

Biography

Joseph Stella was born in 1877 in Mura Lucano, a small village in Italy. During his youth he studied the techniques of classical Italian painting-ideas. Think of Italy and the architecture – what would you see? Lots of gothic buildings, Rome, churches and of course you may think of Venice and the gondolas.

This all would later influence his images of New York.

At age 19 he immigrated to New York and moved in with his brother who was a dentist was serving the immigrant populations of the Lower East Side. He had every intent of becoming a doctor.

He chose instead to study art. For 3 years Stella studied painting at the Art Students League and the New York School of Art in Manhattan. While Stella lived on New York's Lower East Side (1900-09), he made vivid, realistic drawings of immigrants and street scenes. In 1908, a publication called The Survey asked Stella to make a series of drawings documenting the Pittsburgh industrial scene. The resulting studies captured the plight of miners and mining towns and foreshadowed his later interest in the industrial landscape.

From 1911-12, Stella went to Europe where he met other artists: Matisse, Picasso and the Italian Futurist Carlo Carrà. What do you think a Futurist is? Futurists are those who attempt to predict and analyze the future not by guessing – but using facts to back up their predictions.

This style influenced Stella's paintings of New York City and its skyscrapers, bridges, and roadways after his return to America in 1912. With their towering, majestic forms, these images glorify the mechanistic aspects of modern life. From 1916-18, Stella lived in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, a neighborhood known for its factories, mills, and foundries not far from the Brooklyn Bridge.

Between 1922 and his death in 1946, Stella moved between Paris, New York, and Italy. Although his paintings established him as a significant figure in modern American art, Stella's subsequent work did not generate enough interest to be marketable. Stella could not make a living by painting and his later years were marked by periods of poverty.

Brooklyn Bridge

The print we are studying is The Brooklyn Bridge. Before I show it to you I want to tell you a little about the bridge.

When Joseph Stella arrived in New York in 1896, he saw the glamour and power of industry and the promise of social and economic opportunities. He also saw crowded tenements, poverty, and the destructive effects of industry on humanity. He portrayed both views of America in his numerous drawings and paintings. Stella especially liked the Brooklyn Bridge and its sweeping cables, glittering lights, bustling traffic, and spectacular views.

The Brooklyn Bridge is a steel suspension bridge across the East River, connecting Brooklyn and Manhattan. Designed by engineer **John A. Roebling**, the inventor of wire cable, the bridge took thirteen years to build, and it opened on May 24, 1883. In the early 1880s, it was the longest suspension bridge in the world. As the first suspension bridge built with steel instead of iron cables, the Brooklyn Bridge represented the advance of modern technology. It also became a **symbol** for the rapid urban and industrial developments that were taking place in New York City and around the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Brooklyn Bridge had a profound effect on the cityscape and the residents of both Manhattan and Brooklyn. Before the bridge existed, commuters between Manhattan and Brooklyn relied on rowboat and ferry service to cross the river, and water transportation was dictated by weather and tides. When the bridge was constructed, it connected with a growing public transport system of elevated trains, trolleys, subways, and buses on both sides of the river.

During the twentieth century, The Brooklyn Bridge became a well-known landmark and a source of inspiration for filmmakers, photographers, artists, and writers as well as artists.

Remember that Joseph Stella painted this in 1939 and he was a futurist.

Show Print



Stella said:

Many nights I stood on the bridge—and in the middle alone—lost—a defenseless prey to the surrounding swarming darkness—crushed by the mountainous black impenetrability of the skyscrapers—here and there lights resembling suspended falls of astral bodies or fantastic splendors of remote rites—shaken by the underground tumult of the trains in perpetual motion, like the blood in the arteries—at times ringing as alarm in a tempest, the shrill sulphurous voice of the trolley wires—now and then the strange moanings of appeal from tugboats, guessed more than seen, through the infernal recesses below—I feel deeply moved, as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the presence of a new DIVINITY.

Joseph Stella, Excerpt from "The Brooklyn Bridge (A Page of My Life)," (1928) Published in *Transitions*, 16-17 (June 1929), pp. 86-88.

Brooklyn Bridge: Variation on an Old Theme, portrays a frontal view of one of the bridge's stone towers, looking across to the developing city. Lights that suggest stars, theater lanterns, and automobile or subway headlights course across the sky and throughout the various accesses on the Bridge.

This painting (the fifth in a series of six) shows the bridge cables rising up like a church spire. **Gothic** arches frame a Manhattan skyline that glows like a stained-glass window. These arches were purposely designed for the bridge by its engineer **John Roebling**. He, like many of his contemporaries, believed that technology was the “new religion.” The high ceilings, narrow walls, and ample windows of gothic churches made these structures a technological feat of their day while also representing the power of God.

Stella included another view of the Bridge in a lower, separate section of the painting, in the style of a **predella** on a traditional altarpiece. Above the Bridge and skyline view of Manhattan is an arch representing the heavens. (predella: Italian term for a painted panel, usually small, belonging to a series of panels at the bottom of an altarpiece)