

# The feverish pulse of the early 20th century: George Bellows, American modernist

By Tim Tower  
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On March 16 a retrospective devoted to the works of American painter George Bellows (1882-1925) opened in London, at the Royal Academy of Art. The exhibition, subtitled “Modern American Life,” previously presented at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, offers a vivid picture of the burgeoning American powerhouse during the first decades of the twentieth century. In itself, that would be enough—but it has more and should not be missed.

George Bellows was born in Columbus, Ohio and attended Ohio State University, working as a commercial artist during his college years. From his arrival on New York in 1904, until an untimely death twenty years later, age 42, Bellows gulped the world. What you will see in the current show are among the most penetrating and resonant images ever created of American life. At the same time, one must admit that these are joined by a few that are superficial and, ultimately, humiliating for an artist of Bellows’ stature. The contrast itself is of interest and well worth considering.

Bellows’ *Stag At Sharkey’s* (1909), on loan from the Cleveland Museum of Art, measures just over twelve square feet. The Metropolitan Museum curators reproduced a detail from the canvas many times its actual size for one wall of the entrance to the New York exhibition. A similar image fills the cover of the catalogue. The fascination with this early work is justified because it seems to capture an essential aspect of contemporary American life in its thirsting, aggressive, violent origins.

The United States had just emerged from war with Spain (1898), having seized Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines in the opening round of imperialist aggression. Domestically, union membership quadrupled from under 500,000 to more than two million, while Bellows was coming of age between 1897 and 1903. The country was witnessing a rise in the class struggle from bloody mine wars in Colorado (1903), to the shirtwaist strike in Manhattan at the end of 1909, the same city and year in which *Stag At Sharkey’s* was painted.

A “stag” was a boxer who took his chances for a small purse in the back room of a bar at a time when public prizefighting was still illegal. Private clubs like Tom Sharkey’s, located across Broadway from the studio Bellows occupied in 1906, circumvented the statute by accepting membership dues at the door. The artist was fascinated by the spectacle and could paint from memory. He once remarked, “I don’t know anything about boxing. I am just painting two men trying to kill each other.” Theodore Dreiser said of Bellows that intuition was his guide, and Dreiser was on to something.

Bellows’ many skills and talents—mental dexterity, the deft handling of paint and smooth, broad strokes from a fine muscle memory of practiced movements—were well suited to his famous series on boxing. As he did throughout his career, Bellows approached the subject from different angles, producing multiple works in pencil, ink, lithography and paint; and many are on view in the current show. The boxing ring was covered in stretched canvas—and if the self-portrait that appears at the lower right

is any indication, the painter was close enough to feel it while envisioning his own piece of a finer weave waiting across the street. He was immersing himself in the raw material of urban life.

His mentor and friend for life, painter-teacher Robert Henri (1865-1929), urged students to get out of the studio and engage the toiling crowds, encouraging painting of live subjects and sketching in oils to bring a finished painting ever closer to the throbbing pulse of the streets. Classmates included Edward Hopper (1882-1967) and Emma Story (1884-1959), his lifelong companion.

A quick study and already master draftsman, Bellows raced ahead of his peers and even his mentor who tended to idealize similar subjects. Time after time, in various mediums, during his early work, Bellows pummeled the tradition of academic formalism with an unflinching portrayal of raw-boned and ragged metropolitan life. The elegant and carefully-studied realism of Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), for example, served as both challenge and inspiration to this prodigious talent at various points in his career. Bellows’ hometown, Columbus, Ohio, was big for the Midwest. But this was New York City.

After the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts withdrew the 1908 Lippincott Prize initially awarded to Bellows’ *42 Kids*—a depiction of youth playing and diving from a broken pier into the East River—because the museum feared the sponsor would object to the unclothed children, Bellows quipped it was the “naked painting” the institution was actually afraid of.

The painter strove to expose conditions of life and social relations, and his empathy for his subjects is palpable. Among the first paintings he sold was *Kids* in 1906, featuring a squatting, giggling, young girl being teased and pulled in fun by friends. The influence of great realists, Rembrandt, Velazquez, Goya and Daumier among them, can already be felt. Dominant grays and browns form a ground for the radiating humor and human warmth.

In the boxing paintings, his palette was composed of tawdry creams and browns with blood red and glaring white mixed in on the canvas. He caught a moment between life and death set in a sadistic mass of cavorting, leering on-lookers; and the achievement finds echoes in mid-century abstract expressionism. Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), for example, used similar brushwork for intimate, psychological conflicts, and Franz Kline (1910-1962) comes to mind in the terrain of Appalachia. Art would never be the same after Bellows.

## New York City

Precisely what prompted the young man to drop out of Ohio State and make his way to New York to become a professional artist is hard to pinpoint. He spoke about it briefly. “I arose surrounded by Methodists and Republicans... My mother wished me to be a bishop, my father planned for me to become president of a bank... By sheer luck I found myself in my first art school under Robert Henri, never having heard of him before... I had every equipment except all the essentials. My brains

were as innocent as a college could make them. My life begins at this point.”

1903 saw the first automobile traverse the country coast to coast, the first wireless communication between Europe and America and the first sustained flight by a manned aircraft. For the talented Mr. Bellows, who had sold illustrations to local publications in Ohio and planned to play professional baseball, the world was beckoning from beyond the horizon.

Contemporary authors included Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Jack London and the recently deceased Frank Norris, along with “muckrakers” such as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell. The playwright Eugene O’Neill moved into the same block of apartments as Bellows and became his roommate for a brief period. Left-wing journalist John Reed, who would attend the founding of the Communist International in 1919, was another eventual colleague and collaborated with Bellows on a satirical book devoted to the evangelist (and former professional baseball player) Billy Sunday.

Sketches for *Cliff Dwellers* (1913), and drawings such as *Tin Can Battle* and *Street Fight* (both 1907) are also fully developed works. Bellows toyed with accepted practices, seeking more vital and succulent representations of life. Two major early portraits are typical. One of the sitters, in an otherwise formal setting, has all the marks of having just emerged from fisticuffs. *Paddy Flanagan* half-grins, defiant, chin up, from a tanned and bruised face. The pale skin of his whole torso is exposed, the shirt having been ripped apart. *Nude Girl*, *Miss Leslie Hall* (1909) shows a tired and irritated model. She seems distant from her relaxed predecessor in Édouard Manet’s *Le Déjeuner Sur l’Herbe*. The scandal stirred by Manet’s work had faded since 1863. We can almost hear the later sitter, who seems to have been interrupted while getting dressed, sigh, “Mr. Bellows, I’m tired, and I want to go home.”

In her excellent essay in the Bellows exhibition catalog, Carol Troyen comments that the artist’s income began to increase sharply around this time, rising from \$600 in 1909 to \$1,500 in 1910 as a result of “determined marketing of his paintings at home and abroad.” He was becoming the most successful artist of the time.

In March 1912 he donated a drawing to a fundraiser held by the left-wing Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to aid children of millworkers engaged in the convulsive textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. That May he marched up Fifth Avenue in a demonstration for women’s rights and in November voted for Eugene Debs, along with a million others, in the largest vote ever received by a socialist candidate for US president.

### Armory Show 1913

One hundred years ago this February, New York’s legendary Armory Show exhibited the work of European modernists (Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Cézanne, Duchamp, Dufy, Seurat, Picabia, etc.), many of them for the first time in the US. Writing in the *New Yorker*, critic Peter Schjeldahl locates a crisis in Bellows’ art resulting from the event. While the exhibition was undoubtedly disturbing to Bellows (both he and Henri resigned from the association that staged it), there were more powerful factors working on the artistic and intellectual milieu. The contradictions of capitalism were exploding to the surface, and world war was rumbling up through the fissures.

Bellows indicated in a January 1914 letter that he was critical of popular trends and searching for a clear artistic direction: “Having got what I can out of the modern movement for fresh, spontaneous, pure, color,” he wrote to Joseph Taylor, his professor and friend from Ohio State. “I am now turning my attention to... the old masters... I have come to the realization that permanence demands more care... That there are great dangers in too much spontaneity, in haste... But the old Masters got different results, and I want to know how they did it... This is the process of Rubens and Titian, Velazquez, Hals and the rest... This seems to be an extremely original attitude nowadays.”

Following the Russian Revolution of February 1917, Max Eastman asked contributors to *The Masses* — a leading left-wing journal to which Bellows regularly contributed—to sign a petition opposing US entry into the First World War, but the latter refused. “*The Masses* has no business with a ‘policy,’” Bellows objected misguidedly. “It is not a political newspaper.”

The United States declared war on Germany in April, and the artist proved vulnerable to the chauvinist hysteria that ensued. “I cannot put my finger on my war psychology at all,” he admitted. “I have always felt about art, that it was freedom that counted. A man must see things and say things his own way.”

Confronted with cataclysmic events, even acute intuition and profound sympathy for the oppressed, both of which Bellows possessed, proved inadequate to inoculate him against the drumbeat of war. Within months, the painter was lending his support to the war effort with a large series of paintings, drawings and lithographs depicting alleged German atrocities in Belgium, taken not from life, but on the contrary, from propaganda reports. His prized technique seemed to collapse in these pro-war works, as if vitiated from within by the prejudice and outright lies it sought to express.

Between 1911 and 1924, Bellows made a series of portraits of his wife and two daughters in fine dresses, reproducing various compositions from the classical repertoire. His orientation was shifting inward. Success and the accompanying change in lifestyle took their toll. He focused more on his own immediate impressions and circumstances to the detriment of conditions of life outside of his circle. El Greco’s spiritualism now seemed appropriate for paintings such as *Gramercy Park* and *Tennis Tournament*, both from 1920.

Commissioned by the *New York Evening Journal* to cover the September 1923 fight between heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey and his Argentinean challenger Luis Ángel Firpo, Bellows recorded a moment at the end of the first round when the challenger knocked the champ through the ropes.

In Bellows’ *Dempsey and Firpo* (1924), the crowd, the press corps and, more importantly, the painting, itself, are now all respectable. Spectators, attired in black tie and suit coats, wave and shout and gasp in disbelief. But the blood and dirt and sadistic pleasure had been removed. There is a shadowy hand at Dempsey’s back, alluding to the controversy surrounding his return to the ring, but in large measure, the record had been sanitized. From his early days along the East River, the artist had changed.

In the interim boxing had been legalized—sport celebrity exploited as a diversion from social antagonisms. One has the sense that Bellows felt that he had arrived as well, and his decisions should now contribute to creating a popular icon. Fine brushwork, careful modeling, geometric composition and a complementary palette tend to balance and freeze the figures. Firpo’s composure, in the picture, sculpted muscles, solid stance and even the color of his trunks all contribute to the fiction.

Talent, determination, confidence and an intuitive orientation to the life of the masses carried George Bellows to great heights. He proved unable, in the end, to bring into his art in a fruitful manner great changes in American and global life.

Sadly, Bellows failed to heed the diagnosis of a ruptured appendix and the need for emergency surgery. He died of peritonitis in January 1925. His life and legacy are rich with gifts, as well as irony. The most memorable of both are two guys trying to kill each other.

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