

George Wesley Bellows

There is seldom an acknowledged master without a few voices of dissent, but in the case of George Wesley Bellows there seem to have been universal accord. Bellows was a creative artist, neither an academic nor impressionist, but decidedly an American realist, who depicted the everyday scene encompassing the romantic and the brutal, by painting with physical vitality and brilliant bravura brushstrokes.

In 1904, armed with a portfolio of his drawings, and an allowance from his father, Bellows came under the influence of Robert Henri, a man he had never heard of, but chose as his first teacher at The New York School of Art. "My life began at this point," Bellows noted later. William Merritt Chase, Kenneth Hayes Miller and Robert Henri were the three principle instructors at the school. Bellows gravitated toward the vital, energetic, decidedly masculine Robert Henri, who loved life, people and his pupils, and was a great teacher. Henri was the percussion cap that set off the uproar of the Ashcan School, The Eight, a group of artists who rejected what they referred to as the insipid pettiness then in vogue, and replaced it with the humorous, vigorous, and sometimes squalid New York scene. Henri preached, "Do not imitate. Be yourself," and to his students, "Be a man first, a real man with guts. Art can come later." He believed he was creating a class of men with a good strong conscience, and the courage to live up to it.

Almost immediately Bellows led the class. His first painting submitted to the National Academy of Design was the roughly painted *River Rats*, whose subject matter of scantily clad boys cavorting along the East River at the foot of a high, rocky cliff showed the influence of Henri in a natural, keenly observed masculine slice of life. Bellows' first painting of boxers, *Stag at Sharkey's*, followed a short time later. Sharkey's Athletic Club, only a few blocks from the Lincoln Arcade, was an enticing urban underworld which Bellows frequented. Here he developed knowledge of anatomy in motion from watching the boxing matches which he later depicted in his pastel painting, *The Knock Out*, and another oil painting entitled *Club Night*.

In 1909, Bellows was elected as an associate to the National Academy, a professional recognition highly coveted by fellow artists. Henri himself had been elected to the Academy only two years before. The boxing pictures were signature paintings for Bellows, and fit his self-conception, and the process of creating these pictures was a part of Bellows' efforts to construct a sense of his manhood.

Bellows married Emma Story, the daughter of a well-to-do businessman from Upper Montclair, New Jersey. As a devoted husband and father, he found his family a recurring source of pictorial inspiration. His art softened considerably after the birth of his daughters, and he painted a number of sentimental family portraits, and illustrated a number of children's books. The couple lived only a few blocks from Henri and his new wife, and over the years the two couples became close. Henri was nineteen years older than Bellows, and the two maintained a warm father-son relationship. Bellows taught at the Art Students League, and gave liberally of his time in teaching underprivileged children.

Influenced by Hals, Velasquez, Goya, Daumier and Manet, Bellows' art was essentially provincial in its optimism and in its honest picturesque-ness of the common man, and the beauty of the visual world. A prolific painter, he was known to complete two or even three paintings a day

aimed at capturing a vivid moment. In the space of ten years, he succeeded in forging an identity for frank and uncompromising paintings of brutal crudity. In 1911 an art journalist called Bellows the most successful young painter in New York. Bellows made exuberant, spirited pictures of the bigness and boldness of New York City, and of topical events, but they also reflect the “smiling aspects of American life.” Bellows died young and very famous in 1925 of a ruptured appendix.

-Nona A. Butterworth, Docent, 1997