

The Old, Weird Modernity

George Bellows gets a big retrospective at the Met **BY R.C. BAKER**



Courtesy James W. and Frances McGlothlin

BELLOWS WAS DELVING FULLY INTO THE ORGANIZED CHAOS OF THE YOUNG CENTURY.

Aced it: Tennis at Newport, 1920

By his own account, George Bellows (1882–1925) “arose surrounded by Methodists and Republicans” in Columbus, Ohio. Bellows played semipro baseball while attending Ohio State, but in 1904 he left both behind—“My brains were as innocent as college could make them”—and moved to New York to become an illustrator. He never made it to Europe to study the old masters, but absorbed their power through visits to the Metropolitan Museum and from his mentor Robert Henri, a leader of the Ashcan School, which was notorious for gritty, street-level paintings of urban life.

Now the Metropolitan Museum has brought together more than 100 works by this American original for a long-overdue retrospective. The revelatory show opens with *Kids* (1906), chiaroscuro ragamuffins in pleated skirts, kneesocks, and floppy hats surrounded by classical light, a softening miasma that could have been lifted straight out of a Rembrandt. Two years later, in *Noon*, the light has become harsher, enveloping elevated train tracks that form an emphatic black cross that casts both horses and humans into stark shadow, while gray steam obscures surrounding tenements. As in the coarse, black-and-white contrasts of those newfangled “moving pictures,” Bellows was transmitting the tumult of modernity—the clangor and crowds and machines propel-

ling the budding American century. The claustrophobic gloom of *Noon* lends irony to its title: From early on, Bellows had sympathy for the 99 percent, an attitude buttressed by his friendship with the anarchist Emma Goldman, his voting for Socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs, and his illustrations for the leftist magazine *The Masses*.

Bellows’s career gathered momentum with his now-familiar series of boxing paintings, including the iconic *Stag at Sharkey’s* (1909). Here, his protagonists are caught in the glare of incandescent lights, a nocturnal clash of savage combatants cheered on by a crowd of red-faced, cigar-chomping carousers. The entangled combatants form a jagged pyramid of knees, elbows, and tendons, the flailing flesh captured in brushstrokes applied with slashing athletic velocity. Bellows’s figures fully occupy their space, but through his visceral paint handling, we also sense his own body. Such a masterful blend of application and materials had antecedents in the wristy brushwork of El Greco centuries before, and Bellows subsequently bequeathed this painter’s alchemy to the abstract expressionists of the 1940s and ’50s. (In 1949, no less a champion of formal abstraction than Clement Greenberg declared Bellows “one of the most important artists America has produced in this century.”)

Bellows used his preternatural facility to depict the gargantuan excavation for Penn

Station, a construction project that staked another claim to the modernization of the metropolis. A night scene from 1908 features hunched workers dwarfed by the Stygian expanse between a foreground bonfire and glaring arc lights in the distance. Similarly, in *Blue Snow, the Battery* (1910), light and paint seem to arrive simultaneously. The rich blue shadows vary from hard-edged rectangles to cool gray blurs, while the differing pressures of Bellows’s brushstrokes distinguish frozen crust from powdery drift. Flashes of yellow and red accent the dynamic harmony.

Come 1911, Bellows was delving fully into the organized chaos of the young century. A horse-drawn wagon stacked with beige cubes (hay bales?) threads through thronging crowds in the simply—if emphatically—titled *New York*. Rows of green and black windows in the purple- and salmon-hued office towers crowding out the sky add to the abstract syncopation of the composition. Two years later, the artist took the abstractions from Europe on display at the Armory Show in stride, remarking that the cubists were “merely laying bare a principle of construction which is contained within the great works that have gone before.”

But the compositional and chromatic brinkmanship of his younger days was stifled by narrative necessity in the paintings and prints he created to expose atrocities allegedly committed by German troops in

World War I, such as maiming civilians and advancing behind human shields.

Bellows was a master draftsman who usually worked directly from his subjects, but these images based on news reports prove sadly stilted and blunt. After the war ended, he rediscovered the verve of his earlier triumphs in *The Studio* (1919). Recalling Velázquez’s 1656 masterpiece *Las Meninas*, Bellows includes three floors of his home and three generations of his family in this four-foot-high canvas. The richly modulated colors and gently plunging perspectives foreshadow a great painting by his exact contemporary and friend, Edward Hopper. But Hopper did not arrive at the grandeur of *New York Movie*—that blond usherette in an empty movie palace—until two decades after Bellows’s striking composition.

In 1920, Bellows continued progressing with daringly composed and garishly colored scenes of tennis matches. In one, sunlight spills directly down a grassy slope toward the viewer, filling the umbrellas and diaphanous dresses of the crowd with a ravishing glow. In another, the sun comes in low over the viewer’s shoulder, a vertiginous, raking illumination that conveys a sense of abandon at odds with the genteel scene.

Throughout the early 1920s, Bellows painted landscapes that included lakes reflecting azure mountains scoured by purple clouds and radiant horses contemplating dappled green vistas. In 1924, he returned to the ring with Firpo’s roundhouse knocking Dempsey through the ropes, the rigidly crossed limbs conjuring some sort of funny-papers Caravaggio. These are strange, arresting images, redolent of what Greil Marcus, writing about blues and folk music, dubbed “the old, weird America.” Bellows was trying to divine what modernity was visiting upon the nation—and on painting.

Then in 1925, he died of a ruptured appendix, having neglected recurring abdominal pains because of a busy schedule and a born athlete’s disdain for the nagging discomforts of encroaching middle age.

He was 42 years old.

Consider that you would never have heard of Willem de Kooning if he’d died at 42—two years before his breakthrough “Black” paintings and all the world-changing abstractions that followed. There would be none of Philip Guston’s greatest work, those resonant cartoon canvases he only began painting in his mid fifties. Rembrandt’s spellbinding late self-portraits? Not happening—it’s the artist’s unstintingly depicted sixtysomething visage that beckons you into those eternally compelling works.

In fact, it’s a quote from Guston about Rembrandt that might provide the best epitaph for Bellows’s too-short career: “The trouble with most modern painting is that it’s too clear. The painting of the past which fascinates me is the painting which you can spend the rest of your life trying to figure out, trying to fathom what the artist’s intentions were. That’s what keeps me looking at it.”

‘George Bellows’

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