Educator Resources Common Core Inspired Lesson Plans

These lesson plans are designed for second through twelfth grades to accompany the *Jacob A. Riis: How the Other Half Lives* exhibition now on view at Louisiana’s Old State Capitol in downtown Baton Rouge. They includes vocabulary list, images of sources, document based questions, and activities.

These lesson plans are also available online at http://www.mcny.org/lesson-plans/past-exhibition-jacob-riis and many of the featured images can be downloaded from the Museum of the City of New York’s digital archive. To view these and other images from the Museum of the City of New York’s Jacob Riis collection visit http://www.mcny.org/collections and click on Collections Portal.

Historical Overview

Between 1870 and 1900, three-quarters of the 12 million immigrants who came to the United States settled in New York. Like generations before them, the newcomers—largely from eastern and southern Europe—arrived hoping to improve their lives and those of their children. Instead, many of them found themselves living amidst unprecedented urban squalor in the crowded tenements of the Lower East Side.

Their struggles remained generally invisible to the larger society until newspaper reporter Jacob August Riis (1849–1914), himself an immigrant from Denmark, began documenting the appalling conditions of the city’s slums in the 1880s. He rose to national prominence with his 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives*, in which he exposed the nature of tenement life in New York, riveting the attention of the nation and earning a reputation as one of the country’s leading social reformers.

Jacob A. Riis was a skilled and resourceful communicator: his success as an agent of reform derived not only from his passion and actions, but from his innovative use of the media of his time. Indeed, Riis is remembered today as much for his revolutionary photographs as for his writings. Ironically, he did not consider himself a photographer and did not see any intrinsic value in his images beyond their immediate use in illustrating his words. But the images made an indelible mark on his audiences. *Jacob A. Riis: How the Other Half Lives* presents these unforgettable photographs in the context of Riis’s lectures and publications and exposes the methods by which a media-savvy journalist became a national force in social reform.

These Lesson Plans have been adapted from plans developed by the Education Department of the Museum of the City of New York. Although some of the information is New York City-specific, it can be adapted/compared to other cities. New York City, at the time Jacob Riis and his colleagues took these photographs, was a city that welcomed the vast majority of American immigrants (see historical information on Ellis Island), people who were hoping to create a fresh start with work in one of the world’s most bustling economies.

An overview of each Lesson Plan is found on the next page. Choose the lesson plans that interest you and your class and find the detailed information in the TAB with the lesson plans that interest you.

Lesson Plans

**Lesson Plan #1: Playgrounds and Parks in the City**

By analyzing historic images, students will learn about the public health issues New Yorkers faced in the late nineteenthcentury. They will also understand how Jacob Riis used his photographs to advocate for building playgrounds and parks in especially dense neighborhoods. Students will then consider the role of playgrounds and parks in their own neighborhoods and design a new recreational space.

**Lesson Plan #2: An Evolving Photographer: From Candids to Portraits**

By examining a selection of photographs and textual excerpts by Jacob Riis, students will consider Riis’s different techniques for capturing the plight of individuals in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side in the late nineteenthcentury. They will consider how his portrayals evolved, and debate the ethics of Riis’s approach to depicting working class New Yorkers.

**Lesson Plan #3: How the Other Half Works: Immigration and Labor at the Turn of the Century**

Students will analyze visual and textual primary sources and learn about working conditions for immigrants in turn-of-the-century New York. In particular, students will gain an understanding of how labor frequently blurred the line between work and home, at times involving whole families. They will also consider how different reformers envisioned solutions to the labor problems of the day.

**Lesson Plan #4: Images and Technology in Jacob Riis’s Era**

This lesson examines the different formats and uses of Jacob Riis’s images in the late nineteenthcentury. Students will learn about technological innovations, such as flash powder, the stereograph, the magic lantern, and the halftone print, and how differences in these formats shaped the impact of Riis’s images. They will also consider the ethical ambiguities of Riis’s early photographic techniques.

**Media for Social Change: Then and Now**

In addition, the hands-on content extension activity, “Media for Social Change: Then and Now,” with twelve printable Media for Social Change cards, is included at the back of this Programming Guide. The activity explores how various media have been used as agents for social change, both historically and in the present day. Examples cover: photography, print media, broadcasting, digital and social media, lectures, exhibitions, music, and art.