

George Bellows — A Vignette of an American Sporting Artist

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Ohio State University spawned George Bellows, one of the nation's foremost artists, and a man who will probably always be remembered for his virile, realistic renditions of boxing art.

He was a genuine "Big Man on Campus" in 1902 and 1903, having been a starting member of both baseball and basketball squads, a cartoonist for the yearbook, and a thespian for several campus dramatic organizations. He wasn't much of an athlete as an adolescent, but observation and constant practice on the diamond eventually earned him a regular's position in high school and in college as well as the offer of a professional contract with the Indianapolis professional team of the Western League. Diligent attention to his basketball techniques eventually made it possible for him to play semi-professionally and thus earn extra income while attending the New York School of Art.

His dad was 58 when George was born; consequently, there was a dramatic generation gap which caused a big schism between them throughout life. Of this George once exclaimed, "His point of view — even his character — belonged to so remote a past that I look upon many of his ideas to this day with amazement and sorrow."¹ The family disharmony just added to his uncertainty of which vocational direction to pursue, and at the end of his junior year, he decided to pack up his bags and board a train for New York to enter art school.

An insight into his character was revealed at about that period of his life when his mother encouraged him to enter the ministry and his dad recommended him to follow in his foot steps by being a contractor. George said, "I'm going to Ohio State to be a ball player." He did. Then his baseball coach wanted him to play the outfield. Since he wanted more action, he said, "No thanks. I am a shortstop." Later someone suggested that he be a professional baseball player, and he replied, "No. I'm going to be an artist."² This man knew what he wanted, and once he put his boundless energy and abilities in that direction, nothing could stop him — nothing except death at 42.

He studied under Robert Henri, a major influence in his life because not only did he offer advice on technique but he helped him to socialize with the outstanding pioneers of the "Ash Can" school. Henri was disenchanted with the fact that the artistic tastes of Americans was largely determined by a snobbish small group of art jurists whose criteria was traditional and narrow. Consequently, he did all within his power to encourage the realism efforts of those such as Prendergast, Shinn, Sloan, Luds, Lawson, Davies, and Glacken, as well as Bellows, to paint honest-to-goodness life as they saw it. Henri made it possible for their works to eventually be displayed, and the never to be forgotten Armory show of 1913 in New York City was the turning point.

1. Young, Mahonri Sharp, *George Bellows, a Reevaluation*. Unpublished manuscript. Columbus: Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, 1973.
2. Boswell, Peyton Jr., *George Bellows*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1942. p. 13.

From then on Bellows's fame spread. He became the youngest elected member of the National Academy of Design in New York, he won numerous prizes — and his works sold.

He painted typical New York street scenes of tenements, men shoveling snow, placid boat scenes on the Hudson and East rivers; and among the sporting motifs were billiards, tennis, polo, swimming, prosaic gymnasium scenes that are familiar to us who have held a YMCA membership and his most popular activity, boxing.

He painted but four boxing pictures in his life, but these were where he first made his niche in American art. "Stag at Sharkey's" is synonymous with Bellows as "Mother" is to Whistler and "Christina's World" is to Andrew Wyeth. His slashing strokes, the blood on the central figures, the contrast between the light on them and the darkness in the background, and the expressions on the faces of those at ringside made it the most talked about painting of the day as well as causing him to receive considerable comment from the critics. One questioned him as to why he didn't put more detail in the expression of the boxers faces. His reply was, "I don't care about the expression on a fighter's mug. Prize fighter's muscles are his *epluribus unum!*"³ He made numerous lithographs of the same setting.

"Ringside Seats" was his second boxing painting, and this was followed by "Both Members Of This Club," a dramatic contrast between black and white fighters as well as a contrast between black and white pigments. Of this work one reviewer suggested that he did not know his boxing and had planted the feet of the boxers incorrectly and that they were off balance. Here his response was, "I don't know anything about boxing. I was just painting two men trying to kill each other!"⁴

In 1923 Bellows was working for the New York Evening Journal and was given the boxing match between Louis Firpo and Jack Dempsey to cover. 82,000 fans saw the fight at the Polo Grounds, and it was acclaimed as the most savage heavyweight bout ever staged. After flooring Firpo seven times in the opening round, Dempsey, in turn, was knocked through the ropes and into Bellows' lap. The latter remembered the action, went home and reproduced it on canvas as well as by lithograph — and "Dempsey and Firpo" became a sensation.

This has been reproduced with thousands of prints to this day.

The following year he died and was eulogized by his countrymen. Since then his works have been exhibited occasionally in major galleries. Probably the most accurate and modest description of his talents came from his own lips late in his career when he said, "I address you from the grave. This may not be art at all, in your times, but this is America seen by an honest man who never left the American soil in his whole life. I vouch for its honesty."⁵

This personified George Bellows.

3. *George Bellows, His Lithographs.* p. 15.

4. Brown, Jules D., *American Painting.* New York: World Publishing Company, 1969. p. 131.

5. *George Bellows, His Lithographs.* p. 28.