Dancing in the Street: George Luks's *Spielers*

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George Luks's *The Spielers* of 1905 is often seen as a canonical work of American art, embodying the ideals of the Ashcan School with its broad, thick brushstrokes, its dark, rich tonalities, and its success in capturing a moment in the life of its energetic, unidealized subjects (Figure 1). To scholars today, *The Spielers* seems to be an uncontroversial turn-of-the century genre scene, "a pair of little slum girls dancing gleefully on a sidewalk, presumably to the music of an unseen barrel organ"[1] or "a[n]…optimistic view of harmony among children and…a celebration of American opportunity."[2] To these critics, the work either elicits nostalgia for childhood pleasures or suggests a sanitized view of slum life.

However, closer examination of *The Spielers* yields sometimes contradictory and often disturbing elements. The two girls grasp one another tightly, looking out at the viewers with unabashed grins. Their clothes are somewhat ragged, and the setting is shadowy and indeterminate; perhaps they dance outside, on the street, with the dark suggestion of a doorframe behind them and a shadow lurking in the window. The shorter child rests her head on the blond girl's chest, which seems to be a developing bosom.

The painting raises several questions: how old are these girls, after all? Their cheeks are brightly flushed; is this from excitement and the exertion of the dance, or from drinking alcohol? Might they be wearing rouge and makeup? Is the dance for the girls' own enjoyment or do they perform for our pleasure? There is also the troubling question of the title itself. It has traditionally been interpreted as stemming from the German *spielen*, "to play," which suggests an aura of childish innocence. Yet the literature of Luks's time indicates that the term "spieler" was the female equivalent of the "tough," suggesting a meaning far closer to our contemporary slang of "player," a flirtatious and often promiscuous character. An investigation of contemporary reform literature, films, comic strips, and Luks's interests and lifestyle reveals complexities of this painting that have been lost to today's viewers.

To grasp the rebellious nature of this work, it is important to understand Luks's personality and background. As young men, the artist and his brother Will toured the vaudeville circuit dressed in wild plaids and blackface as the comedy team "Buzzey and Anstock."[3] Luks continued to embrace the popular image of the pugilistic and rebellious "Bowery Boy" throughout his days. In his costume and character, he assumed the role of the "tough," picking fights, involving himself in tumultuous relationships with women, and ultimately dying in a barroom brawl at the age of sixty-seven.[4]

Luks began his artistic career as a newspaper illustrator in Philadelphia where he learned the quick style of sketching that captured important details to accompany the paper's stories; there he also met the group of artists and friends who would later constitute the New York Ashcan group headed by the visionary Robert Henri. Luks's work, like that of most Ashcan artists, focused on the immigrant population of New York's Lower East Side. He represented his subjects in thick, fast, and broad strokes of paint, with an unidealizing, unflinching gaze; he painted a range of subjects, from frolicking children with unkempt hair to older residents of the Bowery down on their luck. As Luks told his students, "Surround yourself with life; fight and revel, and learn the significance of toil. There is beauty in a hovel or a grog shop. A child of the slums will make a better painting than a drawing-room lady gone over by a beauty shop."[5]

When *The Spielers* was first exhibited at the Society of American Artists in 1905, Luks's combination of bravura technique and down-to-earth subject matter was surprising. The hanging committee of the exhibition chose to display the work in a high, remote corner in the council room with sculpture and animal paintings. The exhibition was dominated by por-

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1 Ormonde de Kay, "Luks," *American Heritage* 39.1 (1988): 56.

2 Gwendolyn Owens in Susan Faxon et al, *Addison Gallery of American Art, 65 Years: A Selective Catalogue* (Andover, MA.: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1996) 423.

3 Bennard B. Perlman, *The Immortal Eight* (New York: Exposition Press, 1962) 76-77; for a photograph of Luks and his brother in costume, see Stanley L. Cuba et al, *George Luks: An American Artist* (Wilkes-Barre, PA.: Sordoni Art Gallery, 1987).

4 Luks's carefully crafted rebellious persona is captured in Everett Shinn's "George Luks," *Journal of the Archives of American Art* 6.2 (Apr. 1966): 1-12.

5 "Bohemian Life a Joke, Says Artist," *Evening Public Ledger* [Philadelphia] 27 Feb. 1925.

traits, picturesque landscapes, and a few allegorical figures and genre scenes.[6] Most of these portraits were of identified, middle-to-upper class sitters. Compared to other work shown, Luks's painting was daring in content and in form; his choice of young immigrant girls, a blonde German and redheaded Irish child,[7] dancing with abandon was cause for raised eyebrows, as was his quick, sketchy painting technique. John White Alexander was President of the Society the year *The Spielers* was submitted, and his careful rendering of detail and idealization of subjects was held as the paragon of what American painting should be. Luks's *Spielers* flagrantly violated these norms, perhaps explaining the painting's remote hanging. Critic Charles Fitzgerald exclaimed, "[Luks] has been treated so scurvily this year that it is impossible to judge him fairly. But the 'Spielers' is one of his most felicitous discoveries, and would insure his advancement in general estimation if it were hung on the line and in the light of the day instead of being imprisoned in the Society's council room."[8] Fitzgerald hoped that "in two or three years, bravado will perhaps incite its jury to hang Mr. Luks's work where one may see it."[9]

Luks made his own views on painting clear; he frequently gave spirited newspaper interviews, public lectures, and presentations to art classes in which he lambasted the traditions of the Academy and extolled the values of his own work. In a newspaper interview of 1905, the year of *The Spielers*, he lashed out at those who criticized him for a lack of finish in his paintings:

> The more I work the more I study what can be omitted to the advantage of the picture… To the devil with a lot of truck that is useless in telling what I want to say! Why should I weary people with what they know already? Haven't they imagination enough to supply the commonest things—things that merely carry their minds from the point I wish to make?[10]

Luks ridiculed artists who concerned themselves with displaying their finesse at representing illusionistic detail: "'Gérôme …Bouguereau…they've had their fame already, and every year fades 'em more. Industrious, painstaking, laboring at little unimportant details, until all the chumps exclaim: 'My Gawd, how that artist makes art!' But what do they tell us about the people among whom they lived?"[11] To Luks, people, especially those of the Lower East Side, were the focus.

By painting these two girls dancing, Luks was developing this focus and featuring one of the major social issues of his day, that of the dance craze and the concerns it raised among urban reformers. As one such reformer exclaimed, "Dancing has become a national obsession, amounting almost to a mania, both as to amount and kind…. [D]ancing in imitation of the less graceful of the lower animals…is incessant in the dance hall, on the playground, on the stage, and in the street."[12] Dancing was becoming a widespread and popular pastime, and new urban dance halls with their ready supply of alcohol and easy mingling of the sexes without traditional chaperoning provided potential sites for the exhibition of sexual vice, violence, and lawlessness.

This aura of violence and sexuality is clearly seen in the 1902 American Mutoscope and Biograph film *A Tough Dance* (Figure 2). In this film, two dancers grab one another as tightly as do Luks's girls; they spin around recklessly and energetically. The couple is also clearly indicated as lower-class; the woman wears a skirt of modified rags, while her partner's jacket is torn. The posture of the dancers—leaning in towards one another with heads touching, their hips drawn back and apart—is strongly reminiscent of the pose of Luks's *Spielers*.

At the turn of the century, the terms "tough dancing" and "spieling" were used interchangeably. This dance originated in houses of prostitution, and, as historian Kathy Peiss explains, "tough dancing not only permitted physical contact, it celebrated it. Indeed, the essence of the tough dance was its suggestion of sexual intercourse."[13] The film ends with the two dancers literally rolling around on the floor, flaunting the suggestion of sex.

This dance craze and the social reform movement that accompanied it are explained by a variety of social factors. With the extensive efforts of both reformers and workers in lobbying for shorter hours and better working conditions, laborers successfully obtained greater leisure time. Young working women, especially, found both freedom and alienation living in the city away from their families; liberated by their new earning potential and alone in unfamiliar places, they were

6 For reviews of the exhibition, see Charles de Kay, "Old Masters and Portraits of To-day: Educational Influence of the Former," *New York Times* 26 Mar. 1905: X6; "Portraits and Figures at Art Exhibition," *New York Times* 26 Mar. 1905: 7; Charles Fitzgerald, "Certain Painters at the Society," *New York Evening Sun*, 1 Apr. 1905; "Paintings at the Society," *New York Times* 11 Apr. 1905; "Artists' Society May Lose Identity," *New York Times*, 23 Apr. 1905: 9.

7 The dancers were identified as "a red headed Irish girl clutching a blonde girl, unmistakably a German blonde" in "The Fabulous East Side," *The Sun*, 8 May 1910: 16; they were also identified as ethnic types by James Huneker in "George Luks, Versatile Painter of Humanity," *New York Times* 6 Feb. 1916: SM 13.

8 Fitzgerald,"Certain Painters at the Society."

9 Fitzgerald, n.pag.

10 Charles de Kay, "George Benjamin Luks, Arch Impressionist," *New York Times* 4 June 1905.

11 Charles de Kay, n.pag.

12 Joseph Lee, "Rhythm and Recreation," *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction* (Fort Wayne, IN: Fort Wayne Printing Company, 1912) 132.

13 Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1986) 102. For further descriptions of the dance, see Peiss, 100-104; see also Linda J. Tomko, *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999).

soon exploring the entertainments and vices offered by the city.[14] These women most frequently flocked to dance halls where they eagerly participated in dances like the Tough Dance. As I. L. Nascher maintained in his book, *The Wretches of Povertyville,* "the dance may be a waltz, polka, schottische, or gallop, the time of the music depending upon the mood of the piano player. All is called 'spieling.'…it is at these affairs that the tough dances so grossly caricatured on the vaudeville stage can be seen."[15]

Reformers bemoaned spieling as a path to moral ruin. Hutchins Hapgood, writing in his 1910 *Types from City Streets,* observed the fate of many working class women attending the dance halls:

> Some of them dance every night, and are so confirmed in it that they are technically known as '*spielers*' [author's emphasis]. Many a girl, a nice girl, too, loves the art so much that she will dance with any man she meets, whatever his character or appearance. …[M]any of these girls get involved with undesirable men, simply through their uncontrollable passion for the waltz. When carried to an excess, it is as bad as drink or gambling.[16]

Another reformer noted, "vulgar dancing exists everywhere, and the '*spiel*' [author's emphasis], a form of dancing requiring much twirling and twisting…particularly [causes] sexual excitement [through] the easy familiarity in the dance practiced by nearly all the men in the way they handle the girls."[17]

Dance instructors also bemoaned the certain moral ruin and lack of grace that accompanied these new styles of dance. Manuals provided written instructions and illustrations in an attempt to instruct young people in proper dance. In captions accompanying illustrations that closely resemble the posture of Luks's girls and that of the couple from *A Tough Dance*, Alan Dodworth admonished, "The lady's head too close, the extended arms and bad attitude of hand very objectionable."[18] Edward Scott classified this posture as "Low Class Style."[19] In the chapter "Refinement and Vulgarity" in his *Dancing as an Art and Pastime*, he chided dancers for utilizing "such movements, for instance, as jigging around with both arms extended and hands clasped by the opposite dancer, turning backwards…twisting partners round by the waist like so many whirligigs,"[20] a description that closely resembles the dance of both Luks's *Spielers* and the performers of *A Tough Dance*, movements that had both specific class connotations and sexual overtones.

Luks's work thus carries a host of provocative associations, yet he did incorporate sufficient ambiguity in the painting to allow for more benign interpretations: the age of the girls is indeterminate, and its history reveals that it was exhibited under more innocuous titles. As early as 1907, Luks and his dealer in correspondence referred to *The Spielers* with the title "Dancing Girls," and the work was also exhibited with the narrative title "East Side Children Dancing to Hand-Organ Music."[21] Of course, these titles could have been attempts to veil the more disturbing aspects of the work, masking it as an innocent genre scene. Nevertheless, the joy with which these children dance contrasts sharply with the ways in which children of the Lower East Side were usually depicted in Luks's day, as in Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, well known for describing slum children as pitiful creatures living in squalor.

At this time, an active reform and child welfare movement coexisted with a fascination with the life of the Bowery and the inhabitants of the Lower East Side who were often at the center of current interest and debate. The problems of the area—its high crime rate, density of saloons and opium dens, and impoverished immigrant community—were constant topics in genres as disparate as reform literature, popular films, novels, and comic strips. Such depictions often focused on the life of the streets in immigrant neighborhoods where the massive influx of immigrants to New York had created communities with extremely crowded conditions; reformers most frequently depicted the inhabitants as people to be pitied and to be, as quickly as possible, Americanized.[22]

Luks's approach was in stark contrast to reformist depictions. Prior to painting *The Spielers*, Luks had worked on a popular comic strip series entitled "The Yellow Kid" that portrayed and caricatured the life of these crowded streets. Originally created by Richard Felton Outcault for the *New York World* in 1895, "The Yellow Kid" featured the antics of Mickey

14 Peiss; see also Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Art of Leisure: Maurice Prendergast in the Williams College Museum of Art* (Williamstown, MA.: Storey Communications, Inc. and Williams College, 1999); Gary Cross, *Social History of Leisure Since 1600* (State College, PA.: Venture Publishing, 1990) 57-163; David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993); Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1981).

15 I.L. Nascher, *The Wretches of Povertyville: A Sociological Study of the Bowery* (Chicago: Joseph J. Lanzit, 1909) 51, 53.

16 Hutchins Hapgood, *Types from City Streets*, 1910 (New York: Garrett Press, Inc., 1970), 135.

17 Julia Schoenfeld, in Verne M. Bovie, "The Public Dance Halls of the Lower East Side," *Report* [University Settlement Society of New York] (1901) 33, quoted in Peiss 101.

18 Alan Dodworth, *Dancing and its Relation to Education and Social Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1888).

19 Edward Scott, *Dancing as an Art and Pastime* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892) plate xxvii.

20 Scott 130.

21 Owens, in *Addison Gallery of American Art, 65 Years*, 424 n. 2.

22 See Joseph Lee, "Play and Congestion," *Charities and the Commons: Weekly Journal of Philanthropy and Social Advance* 20 (4 Apr. 1908) 43-48; Thomas Jesse Jones, *Sociology of a New York City Block* (New York: Columbia UP, 1904).

Dugan and his fellow inhabitants of "Hogan's Alley," a fictional Irish immigrant neighborhood drawn from the tenement experience.[23] The "Yellow Kid" and his friends wrought havoc on the neighborhood since their daily adventures revolved around the confusion they created in the streets. Although examples like these often caricatured the tenement dwellers, they also spoke to the imagination and independence of children who often danced in imitation of the popular steps. An October 1896 cartoon featured Liz and Mickey "spieling" or "tough dancing" (Figure 3); Liz's feet fly off the ground, suggesting the enthusiastic Tough Dance or Bowery Waltz. It is not difficult to imagine Mickey singing a popular tune of the day to his girlfriend Liz with whom he dances:

> My Pearl is a Bowery Girl
> She's all the world to me.
> She's in it with any the girls 'round the town,
> And a corking good looker, see?
> At Walhalla Hall she kills them all
> As waltzing together we twirl.
> She sets them all crazy, a *spieler*, a daisy,
> My Pearl's a Bowery girl.[24]

The energetic and brash children Luks depicted in his comic strip can also be found in the paintings of the Ashcan School which celebrated children of the city and the street culture they created. One such example is William Glackens's *Far From the Fresh Air Farm*, which communicates the energy and chaos of the streets (Figure 4).[25] As reformer Joseph Lee related,

> The streets are at present the principal playground for city children…. Children dig in the gutter, hold meetings and play games on the steps and on the slides beside them, and play jump rope and tops, marbles and hop scotch on the sidewalks and smoother streets. And the hurdy-gurdy man is the modern Orpheus, to whom the children dance, while the wilder creatures, such as hack men, truck drivers and pedestrians, acquiesce.[26]

In his illustration, Glackens has inventively clustered various aspects of city life, including two children dancing in the background to the music of an organ grinder in an image reminiscent of *The Spielers*. The scene of children dancing to the tunes of an organ grinder was a common refrain during the period,[27] and it brought its own host of associations and reformist issues. Reformers often criticized the presence of organ grinders as a source of indecency. However, one writer for *The Illustrated American* of 1896 expressed her relief that a measure to prohibit street children from dancing to their music had not passed. As the author mused, "I confess I often watch them with pleasure, but never without wondering why they should be considered 'indecent' and 'objectionable' in their dancing."[28]

Apparently some spectators did, indeed, find young girls' dancing "indecent" or "objectionable," underlining the controversy within Luks's painting. Hutchins Hapgood ominously observed, "it is a familiar thing to see little girls on the East Side dancing rhythmically on the street, to the music of some hand-organ…. When those little girls grow older and become shop-girls they often continue to indulge their passion for the waltz…" becoming the hopelessly addicted "spielers" he described earlier.[29]

Thus, only a few years separated innocent child's play from what was perceived as vice, dancing in nightclubs. Although Luks's girls may be innocent children dancing to the music of an organ grinder, their future fate might well involve the risqué side of dance that threatened to undermine their virtue as much of Bowery life did. Indeed, these girls look brashly at the viewer as they perform their dance, perhaps hoping to receive spare change for their impromptu performance. By depicting young girls engaging in a physical and sexually suggestive act with the hope of remuneration from onlookers, Luks foreshadows one possible fate of the girls, either that of prostitute or of a "spieler" who would trade dances

23 A thorough history of the Yellow Kid and several illustrations can be found in *R. F. Outcault's The Yellow Kid: A Centennial Celebration of the Kid Who Started the Comics*, ed. Bill Blackbeard (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1995). See also Bruce Weber, *Ashcan Kids: Children in the Art of Henri, Luks, Glackens, Bellows & Sloan* (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, Inc., 1998) 13; Mark David Winchester, "Cartoon Theatricals from 1896-1927: Gus Hill's Cartoon Shows for the American Road Theatre," diss., Ohio State University, 1995, 69.

24 Author's emphasis. Steve Brodie's version of "My Pearl," quoted in Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991) 125.

25 The fictionalization of Bowery tours and issues of voyeurism are well illustrated in the 1908 Edison film "The Deceived Slumming Party." Autobiographical accounts by those who grew up in the Bowery also recount these events; see Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1936) 428; Charles Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery: The Life Story of an East Side American* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1926) 13, 24.

26 Lee 43.

27 Many historical and literary descriptions of street life of the period include the figure of the organ grinder and dancing children (e.g. Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995] 71-2). They are also depicted in works by photojournalists of the period and the paintings of Jerome Myers, one of Luks's contemporaries (e.g. *The Tambourine*, 1905, now at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.).

28 J.H.N., "As Seen Through Women's Eyes," *Illustrated American*, 18 Jan. 1896, quoted in Grace M. Mayer, *Once Upon a City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958) 82.

29 Hapgood 135.

30 Peiss, 108-114, discusses "the culture of treating, trading sexual favors of varying degrees for male attention, gifts, and a good time" (110).

31 Shinn 2.

and sexual favors for drinks.[30] As Luks's friend and fellow artist Everett Shinn noted, "Luks would be less respectful to the little speilers' [*sic*] older sisters. There would be no illusions once he caught up to them. Only literal transcriptions of their haunts and single purpose."[31] Perhaps Luks did, after all, suggest the fate of his dancers' older sisters in *The Spielers.*

The Spielers, then, is far more than an endearing, sentimental genre painting. It is a rebellious work, deliberately transgressing middle class mores and exalting these dancing girls and reveling in the ambiguity that accompanies them. By defiantly celebrating his *Spielers*, Luks distinguished himself from photojournalists and reformers who focused upon the bleak despair of urban poverty. Instead, Luks painted his subjects as capturing the vitality of the city and its youth, furthering his own reputation as a defiant Bowery Boy.

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Figure 1. George Luks (American, 1867-1933), *The Spielers*, 1905, oil on canvas, 36 1/16 x 26 1/4 in. (91.6 x 66.7 cm). Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., gift of an anonymous donor, 1931.9. All Rights Reserved.

Figure 2. American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, *A Tough Dance*, 1902, 42 feet. Producer: n/a; camera: Robert K. Bonine. The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Paper Print Collection, neg. no. 1907.

Figure 3. Richard Felton Outcault (1863-1928), "The Amateur Dime Museum in Hogan's Alley," 1896. Illustration in New York *Journal* (October 4, 1896). Courtesy the www.deniskitchen.com archives.

Figure 4. William Glackens (American, 1870-1938), *Far from the Fresh Air Farm: The Crowded City Street, with its Dangers and Temptations, Is a Pitiful Makeshift Playground for Children*, 1911, crayon heightened with watercolor on paper, 24 1/2 x 16 1/2 in. Museum of Art, Inc., Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Ira Glackens Bequest.

Detail of Figure 4.