

Brooklyn Bridge, New York, 1929

When the Brooklyn Bridge opened to traffic in 1883, it was the largest suspension bridge in the world, and its towers were the tallest structures in the Western Hemisphere. As the years went by, that triumph of engineering and architecture began to lose its power to inspire awe. By 1929, when Walker Evans began to photograph it, the bridge had become merely the unexciting link between the New York boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan; it was hardly even noticed by the harried commuters who crossed it every day. Evans's gift was to perceive something familiar as if it had never been seen before and therefore to restore the Brooklyn Bridge's original wonder.

Evans became interested in photography as a child, when he collected penny postcards and took pictures of his friends and family with an inexpensive Kodak camera. As a young man, he developed a passion for literature, and he spent 1927 in Paris as an aspiring writer. Upon his return, he began to revisit his childhood hobby, hoping to apply literary concepts such as irony and lyricism to photography. As the technical possibilities of the medium had expanded, photography had grown from its original

documentary and commercial functions (and its function as a popular pastime) into a form of fine art. It was still an art that had not entirely freed itself from the rules of nineteenth-century Western painting. Evans's European experience, however, had converted him to the strict geometries of modernist art. He disliked the preciousness of "art photography," and endeavored to capture the sincerity of a snapshot in his own work.

From the windows of the rooms he rented in Brooklyn Heights, Evans had a fine view of the Brooklyn Bridge. Inspired to take a closer look, he recorded his impressions with the simple camera he habitually carried in his pocket. The resulting series of photographs captures the bold forms of the bridge in stark, arresting, geometric designs. These images helped to establish the Brooklyn Bridge as an emblem of modernity, and to popularize its use as a motif among modern American artists.

Previous photographers had focused on a lateral view of the bridge, taking in the bold shapes and sweeping scallops of the structure as a whole, and keeping the Manhattan skyline visible in the distance. Evans takes an altogether different perspective, shocking the viewer out of complacency. In this photograph, the enormous piers and arches are shown through a web of steel cables. The only immediately identifiable element in the composition is the lamppost on the right, which gives the picture a sense of scale, yet appears strangely separate from its setting. At first, the pattern of radiating lines is disorienting, but once our eyes grow accustomed to the photographer's point of view, we discover we are on the central pedestrian walkway of the Brooklyn Bridge. The composition is slightly asymmetrical, which suggests that Evans had taken his picture standing just off-center of the bridge's walkway. The sharp angle of perspective, emphasized by the quickly receding lines of the cables, suggests that he set the camera low, perhaps even on the ground.

This clever calculation includes no sign that the Brooklyn Bridge serves any practical purpose. Normally vibrant with the commotion of twentieth-century transportation, the thoroughfare here appears quiet and eerily depopulated, an object meant to be appreciated only as a work of art. The unusual vantage point also eliminates the expected views of city and river, so that the bridge appears to float in an empty sky. Because Evans has detached it from its urban context, the Brooklyn Bridge also appears removed from its own time: the heavy forms and medieval-style piers and arches recall the gates of an ancient fortress, while the pattern of steel cables hints at some untried, futuristic technology. In this remarkably compact image (the print is no larger than the vest pocket that held his camera), Evans presents us with two new and substantial concepts that would forever alter our perception of the Brooklyn Bridge: as an icon of modernity and as a monument that already belongs to history.



13-A Walker Evans (1903–1975), *Brooklyn Bridge, New York, 1929*, printed c. 1970. Gelatin silver print, 6¾ x 4⅓ in. (17.2 x 12.2 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Arnold H. Crane, 1972 (1972.742.3). © The Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this photograph,

paying attention to the directions of the bridge and cable lines.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Ask students if they would recognize the image in this photograph as a bridge if it were not titled. Is this the shape they visualize when they think of a bridge?

Most students will probably say it is not.

Why not?

It's from a different viewpoint than the one from which we usually see a bridge.

When most artists create a picture of a bridge, what view do they show of it?

Most photographs show a side view.

Where was the camera when this photograph was taken?

It was down low, looking up at one of the bridge's two towers.

Show students other views of the Brooklyn Bridge so they will understand the unusual viewpoint of this photograph.

E

Ask students to find the lamppost in this art.

It is on the right side.

E | M | S

Have students locate the point to which all the cable lines seem to lead.

It is near the top center of the bridge tower.

Is this point centered in the photograph?

No, it isn't.

Is the balance in this picture symmetrical or asymmetrical?

It is asymmetrical.

M | S

Ask students if they have ever seen windows that were shaped like the arches on this bridge. Where did they see these? *These pointed arches resemble Gothic arches usually found in medieval churches and architecture. Students might have seen pointed arches in a church.*

Gothic cathedrals were the great engineering achievements of medieval Europe. Ask students what the presence of Gothic arches in the Brooklyn Bridge might have symbolized.

The reference to Gothic architecture might have symbolized that the Brooklyn Bridge was an American marvel of engineering, equivalent to the Gothic cathedrals of Europe.

INTERPRET M | S

Evans wanted his photographs to show the national character of America. How does this photograph satisfy his aim?

The Brooklyn Bridge, in America's largest city, was a structure that Americans were proud of. It was a modern feat of engineering and architecture. Evans's photograph shows the beauty of a structure that thousands of Americans used every day.

S

Until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photography was primarily a means of documentation and was not considered art. The photographer who took this picture considered photography to be an art form. Do you agree with him? Use this photograph to support your reasoning.

S

Evans used a modern medium (photography) to create a modern image of a famous structure. When he had studied art in Paris, he saw modern European art that featured abstract, simplified forms. How is this photograph like abstract modern art?

Its unconventional viewpoint makes the shape of the bridge seem abstract and not easily recognizable. The stark dark shape against the plain light background with the explosion of lines leading to it makes it seem like a contemporary geometric composition.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: modernism in America; history of the city, especially New York

Historical Figures: John and Washington Roebling

Geography: East River; topographical issues that impeded the construction of the bridge (for example, deep bedrock underneath the caisson on the Manhattan side of the bridge)

Science: civil engineering; late nineteenth-century inventions

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Walt Whitman (secondary); *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald (secondary); *The Bridge*, Hart Crane (middle, secondary)

Arts: Abstraction; Futurism