

## Todros Geller: A Closer Look

Engage in close looking and get new ideas for your own art making while you reflect on the painting *Strange Worlds* (1928) by Todros Geller. You can view the work in the museum, [online](#), or on a classroom poster.



Todros Geller (American, born Vinnytsia, Russian Empire, now Ukraine, 1889–1949) *Strange Worlds*, 1928, Oil on canvas, Gift of Leon Garland Foundation

### Questions for Looking

- Look carefully at the man in the foreground (front) of the picture. What do you notice about him? What does he seem to be doing?
- What else do you see in the foreground?
- How is what you see in the background different from the foreground?
- Can you find clues that might help us learn about when and where this is?
- What moods or feelings do you find? Which parts of the painting bring them up?
- Why do you think the artist called this piece “Strange Worlds”? What story do you think he wanted to tell? Why?
- Learn more about the work by reading the information provided. Then, look at the painting again. Do you notice anything new?

### Creative Response: A Sense of Belonging

What does it mean to belong somewhere? What does it feel like? Reflect on a place where you have felt belonging or perhaps a place where you haven't. Journal your reflections, then create an artwork that shows your feelings and relationship between you and that place. Use drawing, collage, photography, or a medium of your choice, and represent yourself directly through a self portrait, or use objects, place, and design to suggest the ideas that you expressed.

### Creative Response: Research and Respond

Research what Chicago was like when this painting was made, around 1900–1930. What changes or milestones happened during these years? What do you think it would have been like to live in the city at this time if you had immigrated to Chicago from another country or came through the Great Migration?



Ryan Learning Center

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Todros Geller with students (detail). Todros Geller archive. Courtesy of Spertus Institute, Chicago.

### About the Artist

Born in the Russian Empire in what is now Ukraine, Todros Geller fled Eastern Europe and immigrated to Canada in 1906. In 1918, he moved to Chicago and enrolled at the School of the Art Institute. Geller's Jewish faith, culture, and community were central to his life and art, inspiring paintings and prints that reflect his Jewish identity as well as scenes of daily life and migration.

Geller was an influential art teacher and mentor within progressive organizations including the Chicago College of Jewish Studies and the Jane Addams Hull House. Believing that art could be used as a tool of social reform, his artwork reflected and supported causes important to him, including anti-facism. As a printmaker, Geller created many copies of his prints so they were affordable to a broad range of people. Inexpensive reproductions of *Strange Worlds* hung in many Chicagoland Jewish homes in the early to mid-20th century.

In *Strange Worlds*, a traditionally dressed older man with a long beard stares out at the viewer from below the stairway of a Chicago “L” train station beside what appears to be a newspaper stand. Dark tones and hard angles add to the serious mood. In the background, Geller used brighter colors and more modern artistic style to show people, cars, and a train moving past. The visual contrast highlights the blending and clashing of immigrant traditions and Chicago’s rapidly developing urban culture.

In the early 20th century, Black Americans fleeing the American South as well as immigrants from Europe and Central and South America came to Chicago looking for jobs among the city’s growing industries. In 1900, more than 70% of Chicago’s population was either immigrants or first-generation citizens. Many, like Geller, were fleeing dangerous situations and searching for better opportunities. Chicago grew as a “city of neighborhoods,” with people of shared heritage living close together, because of discrimination but also sometimes by choice.

An example of one of these neighborhoods can be seen in Geller’s [\*Maxwell Street, Chicago, from Yiddish Motifs\*](#) (1926), a print depicting a very different street scene. Maxwell Street, on Chicago’s Near West Side, was known as a hub of Jewish community and for its outdoor flea market, which drew a diverse range of vendors, shoppers, food stalls, and street performers. Maxwell Street Market buildings were torn down in the 1990s when the University of Illinois at Chicago expanded its campus.

### Explore More

Learn more about the work of [Todros Geller](#) and related artists by searching the museum’s collection by name, title, or keyword at [www.artic.edu/collection](http://www.artic.edu/collection). Themes of immigration and migration are referenced in the work of [Walter Ellison](#), [Elizabeth Catlett](#), [Archibald Motley Jr.](#), [Kerry James Marshall](#), [Yashuo Kunioishi](#), and [Lewis Hine](#). Maxwell Street inspired other artists like [Bronislaw M. Bak](#), [Jack A. Jaffe](#), [Steve Sprague](#), [Patty Carroll](#), [Kenneth Josephson](#), and [Thomas Frederick Arndt](#). Geller also founded Around the Palette, later named the American Jewish Artists Club, along with [Emil Armin](#), [David Bekker](#), [Aaron Bohrod](#), [William S. Schwartz](#), [Maurice Yochim](#), and [Louise Dunn Yochim](#).