



Mahonri Young, *Riding the Girder*, c. 1940

ARTIST BIO

Grandson of Utah pioneer leader Brigham Young, Mahonri Young was born in Salt Lake City in 1877. He grew up in a town full of miners, farmers, carpenters, and other laborers. These hard working men had an impact on Young as a child, and they were the subject of his art for decades to come. Mahonri Young began his formal artistic training at age 17 when he enrolled in classes taught by James Taylor Harwood, one of Utah’s most respected painters at the time. Young’s inclination towards quick sketches and interest in everyday realism, however, challenged the academic methods taught by Harwood. In 1899, Young left for New York City to attend the progressive Art Students League; he immersed himself in the city’s cultural life, attending lectures and exhibitions. Young also absorbed the sights and sounds of urban life: its ceaseless motion, towering forms, and burgeoning industry. By 1901, he moved to France to study art at the renowned Académie Julian in Paris. Here, he found a wealth of inspiration in the constant movement and pulsating energy of laborers and street vendors, which helped solidify his artistic ideals. Mahonri Young’s prolific career as an artist spanned more than fifty years, covering a wide variety of media and influencing the next generation of artists.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Despite studying at an illustrious Parisian art academy, Young always considered life itself as the most effective teacher. Indeed, his art was characterized by drawing what he observed in his everyday world. Throughout his career, he carried a sketchbook to record his observations on paper before translating them into another medium. Young pushed himself to master each artistic technique, although he primarily referred to himself as a sculptor.

ARTWORK

When Mahonri Young returned to New York City after his training in Paris, he closely observed the construction workers building the skyscrapers that would soon characterize the metropolis. Precariously perched on a massive steel girder, rising high above the city with no safety equipment to secure their ascent, Young depicts these men as the heroes of twentieth-century urbanization. Without defining facial features, these laborers represent any of the men “riding the girders” in New York City. The artist places the construction workers above the skyline, elevating them not only literally, but also metaphorically. As they look down across the city, one worker gestures as if to present their accomplishments. In the economic boom of the 1940s, New York City became one of the most powerful cities in the world, built on the backs of laborers like those depicted in this painting.

INTRODUCTION

Mahonri Young considered his images of everyday workers “a tribute to honest toil.” Here, he depicts two men heroically poised atop a steel beam that soars above the New York City skyline. Such girders were essential in constructing the skyscrapers for which New York was becoming famous at the time. Young’s thematic artworks are an ode to the intrepid laborers involved in the great era of early skyscraper construction.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- 1 Discuss the historical context and themes related to this painting and analyze how those are reflected in the student’s own life or family history
- 2 Create an original artwork that connects the student with the painting on a personal level

LOOK AND DISCUSS

When and where might this scene take place? How can you tell?

Look carefully at these two figures high above the New York skyline. What does the artist want us to feel as we view these workers?

How does Mahonri Young make the figures seem important?

Compare Young’s painting with Charles Clyde Ebbets’ 1932 photograph *Lunch Atop a Skyscraper* (see below), depicting steelworkers suspended 800 feet above New York City. How does your viewing angle in either image make you feel?



CONTINUE THE STORY

The above photograph was taken during the height of the Great Depression. A time of crisis for the nation, this photograph shows hope in continued building, growth, and most significantly, employment. In 1940, New York City had a population of seven million, the first American city to reach that number. The invention of skyscrapers allowed more people to live and work in the city, while occupying less space. Most of those who worked in construction in New York City during the 1930s and 1940s were travelers from other states or even immigrants from foreign countries such as Ireland, Italy, and Germany, as well as Native American and Canadian tribes. Arriving in a new city during this time would have been incredibly challenging. What important things do immigrants contribute to our country today?

ACTIVITY #1: SHARE YOUR STORY!

Materials: Paper, pencil or pen, colored pencils, markers, or crayons
Subject Areas: Social Studies, Visual Arts, English Language Arts
Duration: 30-60 minutes

When did your family migrate to America or to Utah? Where did they come from? Where did they settle? Why did they choose to immigrate? What difficulties did they experience as immigrants? Why is it important to remember their story? Interview your parents or grandparents to answer these questions. Share your immigration story either through a written narrative or multimedia presentation.

Optional: Draw a picture of your immigrant ancestors either in their home, with their family, or at work.

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Respond (V.R)
Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator. Identify and analyze cultural associations suggested by visual imagery.

ACTIVITY #2: ILLUSTRATING BRAVERY

Materials: Paper, colored pencils, markers, or crayons
Subject Areas: Visual Arts
Duration: 20 minutes

The workers Mahonri Young painted are depicted as strong and brave. Think about a time in your life when you had to be courageous. Illustrate this moment using the materials provided. Share and discuss after completion.

Optional: Alternatively, students may think about a relative or friend who displayed bravery or strength.

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Create (V.CR)
Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection, and evaluation. Formulate an artistic investigation of personally relevant content for creating art.

Strand: Respond (V.R)
Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator. Compare one’s own interpretation of a work of art with the interpretation of others. Interpret art by distinguishing relevant contextual information, and by analyzing subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment for this lesson may include student participation in group discussion or presentation of newly acquired knowledge. The activity “Share Your Story!” can be used as an opportunity to discuss issues important to our country both historically and presently. The students’ personalized stories will help them become invested in the subject and think critically about the questions posed. The creative activity “Illustrating Bravery” can be used to assess student craftsmanship, thoughtfulness, and personal connection with the artwork.