



Gertrude Käsebier, *George Luks*,
c. 1910, Library of Congress Prints
and Photographs Division
Washington, DC, 2006684231

Luks, George

Also known as

Luks, George Benjamin

American, 1866 - 1933

BIOGRAPHY

George Luks was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in 1866 to a lively and cultured family. Luks's father, a multilingual doctor, emigrated from Poland; Luks's mother, born to a noble family in Germany, was an amateur painter. At a young age, Luks moved with his family to the coal-mining town of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. He studied briefly at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1884 and spent several years as a traveling vaudeville performer with his brother Will.

In 1889 Luks embarked on his first trip to Europe. He attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf for a few months and visited major museum collections in Paris and London. A second voyage to Europe a few years later took Luks to Spain, where he drew inspiration from the works of Diego Velázquez (Spanish, 1599 - 1660) and Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746 - 1828). He also made several trips to Paris in the early 1900s. As his career progressed, Luks did not draw attention to his privileged upbringing or to his European travels as a young man. Instead, Luks became known as a boastful, quarrelsome alcoholic who gave distorted accounts of his past—emphasizing youthful exploits and the bucking of tradition, even inventing an alter ego, the boxer “Chicago Whitey.”

In the early 1890s, Luks worked in Philadelphia as a magazine and newspaper illustrator. There he joined the circle of young artists who had gathered around Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929), including fellow newspaper illustrators

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American Paintings, 1900–1945

William Glackens (American, 1870 - 1938), Everett Shinn (American, 1873 - 1953), and John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951). In 1895 Luks traveled to Havana as an artist-correspondent for the Philadelphia *Bulletin*, where he covered the Cuban fight for independence from Spanish rule. Upon his return to the United States, Luks started work at the *New York World* and drew the cartoon *Hogan's Alley* featuring the Yellow Kid, which had been originated by Richard Outcault (1863–1928).

Though Luks continued to work as an illustrator, his paintings began to achieve recognition at the turn of the century. In 1903 Luks exhibited with the Society of American Artists, and in 1908 he participated in the show of The Eight at the Macbeth Gallery. The artists shown at Macbeth, along with George Bellows (American, 1882 - 1925) and several others, were later dubbed the Ashcan school for their focus on the grittier side of modern New York. Luks's paintings represent life on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and his portraits of children, beggars, and unusual individuals express a marked concern for the plight of these figures. He painted in a dark palette and with a vigorous handling of paint that reflected the influence of Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666), whose works Luks had seen on his travels.

Two years after The Eight exhibition, Luks had his first solo show at Macbeth. A member of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, Luks was included in the Armory Show of 1913. The following year he began to submit illustrations to *Vanity Fair*, the beginning of a publishing relationship that lasted the remainder of his life. Luks was represented by the Kraushaar Galleries until 1925, when he switched to the Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries. By then Luks had established himself as a prolific, well-known artist; he exhibited widely and received awards, including the gold medal at the Corcoran Gallery of Art's biennial exhibition in 1932. He taught at the Art Students League between 1920 and 1924 and later opened the George Luks School of Painting in New York. However, he was never able to extricate himself from his identity as a brawler. In 1933 Luks was found dead in a lower Manhattan doorway under mysterious circumstances, possibly the result of injuries from a bar fight.

Robert Torchia

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