**ISSN 2658-4824 (Print)**
**УДК 725.95**
**DOI: 10.33779/2658-4824.2019.2.128-136**

**JOHN STERN**
**CARRIE WILSON**

*Aesthetic Realism Foundation*
*New York, United States of America*
*ORCID: 0000-0003-4976-7504*
*fjmstern@yahoo.com*

*Terrain Gallery*
*Aesthetic Realism Foundation*
*New York, United States of America*
*ORCID: 0000-0002-0004-3655*
*carrie.wilson100@gmail.com*

**ДЖОН СТЕРН**
**КЭРРИ ВИЛСОН**

*Фонд эстетического реализма*
*Нью-Йорк, Соединённые Штаты Америки*
*ORCID: 0000-0003-4976-7504*
*fjmstern@yahoo.com*

*Галерея «Террейн» [«Рельеф»]*
*Фонд эстетического реализма*
*Нью-Йорк, Соединённые Штаты Америки*
*ORCID: 0000-0002-0004-3655*
*carrie.wilson100@gmail.com*

# Aesthetic Realism and the Beauty of the Brooklyn Bridge

This article is about one of the world's most celebrated structures — the Brooklyn Bridge: what makes it beautiful, and why it has been loved by millions of people.

It is based on this landmark principle, stated by Eli Siegel — poet, critic, and founder of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves."

Beginning with the effect of this bridge on such artists and poets as Joseph Stella and Hart Crane, it then describes each step of the design and construction of this magnificent structure, showing how the making one of opposites — Power and Grace, Heaviness and Lightness, Firmness and Flexibility, Simplicity and Complexity — is what makes it a great work of both engineering and art. For example, in *Bridges and Their Builders*, Steinman and Watson write: "The pierced granite towers, the graceful arc of the main cables, the gossamer network of lighter cables, and the arched line of the roadway combine to produce a matchless composition, expressing the harmonious union of power and grace".

Doesn't every person want to be at once strong and graceful? The authors describe how, as people are affected by the beautiful,

# Эстетический реализм и красота Бруклинского моста

Эта статья об одном из самых знаменитых в мире сооружений — о Бруклинском мосте, о том, что делает его столь красивым и почему он нравится миллионам людей.

Статья построена на знаковом принципе, изложенном Эли Сигелем — поэтом, критиком и основоположником философии эстетического реализма: «Вся красота есть соединение противоположностей, и именно к этому соединению противоположностей мы стремимся в самих себе».

Начинается статья с рассказа о воздействии моста на таких художников и поэтов, как Джозеф Стелла и Харт Крейн, затем описываются этапы оформления и конструкции этого замечательного сооружения, показывается, что соединение противоположностей — Силы и Изящества, Тяжести и Лёгкости, Прочности и Гибкости, Простоты и Сложности — делает мост как великим техническим сооружением, так и произведением искусства. Например, в книге "Bridges and Their Builders" [«Мосты и их строители»] Стайнман и Ватсон пишут: «Пронзённые гранитные башни, изящная дуга основных тросов, тонкая сеть более лёгких тросов и изогнутая линия мостовой объединяются, создавая бесподобную композицию, выражающую гармоничное единство силы и грации».

sensible relation of opposing forces working together for one purpose in the Brooklyn Bridge, they feel more hopeful that these same opposites can make sense in their own lives.

Разве не хочет каждый человек быть одновременно сильным и грациозным? Авторы описывают, как люди, поражённые видом Бруклинского моста, прекрасным и разумным соотношением на нём сил — противоположных, но направленных на достижение одной цели, — как люди преисполняются надежды, что подобные противоположности могут наполнить смыслом и их жизни.

Keywords:

Brooklyn Bridge, David McCullough, Aesthetic Realism, Eli Siegel, John A. Roebling, Washington Roebling, Emily Warren Roebling, Opposites, Hart Crane, Joseph Stella.

Ключевые слова:

Бруклинский мост, Дэвид Маккалоу, эстетический реализм, Эли Сигель, Джон А. Рэблинг, Вашингтон Рэблинг, Эмили Уоррен Рэблинг, противоположности, Харт Крейн, Джозеф Стелла.

*For citation/Для цитирования:*

Stern J., Wilson C. Aesthetic Realism and The Beauty of the Brooklyn Bridge // ICONI. 2019. No. 2, pp. 128–136. DOI: 10.33779/2658-4824.2019.2.128-136.

*Chromolithograph of The Great East River Suspension Bridge (Brooklyn Bridge)*
*Currier & Ives 1883*

The Brooklyn Bridge is one of America's most famous and beloved structures, known all over the world. On May 24, 1883, Brooklyn Mayor Seth Low said, at the opening of what was then known as The Great East River Bridge, "Not one shall see it and not feel prouder to be a man."[1] And this is still true today.

This bridge of stone and steel has been a source of inspiration to more artists, writers

*Aerial view of Brooklyn Bridge*

and photographers than any other structure on our continent. Yet, as David McCullough writes in his book, *The Great Bridge*:

*Just why this bridge, more than all others, has had such a hold on people is very hard to pin down.*[2]

We have seen the answer lies in this principle of the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism, stated by its founder, Eli Siegel: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves."

It is the opposites in the Brooklyn Bridge, notably strength and grace, weight and lightness, repose and energy — and more, that have moved people all these years. It inspired the most powerful works of painter Joseph Stella.

This is "The Bridge, 1920–22." Dynamic and graceful cables sweep down and out, drawing us in through dark soaring arches which frame a world of shape and color, glowings and darknesses, towering buildings and sky. And the future and past join, for as we look through the arches of Stella's bridge at this futuristic vision, we also seem to be looking at the stained glass windows of a Gothic cathedral. "Many nights," he said, "I stood on the bridge. I felt deeply moved, as if… in the presence of a new DIVINITY."[3]

Opposites in the bridge inspired Hart Crane's great poem, "To Brooklyn Bridge," which has these lines:

*O harp and altar, of the fury fused,*
*(How could mere toil*
*align thy choiring strings!)*

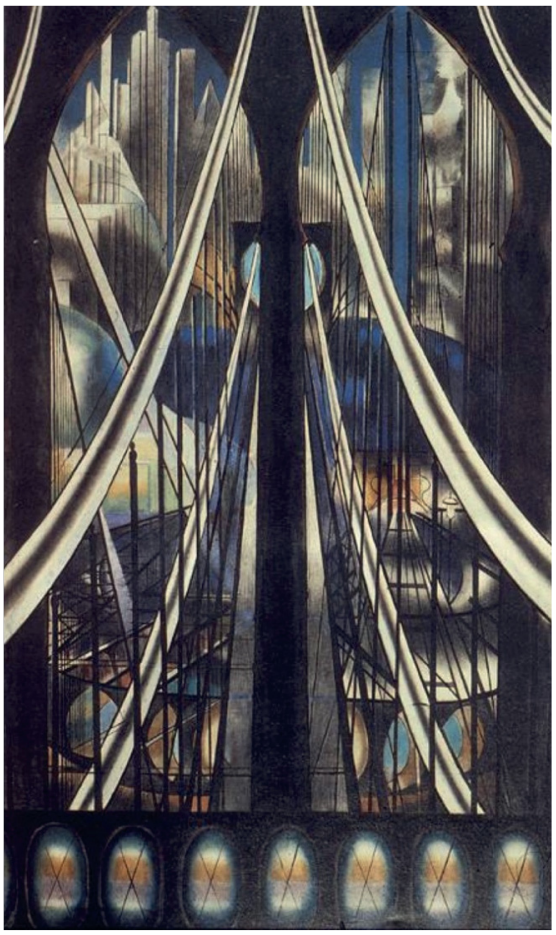
***

*Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift*
*Unfractioned idiom,*
*immaculate sigh of stars,*
*Beading thy path — condense eternity:*
*And we have seen night*
*lifted in thine arms.*[4]

And it is opposites that David McCullough writes about in describing John A. Roebling's design of the bridge:

*The way he had designed it, the enormous structure was a grand harmony of opposite forces — the steel of the cables in tension, the granite of the towers in compression.*[5]

Roebling was born in Germany in 1806. As a young man, he was a student and friend



*Joseph Stella "The Bridge, 1920–22"*
*Oil and tempera on canvas*

of the philosopher George W.F. Hegel, and in 1831 he emigrated to America. From 1848 to the 1860s Roebling built several suspension bridges, of which those at Lackawaxen, Pennsylvania, and Cincinnati, Ohio are still in use today.

When the Brooklyn Bridge was completed in 1883, its towers were taller than any other structure in New York except the spire of Trinity Church, and it was half again as long as any other suspension bridge in the world. It was daring. People had felt it could not be done. And yet it was needed. Thousands of people crossed the East River by ferry every day. Although Brooklyn and New York were separate cities at that time, Roebling's bridge was to unite them.

We want to look now at four ways opposites are beautifully one in this bridge, making for its greatness.

*The Bridge seen*
*from Manhattan*

**Power and Grace**

In their book *Bridges and Their Builders*, David B. Steinman and Sara Ruth Watson write:

*The pierced granite towers, the graceful arc of the main cables, the gossamer network of lighter cables, and the arched line of the roadway combine to produce a matchless composition, expressing the harmonious union of power and grace. It is a thing of enduring beauty.*[6]

This relation of power and grace has meaning for us. Every person wants to be strong but not overbearing, graceful without being weak. As we look at this bridge and study its history, we can learn about what we are hoping for.

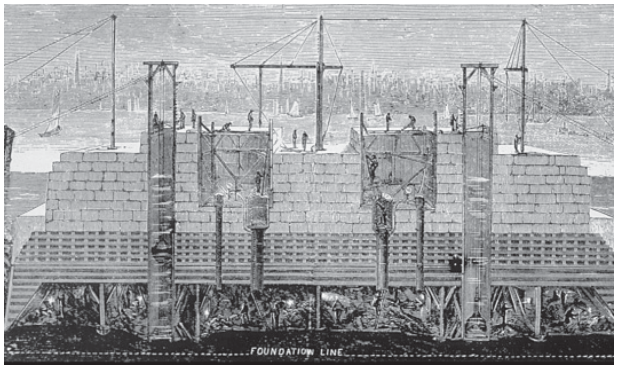
The history is dramatic and moving. Sadly, John Roebling did not live to complete the structure he designed. In 1869, after his death, his son Washington Roebling had to make the thousands of detailed specifications that his father's uncompleted plans had not included. It was to take 14 years. There were engineering difficulties with foundations, interferences by politicians, accidents, and caisson sickness or the bends, which crippled Washington Roebling himself.

To assist him, his wife Emily Warren Roebling taught herself engineering, handled

*Washington A. Roebling circa 1870*
*Emily Warren Roebling circa 1880*

correspondence, and as her husband's trusted eyes and ears closely supervised the complex work for the 11 years he was partially paralyzed.

Each stage of the construction was a huge undertaking.




*Cut-away drawing of the caisson*

First, the foundations for the two towers had to be prepared by digging down into the river bed to bedrock by means of caissons — watertight chambers used in construction under water — where men dug with pick and shovel under primitive conditions of light and ventilation. As the caissons descended, the masonry towers were built on top, and their weight helped to sink the caissons deeper. The towers took six years to complete. As these were under way, the approaches to the bridge and the anchorages for the cables were begun. Next came the spinning of the steel cables, strand by strand, from one anchorage over one tower to the other tower, down to the other anchorage, and back again, thousands of times over one and a half years.

Then the vertical suspender cables were hung from the four main cables, crossbeams were attached to the suspenders, and the roadway deck was laid atop the beams. Many thousands of people in New York and Brooklyn followed all these stages with avid interest. And then, at last, it was done.

*Photo of the Brooklyn Bridge*
*by Russell Thompson*

David McCullough writes — and this is about how the power of steel also has grace:

*...finally, now, the diagonal stays were in place, hundreds of them, radiating down from the tower tops, angling across the vertical harp-string pattern of the suspenders, and forming what, at close range, looked like a powerful steel net, or, from a distance, like a fine-spun web.*[7]

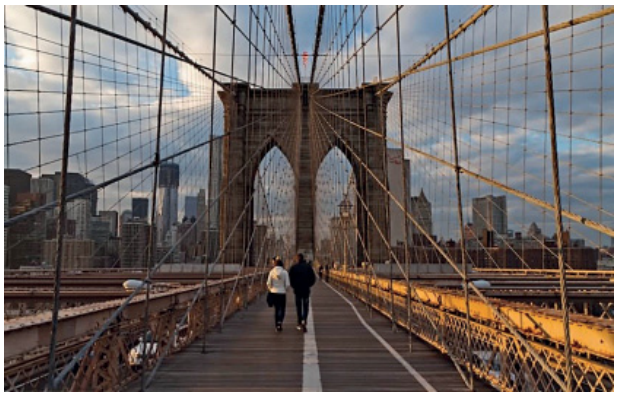
This relation of power and grace is something I, John Stern, have learned every woman is looking for in the man she is close to. In his essay "Husbands and Poems," Eli Siegel writes of the fact that a woman can be disappointed because:

*...when men are energetic, assertive, forceful...they lack sensibility, fine understanding, rich sympathy; and when they are gentle, sentimental, soft, they no longer seem to have strength, energy, momentum.*[8]

And as an Aesthetic Realism consultant to women, I, Carrie Wilson, have seen that every woman needs to do a good job with her desire to be forceful, and also yielding, graceful. Women, like men, can assert ourselves without sufficient kindness and respect, and yield in a way that's insincere. Neither represents what we really hope for — to have power and grace, strength and kindness together.

As John Roebling designed this mighty and exquisite structure he proposed something bold and innovative that was deeply considerate — an elevated walkway for people. "There was not a bridge in the world with anything like it," McCullough tells us. Roebling wrote:

*This part I call the elevated promenade, because its principal use will be to allow people of leisure, and old and young invalids, to promenade over the bridge on fine days, in order to enjoy the beautiful views and the pure air.*[9]



*View from Pedestrian Walkway*

Walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, with the grand vista all about you, the cables have an embracing quality. There is a human warmth that is so surprising it can bring tears to your eyes. You feel secure without being closed in. Roebling's vision, his kindness, is part of what gives this bridge its power.

**Heaviness and Lightness**

In Eli Siegel's landmark essay, "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?," he asks:

*Is there in all art, and quite clearly in sculpture, the presence of what makes for lightness, release, gaiety? — and is there the presence, too, of what makes for stability, solidity, seriousness? — is the state of mind making for art both heavier and lighter than that which is customary?*[10]

*Bridge seen from Manhattan*

The heavy granite towers seem to arise from earth itself. Yet these massive stone supports have, carved out within them, the beautiful, soaring pointed arch of the Gothic cathedral. Through these arches you can see the sky. Then there is the delicate web of the cables — yet these filaments are of heavy steel. Their radiation makes for a sense of release; meanwhile, it is they which lift the heavy roadway in its graceful curve, and have held it aloft these hundred thirty-five years.

We were moved to see that when Roebling drew the Elevation and Plan for the bridge, he put a waving pennon atop each stone tower, and in another view, drew sailboats below curvetting in the wind. "Is the state of mind making for art both heavier and lighter than that which is customary?" Yes, it is.

In an Aesthetic Realism class, Eli Siegel asked me (Carrie):

*Is there a conflict [in you] between the person who is lively and the person who is very serious? — a fight between lightsomeness*

*and gravity, the comedienne and the person who has to see life — all of it?*[11]

"Yes, there is," I said. I felt something that had troubled me very much, made it hard for me to take seriously my own mind, was being described and understood for the first time, so it could change. Mr. Siegel explained that the way to have these opposites more one in myself was, "to see them as real first." "The world," he said, is "bleak sky and rippling brook — reality is that which brings things together."

We think a large reason so many people love the Brooklyn Bridge is because of the way it brings together, shows the oneness of reality's opposites, and as we see this, we feel they are more together in ourselves.

Here is historian Lewis Mumford's description of the Bridge in 1924:

*The heavy stone plays against the spidery steel. In this structure, the architecture of the past, massive and protective, meets the architecture of the future, light, aerial, open to sunlight.*[12]

Even the choice of brown granite, and beige and light brown paint for the cables, makes for a oneness of heaviness and lightness. For many years the bridge's cables were painted battleship gray. Now it is near what it was originally. Architectural critic Paul Goldberger writes:

*The colors [of the cables] blend handsomely with the rich brown granite of the towers, and they bring lightness and energy to the bridge without making it seem frivolous.*[13]

When I (John) came to know Faith, who has been my wife for 48 years, I was set in my ways, rather ponderous, and whenever Faith made a lively suggestion, I felt I had to mull it over. In an Aesthetic Realism class, Faith told Mr. Siegel she felt I was too slow, and he said, "You mean Mr. Stern is too stolid, too dignified?" I was. And he said to me, "Mr. Stern, there is a need to have a person serious and also lively and mobile," adding, "maybe you could talk with a red feather on your right ear, or play some music and dance a medieval round."[14] Mr. Siegel was encouraging me, with humor and imagination, to have honest exuberance, to have heaviness more at one with lightness. For this and much more I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

**Determination and Ease, Firmness and Flexibility**

One of the things we love has to do with the beautiful curve of the bridge's cables. This is called a "catenary curve," the natural one made by gravity when a chain is suspended between two points. It has been referred to as the "lazy catenary curve," and is the one made by a hammock. These, made by the four main cables have an effortless ease, and yet each one of these is capable of supporting 24,621,780 pounds, or 12,300 tons. The daring thrust of the roadway, across what was then the widest span bridged by suspension, is sustained by this effortless curve.

In a class, Mr. Siegel said to me (Carrie): "The answer to life can be seen in how we stand up. It's a job. There has to be a certain casualness — determination and taking it easy." A great determination of purpose in the Roeblings was at one with a deep respect for, and yielding to, the forces of nature. David McCullough writes:

*The bridge was designed to adjust itself to the seasons — its roadway was built with big expansion joints to allow for the expansion and contraction caused by temperature changes. (The vertical rise and fall at the center of the main span, for example, could be nearly three feet.) Only by thus working with nature rather than against it, could the bridge survive.*[15]

The reason the Brooklyn Bridge has been able to stand up so well is because it is flexible as well as firm, and this is something we all can learn from.

**Simplicity and Complexity**

Here is Mr. Siegel's question about these opposites in "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?"

*Is there a simplicity in all art, a deep naiveté, an immediate self-containedness, accompanied perhaps by fresh directness*

*View of the bridge looking up at roadbed*

*Brooklyn Bridge looking toward Manhattan*

*or startling economy — and is there that so rich, it cannot be summed up; something subterranean and intricate counteracting and completing simplicity; the teasing complexity of reality meditated on?*[16]

The bridge is one grand, simple object, joining two shores, which we can take in at a glance; yet, the more we look the richer it becomes. The towers are not just monoliths: there are angles, juttings, thousands of individual granite blocks, bands of lighter stone, cornices.

The hundreds of vertical and diagonal suspender cables make varied geometric patterns of space as they intersect, and the roadway is made up of thousands of girders — crosswise, lengthwise, up and down, and diagonal.

Then, when you learn that each cable has 19 strands of wire, and each strand has 278 wires, that there are 14,000 miles of this wire and that all this was spun in the air, the oneness of simplicity and complexity makes for a respect for the world and the human mind that is tremendous.

The study of why this bridge affects people so deeply matters, because the opposites that it puts together greatly are what, without knowing it, people have yearned — sometimes desperately — to have one in themselves.

The Brooklyn Bridge — solid and graceful, majestic and democratic, strong and kind, stands for the hopes of people everywhere. We are grateful to Aesthetic Realism for making it possible for us all to learn from its beauty.

## NOTES

1 David McCullough, *The Great Bridge* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 536.
2 Ibid p. 548.
3 Joseph Stella, "The Brooklyn Bridge (A Page of My Life)," (Transition 16, June 1929), p. 87.
4 Hart Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose*, ed. Brom Weber (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 46.
5 McCullough, *The Great Bridge*, p. 30.
6 David B. Steinman and Sara Ruth Watson, *Bridges and Their Builders* (New York: Dover Publications, 1957), p. 247.
7 McCullough, *The Great Bridge*, p. 511.
8 Eli Siegel, "Husbands and Poems," in *11 Aesthetic Realism Essays* (New York: Aesthetic Realism Foundation, 1974), p. 31.
9 McCullough, *The Great Bridge*, p. 32.
10 Siegel, "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?" (New York: Aesthetic Realism Foundation, 1955).
11 Siegel, Aesthetic Realism Class, 1969.
12 Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), quoted by David McCullough in *The Great Bridge*, p. 550.
13 Paul Goldberger, "The Bridge That Built New York" (New York: Vogue, May 1983), p. 184.
14 Siegel, Aesthetic Realism Class, February 20, 1970.
15 McCullough, *New York Times*, March 27, 1983.
16 Siegel, "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?".

*About the authors:*

**John Stern**, a consultant on the faculty of the Aesthetic Realism Foundation (10012, New York, United States of America),
**ORCID: 0000-0003-4976-7504**, fjmstern@yahoo.com

**Carrie Wilson**, co-director of the Terrain Gallery, the faculty of the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, co-teaches “The Critical Inquiry,” a workshop for visual artists (10002, New York, United States of America),
**ORCID: 0000-0002-0004-3655**, carrie.wilson100@gmail.com

*Об авторах:*

**Джон Стерн**, консультант и преподаватель факультета, Фонд эстетического реализма (10012, г. Нью-Йорк, Соединённые Штаты Америки),
**ORCID: 0000-0003-4976-7504**, fjmstern@yahoo.com

**Кэрри Вилсон**, содиректор галереи «Террейн» [«Рельеф»], Фонд эстетического реализма; преподаватель курса «Критическое исследование» и мастерской для художников визуальных искусств
(10002, г. Нью-Йорк, Соединённые Штаты Америки)
**ORCID: 0000-0002-0004-3655**, carrie.wilson100@gmail.com