

George Bellows

Original Lithographs and Drawings

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Biography

George Wesley Bellows grew up in Columbus, Ohio, the son of a devout and solidly Republican building contractor, and a mother who hoped that her son would become a Methodist Bishop. He always felt deeply ambivalent about his father, noting at the time of his death that, "He was a wonderfully fine man, yet being fifty-five when I appeared, his point of view, his character even, belonged to so remote a past that I look upon many of his ideas to this day with amazement and sorrow."

Teased as a sissy by his classmates, George Bellows quickly learned to defend himself with his fists, and compensated for his gangling awkwardness by becoming an outstanding athlete, particularly in baseball. His love of drawing was kindled early since he was forbidden to play outside on Sundays but allowed to draw while his mother read aloud from the Bible.

At Ohio State University, George Bellows proved a spirited extrovert, excelling in baseball as well as in the new sport of basketball, singing in theatricals, and producing drawings of Gibson-like girls for the university's magazine. Bellows's athletic prowess almost diverted him from a career in art, but in 1904 he decided to turn down a professional baseball contract and move to New York City to study painting.

The sprawling, teaming city of New York was a revelation to him after the neat lawns and tidy homes of Columbus. There he quickly fell under the spell of the charismatic teacher Robert Henri, who introduced him to Shaw, Ibsen and socialism, and inspired him to shift from drawing Gibson Girls to painting the life of the streets. Bellows was still a relative newcomer to New York when Henri and his followers staged their famous exhibition of "The Eight" at the Macbeth Gallery, and consequently he was not included. But in spirit his work belongs with that display - perhaps someday Henri's group will be rechristened "The Nine" to pay tribute to the fact that George Bellows was the painter whose work best expresses the goals of the group.

In 1906 Bellows painted his first masterpiece, "The Cross-Eyed Boy." He followed with several other equally memorable likenesses of street urchins, and then expanded his vision with a series of masterful urban scenes that record such subjects as boys swimming in the East River, bums swarming around a lone tenement, the bridge to Blackwell's island, or the great scar created by the excavation of Pennsylvania station. A dozen or more of these canvases rank with the best American paintings ever made. Perhaps his masterpiece was his boxing scene, "Stag at Sharkey's," inspired by Sharkey's saloon, just across the street from the Lincoln Arcade where he had his studio, where amateurs pummeled each other on "Fight Night." The painting has become an icon of American art, perhaps the most memorable single expression of the tough, rough excitement of the modern city. Dazzling in its execution, the brushwork has the same athletic bravura as the scene itself, as befits a painter who was also a star athlete.

In 1910, after a long and at times tempestuous courtship, Bellows married a very proper American girl, Emma Story, in St. George's Episcopal Church in the Bronx. They had two children, Anne, born in 1911 and Jean, born in 1915. After his marriage, Bellows's subject matter began to shift. While he continued to paint urban scenes, increasingly he focused on landscapes of Maine and Woodstock, as well as portraits. Somewhat surprisingly, the painter of bums and boxers proved particularly adept at sensitive portraits of

women, including many masterful likenesses of his wife and daughters. Just a year before his death he painted the most famous of these, "Lady Jean," showing his ten-year-old daughter Jean dressed in quaint Victorian attire. Appropriately, Jean later became an actress, appearing on Broadway opposite such stars as Helen Hayes.

While the vigor of his work conveys an unselfconscious feeling, George Bellows was actually a remarkably intellectual painter, who mastered a variety of different color systems, including those of Hardesty Maratta and Denman Ross, and also explored complex systems of design, such as Jay Hambridge's theories of "Dynamic Symmetry."

Along with being a great painter, George Bellows was also one of this country's greatest printmakers, who exploited the technique of lithography to make prints that are as fresh and natural-looking as a charcoal sketch. In executing these designs, George Bellows worked closely with the great printer Bolton Brown, who along with George Miller ranks as one of the two most significant American lithographers of the 20th century. The delicacy of Brown's printing, however, was unique. While Miller produced richly tonal effects for artists such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, Brown produced lithographs with a silvery delicacy that almost perfectly matches a pencil line, and gives Bellows's prints the fresh, silvery appearance of actual drawings.

Sadly, George Bellows died of appendicitis, at the height of his fame and artistic prowess, at the early age of forty-three. Later that year a great memorial exhibition of his work was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. At the opening, Bellows' teacher, Robert Henri squired his widow, Emma, through the opening, and when it was over he turned to her in tears. "I always gave him my most severe criticism," he commented, "because I thought he was my best pupil. Now I am sure of it."

Bellows's fame came early and has proved long lasting. At the age of twenty-three, he attained membership in the National Academy of Design, and at the age of thirty-one became a full academician, the youngest painter ever elected to that body. By the age of thirty his work hung in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as much an honor as it would be today. Today he is still ranked as one of the giants of American art - a figure whose tough-minded realism rivals that of Eakins, whose technical virtuosity rivals that of Sargent.

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