George Bellows Revisited

George Bellows Revisited:

New Considerations of the Painter's Oeuvre

Edited by

M. Melissa Wolfe

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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PREFACE

NANNETTE V. MACIEJUNES
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COLUMBUS MUSEUM OF ART

As a Columbus native and one of America's great realists of the early twentieth century, George Bellows is central to the institutional history of the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA). The museum has been privileged to host exhibitions and promote scholarship on the artist from his initial rise to fame to today. Such is the case with the symposium, "George Bellows Revisited," held at the CMA in the fall of 2013 in conjunction with the concurrent exhibition *George Bellows and the American Experience*. The Columbus exhibition was an epilogue of sorts to the larger retrospective, *George Bellows*, which was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Royal Academy of Arts, London. The CMA lent the largest number of paintings to *George Bellows*, and it is with the aid of the National Gallery of Art (particularly Charles Brock, associate curator of American and British paintings) that the Columbus exhibition was made possible.

Although Bellows' artistic career unfolded in New York beginning with his move there in 1904, his roots in Columbus continued to play a role in the imagery and style of his artistic production throughout his life. He maintained close ties to his native city and returned frequently. On these trips, he would often paint portrait commissions of the men and women of Columbus, such as *Mrs. Albert M. Miller*, 1912, which was exhibited the following year in the historic Armory Show (*International Exhibition of Modern Art*) and is now in the collection of the CMA. The relationship with Columbus was reciprocal. The museum, then known as the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, acquired Bellows' *Polo at Lakewood* from the artist in 1911, shortly after it was painted. Earlier, Bellows assisted with the museum's first acquisition of a modern American painting, Robert Henri's *Dancer in a Yellow Shawl*, which was purchased through subscription.

Also in 1911, Bellows, with the assistance of Henri, organized an exhibition of American paintings, many from the Ashcan School artists, at

the Columbus Public Library. It totaled a staggering 135 paintings by 36 artists, including works by Arthur B. Davies, Ernest Lawson, Edward Everett Shinn, and J. Alden Weir. When the library's administration attempted to censor some works, including Bellows' *Stag at Sharkey's*, as well as nudes by Davies, Sloan, and Rockwell Kent, Bellows, as a fierce defender of realism and artistic freedom, fought to restore them to the exhibition. Indeed, due in large measure to Bellows' vision and commitment, the CMA has a major strength in early 20th century American art, including his work.

For the symposium, exhibition and this publication, we thank Melissa Wolfe, curator of American art at the CMA from 2003–2014, who has consistently demonstrated deep commitment to furthering scholarship on Bellows. Melissa envisioned and organized both the symposium and the accompanying exhibition. Thanks are also owed to Mason McClew, Curatorial & Collections Assistant for American Art, who worked closely with Melissa on the exhibition and the symposium. Anastasia Kinigopoulo, Assistant Curator, worked with the publication's authors, editors, and publisher, to ably shepherd this volume to its conclusion. The scholars who contributed to this publication, each of whom presented their work at the symposium—Martin Berger, Charles Brock, John Fagg, Randall Griffey, David M. Lubin, Leo Mazow, Didier Ottinger, Susanne Scharf, and Douglas Tallack—offer nuanced and complex viewpoints on Bellows' life and *oeuvre.* These writers bring fresh insights on the artist that will continue to push scholarship in innovative directions. Our appreciation goes to interns Adrienne Pohl and Katie Catipon, who assisted in obtaining image rights for this book. We are also grateful for Mariah Keller's work in editing and proofing this publication. Finally, projects like this are only possible through the exceptional work of publishers such as Cambridge Scholars, whom we thank for realizing the present volume.

INTRODUCTION

M. MELISSA WOLFE

George Bellows, one of the most important American painters and printmakers of the early twentieth century, was a Columbus, Ohio, native, who maintained close ties to the city and to the Columbus Museum of Art throughout his career. The museum consequently has an internationally recognized collection of works by Bellows. Its representation is the largest in the world—comprising 21 paintings, 111 prints, and 9 drawings—and its institutional commitment to the artist is ongoing. With the 2002 purchase of an important suite of Bellows prints from collectors Dr. and Mrs. Harold Rifken, the museum has instituted a long-term focus to complete as nearly as possible its holdings of the artist's prints. In 2012, the museum and the University Libraries of The Ohio State University jointly acquired the artist's three-volume record book and his sales book, which had been held privately by the Bellows family since his death.

The museum also has a long-standing reputation for its engagement in Bellows scholarship, either lending or being a venue for every major Bellows exhibition since the artist's death. Nine works from the collection were included in the most recent 2012 retrospective, *George Bellows,* which was organized by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, and the Royal Academy of Arts, London, England. As the curator of American art at the Columbus Museum of Art, one of my most significant contributions to the museum's long institutional commitment was authoring an essay on the artist's family portraits for the 2012 retrospective catalogue.

Over the course of several years' planning for the retrospective, I spoke often with Charles Brock, the exhibition's curator and associate curator of American and British paintings at the National Gallery of Art. One particular topic repeatedly found its way into our various discussions: While such major exhibitions can be watersheds for the ways in which audiences understand an artist, there is often very little opportunity to give voice to re-assessments of scholarship on an artist's work after the exhibition is open and the catalogue published. Together we wondered, how could such an enormous project go one step further toward engaging

and supporting a vital response that, while somewhat secondary to the responsibility of presentation, is nonetheless so central to its intellectual goals? In 2006, I initiated an annual two-day scholarly symposium that addressed various thematic topics of central importance to the museum's American collections. It seemed that the symposium could be a compelling platform both to support and to more effectively make public the important "second round" of interpretive scholarship that the exhibition and its catalogue would instigate. To "re-think Bellows," as it were, was an obvious fit for a symposium topic, and that type of engagement was an equally fitting contribution by the museum given its particular history.

With generous support from the Terra Foundation for American Art and a complete buy-in by the museum's director, Nannette V. Maciejunes, the project evolved to inviting a group of national and international scholars to meet in Washington, DC, and view the retrospective in person. Most of the scholars had not previously published on Bellows, but had produced thoughtful, innovative scholarship on topics that could inform re-thinking ideas and assumptions about the artist. The authors then had a year to develop a response based on their experience and without obligation to a pre-organized narrative or trajectory. The papers were then presented in the fall of 2013 at the museum's symposium. This publication, *George Bellows Revisited*, is a compilation of those papers.

Individually, the nine papers suggest the fertile directions exhibitions can lead scholarship when such extended support is part of the larger exhibition project. In fact, nearly every author expanded on an element from the exhibition or from its critique, many of which are reviewed in the essay by Brock. This point argues powerfully in support of the often-overlooked contributions of exhibitions and museum-based scholarship to the broader world of art history. Equally important, this project suggests that when such nuanced interpretive scholarship on seemingly disparate topics is pulled together into a single publication, certain patterns reveal themselves to be persistently present across the whole of Bellows' oeuvre and career. In an individual essay, such issues would seem connected to a single painting or topic or, at the very least, idiosyncratic to a particular characteristic of the artist. As has been proven by many publications like this one, in compiling these persistent points, which are often points of tension, something much bigger than a specific topic tied to a specific artist might be at stake; thus, this publication gives direction to future scholarship on Bellows.

One such persistent point is Bellows' seemingly effortless facility to straddle multiple, often deeply conflicting, social and artistic convictions.

Several papers focus on the locus of tension this straddling creates. Martin Berger reveals the visual control and effacement of blacks necessary to enable the particular way in which the artist juggled democratic impulses and social acceptance in his paintings. Leo Mazow explores the way in which Bellows intentionally coded his visualizations of preacher Billy Sunday to target larger humanist concerns of hypocrisy and inequality. Douglas Tallack pushes on color as the point at which Bellows straddles realism and abstraction in order to play out the uncertainty that Tallack holds as a hallmark of European Modernism. John Fagg focuses on a single drawing to surface issues of violence and complicity in Bellows' experiences that he himself seemed to dismiss. David Lubin suggests that Bellows employed popular motifs to mediate the overwrought outrage that shaped his other war paintings to find a more sophisticated response in his depiction of Edith Cavell. And, Susanne Scharf and Randall Griffey explore the complicity of both patronage and received narrative that enabled this nearly seamless performance of the artist's straddling act. While the essays unravel the process of these balancing acts to expose the consequences of their negotiations, the end result is not just to identify them or the tensions they entail. Rather, as a group, these essays force the issue of what is at stake in this process.

One point at stake is the way in which Bellows' exceptional ability to straddle—to keep everyone at the table satisfied and feeling in control—worked to sustain a cultural narrative that empowered the country's "fair-haired" boys, as Griffey quotes. Both Griffey's and Brock's essays work to disentangle Bellows from the constraints that serving this narrative have placed on understanding the complexity of his oeuvre. Regardless of his own awareness or desire for it, Bellows became the banner artist for a hyper-masculine American identity that serviced nationalistic ideology. While the artist's canvases are fraught with the disempowering negotiations incumbent upon this role, as explored by numerous authors here, Bellows himself also suffered repercussions. Again, both Griffey and Brock work (in some ways from opposite ends) to free the artist from the primacy this nationalistic narrative places on the early works to the continued dismissal of the great technical and aesthetic appetite that attended the artist's production throughout his career. The ideological demands disfigure not only the narrative of American art but also the work of those artists, like Bellows, conscripted into its service.

One strategy to dismantle the ideological grip still dominant in the received narrative of Bellows is offered in the essays by Didier Ottinger and Scharf. In reading Bellows through the lens of Edward Hopper, Ottinger de-centers the monographic focus on Bellows—so common even

in current scholarship—and considers the artist and the dynamics that constructed his national reputation in the context of a dialogue. Ottinger attends to Bellows as a participant rather than as a focus or center of a dialogue, and in so doing reveals that much of what we continue to build upon in addressing Bellows is too often drawn from normalized assumptions. Similarly, Scharf offers fodder for re-constructing a more complicated non-Bellows centered narrative in her discussion of the European responses to Bellows' work.

In addressing very articulate and, in some ways, narrowly focused points that emerged out of the experience of intense exposure to both visual and archival material, the symposium participants have offered significant avenues to re-thinking Bellows. They have gotten closer to the historic or physical context of the work and expanded or pushed an element that was present in, if not always the focus of, the exhibition. The participants have stepped back from the allure of the artist's monographic context to consider how that narrative naturalizes problematic and pervasive issues. And, they have de-centered the works or narrative by re-focusing on dialogues in which the artist or his works do not necessarily dominate. In these tactics, the participants have also suggested directions for thinking about Bellows that might, yet again, continue new and productive inquiry.

Continuing to approach Bellows through dialogues that are able to subvert or mediate the power of his oft-remarked "quintessential Americanness" to take control of inquiry is shown in this publication to hold great possibilities. Not surprising, the appeal of Bellows' fair-haired Americanness is more easily resisted by non-American audiences. Drawing from those audience responses, the perspectives of European scholars, and topics that address the artist within non-American dialogues broadens our understanding of the ways in which Bellows can prove *pertinent* to, and not just *dominant* in, American art and cultural history. The results of moving away from the pull of received monographic trajectories also suggest that Bellows is a potential locus from which to dismantle the even larger ideological narratives that his biographical narrative serves. Several scholars in this publication write that the effort of dismantling the received narrative of Bellows seems more akin to the effort of dismantling myth—suggesting a very important direction for future scholarship.

The modes by which artistic production services the myth-making that both sustains nationalistic ideology and conceals its underbelly of disempowerment, violence, and acquiescence have been the focus of critical inquiry in any number of historical topics. They have been

analyzed maybe most explicitly in images of the American West, but I suspect Bellows' ability to register even the most nuanced social dynamics in paint—whether conscious of what he was observing and translating or not—suggests he also has the potential to be an exemplar for analyzing the deep and broad power structures engaged in ideological meta-narratives. Several essays in this publication reveal the points where there seems to be a rupture in the narrative fabric of Bellows' paintings. Fagg notes that Bellows seems aware of the violence, intimidation, and forced conformity in his drawing of a fraternity initiation; aware of his artistic and personal complicity in it; and yet also willing to dismiss its very presence that he himself chose to visualize. There is an excess in Bellows (Tallack notes this formally, but it is persistent thematically as well) that, while held in check by the artist's facility to straddle, can be detected through a close focus on the visual areas of narrative rupture. The violence revealed in the moment of rupture in the drawing points to the militaristic violence and fears of immigration that permeated American culture at the time. Fagg, like others in this publication, connects the excessive elements of a single anecdote to broad manifestations and insidious consequences of ideology.

The essays here also offer direction for one of the most common questions regarding Bellows' oeuvre. When Bellows died suddenly in 1925, at the age of forty-two from complications of a ruptured appendix, he was working in styles and subjects that appear in sharp contrast to his celebrated early work. Much ado has attended speculation on where his career was headed. One central premise of the retrospective was to counter the primacy given his early works over these later, less easily digested ones. Tallack offers a compelling suggestion that understanding and validating the direction of this late period—and a way to think about the seeming unevenness or uncertainty of many of these later works—lies not in comparing them, or contextualizing them with the sorts of genre from Bellows' early career that seem precursors to American Scene painting, but rather to look at his late explorations in the context of modernism. Bellows' excessiveness of color and his uncertainty (which some have read as anxiety) in straddling the convictions of realism and abstraction are shown by Tallack to rest fully within the central tenets of high European Modernism.

The National Gallery of Art's retrospective posited a set of overarching characteristics—an enormously charged ambition, a nearly limitless capacity for experimentation, and radically democratic impulses—through which Bellows' oeuvre could be sifted and ordered to better accommodate its complexity. Based on the evidence of the retrospective and the essays in this publication, I would add a fourth—the compulsion to make

vernacular experience transcendent through formal elements. I am forever transfixed by Bellows' facility in *Stag at Sharkey's* to merge human violence, desperation, and physicality into the viscous collision of paint on canvas. Mazow meets an equally transfixing experience in *Shore House,* with its powerful aura of failed communication evoked simultaneously with an intangibly moving spiritual soundfulness, for lack of a better term. Lubin finds in the depiction of Edith Cavell's murder a rhetoric of war brought into the service of genuine tragedy. Tallack isolates the eponymous "blue" of *Blue Morning* to reveal its evocative, otherworldly potential. Blue tethers the present world of mundane experience and anecdote—the world of the tracks under which we as viewers and workers stand—to a shimmering distance, a blue that seems of its own accord to evoke a much-desired utopian promise.

The essays in this publication suggest rich avenues to re-think—to reconfigure, reorganize, and refocus—the complicated nature of Bellows' oeuvre. However, importantly, in looking inward to the artist's oeuvre, they also suggest the pertinence of his works to analysis aimed at larger narratives and structures operative outside of the circle of the artist and, even, outside of the explicit topics of American art. The George Bellows posited here brings a complicated set of dynamics, assumptions, contradictions, and complicity that can be enormously frustrating. In the end, however, this is exactly why Bellows has the potential to bring new insight into the kind of sophisticated critical inquiry that has the ability to break down (and, unfortunately sometimes to build) the massive, deeply rooted, and often elusive power structures operative in constructing and deconstructing meaning in our world.

GEORGE BELLOWS: REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

CHARLES BROCK

Figure 1-1. George Bellows, *Stag at Sharkey's,* 1909. Oil on canvas, 36 3/16 x 48 1/4 in. (92.00 x 122.60 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art. Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection, 1133.1922.

The George Bellows retrospective, presented from spring 2012 to spring 2013 at the National Gallery of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Royal Academy of Arts, in conjunction with the exhibition held at the Columbus Museum of Art in fall 2013, tried to come to terms with a brief but very complex career. Bellows became well known for his innovative boxing pictures and urban subjects while still in his twenties

and received sustained recognition until his death in 1925 at the age of forty-two. He was always viewed as a leading contemporary artist and his consistently prolific and diverse output, as Bellows had intended, provoked wide-ranging and lively debate. The critic Forbes Watson noted that "Bellows believed in being successful while alive. He did not console himself with the thought of a post mortem success."[1] The artist may perhaps never be as richly understood as he was during his own lifetime when a formidable array of commentators, including Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Edmund Wilson, Henry McBride, and Edgar Holger Cahill, offered insightful readings.

Following Bellows' passing, a narrow, simplistic narrative about his role in the history of American art took hold. Bellows was portrayed as an artist who—in the wake of the introduction of European modernism to America at the Armory Show in New York in 1913—lost his way and went into decline during the last years of his abbreviated life. A broad consensus eventually emerged that only the works before 1913, and in the popular imagination just the early boxing paintings, mattered. Instead of a difficult personality who experimented with a wide variety of representational styles and methods while delving into issues of politics, race, class, gender, sexuality, war, and violence, Bellows was presented as the juvenile "boy wonder" of American art.[2] This reductive thinking dovetailed with the marginalization of the first American avant-garde and representational art that accompanied the rise of abstract expressionism at midcentury. Such a fate was particularly unfortunate for someone who had rarely accommodated critical or popular expectations and who prized his independence from both. As Bellows put it, "Watch all good art, and accept none as a standard for yourself. Think with all the world, and work alone."[3]

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[1] Forbes Watson, "George Bellows—The Boy Wonder of American Painting," lecture, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, May 27, 1945, Forbes Watson Papers, Archives of American Art.

[2] Ibid.

[3] "'The Big Idea': George Bellows Talks about Patriotism for Beauty," *Touchstone* 1, no. 3 (July 1917): 275.

Figure 1-2. George Bellows, *Dempsey and Firpo*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 63 1/4 in. (129.9 x 160.7 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase with funds from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, 31.95.

The problem of early and later Bellows is crystallized by a comparison that is often used to highlight his supposed decline: *Stag at Sharkey's* (**fig. 1-1**) and *Dempsey and Firpo* (**fig. 1-2**). *Stag at Sharkey's* is usually characterized as the superior painting because of its aggressive, energetic paint handling, while the latter is seen as dry, static, and lifeless, and fatally compromised by Bellows' interest in the intricate compositional theories of Jay Hambidge. The retrospective sought to demonstrate that the key to understanding Bellows is to see a pairing like this not as an either/or proposition but rather as an expression of his ambition to constantly experiment with styles and themes. In *Dempsey and Firpo* Bellows returned to his great early subject in order to completely reconfigure and contradict it. Rather than a dark, illicit barroom brawl, we see a brightly lit public spectacle. Instead of a horizontal side-to-side clash rendered with thick expressionistic brushwork, there is the vertical up and down of the standing and falling boxers presented in a vivid, bright commercial poster format. The two paintings, as is often presumed, do not represent any neat formal evolution from an early to a late style. Bellows always worked in

multiple styles simultaneously and, more to the point, he never had a true late phase, having died abruptly at midcareer. It is believed that the artist makes an appearance in both works in two very different guises. Reflecting the mutability of Bellows' creative persona, he intently peers over the edge of the ring on the right side of *Stag at Sharkey's* and stares blankly away from the ring on the left edge of *Dempsey and Firpo* **(fig 1-3).**

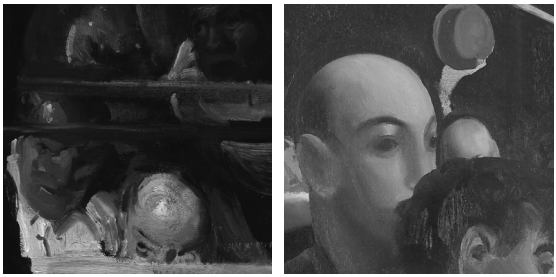

Figure 1-3. George Bellows, self-portraits in *Stag at Sharkey's* and *Dempsey and Firpo*.

Bellows' art was as full an expression as possible of his mentor Robert Henri's creed of "art for life's sake." For both men making art was not an end in itself, but rather a never-ending quest to create works of such force, vitality, and interest that they became part and parcel of the dynamic world and larger culture around them. Art was not about formal evolution, perfection, or establishing a fully resolved signature style but something that was never finished and always up for grabs; an activity, like life itself, where success or failure, winning and losing, always hung in the balance. Bellows sought out controversy and engaged his audience in a constant debate about his content and methods with the struggle counting more than the conclusion. His art was mercurial, always self-consciously reinventing itself and moving on to another round, another roll of the dice, the next victory or defeat. Success and failure, triumph and tragedy, were two sides of the same coin. This is the central theme of *Stag at Sharkey's*, a fight in progress, as well as *Dempsey and Firpo* where the eventual winner, Dempsey, is shown falling out of the ring while the eventual loser in the second round, the Argentinean Firpo, looms above him.

The retrospective impressed upon visitors the open-ended, uncensored, capacious qualities of Bellows' enterprise. Critics were compelled to weigh in on the entire range of his work. Lavish praise and harsh criticism were directed at almost every aspect of his output in ways that

approximated the richness and depth of the criticism accorded to Bellows during his lifetime. In addition, as the retrospective was being organized a number of Bellows' neglected later works— *Riverfront, No. 1* (1914), *The Shower Bath* (1917), *The Picnic* (1924), and *Two Women* (1924)—were included in two groundbreaking thematic exhibitions: *Hide/ Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portaiture* at the National Portrait Gallery and *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.[4] These projects and their accompanying publications, in tandem with the ambitious retrospective catalogue and the collection of essays gathered together in this volume, have helped to reestablish Bellows as a multivalent figure whose art not only had profound implications for the years before the Amory Show but also for many other forms of modernism in the 1920s and '30s and past midcentury. Bellows' international standing in the broader history of Western art was moreover affirmed when the National Gallery in London purchased the major oil *Men of the Docks* in 2014 and the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham, England, acquired the standing nude, *Miss Bentham*, in 2015. These developments will undoubtedly encourage further research initiatives to address some of the prominent lacunae in Bellows studies. For instance, Bellows' drawings have yet to be systematically catalogued and there is no definitive scholarly biography.

There were well over fifty reviews of *George Bellows* with many major newspapers and art periodicals weighing in, including *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Apollo*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Studio International*, *The Quarterly Review*, *The Art Newspaper*, *The Spectator*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Observer*, and *The Independent*. The commentators fell into three categories: critics who repeated the received notions about Bellows and privileged his early period, others who were impressed by the full range of his career, and finally, those who recognized that the most compelling, and in many ways irresolvable problem of Bellows' art, was the struggle to reconcile its many disparate and, given his early death, missing pieces. A small, representative sampling of these three approaches are presented here. The essay concludes with a discussion of how, as the exhibition's coordinating curator, and after having had the opportunity to reflect upon the retrospective in Washington, New York, and London, my own understanding of Bellows deepened. Most surprisingly, Bellows' depictions

[4] Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, 2010); Teresa A. Carbone, ed., *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2011).

of German atrocities in Belgium in World War I, works that have been as consistently pilloried by critics as much as the boxing pictures have been praised, raised essential questions about the artist.

Reviews

One of the initial reviews of the retrospective, "A Holistic View of George Bellows" by the Pulitzer Prize–winning critic for the *Washington Post*, Philip Kennicott, was also one of the most perceptive:

> The National Gallery of Art's large exhibition devoted to the work of *George Bellows*…feels more like pieces of a puzzle, a fascinating, imperfect puzzle…. As with so many artists, poets and composers who lived during periods that seemed…wildly eclectic and are considered …historically transitional, Bellows is unclassifiable. If you ignore large tracts of his work, he can, at best, be pigeonholed. This exhibition demands that Bellows' oeuvre be considered as a whole, including a room of deeply disturbing paintings he made in response to World War I, political imagery that veers toward social caricature, and portraits in which the artist seems to be channeling the ethos of another era. In other words, a career of many modernisms...early paintings of New York…suggest an artist feverishly exploring aesthetic breaking points…As Bellows matured, his output became stylistically more diverse, and at times the only common thread seems to be a distinctive quirkiness, a restless need to add in something weird and unpredictable. It is almost intangible, more a matter of the personality behind the art than what any individual piece says. Only a large retrospective gives enough data points to reveal this inchoate sensibility, and, for that, one is grateful for a chance to see Bellows from brilliant beginning to premature end.... If most visitors come away dazzled by the early works, and with a mixture of amusement and admiration for all the rest, the exhibition won't necessarily have unsettled the long-standing view of Bellows. But that common wisdom about Bellows will at least be buttressed with a deeper knowledge of his work. And perhaps, over time, exhibitions such as this one will finally dismantle the still seductive view of monolithic Modernism."[5]

Other critics of the show in Washington, while skeptical about Bellows' late career, addressed its implications in thoughtful ways. James Gardner in his article titled "Genius is Always Above its Age," for *Antiques Magazine*, wrote: "Although in theory there is no reason to prefer spontaneity to classicism or classicism to spontaneity, Bellows' works of

[5] Philip Kennicott, "A Holistic View of George Bellows," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2012, C1, C7.

the 1920s, though not without their charms, are more stylized and conventional, and feel like something of a falling off when measured against the epiphanies of his earlier masterpieces… the new exhibition in Washington should make clear that he deserves far more of the world's attention than he has thus far received. He is as eminent a painter as Edward Hopper and he exhibits, I believe, a greater mastery of his materials."[6] *The New Yorker*'s art critic Peter Schjeldahl dubbed the National Gallery installation a "tangy retrospective": "The young Bellows had much of what it took to be a great painter, and he hadn't lost it when he died....The uncanny *Fisherman's Family*...doesn't overcome Bellows' faults of stylistic nostalgia and busy calculation but, rather, exaggerates them, with a sort of frozen hysteria, to the point of something fiercely original....The cumulative effect is a surreal intensity, not of this world or of any other but of painting as the only home of a gifted, proud, desperately yearning spirit."[7]

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Roberta Smith, in her review "Restless in Style and Subject," for the *New York Times*, criticized the show's selection and organization, which she believed was lacking in late Woodstock landscapes. As to the art itself, she admired Bellows' early masterpieces, especially the excavation series and, like Schjeldahl, saw glimmers of hope and possibility in the late period: "Whatever Bellows was after, he pursued it restlessly, not just in his final canvases but through most of his busy and multifaceted, if truncated, career…genuinely forward-looking are three dark, enigmatic paintings of the excavation for Penn Station from 1907–9 that show modern progress as a violation of nature, a giant void in the earth, and give this 'wound' a reality and lasting power that no photograph could match. In these works, paint is laid on in broad, rough slabs, becoming earth and also incipient abstraction. This exhibition...conveys the complexity of Bellows' work without sorting its strengths and weaknesses or examining the importance of his landscape paintings...his final years…may have brought him closer than anyone yet realizes to the something he was always after."[8]

The New York critics privileged Bellows' New York subjects. Patrick McCaughey, in "The Mire of Experience," for the *Times Literary Supplement,* commented: "In the ten to twelve years after his arrival in New York in 1904, Bellows wrenched American painting out of gentility

[6] James Gardner, "Genius is Always Above Its Age," *Antiques,* May/June 2012.
[7] Peter Schjeldahl, "Young and Gifted: A George Bellows Retrospective," *The New Yorker,* June 25, 2012, 78–79.
[8] Roberta Smith, "Restless in Style and Subject," *New York Times*, November 15, 2012, C27.

and into the mire of experience. No American painter equaled his full-blooded response to the power and presence of America in the twentieth century… The effort and ambition in the work are nothing less than heroic...the impastoed bodies of the boxers anticipate the morphology and the horror of Francis Bacon. The sado-sexuality of the paintings reveals a Bellows who can reach down into the lower recessions of the imagination where non-ethical passions and energies reside.... 'Late Bellows' remains a point of contention."[9] *The New Yorker* published an additional review on their website by the critic Richard Brody: "The most alluring and most stimulating works in the show are his views of New York City, Bellows is no abstractionist...but these early paintings contain fascinating hints of the limits of painting in confrontation with the incommensurable density of modern experience.... In a single image that is one of the craziest, most ambitious (**fig. 1-4**) and—for all of its clumsiness—most exhilarating that I've seen in a while, Bellows tries to bite into the very tangle at the city's core...The clashing angles and colors and shapes make for a wild riot of visual energy that, for all of its meticulous representational specificity, points ahead to the furious tangle of cosmic inwardness realized by Jackson Pollock.... The failure of Bellows to achieve his mighty visions may well be a failure of painting itself, the inadequacy of the method to simulate the technologically advanced world that gave rise to photography—and above all to cinema."[10] In the same vein, Sanford Schwartz, in his review "Luscious, Delicate, Muscular Bellows," for *The New York Review of Books*, observed: "In Bellows' art one finds, especially in his early pictures, which are among the most beautiful made by an American, that his subject is elusive. It seems to be simply (or not so simply) an exuberance in being alive…. Especially in the Woodstock-area landscapes of his later years…Bellow's color and design sense can have a peacocky flamboyance, making for pictures that seem equally to be visions and confections… however, it was Bellows' early New York pictures that mattered."[11]

[9] Patrick McCaughey, "The Mire of Experience," *Times Literary Supplement,* no. 5727 (January 4, 2013): 18.

[10] Richard Brody, "George Bellows' New York," *The New Yorker*, February 4, 2013, www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/movies/2013/02/george-bellows-new-york-at-the-met.html.

[11] Sanford Schwartz, "Luscious, Delicate, Muscular Bellows," *The New York Review of Books* LIX, no. 19 (December 6, 2012): 20–21.