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The Electric Metropolis

The energy of modernization can be characterized as fast-paced, exhilarating and rapid - all descriptions you can see reflected in art movements such as futurism, precisionism and hints of Cubism in early 20th century New York - especially within Joseph Stella's dynamic compositions. With a stunning combination of bold lines, vibrant colors and fragmented perspectives, he captures the electrifying pulse of New York City - transforming the urban environment into a futuristic spectacle. The swift pace of modernization often brought a sense of profound dislocation in city dwellers, where the bustle of the streets and endless blocks of towering structures created an overwhelming sensory experience - with traces of this confusion being displayed in Stella's work *The Battle of Lights, Coney Island* (Figure 1) and industrial prowess being exemplified in *Brooklyn Bridge* (Figure 2) and *Factories* (Figure 3). Stella's new pictorial way of New York City captures the excitement of modernization through bold geometric forms and dynamic forms, worldbuilding almost a spiritual-like experience of urban life for his viewers.

Urban space is constantly in motion, and this notion can be exemplified through Stella's 'kaleidoscopic' perspective of the drama of the modern city. New York City had built itself up so dramatically in the early 20th century that it created almost a new spiritual effect - birthing the skyline into a realm of fantasy. Skyscrapers are the cathedral of the new world, and other monumental structures of steel are not excluded from this statement. The Brooklyn Bridge serves

as the perfect embodiment of this transformation, standing as a literal and metaphorical connector of Manhattan and Brooklyn. It quickly became an icon of modernity, as it represents the bridging of the gap between human ingenuity and the natural world. The vibrating coils of this structure become a focal point of *The Brooklyn Bridge* (1939), as the painting carries the heavy movement, vibrancy and complexity of the city's modern essence. Stella uses bold lines and fragmented shapes in order to create a sense of dynamism, making the static fluid. - capturing the intricate cables of the Brooklyn Bridge as more than just an architectural feat, but a representation of spiritual and transformative power. These design elements are borrowed from Italian Futurism, as linear dynamism is the focal point of this movement ¹. The swirling lines and layered crystal-like colors evoke the rapid motion of the urban environment, emphasizing how the city is always in a perpetual state. Figure 1 serves as a representation of the infinite possibilities the urban space has to offer, creating an image of economic prosperity for both individuals and society as a whole.

Building on the theme of economic prosperity and transformative power of the urban space, Figure 2 offers a deeper exploration of the industrial forces that shaped the modernizing New York City. While Figure 1 has more of a focus on the celebratory of the aesthetic and spiritual grandeur of New York's skyline, *Factories* (1918) shifts the main focus to the heart of the city's industrial life. Stella captures the mechanical raw energy of factories, and hum-drum rhythm that the economic boom brought to the city. These shifts would not have been possible without the drive produced by the relentless work of manufacturing and production that factories incubate. Just how the *Brooklyn Bridge* connects the physical divide between neighborhoods, *Factories* connect the viewer to the industrial backbone of the city. With such a huge emphasis

¹ Whitney Museum of American Art. "Sam Gilliam: *Robe de Chambre* (1971)." Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://whitney.org/collection/works/2968>.

on the importance of manufactured labor, it highlights the power of industry in the modern urban landscape. Stella uses a heavily layered composition in order to convey the intensity of the factory setting. The painting is organized through a series of vertical and diagonal lines that guides the viewer's across the work. The lines, being a dominant feature in this piece, emphasize the towering structure of the factory itself and how overwhelming its presence can be. The intense contrast between the light and dark hues of colors also emphasize the harsh, industrial nature of the factory. The interplay of the light and dark - such as the black parts of the factory structure being highlighted by the softer blue's of the sky in the back - can possibly symbolize the tension between progress and exploitation, a theme that carries itself with the rise of industrialization and working conditions of factory laborers in the early 20th century.

The most electrifying piece out of all the chosen artworks is arguably Figure 3. *The Battle of Lights, Coney Island* (1913). Coney Island has been significantly recognized as a cultural and artistic symbol, especially in the early 20th century. It was known for its iconic boardwalk, lively entertainment scene and amusement parks and was a popular destination for middle-class New Yorkers to escape and seek leisurely pleasures and activities ². For Stella, Coney Island represented both modernity and a dynamic cultural landscape. Figure 3 hastily captures the sense of fragmentation and ecstasy of modernization and its products. Through the usage of artificial colors of paint, Stella illustrates machines dotted with electric lights - highlighting artists fascination with speed and technology during this time period. The notion of 'Embrace the new forget the classic' is manifested in Figure 3, as it abandons traditional principles of classical design techniques, as these new emerging contemporary artists sought to express the dynamism of the modern world through repetition of abstract forms and bold fragmentation. There is a

² Register, Woody. *New York History* 85, no. 3 (2004): 282–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23185838>.

sense of the urban form being a staccato, pulsating rhythm, mirroring the rapid movement of the city. The overlapping shapes reflect the disjointed yet exciting new experience of modern life. Stella's depiction of Coney Island, is a mere physical rendition of the conceptual ideals such as speed and the synthetic being celebrated during this time. The electrifying lights and color disguised machinery are not just representations of physical space, but also an expression of the cultural energy that defined the early 20th century.

Joseph Stella's work remains a timeless exploration of how modernity reshapes both the physical and psychological landscapes of urban life. By pushing the boundaries of traditional artistic representation, he was able to offer new ways to see the city - reshaping the urban life as something full of possibilities and being alive with life. Whether through the capturing of the raw power of factories, or the chaotic lights of Coney Island, Stella's art reflects both the excitement and disorientation brought upon modernization in urban life.



Figure 1.
Joseph Stella, *The Brooklyn Bridge: Variation on an Old Theme* (1936)



Figure 2.
Joseph Stella, *Factories* (1918)



Figure 3.
Joseph Stella, *The Battle of Lights, Coney Island* (1913)

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