

Immigrant Artists and How They Affected the World Art Center (NYC) in the 1900s

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Abstract: This research is based on the population migration that is located in New York in the 1900s, where, at that time, numerous immigrants from all around the world arrived and dwelled, seeking chances and a place to live. Such a social context promoted interpersonal exchange and cultural diffusion and made New York the world center of art at the time. The paper focuses on the immigrant artists in New York city in the 1900s and how they affected New York city in that time period, giving examples of artists. This research views art from the perspective of immigration and cultural fusion and the impacts of modern population migration, so it will be able to explain the art developments in New York city from a different perspective. Finally, this research concludes that through influencing local organizations and inspiring people to pay more attention to the issues that immigrants face.

Keywords: New York city, immigration, modern art

1. Introduction

New York City, with all its sky-lined glamour, communal bustle, and economic bloom, was, in the eyes of many people, the ideal residence for life. As Michel de Certeau defined it, New York was “a gigantic rhetoric of excess.” [1]. Immigrants see New York as the ultimate destination of opportunity and wealth; as demographer Audrey Singer states, it has become a continuous gateway of immigration where immigrants throughout history have seen the city as a point to enter the US society [2]. True to word, in the 1900s, NYC has become the whirlpool that draws in talented individuals from all over the world. The immigrants came from a large assortment of countries and regions, were of different ethnicities, and often believed in different philosophies. This multiplicity can also be seen in the category of artists that immigrated from their home nation to this prevailing city. Many of the artists fuse what is conceived as the style of modern art completed by characteristic white artists of US or west European origin and the culture and norms of their homeland. The outcome always speaks of some form of social difficulty that the artist is struggling against or the overall brawl of cultural differences or social discrimination between immigrants and local white people. These influential and novel art styles and connotations blended with the local modern art and became a collective voice that shouted out to society. In turn, these styles notify the city’s residents of the violence, cultural discrimination, racism, sexism, and many other crimes. All the changes are being committed by the extensive immigrant settlers, creating this newfangled and solid art style of expressing the voice of a modern population. “There are conflicts and struggles.

But the struggle has produced a kind of strength, even beauty.” Immigrant black artist Jacob Lawrence said during an interview

This new system and style of artistic creation greatly impacted New York society. Nowadays, nonprofit organizations functioning to help immigrant artists and the general immigrant population appear in many major cities in the USA, including New York. These none profit organizations kept count of the immigrant populations working in different industries and their living conditions and helped the people under poor living conditions and with low wages to settle in the city. The New York public art exhibitions also accepted the works of immigrant artists into their halls. Now spectators can see masterpieces done by immigrant artists in established institutions like the MOMA and the Smithsonian art museum. These public announcements and exhibitions help convey the ideology of the artists and the idea of racial and cultural equality.

New York, as seen in the eyes of many artists, Is the center of modern world art. The New York 1939 world fair exhibited numerous murals of modernism features, the poster was composed of geometric shapes and vibrant colors that portrayed satellites and spotlights, and the perspective was drawn as if looking from space at the dwindled earth. This contemporary selection of topics and its novel viewpoint was nothing like the classical oil paintings with perfectly linear perspectives and proportions in Europe. This innovation in the style of art and the collectiveness of modernism in New York City attracted many eager to use this less professional manner of art to express their own opinions through the act of composition and display. New York, with its diverse population and the large number of notions and perspectives its occupants hold, became the ideal studio for modern artists all around the world. This attraction to modern art and cultural diversity may be why New York became the center of modern art and certainly one of the most diverse in its style of composition [3].

Against this background, this essay attempts to argue that immigrant artists greatly influenced New York in the 1900s. Additionally, it will analyze the examples of multiple immigrant artists and their works.

2. Social Context of Immigration

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, immigrants from all over the world came to the USA, landing in major immigrant cities like Philadelphia, Chicago, and most importantly, New York. They sought opportunities to obtain profitable jobs and start businesses with the encouragement of America’s booming economy and industry, or perhaps simply to flee from the social unrest going on in their home country. However, a considerable quantity of these individuals found themselves facing local unwelcomeness and discrimination, sometimes even harassment. For immigrants-those who came from South America, and Asia-people with colored skin were considered especially as outsiders, and even for those that are from Europe or of European descent, they are still considered of another ethnicity because of their native tongue and the cultures they grew up immersed in.

In the 2018 award-winning movie that discusses racism, the Green Book, the half-Italian driver was considered and called quite rudely as “half a nigger” by two white policemen, and was talked to in a condescending manner. This shows that the native white community viewed anyone of immigrant identity or of immigrant descent as lower than them in terms of social status and capability, and this phenomenon was inevitable in a populated area such as New York.

Between 1892 and 1954, seventeen million immigrants came to the United States through Ellis Island in New York City [4]. Artworks of immigrant artists that experienced these discriminations firsthand also included factors such as people of different races facing off against one another or illustrate the division between the immigrants and the locals by physically drawing the two populations apart. This shows the vital situation immigrants face when arriving in New York, if they were healthy or lucky enough to get past the inspections positioned in Ellis Island and avoid

detention, especially the judgments that they receive. Due to this social imbalance, the immigrants were forced into poorer living and producing conditions. The houses where these immigrants lived were called tenements. They were small in size and tightly packed together, similar to the apartment buildings today but only smaller and less equipped. In the book *How the Other Half Lives*, the author documents how immigrants lived in tenements in New York City. Jacob Riis described that sometimes in tenements, up to 12 adults would sleep compacted together in a space just 13 feet across. And for children, life was harder: the infant mortality rate in these tenements was one in every ten [5].

These conditions that immigrants face in the US, especially in great metropolises like New York, lead to the genre of artworks, mostly composed by immigrant artists who experienced the ill environment firsthand that depict struggling immigrants and their poor condition and the mistreatments they endured.

3. Influence of Immigrant Environment on Artists

An example of an immigrant artist who sought to fight the ill-treatment laid upon immigrants was the famous artist and cartoonist Art Spiegelman. When Art Spiegelman first saw the statue of liberty, standing tall with its golden torch gleaming and its rusted body the colour of the wave below, he was three years old. And was perched on his father's shoulders as his dad pointed out the giant statue to him on the deck of the *Gripsholm* heading to Ellis Island. His parents were Polish Jews and survivors of the concentration camps during the holocaust in the second world war. Consequently, they gained the privilege of immigrating to the United States and took their three-year-old son with them as they sailed across the Atlantic to their new residence. The Spiegelman family came ashore at New York, Ellis Island, where the scene portrayed above took place.

After immigrating to New York City in 1951, the Spiegelman family settled in Queens [6], the most populous area in the busy metropolis at that time and also one of the most racially and culturally diverse zones in the city where forty percent of the population was foreign-born and approximately nine percent were Jewish. In this particular expanse of the city landscape, Spiegelman grew up being influenced by his family and fellow immigrants living in the area. Also, he was inspired by the *Mad* magazine, which was a novelty at that time and had quickly gained popularity, which features humorous comics with proportionally distorted figures of celebrities and often included the technique of satire and used that technique to convey political viewpoints and comment on current news. He became fascinated with this art style and especially how comics, an art form much disputed over by conventional artists, can easily convey one's perspective and opinions. He later composed the piece: *A Warm Welcome*, in the year 2015, reflecting on when he used to live as an immigrant newly arrived in the city [7]. The piece depicted the customary resident white culture on the left, with elements like the American flag and the statue of liberty. But the artist distorted these elements so that they are shown as horrors that oppose the immigrants on the right side of the painting. The statue of liberty, which was normally considered a welcoming landmark, was the first thing many immigrants saw when they arrived in New York by the sea with her mouth opened wide like a devouring maw and spewed columns of flame at the new arrivals, hindering their process of coming to the US. Besides the iconic statue, two semi-bald white, old men, with their signature jeans and polo shirts on which the American flag was printed, held signs that read unwelcoming statements such as "return to sender", telling the immigrants to go back to where they had come from. The immigrants were portrayed with their faces, adults and small children alike, scrunched up in agony and horror and sorrow. Their postures low and twisted, some were lying on the floor and some falling or kneeling, their luggage falling from their grips. These powerful constitutions convey the sense of unwelcome that the immigrants faced in New York City, where, at the time Spiegelman was still young, the white culture was still the prevailing force. His

artworks are now exhibited in numerous exhibitions all over the world. A particular exhibition called big city life which was featured in 2021, portrayed some of art Spiegelman's works about New York [8]. The substance of the exhibition had been to show the city from different perspectives and to show cities with idiosyncrasy and divergence. Through the exhibition, and the many international occasions that his work was shown to an audience, the artist was seen by society, as people bought tickets to witness their masterpieces, the spreading of their ideals was done, and those who were influenced by these magnificent and astonishing artworks opened their eyes to the social issue of immigrants facing mistreatment and living in deprived conditions and perhaps take action to improve and ameliorate the current status.

4. Improvements in the Immigrant Environment

Indeed, people have acted as immigrant artists, and their astonishing artworks were beginning to make their official appearance in society as the immigrant problem began to gain the attention of those who care and worry about humanity and civil rights. Abou Farman, an artist who teaches at the new school and also founded art space sanctuary, says that, in a media interview, "art organizations have a powerful opportunity to step up and rise to the call, by becoming engaged and playing a crucial role in protecting and serving migrant communities, and our goal is to find and facilitate the pathways for artists and cultural organizations to become directly engaged in this struggle."

New immigration laws have been established that ensure safety and well-being, such as the act of March 3, 1903. Law guides in various languages are created and distributed on the internet for the free use of citizens and immigrants who need legal support [9]. These online pamphlets have sections in them like sources for immigration law and the overall introduction to the up-to-date immigration status. all are made for the convenience and safety of the immigrant. Also, the industry of immigrant assistance in New York City has developed, and how people who are willing to migrate have legal ways to come to the United States as an upright citizen with all the social and political powers that an immigrant should have. Also, immigration services sprang up to solve problems based on immigrant living conditions. The New York City community development agency, also known as the CDA, found that numerous immigrants were sustaining resources provided by these nonprofit services [10]. Neighborhood-based services in New York have come to the aid of those with requirements and helped immigrants get out of tenements and into brighter and healthier apartment buildings to ensure personal hygiene and individual space. Another change is that the government and local administrations have noticed the need for immigrant families to take care of their children and find ways to acquire maintainable financial income. The comprehensive efforts of the New York city administration for children's services, along with immigrant advocacy organizations, developed resources and methods to serve migrant families with children and help them raise their kids in the novel urban environment.

5. Conclusion

In the 21th century, matters considering immigrants are a lot better. Immigrants have decent jobs, and money to feed themselves and their children and maybe enjoy entertainment; the overall immigrant life has never been better. Additionally, laws and organizations are established to help the immigrant population and aid their need, and government policies also protect the basic rights of immigrants. Certainly, the works and ideals of artists played an indispensable role in spreading the open mindset of acceptance and protection, their works, although maybe not appreciated back in the 1900s, were priceless masterpieces today that symbolize a generation of hardship laid upon the first immigrants to this foreign land of freedom and opportunities. But what cannot be overlooked is

how many immigrants who crossed the US border through illegal means still exist, and so many other problems still bother immigrants and Americans alike, meaning many improvements are yet to be made. But what has to be remembered is that the immigrant artists who bravely put their paintings of suffering and difficulty on display did participate, on a large scale, in changing the way people view immigrants and, therefore, helping to improve their social status.

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