooklyn Bridge No. 6*) and in the watercolor of about 1912 on which the print was based (also called *Brooklyn Bridge*), the exhilaration of these sensations is so dizzying as to destabilize the structure. In the watercolor Marin adds bright splotches of red and blue to convey the impressions experienced by the strolling figures. A similar sort of energy is seen in his 1928 oil painting *Related to Brooklyn Bridge*, a night scene with blue stars dotting a luminescent sky. There the pedestrians are dwarfed by green skyscrapers and slashing brown cables, and technology appears to engulf humanity.

Marin's involvement with the Bridge was similar to that experienced by Max Weber, a fellow member of the circle of artists who gathered around the avant-garde photographer and pioneer dealer of modern art Alfred Stieglitz. Like Marin, Weber was first attracted to the Bridge when he returned to New York after a sojourn in Europe. His first views were also relatively conventional, as in a 1911 painting of the Bridge seen over rooftops.[8] Then, in 1912, he painted a modernist *Brooklyn Bridge* watercolor with fluid, dynamic brushstrokes. Although this work is comparable to Marin's contemporary watercolor of the promenade, it has a greater solidity, making it an important forerunner of Joseph Stella's massive Bridge paintings. Weber gave this image to a friend, the English photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn, in 1914, but he later made a lithograph based on it. In both works, the focus is on a single monumental tower, with the lower part of the tower's arches filled in by the cables behind.

In the mid-teens, as Weber became more interested in figural compositions and Marin turned increasingly to pastoral landscapes, Albert Gleizes arrived from Europe and took up their intoxication with the Bridge. His first depiction (a 1915 work) was the most abstract image of the Bridge yet made, with criss-crossed cables forming a flat pattern analogous to the form of an aeolian harp. But his third version, a 1917 painting entitled *On Brooklyn Bridge*, is even more encompassing and symphonic. In it, Gleizes suggests the Bridge's towers amidst a rainbow of colorful concentric circles derived from the Orphic Cubism of his countryman Robert Delaunay. Like Delaunay's Eiffel Tower paintings, this work is a highly optimistic view of technology unshadowed by World War I. In addition to supporting Gleizes's claim that the Bridge belongs in the same league as Notre Dame, it illustrates Marcel Duchamp's assessment that America's greatest works of art are its bridges and its plumbing.

After Gleizes returned to Paris, Joseph Stella adopted the Bridge motif. Born in Italy, Stella had immigrated to New York in 1896. During a year in Paris (1911-12) he came in contact with the Italian Futurists, who glorified machine technology and dynamic motion. Upon his return to New York he moved to Brooklyn and there found in the Bridge the perfect vehicle for his Futurist vision.

“Many nights I stood on the bridge,” he later recalled, “…shaken by the underground tumult of the trains in perpetual motion... now and then [hearing] strange moanings of appeal from tug boats.... I felt deeply moved, as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the presence of a new DIVINITY.” [9]

Stella’s *Brooklyn Bridge* of 1918–19 is probably the single most renowned rendition of the span. It is as steely and nocturnal as Gleizes’s 1917 work is vivid and sunny. Flashes of red and green signal lights punctuate a deep blue sky interlaced with the Bridge’s flickering wire ropes. The focal point is in the upper middle, where a tripartite tower rises in front of a pair of seemingly endless crossed cables. Upon seeing this seven-foot canvas when it was first exhibited in 1920, one critic who had actually watched the Bridge being built hailed the work as “the apotheosis of the Bridge…the whole picture is throbbing, pulsating, trembling with the constant passing of the throng of cars.” [10]

A more streamlined, less fragmented Bridge appears in the right-hand wing of Stella’s ambitious polyptych *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted*, painted in 1920–22. The Bridge is given equal footing with the skyscrapers, the port, and Broadway in this icon of the metropolis. Its first tower is aligned with the framing edges, reaffirming the surface while providing large, arched perforations through which the Bridge’s web of wires, its second tower, and the buildings beyond are viewed. The four main cables curve in front of the first tower, implicitly in front of the picture plane, sweeping into the spectator’s space. This formal innovation both engages the viewer and lends the painting its ominous, almost frightening power.

The view through the arches of one of the towers also figures in Stella’s 1929 *American Landscape*. By the title of that work, Stella elevates the Bridge beyond local significance to the status of national icon. He crops the first tower, through which the second tower and a skyscraper are glimpsed, at the left edge. Beyond the swing of cables to the right, the Flatiron Building is seen amidst a forest of futuristic structures which are implicitly equated with the Bridge’s towers as symbols of the new America.

Many art historians have speculated that Stella’s Bridge pictures, particularly *New York Interpreted*, inspired the poet Hart Crane, whose ode “To Brooklyn Bridge” (begun in the early twenties and published in 1930 with photographs by Walker Evans) may have in turn inspired such 1930s artists as Stuart Davis. Crane himself seems to have felt that the similarities in their works were a product of parallel interests. In offering to help Stella get his illustrated essay on the Bridge published in the Parisian avant-garde magazine *transition* in 1929, he wrote, “It is a remarkable coincidence that I should, years later, have discovered that another person, by whom I mean you, should have had the same sentiments regarding the Brooklyn Bridge which inspired the main theme and pattern of my poem.” [11]

The clarity and sleekness that Stella found in the Bridge also appealed to the so-called Precisionist movement that was popular in American visual arts of the 1920s. In film, Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand incorporated clean, architectonic images of the Bridge in their 1921 movie *Mannahatta*, which is largely a cinematic *New York Interpreted*. And in printmaking, the Ukranian immigrant Louis Lozowick included the Bridge in his streamlined 1925 lithograph *New York* and in one of a series of five lithographs of New York bridges that he produced in 1929–30. [12] Although the viewpoint in Lozowick's 1930 view (which was reproduced in the 1939 *WPA Guide to New York City*) is nearly identical to that in John Taylor Arms's *Gates of the City*, a tenser and more contemporary feeling is conveyed.

Such urban vitalism seemed inappropriate to the Magic Realists of the 1930s, who responded to the collapse of the American economy and the rise of European Fascism with surrealistic visions of doom. Thus in his 1932 mural *Wheels: Industrial New York*, Yun Gee juxtaposes the Bridge against a chaotic panorama. Born in Canton, China, Gee had arrived in New York via Paris in 1930 and had completed this work as his submission for the Museum of Modern Art's invitational mural exhibition of 1932. In the seven-by-four-foot format specified, he depicts an oversized solar disc overheating the frenzied scene and casting long, strange shadows among the polo players in the foreground. These symbolic riders circle endlessly, more like horsemen of the apocalypse than sportsmen of leisure. [13]

Even more surrealistic interpretations of the Bridge are found among the works of O. Louis Guglielmi. Guglielmi, who had immigrated to New York with his Italian parents in 1914, first began to include symbolic images in his tightly delineated paintings in the mid-thirties. He first used the Bridge in 1935 in *South Street Stoop* and used it again the following year in a similar manner in *Wedding in South Street*. Both works are cityscapes in a minor key, reflecting the melancholy of the Depression, when the Bridge seemed to stand for an earlier, better world. *Wedding*, which the artist submitted to the Federal Art Project in May 1936, struck one art historian as more funereal than celebratory. [14]

In 1938, the year after Picasso completed *Guernica*, Guglielmi painted his own antiwar masterpiece *Mental Geography*. This striking image, probably the most radical expressive distortion of the Bridge ever painted, envisages the Bridge in ruins. The seated woman in the foreground with a bomb in her back signals the metaphoric intention of the image, as does the statement Guglielmi wrote when the painting was first exhibited: "Headlines, eloquent loudspeakers of Fascist destruction scream out the bombing of another city…Madrid, Barcelona, Guernica…Chartres—New York—Brooklyn Bridge is by the process of mental geography a huge mass of stone, twisted girders, and limp cable." [15] It is noteworthy that in this impassioned transmutation of the Spanish Civil War Guglielmi links the Bridge to a great French Gothic cathedral.

Following the Fascist victory in Spain, Guglielmi turned to a more personal symbolism. In his 1942 painting *The Bridge*, he views the structure as a huge musical instrument, adding a giant violin bridge to one of the Bridge's towers. This strange pun is reinforced by the semi-transparent, scroll-headed figure who grasps for the Bridge as if for a harp. Likewise, the workmen bringing a new cable can be interpreted as replacing a broken string. Guglielmi thus literalizes the metaphor of the Bridge as stringed instrument implicit in Albert Gleizes's 1915 painting and Hart Crane's verse: "fleckless the gleaming staves—/Sibylline voices flicker, waveringly stream! As though a god were issue of the strings..."

Among the other artists who depicted the Bridge in the 1940s were George Grosz, James Henry Daugherty, and Georgia O'Keeffe. For the cover of Henry Miller's novel *Plexus*, published in France in 1949, Grosz, a Berlin-born satirist, painted a deep blue watercolor of the span with flocks of red birds. Daugherty, an illustrator born in North Carolina, produced an Ashcan-type genre scene in which the vivid, arching Bridge dwarfs a trio of skinnydippers. And O'Keeffe, who had painted views of the East River in the late 1920s, explored the Bridge's iconic possibilities in two works.

O'Keeffe's sketch and painting of the Bridge feature formal inventions which rival those of Joseph Stella. In both works, one of the Bridge's towers is coequal with the framing edges, and, as in Max Weber's watercolor and lithograph, the arches are tapered by the cables behind them. In the sketch, the top of the other tower is visible at the lower center, as if the front tower were transparent, or as if two views had been telescoped onto one sheet. This simultaneity imparts a complex and mysterious power to the drawing. In contrast, the painting is distant and detached, with the tower overwhelming the thin, spidery cables and flattening the pictorial space. Since these works were done just before she left New York to live in New Mexico, O'Keeffe may have intended for the Bridge to serve as a symbol of the city of her early career.

In the last thirty years, the Bridge has come to seem somewhat less modernistic (especially compared to such recent marvels as the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and the towers of the World Trade Center), and some artists have begun to take more stylistic liberties with it. Among these artists are John Shaw, who painted an imaginative and varied series of Bridge views over an eighteen-month period from 1980 to 1981; Red Grooms, who made it the object of his humor in his zany tableau-environment *Ruckus Manhattan*; and the Greek artist Athena, who used it as a sort of giant rainbow in her huge mixed-media panorama of the crowded city. In the last two works, as in Stella's *New York Interpreted*, the Bridge is an essential feature of the artist's all-encompassing vision of the metropolis. In another vein, Richard Haas has painted a *trompe l'oeil* mural, which creates an illusionary vista of the Bridge in the shadow of the real thing.

One contemporary artist who has brought the Bridge into the age of sleek graphic design is Robert Indiana, who has lived in view of the span since he moved to a studio in lower Manhattan in 1956. Indiana's Bridge painting of 1964

shows a single majestic tower reproduced in four lozenge-shaped panels. The image is reduced to a logo encircled by the stenciled words of Hart Crane's poem, by now inseparable from the structure. Each panel is colored a different hue to suggest the different times of the day, as in Monet's more atmospheric series on the London bridges. The cycle begins with dawn at the right, ringed by Crane's line "silver-paced as though the sun took step of thee," and continues clockwise through day, sunset, and finally night at the top. Even in the year of the futuristic structures seen at the New York World's Fair, a reviewer singled out the venerable bridge of Indiana's painting as "the symbol and promise of change and the future." [16]

The majestic presence of the Brooklyn Bridge has long captured the artistic imagination without defeating it. Now, as we look forward to the second century of this "symbol and promise," it is not difficult to imagine that the growing number of artists who have recently begun living and working near the Brooklyn waterfront will discover their own meanings in the Bridge, thus creating new homages to this incomparable inspiration.

Notes

[1] Joseph Stella, "The Brooklyn Bridge (A page of my life)," *transition* 16 (June 1929), p. 87.

[2] Lewis Mumford, "The Brooklyn Bridge," *American Mercury* 23 (August 1931), P. 449.

[3] Albert Gleizes quoted in *The Literary Digest* 51 (November 27, 1915), p. 1225.

[4] Stuart Davis, *Stuart Davis* (New York: American Artists Group, 1945), p. 2.

[5] Sheldon Reich, *John Marin* (Tucson, 1970), volume II, nos. 10.6–10.12, 11.1–11.3, 11.9, 11.21, 12.10–12.13; and Carl Zigrosser, *The Complete Etchings of John Marin* (Philadelphia, 1969), nos. 104–112.

[6] The rainbow/grid duality was developed by Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (biblio. ref. no. 26), p. 12. The English Futurist painter C.R.W. Nevinson visited New York in 1919 and also produced an etching of a view through the cables.

[7] I am indebted to Kirk Varnedoe of New York University's Institute of Fine Arts for this suggestion. See also Donat de Chapeaurouge, "Die Kathedrale als modernes Bildthema," *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen* XVIII (1973), pp. 155–172. Lyonel Feininger is another modern artist who often painted cathedrals and who made a number of drawings of the Brooklyn Bridge in the 1940s and '50s.

[8] Percy North, *Max Weber: American Modern* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1982), il. p. 56. North also discusses Weber's unpublished 1912 essay "On the Brooklyn Bridge" and concludes that "for Weber the bridge represented a personal link between his adult life in Manhattan and his childhood in Brooklyn."

[9] Stella, *Ibid*, p. 88.

[10]. Hamilton Easter Field, *The Arts* vol. 2, no. 1 (October 1921), p. 25.

[11] Brom Weber, ed., *The Letters of Hart Crane* (New York, 1952), letter no. 317 of January 24, 1929, p. 334. For a detailed discussion of this interchange, see Irma Jaffee, "Stella and Crane," *American Art Journal* 1 (Fall 1969), pp. 98–107.

[12] Janet Flint, *The Prints of Louis Lozowick: A Catalogue Raisonne* (New York, 1982), no. 6.

[13] See further Judith Tannenbaum, "Yun Gee: A Rediscovery," *Arts Magazine* vol. 54, no. 9 (May 1980), p. 166, color il. p. 167.

[14] Rutgers University Art Gallery, *O. Louis Guglielmi*, New Brunswick, 1980, p. 13 and fig. 27. Milton Avery also submitted a Brooklyn Bridge painting to the Federal Art Project in 1938, but it is now lost. See "An Interview with Sally Avery," *Art/World 7*, no. 1 (October 1982), p. 10. In conversation with the author, Mrs. Avery recalled that this painting was the same one awarded the Atheneum prize in 1929. To judge from an old photographs it was an imposing, dark painting of the Bridge seen from below.

[15] Rutgers, *Ibid*, pp. 20 and 23.

[16] Mildred Constantine, "Visit New York Visit New York" *Art in America* 52, no. 3 (June 1964), p. 129.