

THE RENEE & CHAIM GROSS FOUNDATION



The Lives of Immigrants

Grade level: 3–5

Time estimate: 15–20 minutes for slideshow and discussion, 30 minutes for optional classroom activities

Overview and Learning Objectives:

Students will learn about immigration to the United States in the early 20th century through the art in the RCGF’s collection and Chaim Gross’s personal story. They will utilize speaking and listening skills to observe and discuss works of art that illustrate the lives of immigrants. Students will examine a primary source document that lists immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island, including Chaim Gross. Students will reflect on the experience of immigrants, the challenges they faced, and the cultural traditions they brought to the United States.

Classroom activities:

Letters home (Language Arts):

Imagine you have left your home country and have just arrived in a new country. Write a letter to a family member back home describing what you see and experience. Tell them how you feel, what you miss about home, and what you’re excited about for your new life here. Share and discuss.

Fill a suitcase (Art, Language Arts):

Imagine you are immigrating to a new country. What items would you bring with you? Fill a box with items from home that you would pack in your suitcase. Write about why you’d bring each item, what makes them special, and why they’d be important to keep with you as you started your new life.

New York Immigration (Social Studies):

Research immigration to New York City in the early 20th century. Where were people coming from, and what were some of the reasons they left their home countries? How did people travel to the United States? What were some of the challenges people faced once they arrived? What kinds of work did immigrants do in New York? What are some of the ways we can learn about immigrants’ stories today?

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Extensions:

Read one of more of the books listed below to extend the discussion of the immigrant experience.

- *The Color Collector* by Nicholas Solis is a beautiful picture book that tells the story of a girl who collects colorful bits of materials she finds outside to create art that reminds her of her home country.
- *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson shares a message that even though we may feel different than others, we can bravely be ourselves and feel supported in our individuality.
- *Salma the Syrian Chef* by Danny Ramadan tells the story of a girl who has immigrated to Canada from Syria with her mother, but her father has yet to arrive. They both miss him, and Salma makes a Syrian dish to lift her mother's spirits.
- *Drita, My Homegirl* by Jenny Lombard (for ages 8+) is the story of a girl who flees Kosovo with her family, the challenges she faces, and the friendships that help her through.
- *The Welcome Chair* by Rosemary Wells is a beautiful picture book (illustrations by Jerry Pinkney) follows the story of a wooden chair that is passed from family to family over decades. Each new owner carves the word "Welcome" in a different language into the chair.

There are excellent resources and lesson plans on immigration based on works of art from the National Gallery of Art that could extend the discussion:

<https://www.nga.gov/learn/teachers/lessons-activities/uncovering-america/immigration-displacement.html>

Research one or more of the artists included in the slideshow:

- Jules Pascin (1885–1930), immigrated to NYC in 1914, moved back to Europe in 1920, but kept his American citizenship.
- Moses Soyer (1899–1974), immigrated to the U.S. with his family in 1912.
- Raphael Soyer (1899–1987), immigrated to the U.S. with his family in 1912.
- Abraham Walkowitz (1878–1965), immigrated to the U.S. with his family in 1893.