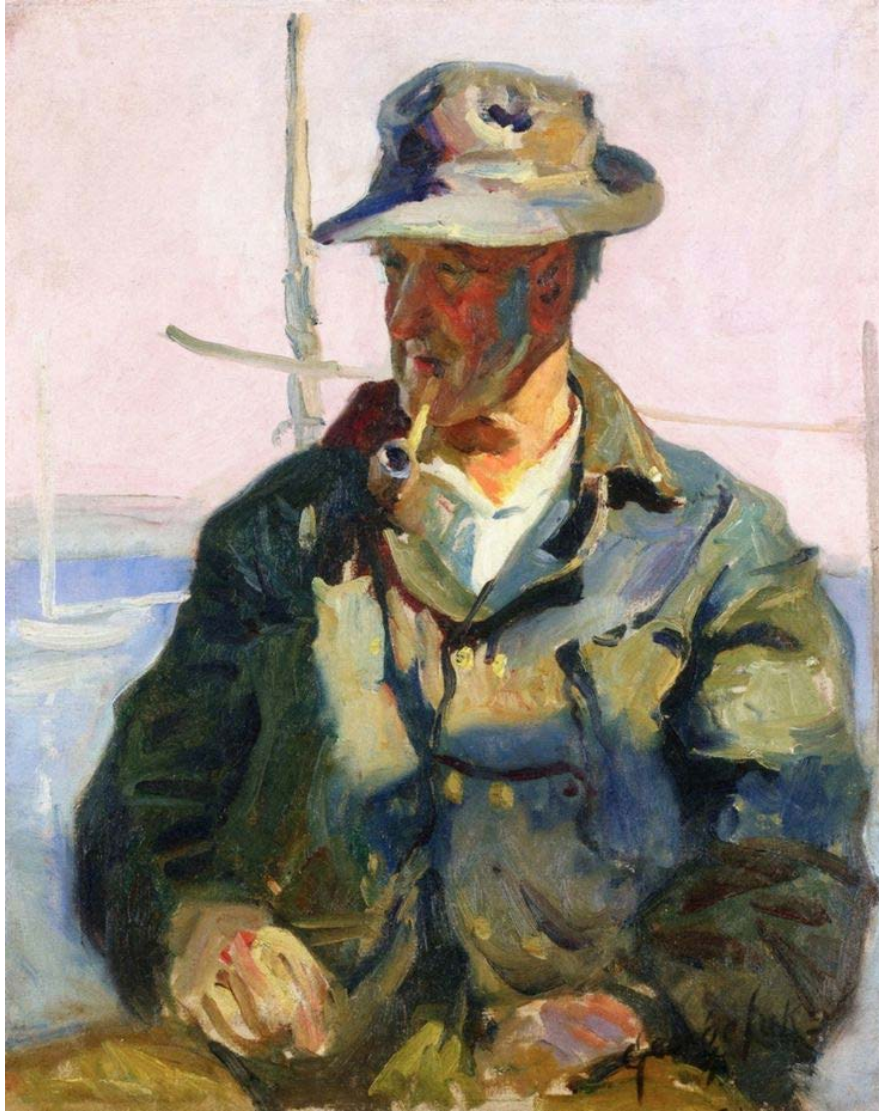


# *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks*



George Luks, *Old Salt*, 1909, oil on canvas, Private Collection

An Exhibition Proposal  
by Jerika Jordan

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# *Section 1*

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## *Exhibition Proposal*









## Exhibition Abstract









George Benjamin Luks (1867-1933), often referred to by his inner circle as “Lusty Luks,” is well-known to lovers of American Realism through his frequent inclusion in popular exhibitions of the Ashcan School. Working alongside John Sloan, George Bellows, William Glackens, and Robert Henri, Luks shared their interest in depicting the gritty realities of modern life—including city slums, immigrant neighborhoods, and seedy speakeasies—as a rejection of the pristine, academic realism that continued to dominate the art market. As one of the formative members of The Eight, Luks is recognized by scholars for his contributions to the development of the distinctly American, Ashcan aesthetic. Demonstrating dexterity across a number of media, Luks’s paintings and watercolors, and less often his early illustrations, have been displayed in numerous exhibitions as exemplars of the Ashcan style. Despite the artist’s inclusion in high-profile exhibitions and his established presence in prominent public and private collections, Luks holds a reputation among scholars as a highly mercurial artist—volatile in terms of the quality of his works—which has resulted in the current dearth of dedicated scholarship and public exposure.









As the first major museum retrospective of the artist’s career, this exhibition reasserts Luks’s position as an artist both deserving and demanding of further consideration. By contextualizing Luks’s production in the early stirrings of the Ashcan School, we are better able to understand that, throughout his career, Luks was in constant dialogue with the modern rhetoric concerning what American art was, what it should be, and where it belonged in relation to the dominant forces emerging in Western Europe. More importantly, it will also highlight Luks’s achievements as they developed in tandem with less successful experiments in technique and execution. In reassessing Luks’s work, we are given a unique opportunity to examine one artist’s insecurities and imperfections on canvas, placing them in dialogue with his most celebrated masterworks. In this way, larger questions are also raised concerning the role of experimental art processes in today’s art historical discourse. *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks* will finally track the full scope of George Luks’s artistic journey, encouraging visitors to engage with—and perhaps to question—current scholarship regarding the nature of his artistic process and its products.

## Exhibition Checklist for *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks*









	Object	Title	Date	Medium	Dimensions	Repository	Identification #	Credit Line	Marks/Inscription	Notes
1		<i>Self-portrait with Pince-Nez</i>	1930	oil on canvas	h:32 w: 26 inches	New York Historical Society Museum and Library	2008.4	Gift of Jan and Warren Adelson	unsigned	
2		<i>Armistice Night</i>	1918	oil on canvas	h: 37 w: 68 3/8 inches	Whitney Museum of American Art	54.58	Gift of an anonymous donor	Dated (?) Nov. 13, 1918 LR	
3		<i>The Bersaglieri</i>	1918	oil on canvas	Framed: h:46 7/8 w: 66 3/4 inches Unframed: h: 40 1/8 w: 59 5/8 inches	National Gallery of Art	1950.5.1	Gift of the Avalon Foundation	signed LL	
4		<i>Bleecker and Carmine Streets, New York</i>	1905	oil on canvas	h: 25 w: 30 inches	Milwaukee Art Museum	M1976.14	Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donal B. Abert and Mrs. Barbara Abert Tooman	signed LR	
5		<i>The Butcher Cart</i>	1901	oil on canvas	h: 22 w: 27 inches	Art Institute of Chicago	1941.825	Friends of American Art Collection	signed LR, dated 1901	
6		<i>The Circus Tent</i>	1928-30	oil on canvas	h: 18 w: 22 inches	Heckscher Museum of Art	1975.5	Heckscher Trust Fund	signed LR	
7		<i>Copley Square, Boston</i>	c. 1904 (1923-25?)	oil on canvas	h: 20 w: 24 inches	Private Collection			signed LR	


8		<i>Fifth Avenue, New York</i>	1920	oil on canvas		Private Collection			signed LR	
9		<i>Hester Street</i>	1905	oil on canvas	h: 25 13/16 w: 35 7/8 inches	Brooklyn Museum	40.339	Dick S. Ramsay Fund	unsigned	
10		<i>Hitch Team (Horses in the Snow)</i>	1916	oil on canvas		Virginia Museum of Fine Arts	L.2015.13.36	The James W. and Frances Gibson McGlothlin Collection	singed LL; dated 1916	
11		<i>Holiday on the Hudson</i>	1912	oil on canvas	Framed: h:37 15/16 w:43 7/8 d:2 5/16 inches. Unframed: h:30 w: 36 1/16 inches	Cleveland Museum of Art	2291.1933	Hinman B. Huribut Collection	signed LR	
12		<i>In the Steerage</i>	1900	oil on canvas	h: 30 5/8 w: 19 1/4 inches	North Carolina Museum of Art		Purchased with funds from the Elizabeth Gibson Taylor and Walter Frank Taylor Fund and the North Carolina	signed LL	
13		<i>The North River, New York</i>	c. 1910	oil on canvas		Private Collection			signed LR	
14		<i>Roundhouse at High Bridge</i>	c. 1909	oil on canvas	h: 30 1/2 w: 30 1/4 inches	Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute	50.17		signed LL	
15		<i>The Breaker Boys</i>	c. 1925	oil on canvas	h: 50 w: 60 inches	Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens			signed LL	

16		<i>Three Top Sargeants</i>	1925	oil on canvas	Framed: h:38 1/4 w: 44 1/8 d: 2 7/8 inches Unframed: h: 30 w: 36 inches	Detroit Institute of Arts	25.6	City of Detroit Purchase	signed LR	
17		<i>The Wrestlers</i>	1905	oil on canvas	h: 48 3/8 w: 66 3/8 inches	Museum of Fine Arts, Boston	45.9	The Hayden Collection-- Charles Henry Hayden Fund	LR: signed/dated 1905	
18		<i>Hobo Musician</i>	n.d.	oil on canvas		Private Collection			signed LL	
19		<i>Old Salt</i>	1909	oil on canvas		Private Collection			signed LR	
20		<i>Oris Skinner as Col. Philippe Bridau</i>	1919	oil on canvas	h: 52 2: 44 inches	The Phillips Collection			signed LL	
21		<i>Pals</i>	c. 1907	oil on canvas		New Britain Museum of American Art	1943.11	Harriet Russell Stanley Fund		
22		<i>The Polka Dot Dress</i>	1927	oil on canvas	Unframed: h: 58 w: 37 inches	Smithsonian American Art Museum	1969.148	Gift of Mrs. Howard Weingrow	unsigned	
23		<i>Telling Fortunes</i>	1914	oil on canvas	h: 20 w: 16 inches	The Phillips Collection			signed LR	

24		<i>Boy with Dice</i>	c. 1923	oil on canvas		Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester	74.103	Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas H. Hawks, in honor of Harris K. Prior	inscribed "To Elizabeth" and signed UR	
25		<i>Breaker Boy of Shenandoah, PA</i>	1921	oil on canvas	Unframed: h: 30.25 w: 25.125 d: 1.5 inches	Walker Art Center	1949.13	Gift of the T.B. Walker Foundation, 1949	signed LL	
26		<i>Child with Wagon (Snow Kid)</i>	1916	oil on canvas	h: 20 w: 16.5 inches	Private Collection			signed LL	
27		<i>Girl with a Pink Ribbon</i>	n.d.	oil on canvas	h: 18 w: 14 inches	Private Collection			signed LL	
28		<i>Lily Williams</i>	c. 1909	oil on canvas	h: 45 w: 39 1/2 inches	Private Collection			signed LR	
29		<i>The Little Madonna</i>	1907	oil on canvas	h: 27 3/8 w: 22 1/4 inches	Addison Gallery of American Art	1930.4	Gift of an anonymous donor	signed LR (?)	
30		<i>The Sand Artist</i>	1905	oil on canvas	h: 29 1/2 w: 28 7/10 inches	Private Collection			signed L	
31		<i>The Spielers</i>	1905	oil on canvas	h: 36 1/16 inches w: 26 1/4 inches	Addison Gallery of American Art	1931.9	Gift of an anonymous donor	signed LR, dated 1905	



32		<i>Tom</i>	n.d.	oil on canvas		Private Collection			(visibly) unsigned	
33		<i>Autumn Landscape</i>	1930	watercolor on paper		Private Collection			signed LR	
34		<i>Boulders on a Riverbank</i>	1919	watercolor on paper		Private Collection			signed LR	
35		<i>Landscape with Pool, Montauk, Long Island</i>	c. 1930	watercolor on white paper	Framed: h: 21 w: 27 d: 1 1/2 inches	Indianapolis Museum of Art	71.9	Mary B. Milliken Fund	signed LC	
36		<i>Lower Ausable Lake, Adirondacks</i>	n.d.	watercolor on paper	Unframed: h:14 w: 20 inches	Private Collection			signed LC	
37		<i>My Garden, Berk(shire) Hills</i>	c. 1930	watercolor on paper		Private Collection			signed LC	
38		<i>Pennsylvania Coal Town</i>	c. 1920	watercolor and gouache over graphite on paper	h:13 15/16 w:19 15/16 inches	Cleveland Museum of Art	1972.232	Bequest of Lucia McCurdy McBride	signed LR	
39		<i>Purple Hills</i>	n.d.	watercolor on paper laid on board	Unframed: h:14 w: 20 inches	Private Collection			signed LL	

40		<i>Sunset</i>	c. 1928-32	watercolor on paper	Unframed: h:14 w: 20 inches	Private Collection			signed LR	
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## Script: Exhibition Proposal Presentation

Good morning, and thank you all for joining us. My name is Jerika Jordan, and I'm a first year master's student in the Art History and Museum Studies program at Case Western Reserve University. Over the course of the past year, I have had the pleasure of dreaming up, designing, and curating *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks*. This exhibition promises an exciting new look at the career of a prolific artist who, too often, has been overlooked in art historical research and museum representation.

When we began these projects last year, Dr. Holly Witchey gave us nearly unlimited parameters, encouraging us to think and dream big. For my exhibition, I knew immediately that I wanted to focus on the Ashcan School, feeling freshly inspired by the strong representation of these artists in the Cleveland collection. I was first introduced to the Ashcan School about halfway through my undergraduate studies, when I took an upper-level course in American Art. As the class worked its way toward the turn-of-the-century, we'd spent weeks looking at crisp Luminist landscapes, and dozens of the American Impressionists' idealistic moments of modern leisure. But then, something radical happened. This slide popped onto the classroom projector, and I remember feeling so refreshed by this lively new realism. For me, the gritty street scenes and industrial landscapes of the Ashcan artists were more effective in capturing a true reflection of early modern life in America.

For many people, the beginning of the twentieth century was not a glamorous time—particularly in major urban centers like New York. Following the end of the Civil War, between 1870 and 1900, nearly 12 million immigrants came to the recently re-United States. Some sought new opportunities or a fresh start, but more often, it was the promise of refuge in a period of global economic crises, and political and religious persecution. More than 70% of these immigrants entered the country through New York City, with mass-processing centers at Castle Garden Depot and Ellis Island discharging hundreds of new citizens each day. This period of rapid industrialization created some of the city's greatest feats in engineering, including a new system of elevated trains which allowed New Yorkers to traverse the city with unprecedented ease. But even as New York was becoming more physically united, social and economic divisions were peaking. In 1890, Jacob Riis published a photojournalistic account of the conditions in tenement neighborhoods and local sweatshops, appropriately titled *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*. Because while some of America was living in the Gilded Age, for a much greater portion of the country, this was their everyday reality.

And this was the period that saw the birth of the Ashcan School. Under the tutelage of Robert Henri, artists like John Sloan, William Glackens, and George Luks moved to New York City to pursue painting as a profession. Henri urged them, "*Paint what you feel. Paint what you see. Paint what is real to you.*" Originally known as The Eight, the early Ashcan artists were united in their rejection of traditional restrictions in juried exhibitions, while the Philadelphia Four—Luks, Sloan, Glackens, and Shinn—translated their experiences as newspaper illustrators into a fresh passion for capturing the harsh realities of modern life in paint. And when The Eight held their first New York exhibition in 1908, their humble subjects and loose, painterly style broke new ground in American art.

As you could imagine, this first, very general inspiration had the potential to blossom into any number of exciting possibilities. To narrow my focus, I began researching recent exhibitions on the Ashcan School to gain a sense of current scholarship and recent approaches. I found that after 2008, new interest was generated in the movement. The centennial of The Eight's first public show was celebrated with numerous exhibitions and retrospective features, many of which initiated questions about the greater diversity and complexity of the Ashcan style. I quickly realized, however, that scholarship on one of the movement's founding members, George Luks, was conspicuously absent. His most recent one-man feature in a commercial gallery exhibition was in 1987. George Luks had no substantial monograph, and he has never been the focus of a major museum retrospective.

Feeling both baffled and curious about Luks's status in current scholarship, I contacted the Cleveland Museum of Art's Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, Mark Cole. In my discussion with Mark, I learned that Luks is often overlooked as an important artist because he produced an uneven body of paintings, each of highly variable quality. To some, this suggests a lack of seriousness in Luks as a painter, and—perhaps even more fatal in art history—his career seems to have little sense of trajectory or progression. To Mark's absolute credit, he didn't discourage me from running with the idea at this stage—which might've been the logical thing to do. But he did urge me to proceed cautiously. Mark rightly advised me to carefully consider that this type of exhibition has the power to enhance Luks's reputation, or to reinforce the reasons for its current stasis.

With this in mind, I began a vigorous search for anything and everything I could find on Luks. Whether by show of fate or sheer dumb luck, professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota, Robert Gambone, published the first substantial monograph on Luks in March of last year. This was an immense contribution to my research, particularly in consolidating accurate information on Luks's life and career, which the artist is known to have intentionally misrepresented—most often for dramatic effect. Pooling the resources of this book and other exhibition catalogues, I discovered a wealth of information . . . George Luks was born as a first-generation American in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, his parents both immigrants from Central Europe. After spending a few years touring with his brother as vaudeville entertainers, Luks decided to pursue a career as a painter. In total, his professional training lasted less than a year. He spent a few months at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts before traveling to Europe. Luks stayed with a distant relative and briefly attended the Dusseldorf School of Art, before deciding to study the Old Masters independently in Germany, Paris, and London. While abroad, he was particularly inspired by the paintings of Manet, Velasquez, and, above all, the Dutch Master, Frans Hals. He returned to America in 1893, where he began working as a newspaper illustrator, first in Philadelphia and, later, New York, before devoting himself to painting around 1899. Among friends, he was known as "Lusty Luks," a loud and boisterous character in every sense of the word. He was a man who was given to bouts of both gusto and depression, each tempered by his lifelong battle with alcoholism.

As for his uneven production, it didn't take long for me to see for myself. It was unquestionable—Luks *was* highly inconsistent. His paintings range from technically brilliant early masterpieces, like *The Wrestlers* from 1905, to . . . some rather unsettling fumbles later in his career. But still, I wasn't satisfied. For weeks, I struggled to understand why I felt so bothered by the fact that it seemed like the experts were right. I pressed on in my research, chewing over how I could present only the best of Luks's work and still feel the exhibition was an honest representation of his career—and finally, I

figured it out. It bothered me that I couldn't resolve the unanswered questions lingering about Luks and their much larger implications for art and art history as a whole. It is clear that Luks's technical ability was present from the start. So where did these inconsistencies come from, what did they mean to the artist, and why might answers to these questions discount Luks from being considered a master in his field? Do Luks's less successful paintings negate the importance of his greatest achievements? Is consistency required to be a great artist?

To me, it seems as if George Luks struggled with these very same questions. Rather than seeing this as a technical failure, I hope to highlight that these inconsistencies should be characterized and understood for what they were—pure, unfettered experimentation. The Ashcan School was founded on the principles of risk, daring, and observation. Like all of Henri's students, Luks was exploring curiosities and pushing the extent of his own possibilities in paint. His art served as a visual diary, a physical working-out of the problems, questions, and paradoxes observed in the world around him. Further, Luks was notoriously insecure about his paintings. Behind all the bravado, he desperately wanted his art to please others. An off-handed comment from a studio visitor—whether one of his colleagues or the milk man—could result in the vigorous reworking of a composition. Above all, he was driven by a desire to develop a unique aesthetic that was both deeply personal to Luks and profoundly American in sensibility. Although the bold palettes of European modernism sometimes intrigued him, Luks would never abandon his love of form and figure. And if the Ashcan School is primarily defined by its devotion to urban subjects and the honest, artistic representation of traditionally unartistic places, people, and moments, then Luks was more devout in his career than any of The Eight or their followers.

This retrospective has been planned as a traveling exhibition, designed for consecutive displays at the Cleveland Museum of Art; The Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee; the Addison Gallery of American Art; and The Brooklyn Museum of Art. Each of these museums is an important contributor to the exhibition, and typical visitors at these institutions are likely to have at least some familiarity with the Ashcan School through its permanent collection. Forty paintings have been included in this exhibition, many of which will be on display in an art museum for the first time. *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks* will provide visitors with a rare opportunity to view the corpus of Luks's career, examining the highs and lows of his artistic process side-by-side. The paintings in the exhibition are intended to be displayed in thematic groups by subject, but this can be easily adapted to suit any number of gallery arrangements. These gallery groups will create a sense of unity throughout Luks's oeuvre, while capturing the dynamism and diversity of his artistic interests. More importantly, this organization allows for an egalitarian approach to including Luks's less successful paintings, allowing visitors to experience the full range of Luks's production and consider how each painting might help or hinder Luks's own artistic experience.

Gallery groups are intended to highlight the numerous sources of Luks's inspiration. Like other realists of the Ashcan School, Luks's was attracted to the chaotic frenzy of the city, which he captured in a number of urban scenes, like *Hester Street* from 1905, and *Copley Square, Boston*. However, to Luks, the excitement of a bustling crowd could never compare to the fierce individuality of the city's populace. Luks shows a continuous fascination with painting portraits, especially of children, most of whom were born to immigrant families on New York's Lower East Side. Luks delighted in capturing the essence of his sitters—humble but dignified. He frequently

isolated them against dark, nondescript backgrounds, like those you see here. However, Luks's was also empathetic to their daily strife. Many of these portraits document anonymous child laborers, perhaps a critical commentary on the mass exploitation of immigrant families, harking back to the artist's days as a news illustrator. But he also seems to have been inspired by their fortitude, their ability to create joy in circumstances that were, in reality, often excruciating. Similarly, Luks also favored the weathered, hard-working elderly he encountered during his frequent strolls through New York's underbelly. These serve as the aged counterparts of his portraits of youth, as if demonstrating the inescapable cycle of immigrant life in the modern city. But for all the pitfalls of the modern era, Luks was a firm believer in the beauty that endures all around us, in the seemingly insignificant. The Commonplace. From the industrial landscapes that both defined and signified the new, modern America, to common encounters with hardship and leisure, Luks painted from his own experiences. All around him, life was changing at an accelerated pace, and he recorded each moment as it unfolded before him on the streets of New York. Although it often seems that Luks thought of his own life as a crude theatrical performance, there was nothing artificial about his approach to art-making. As Luks once put it, "*It's in you or it isn't. Who taught Shakespeare technique? Guts! Life! Life! That's my technique.*"

And so, it is with great pride that I can be the first to introduce you all to *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks*. As the first major retrospective of the artist's career, this exhibition reasserts Luks's position as an artist both deserving and demanding of further consideration. By contextualizing Luks's production in the early stirrings of the Ashcan School, we are better able to understand that, throughout his career, Luks was in constant dialogue with the modern rhetoric concerning what American art *was*, what it *should be*, and where it belonged in relation to the dominant forces emerging in Western Europe. More importantly, it will also highlight Luks's achievements as they developed in tandem with less successful experiments in technique and execution. In reassessing Luks's work, we are given a unique opportunity to examine one artist's insecurities and imperfections on canvas, placing them in dialogue with his most celebrated masterworks. This exhibition will finally track the full scope of George Luks's artistic journey, encouraging visitors to engage with—and perhaps to question—current scholarship regarding the nature of his artistic process and its products. In closing, if at any time during your consideration of this exhibition proposal, I have caused you to wonder whether geniuses are born or made in American history, then I have done this exhibition justice.

At this time, I would like to extend my utmost thanks and appreciation to those who have helped me shape and mold this proposal into its final form. First, I would like to thank Dr. Holly Witchee, not only for allowing each of her students to reach for the stars, but for encouraging us to aim a little higher with every step we take. I'm indebted to Mark Cole for his invaluable guidance and advice, as well as his inspiration and encouragement to dig deeper into Luks's whole story. To my colleagues, Bailey and Valerie, who have helped me throughout this process with their thoughtful feedback and unconditional support. I would also like to thank Dean Yoder, in the Cleveland Museum of Art's conservation department, for his insight into Luks's technical processes, and Christine Edmonson, in the Ingalls Library, for her help and enthusiasm throughout my early research. And finally, to each of you—for coming in this morning, for giving your time and attention, and for showing interest in this ambitious new scholarship—Thank You!

# *Section II*

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## *Preliminary Content*

# Press Release

**PROPOSAL**



August 2017

## ***Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks* opens at the Brooklyn Museum, August 27 – October 1**

The Brooklyn Museum is pleased to announce the opening of *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks*, coming at the end of August. As the first major retrospective exhibition of George Luks, this exhibition has received national press at previous venues, which include the Cleveland Museum of Art, The Hunter Museum of American Art, and the Addison Gallery of American Art. *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks* engages with current scholarship, presents new research on the artist's life and career, and invites visitors to judge Luks's merit as an artist. The exhibition is scheduled to open August 27, and will run through October 1, 2017.



George Luks, *The Sand Artist*, 1905, oil on canvas, Private Collection

During his lifetime, Luks was known best for his portraits of immigrant women and children and bustling street scenes. Luks's rapid brushwork and thick, paint encrusted surfaces, paired with his unconventional subject matter, were evidence of his complete rejection of traditional styles then in vogue.

While there is no dispute regarding George Luks's status as an important contributor to the development and popularization of the Ashcan School, he is rarely discussed as a serious artist in his own right. Criticized for his experimental approach to painting, the inconsistencies in Luks's work and his often uneven style led to his eventual banishment from mainstream Art History. In reality, however, his bombastic personality and self-professed egotism may have masked Luks's deeper insecurities as an up-and-coming artist at the turn of the century.

Forty works will be on view, including *The Wrestlers* (1905), *Lily Williams* (c. 1909), and *Armistice Night* (1919), as well as several paintings that have never been seen in museums. Focusing on his canvases and watercolors, the exhibition will trace Luks's development as an experimental painter. The artist's most celebrated works will be displayed alongside paintings that are typically dismissed as inferior, allowing visitors the rare opportunity to compare such paintings side-by-side.

## **Brooklyn Museum**

200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY 11238-6052

T (718) 638-5000 F (718) 501-6134

[www.brooklynmuseum.org](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org)



In conjunction with the exhibition, the museum will host a lecture series on Luks and offer a variety of special events for families and adults, including an art history survey of American art led by renowned scholar Barbara Haskell. For a complete schedule of exhibition programs, visit [www.brooklynmuseum.org/calendar](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/calendar).

The Ashcan School was an artistic movement that formed in the early 20th century under the style of American Realism. Influenced by artist and teacher Robert Henri (1865-1929), a small group of artists moved to New York City and pursued painting as a profession. Henri urged them, "Paint what you feel. Paint what you see. Paint what is real to you."

Initially known as The Eight, artists like George Luks, John Sloan, Everett Shinn, and William Glackens spurred the growth of the Ashcan School. These artists shared an interest in depicting the harsh realities of modern life, including city slums and seedy speakeasies—subjects traditionally unworthy of recording in paint. However, the majority of this group (five of the Eight, including Luks) previously worked as newspaper illustrators, where their attraction to the real experiences of modern American life was born. When The Eight held their first New York exhibition in 1908, their humble subjects and loose, painterly style broke new ground in American art. The movement enjoyed only brief success, losing its political edge in the wake of European modernism after the revolutionary Armory Show in 1913.

**George Luks** (1867-1933) was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania as a first-generation American; his parents were both immigrants from Central Europe. In total, his professional training lasted less than a year. Luks moved quickly between several art schools in Pennsylvania and Europe before deciding to independently study the Old Masters in Germany, Paris, and London. Luks's most celebrated paintings have been exhibited widely in the United States and are frequently included in exhibitions of other Ashcan artists. He is always cited as one of the movement's major contributors, and Luks's works can be found in major museums and private collections, but he hasn't been the focus of a one-man show since 1987.

This exhibition is organized by Jerika Jordan, guest curator, in conjunction with the Cleveland Museum of Art.

**Press Contact:**

Fatima Jones Kafele, Public Information Officer, (718) 638-6331, [fatima.kafele@brooklynmuseum.org](mailto:fatima.kafele@brooklynmuseum.org) Sarah Lukacher, Public Information Associate, (718) 501-6354, [sarah.lukacher@brooklynmuseum.org](mailto:sarah.lukacher@brooklynmuseum.org)

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Admission:**

Contribution: \$16; students with valid I.D. and seniors \$10. Ages 19 and under FREE. Also FREE: Thursday nights, 6–10 pm, and first Saturday of the month (except September), 5–11 pm. Group tours or visits must be arranged in advance by calling extension 234.

**Directions:**

Subway: Seventh Avenue express (2 or 3) to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop; Lexington Avenue express (4 or 5) to Nevins Street, cross platform and transfer to the 2 or 3. Bus: B41, B69, B48. On-site parking available.

**Museum Hours:**

Wednesday and Friday, 11 am to 6 pm; Thursday 11 am to 10 pm; Saturday and Sunday, 11 am to 6 pm; first Saturday of each month (except September), 11 am to 11 pm. Closed Monday, Tuesday, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

## Educational Programming and Public Outreach

### Lecture Series

In conjunction with the exhibition *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks*, the museum will offer a lecture series featuring today's top scholars on George Luks. Robert Gambone, author of the only two substantial monographs on Luks's career, will discuss Luks's personal biography as it relates his varied artistic production. Judith O'Toole, author of the first comprehensive study on the artist, will engage with current scholarship on George Luks and discuss the artist's current reputation.

The museum will also bring together a variety of scholars in American and Contemporary Art in an informal Discussion Panel, during which scholars can engage with each other, questions from the audience, and the exhibition content as a platform for considering George Luks as an artist, his variable quality, and new considerations (if any) after viewing the exhibition.

Prior to the initial opening, the museum will also host "Coffee with the Curator," a special event offering museum members the opportunity to speak casually with the curator over light refreshments, followed by a gallery talk and an early preview of the show.

### Adult Programs

Join us for Pint Night to enjoy one of Luks's favorite beers at the museum café! The café will have a special brew from McSorley's Bar in New York, a favorite hang-out of the Ashcan artists made famous by John Sloan's numerous paintings of the subject. Tickets to the event also provide visitors with a collectible pint glass, specially printed with four works selected from the exhibition. Visit the museum shop to collect all four!

A Visitor Forum will be installed at the end of the exhibition, where visitors can post comment cards discussing what they liked (or not) about the exhibition and why, what they found provoking, and whether Luks should be a celebrated American artist.

Visitors are also invited to attend American Art at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: An Art History Course. Taught by special guest art historian and curator of American art, Barbara Haskell, this series will introduce visitors to the tumultuous period of American art at the turn of the century, highlighting the reasons for the rise and fall of the Ashcan School. This will consist of a four-part series spread over 4 weeks, for one low-price ticket.

### Interactive Family Programs

Among his colleagues, Luks was known for his extreme insecurity as an artist. He would frequently repaint or destroy canvases in his studio based on off-handed comments from friends and unexpected visitors. Reflecting this tendency, the museum will present "An Artist at Work." This four-part series will host a working artist for two hours each Saturday in the galleries, as (s)he paints a portrait in the Ashcan style. A box of visitor comment cards, where visitors can post their comments and suggestions on the portrait, will be installed next to the artist's working space. Once

each hour, the artist will randomly draw one comment card from the box and apply it's suggestion to the painting. A previously completed version of the same portrait will be installed next to the artist, so that guests can see how dramatically such comments can influence the final product.

To allow guests of all ages to engage with current scholarship on Luks, the museum will present "Treasure Hunt." This interactive, self-guided tour will allow visitors to guess which paintings in the exhibition are described as the artist's "masterpieces" by modern critics. A scorecard pamphlet will be provided with image reproductions, open-ended questions, and a ranking system. At the end of the exhibition, a scorecard will be available for guests to compare how their rankings compare to those of current scholars.

### Guided and Self-guided Tours

Visitors are encouraged to engage in self-guided tours of the exhibition with small "Art Talk" print-outs that will be available at the front of the galleries. These documents will include a small map of the exhibition, an overview of major themes presented, suggested traffic patterns, exhibition highlights, and a set of open-ended questions to encourage dialogue about the exhibition and its content. Q-codes will also be provided on the gallery labels, which will allow guests to get more information on a particular piece or theme panel throughout the exhibition.

Periodic docent tours of the exhibition will be provided on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Audio tours will also be made available for visitors to rent at the ticket counter.

# *Ashcan America: The Art of George Luks*

When you look at a painting, what makes it good or bad? Is it the way it looks, or how it makes you feel that's most important to you? To be a great painter, does everything you paint have to be a masterpiece?

George Benjamin Luks (1867-1933) grappled with these very same questions. His canvases question conventional beauty, express frustration, and highlight social conditions at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, these paintings also betray a self-conscious desire for fame and success. Luks desperately wanted his art to please people.

Even after his death, Luks's paintings never achieved the fame he sought. A few are praised as masterpieces, but most are overlooked. Though often listed among the most important names of the Ashcan School, he is rarely discussed as a serious artist in his own right. Like his earliest critics, modern scholars disapprove of Luks's struggle to produce high-quality paintings.

The artist's reputation has suffered criticism for more than a century, but no one has stopped to ask *why* this range of quality exists, or what it means for Luks's process and progress as an artist. This exhibition allows you to consider—where should Luks rank among 20<sup>th</sup>-century American artists?

# *What is the Ashcan School?*

The Ashcan School was an artistic movement that formed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century under the style of American Realism. Influenced by artist and teacher Robert Henri (1865-1929), a small group of artists moved to New York City and pursued painting as a profession. Henri urged them, *“Paint what you feel. Paint what you see. Paint what is real to you.”*

Initially known as The Eight, artists like George Luks, John Sloan, George Bellows, and William Glackens came to be called the Ashcan School. These artists shared an interest in depicting the harsh realities of modern life, including city slums and seedy speakeasies. Such subjects were traditionally thought to be unworthy of recording. However, the majority of this group (five of the Eight, including Luks) previously worked as newspaper illustrators. This increased their attraction to true experiences of average people. When The Eight held their first New York exhibition in 1908, their humble subjects and loose, painterly style broke new ground in American art.

The movement enjoyed only brief success. European modernism took America by storm after the revolutionary Armory Show in 1913. Ironically, although the Armory Show would ultimately cripple their popularity, many Ashcan artists, including Luks, helped organize this exhibition and displayed their works there. However, next to bold, avant-garde masters like Picasso, Matisse, and Gauguin, the Ashcan style no longer seemed so daring.

*“I don’t believe any real artist cares whether what he does is ‘art’ or not. Who, after all, knows what art is?”*

— Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*

*The Circus Tent*

1928-30

oil on canvas



*Heckscher Museum of Art; Heckscher Trust Fund*

The golden glow of a circus tent grabs our attention. The blackened sky, dotted only by the lights of a distant Ferris wheel, sharpens our sense of mystery. A crowd filters in through the open flap. We've arrived just in time to see the show. Amusement is the promise, and our enchantment with this scene is the reward.

Painted near the end of Luks's career, *The Circus Tent* shows us the world through an Ashcan lens. The scene is a bustling crowd of spectacle—but the attendants are not aristocrats at the opera. Circuses are places of oddity, wonder, and excitement. They are full of loud sounds, strange smells, and curious crowds. You never know what you might find inside, and Luks's painting urges us to imagine the full range of possible experiences that lie within it.

*Hester Street*

1905

*oil on canvas*

*The Brooklyn Museum; Dick S. Ramsay Fund*



This bustling street scene fully embraces the ideals of the Ashcan School. Near the turn of the century, Hester Street in New York City was a busy immigrant neighborhood. A new community of Jews from Eastern Europe settled in, establishing regular open-air markets. Hundreds of people gathered daily to shop for food and other goods.

Now imagine this painting on display among the glass-front galleries of Manhattan. The social elite, who could afford to spend luxury time and money shopping in art galleries, were the intended audience. For them, paintings like *Hester Street* reflected the unfortunate effects of urban living. However, to Luks, these scenes bore the true heart of New York. This was life as he, and most others, saw and experienced it every day.

## *The Butcher Cart*

1901

*oil on canvas*

*The Art Institute of Chicago; Friends of American Art Collection*



The wooden wheels of a horse-drawn cart creak and wobble through muddied snow. A full load of freshly-slaughtered hogs swings and sways on the back of the cart as it heads to the meatpacker. A hopeful mutt follows close behind, sniffing longingly at the stock.

Luks often walked city streets looking for inspiration in the world around him. One of his earliest known paintings, *The Butcher Cart* depicts Gansevoort Market, a neighborhood near the Hudson River. This small district was home to more than 250 slaughterhouses, with tenement housing spread throughout. The cobbled streets were said to be permanently bloodstained, and the constant stench of decay hung thick in the air. As we come to accept that this was a specific moment in a familiar location, possibilities beyond the painting's initial humor begin to unfold.



*Copley Square, Boston*

1905 (1922-23?)

*oil on canvas*

*Private Collection*



Luks completed a series of Boston scenes during his trips to the city in the early 1920s. This painting captures the crisp feel of a wintery night experienced by local commuters. The moody blues and tonal purples distill the scene to a pattern of shadows and unnatural light. We stand as if under a street lamp, where the bright light blurs our vision of what lies beyond.

Like many of his paintings, the proposed date of this work has been questioned. Luks never traveled to Boston around 1905. However, this composition closely resembles popular postcards of Copley Square from the 1920s, which he probably saw during his stay in Boston around this time. From the vantage point of the public library to the dark silhouette in the foreground, Luks borrowed heavily from these simple souvenirs.

*Roundhouse at High Bridge*

1909-10

*oil on canvas*

*Munson-Williams-Proctor Art Institute*



Luks painted *Roundhouse at High Bridge* when he was at the height of his early career. A familiar location to fellow New Yorkers, this slice of the Harlem River divides northern Manhattan from the Bronx. Luks probably drew a quick sketch of the scene in pencil or charcoal from the footbridge, but returned to the studio to complete the final painting. This practice reflects his earlier work as a newspaper illustrator, which required him to capture the essence of a scene quickly and develop the details from either memory or imagination.

*Lily Williams*

c. 1909

*oil on canvas*

*Private Collection*



One of Luks's greatest strengths was in painting portraits. The youngest and oldest inhabitants of immigrant neighborhoods and tenement housing interested him greatly, and he painted them often.

*Lily Williams* is a rare example where Luks titled the painting with the sitter's name. Like many of his East Side portrait sitters, before becoming one of Luks's subjects, Lily Williams was a faceless girl from the wrong side of town. The hard side. The side that makes you tough. To us, she now represents the whole body of anonymous children suffering the injustices of having no choice in where and when you are born.

But she is also fiercely individual. Her blue eyes feel piercing as we look back at her, as if she's sizing us up. Her weight is pushed casually onto one leg. At any moment, she could choose to fight, or to run. This straightforward stare suggests that she is unashamed (or unaware) of her social status, but her reserved expression hints that she has the upper hand in this sidewalk encounter.

*The Breaker Boys*

c. 1925

oil on canvas

Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens



Luks was born in the small coal town of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. His father worked closely with local laborers, providing healthcare to coal miners and their families. At a young age, Luks learned to respect the high stakes of industrial life for those outside America's major urban centers.

In the summers of 1923, 1925, and 1927, Luks returned to coal country. The industry suffered severe wage cuts after World War I, and miner's riots began spreading across the country. This painting bears strong political undertones, recalling Luks's early years as a newspaper illustrator. Not only did *The Breaker Boys* speak to current events, but Luks also highlights one of the more controversial aspects of production—dangerous child labor.

*My Garden, Berk(shire) Hills*

c. 1931

*watercolor on paper*

*Private Collection*



In 1925, Luks purchased a small farm in the Berkshire Hills of Old Chatham, New York. This view shows his extensive garden in full bloom. An ocean of fresh flowers recedes into the even deeper-blue sky above. While his watercolor landscapes from this period visually burst with color and life, this period was a troublesome time for Luks.

Early in the 1920s, many artists from the original Eight died, most of them unexpectedly. The rest abandoned New York. At the same time, Luks's own fame was rising to new heights, and he enjoyed fresh success with popular collectors. The farm became a safe haven for Luks as he began experimenting with watercolor to combat bouts of depression and alcoholism.

*The Spielers*

1905

*oil on canvas*

*Addison Gallery of American Art; Gift of an anonymous donor*



This painting, both in appearance and message, are simple. There is nothing fancy about this scene, and its participants are neither rich nor famous. Even in the tenement slums, there is joy to be found. If only just for a moment, the sounds spilling out of overcrowded apartments are replaced by feet tapping to an unheard tune and the young girls' spirited laughter.

Luks may have been inspired by the childlike abandon as the girls dance freely in the street. They have no anxieties about work, money, or survival. However, he may have also empathized with the importance of these brief moments of happiness. Many immigrant families survived the worst conditions imaginable, struggling every day to make ends meet. And he would know. After all, his parents were immigrants, too.

*The Bersaglieri*

1918

*oil on canvas*

*National Gallery of Art; Gift of the Avalon Foundation*



Just as Luks was beginning to establish his reputation as a serious painter, America entered into World War I. By the summer of 1918, American soldiers were being shipped to the battlefield at the rate of nearly 10,000 GIs per day. No one was left unaffected.

In July of 1918, the streets of Fifth Avenue were decorated for a public fundraiser promoting Liberty Loan War Bonds. The title of this painting is taken from the specific troop of Italian soldiers, The Bersaglieri, shown here in a march supporting the Fourth Liberty Loan. Luks paints the dramatic moment in which the uniformed soldiers, with Italian flags waving, emerge from the shadows of high-rise buildings, spilling into the sunlit boulevard.

A massive undertaking, this painting was created as a pendant piece to Luks's *Blue Devils on Fifth Avenue* from the same year. Luks intended both of these paintings to be displayed in his October exhibition, alongside a series of patriotic subjects begun after 1917.

*The Wrestlers*

1905

*oil on canvas*



*Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Hayden Collection – Charles Henry Hayden Fund*

Wrestling gained new popularity as a spectator sport after it was reintroduced in the Olympic Games in 1896. However, at the beginning of the 1900s, Victorian ideals of modesty still influenced American culture. With its nearly-naked participants and extreme physical contact, wrestling wasn't yet a respectable pursuit at the turn of the century.

Here, the artist faithfully recorded the tense muscles and fierce competition of this match's unnamed contenders. A trophy of Luks's technical skill, this painting had the potential to boost the artist's early career. Still, Luks understood the social tensions of the sport, and he kept the painting out of public view until 1910. Local critics immediately praised it as a masterpiece.



*Pals*

1905

oil on canvas

New Britain Museum of American Art; Harriet Russell Stanley Fund



*Pals* is a tribute to the Old Master painter Luks most admired, Frans Hals. This painting is Luks's updated version of Hals's frequently copied *Malle Babbe* (c. 1633). The Dutch painter's bold brushwork and thick layers of paint influenced Luks's personal style from the beginning of his career. Luks was often compared to Hals—by both Luks and his critics.

Luks pursued humble subjects throughout his lifetime. In *Pals*, the real subject is emphasized by the title. It is not the old woman, nor the exotic bird which should intrigue us most. The love and companionship shared between them is simple, but dignified. These are the moments of beauty disguised in the forms of the commonplace. This is the Ashcan aesthetic.

Frans Hals, *Malle Babbe*



# *Section III*

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## *Color Plates*

**Checklist No.:** 1

**Title:** *Self-Portrait with Pince-Nez*

**Date:** 1930

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** New York Historical Society Museum and Library



Checklist No.: 2

Title: *Armistice Night*

Date: 1918

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Whitney Museum of American Art



Checklist No.: 3

Title: *The Bersaglieri*

Date: 1918

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: National Gallery of Art



**Checklist No.:** 4

**Title:** *Bleecker and Carmine Streets, New York*

**Date:** 1905

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Milwaukee Art Museum



Checklist No.: 5

Title: *The Butcher Cart*

Date: 1901

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Art Institute of Chicago



Checklist No.: 6

Title: *The Circus Tent*

Date: c. 1928-30

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Heckscher Museum of Art





**Checklist No.:** 7

**Title:** *Copley Square, Boston*

**Date:** 1904 (1923-25?)

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Private Collection



**Checklist No.:** 8

**Title:** *Fifth Avenue, New York*

**Date:** 1920

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Private Collection



Checklist No.: 9

Title: *Hester Street*

Date: 1905

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Brooklyn Museum



**Checklist No.:** 10

**Title:** *Hitch Team (Horses in the Snow)*

**Date:** 1916

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



Checklist No.: 11

Title: *Holiday on the Hudson*

Date: c. 1912

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Cleveland Museum of Art



Checklist No.: 12

Title: *In the Steerage*

Date: 1900

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: North Carolina Museum of Art



**Checklist No.:** 13

**Title:** *The North River, New York*

**Date:** c. 1910

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Private Collection



**Checklist No.:** 14

**Title:** *Roundhouse at High Bridge*

**Date:** c. 1909

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute





Checklist No.: 15

Title: *The Breaker Boys*

Date: c. 1925

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens



Checklist No.: 16

Title: *Three Top Sargeants*

Date: 1925

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Detroit Institute of Arts



**Checklist No.:** 17

**Title:** *The Wrestlers*

**Date:** 1905

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



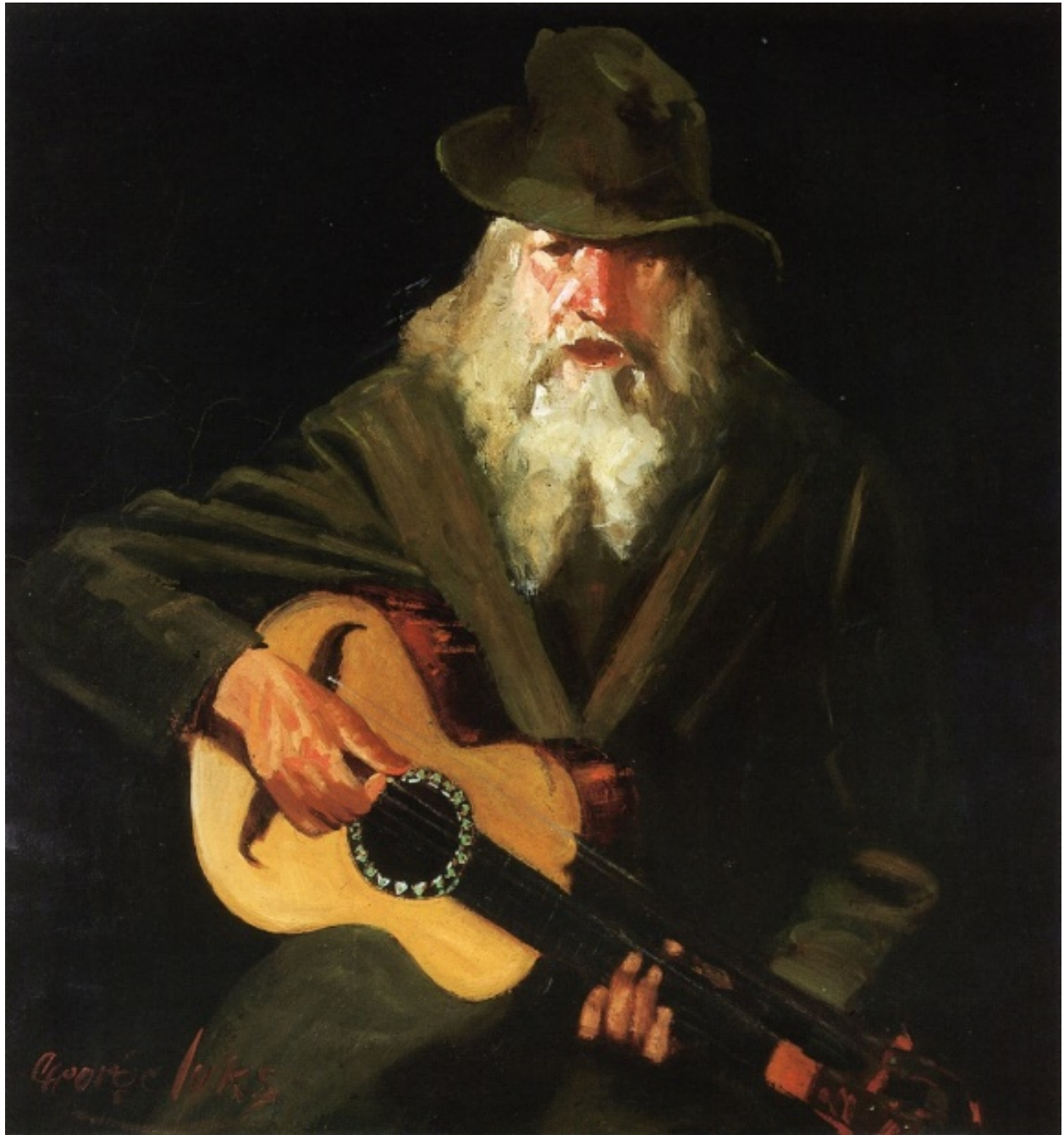
Checklist No.: 18

Title: *Hobo Musician*

Date: n.d.

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Private Collection



Checklist No.: 19

Title: *Old Salt*

Date: 1909

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Private Collection



Checklist No.: 20

Title: *Otis Skinner as Col. Philippe Bridau*

Date: 1919

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: The Phillips Collection



Checklist No.: 21

Title: *Pals*

Date: c. 1907

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: New Britain Museum of American Art



Checklist No.: 22

Title: *The Polka Dot Dress*

Date: 1927

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Smithsonian American Art Museum





Checklist No.: 23

Title: *Telling Fortunes*

Date: 1914

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: The Phillips Collection



Checklist No.: 24

Title: *Boy with Dice*

Date: c. 1923

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester



Checklist No.: 25

Title: *Breaker Boy of Shenandoah, PA*

Date: 1921

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Walker Art Center



Checklist No.: 26

Title: *Child with Wagon (Snow Kid)*

Date: 1916

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Private Collection



Checklist No.: 27

Title: *Girl with a Pink Ribbon*

Date: n.d.

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Private Collection



**Checklist No.:** 28

**Title:** *Lily Williams*

**Date:** c. 1909

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Private Collection



Checklist No.: 29

Title: *The Little Madonna*

Date: 1907

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Addison Gallery of American Art



Checklist No.: 30

Title: *The Sand Artist*

Date: 1905

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Private Collection





**Checklist No.:** 31

**Title:** *The Spielers*

**Date:** 1905

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Repository:** Addison Gallery of American Art



Checklist No.: 32

Title: *Tom*

Date: n.d.

Medium: oil on canvas

Repository: Private Collection



Checklist No.: 33

Title: *Autumn Landscape*

Date: 1930

Medium: watercolor on paper

Repository: Private Collection



Checklist No.: 34

Title: *Boulders on a Riverbank*

Date: 1919

Medium: watercolor on paper

Repository: Private Collection



**Checklist No.:** 35

**Title:** *Landscape with Pool, Montauk, Long Island*

**Date:** c. 1930

**Medium:** watercolor on white paper

**Repository:** Indianapolis Museum of Art



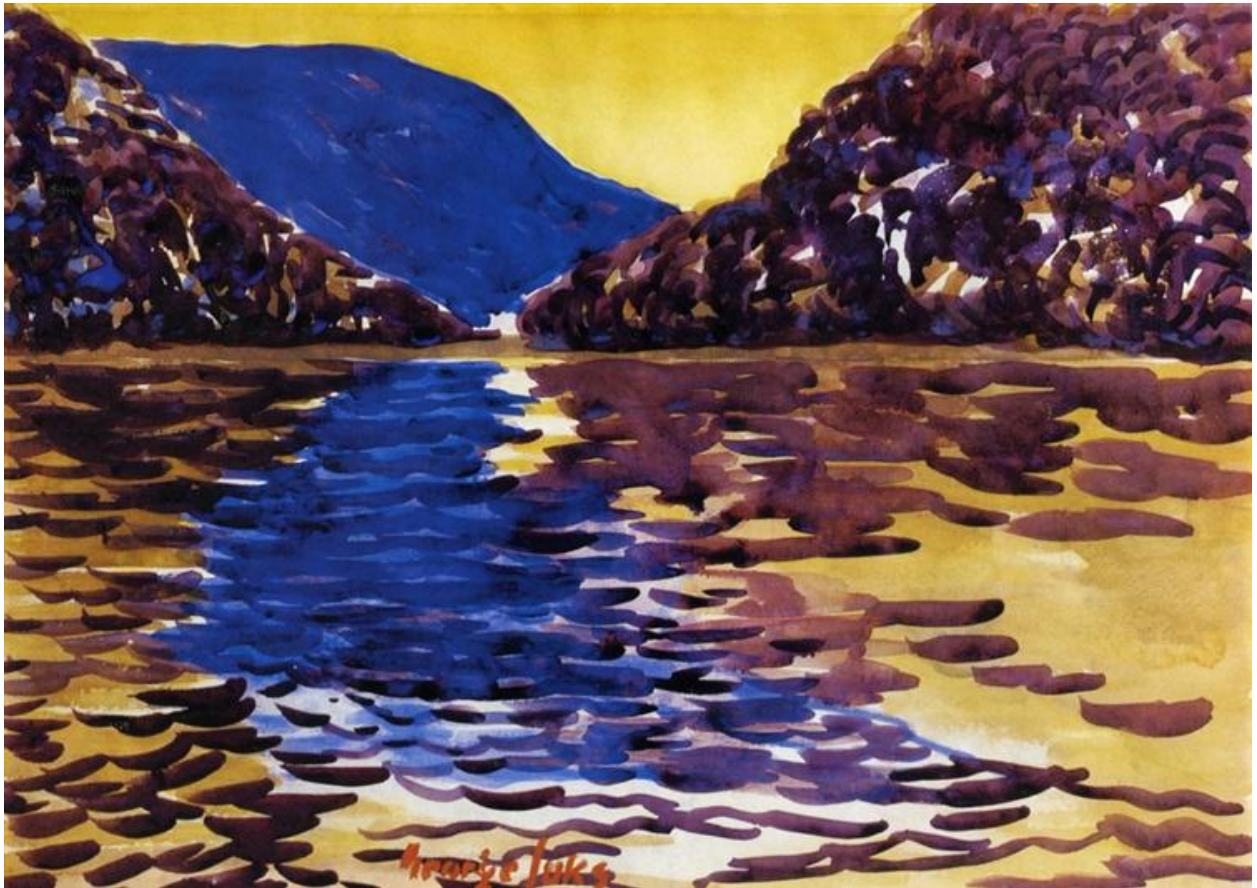
Checklist No.: 36

Title: *Lower Ausable Lake, Adirondacks*

Date: n.d.

Medium: watercolor on paper

Repository: Private Collection



Checklist No.: 37

Title: *My Garden, Berk(shire) Hills*

Date: c. 1930

Medium: watercolor on paper

Repository: Private Collection



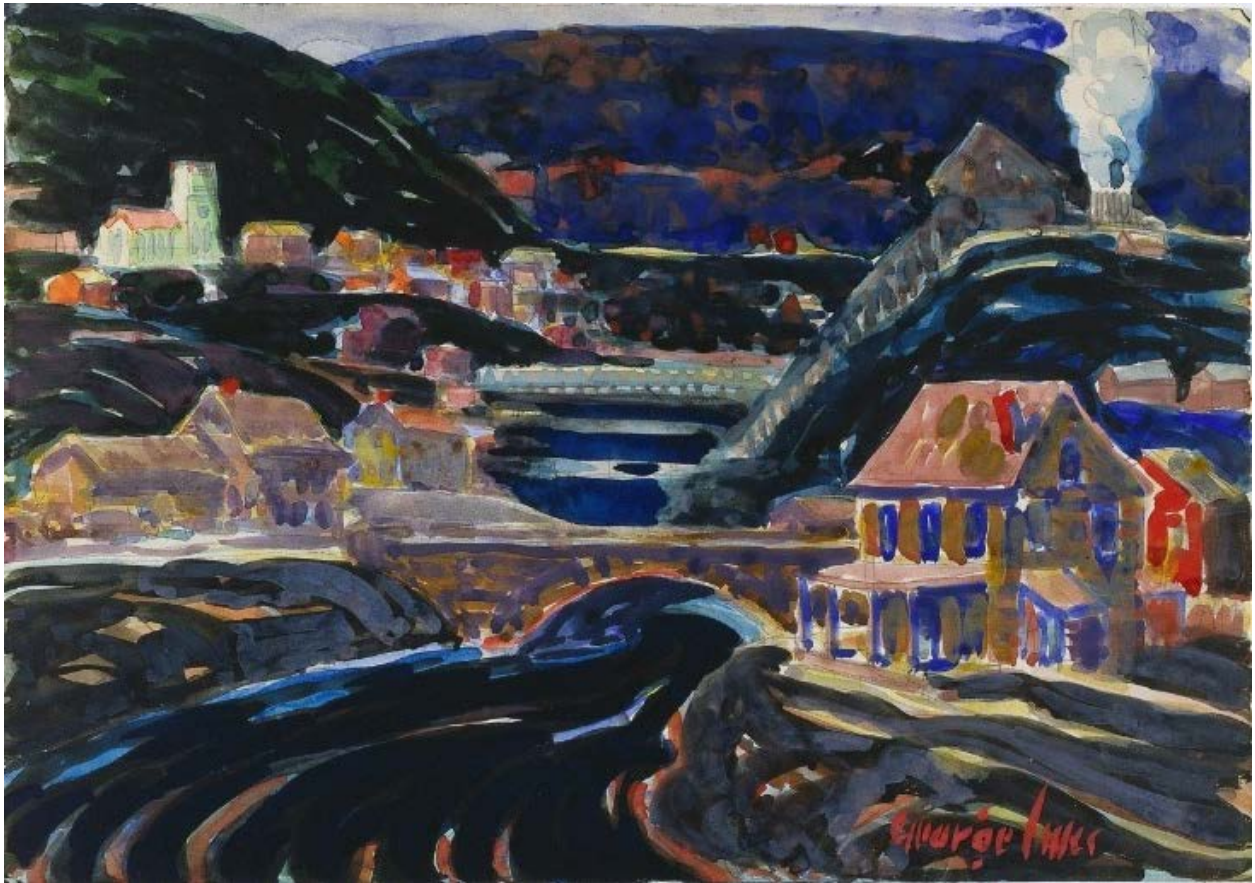
Checklist No.: 38

Title: *Pennsylvania Coal Town*

Date: c. 1920

Medium: watercolor and gouache over graphite on paper

Repository: Cleveland Museum of Art





Checklist No.: 39

Title: *Purple Hills*

Date: n.d.

Medium: watercolor on paper laid on board

Repository: Private Collection



Checklist No.: 40

Title: *Sunset*

Date: c. 1928-30

Medium: watercolor on paper

Repository: Private Collection

