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Bellows on Monhegan

By MARIANNE DOEZEMA

DURING HIS FORMATIVE YEARS, George Bellows was involved with a group of young artists who reveled in their challenge to cultural, social, and artistic conventions. He is best known for his gritty urban subject pictures, especially his depictions of brutal prizefights that went on in smoky dimly lit clubs. In 1910, six years after his arrival in the City to become an artist, Bellows married the daughter of a well-to-do businessman, cementing what many perceived as his closeted uptown social aspirations. He was able to install his new wife in a house on East Nineteenth Street and soon thereafter to provide her with a maid. Part of the social ritual attendant to the life of his bride's family was the annual event of leaving the city for the summer. This became Bellows's habit as well. One of these summer retreats, in 1913, produced Colby's *Hill and Valley (Monhegan)*, p. 362 & 395). To appreciate the way this elegantly painted landscape represented a departure for the artist, it is useful to position the work in the context of his painting career.

* * *

BELLOWS CAME TO NEW YORK from Columbus, Ohio, in 1904, with the intention of becoming an illustrator. Having spent years copying magazine illustrations by Charles Dana Gibson and Howard Chandler Christy, he was already a facile draftsman. He enrolled in classes at the New York School of Art and sketched in Central Park, the subject of a number of paintings by one of his teachers, William Merritt Chase. But in a few short months, Bellows's methods and his notions about art began to change. He quickly fell under the influence of one of the most dynamic and persuasive personalities at the school, Robert Henri.

Henri made it quite clear that life was more "real" in the tenement district than it was in Central Park. He sent his students to the Lower East Side, to the asylum, to the Bowery, and to the prizefight arena—in places like these they would find subjects unencumbered by the social conventions of bourgeois society. He encouraged his students to ignore artistic conventions and formulas—to paint from fresh visual apprehension—and most importantly, to paint the real life they saw around them every day.

It was certainly because of Henri's influence that Bellows's first painting shown at the National Academy of Design was *River Rats* (Plate 1, p. 384). Along the lower edge of this canvas Bellows painted a gangling group of scantily clad boys cavorting at the edge of the East River. The entire center of this painting is given over to that graceless, rocky mass. Academicians such



Plate 1

George Bellows, *River Rats*, 1906.
Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.
Private Collection, Washington, D.C.

as Kenyon Cox and George de Forest Brush must have considered the surface of *River Rats* to be gritty and unfinished and the subject decidedly indecorous. Sergeant Kendall, whose painting *An Interlude* (Plate 2, p. 386) was very popular at the National Academy that spring (1907) and was featured on the frontispiece of the catalogue, can serve here to represent what is commonly referred to as the genteel tradition and the academic artistic vocabulary associated with it. Kendall's painting represented an attitude toward art based on sound draftsmanship and fine technique, the idealization of nature, and a dedication to the loftiest ideals of art, whereby a painting would uplift and inspire the human spirit through its vision of perfection, of the ideal. To a traditional academic like Kendall, again, the rough surface and crude subject of *River Rats* presented an affront to the most highly cherished principals of art and culture.

However, a growing segment of the art audience, led perhaps by a cluster of progressive critics, was expressing frustration with the bankruptcy of academic idealism and the simpering sentimentality of the conservative fare at the academy. They welcomed paintings by Bellows and certain other members of the Henri circle as a refreshing, more vital expression. So, part of the resonance of Bellows's choice of gritty urban subject matter was tension involved with cultural change.

Painting *River Rats* associated Bellows, quite accurately, with Robert Henri who was his teacher and mentor, and Henri's circle of insurgent realists. Such a connection did Bellows no harm, as the Henri group was receiving considerable attention in the press. A *Harper's Weekly* article in the spring of 1907 called attention to the "Revolutionary Figures in American Art" and detailed their struggle against the art establishment. The author portrayed artists such as Abbott Thayer and George de Forest Brush as part of an old guard, clinging to their positions in the face of newer, stronger trends. By contrast, the "school of Robert Henri" offered "something affirmative and stimulating": "They seek what is significant.... There is virility in what they have done ... a manly strength," and so on.¹

In 1908 eight members of the Henri circle staged a very important exhibition, which has become quite famous in the annals of American art history. The leader/mentor of this group, the tireless crusader Robert Henri, was frustrated with having his protégés rejected at the hands of the jury of the National Academy and thought their work deserved to be seen. The eight artists organized a show of their own paintings in the Macbeth Gallery. It attracted enormous crowds and lots of attention from the press. Again, Bellows's association with this group enhanced his career. The Henri circle was at the vanguard of advanced art in New York. Bellows had the best of both worlds—while he did not show with them at the Macbeth Gallery, he profited from their reputation and their very public struggle with the leadership of the National Academy of Design. Meanwhile, Bellows was doing very well at the Academy.

1. Samuel Swift, "Revolutionary Figures in American Art," *Harper's Weekly* 51 (April 13, 1907): 534-36.



Plate 2

William Sergeant Kendall, *An Interlude*, 1907. Oil on canvas,
44 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
Gift of William T. Evans.

The following winter, six months after *River Rats* was in the Academy's spring annual, Bellows gained more visibility when two big, dark, unacademic-looking pictures, *Pennsylvania Excavation* and *Club Night*, were accepted by the Academy's discriminating and very conservative jury. A few months later they were shown at another exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy. A critic for the *New York Times* wrote an important review of the Philadelphia exhibition, focusing at some length on what he saw as a renaissance of art in this country, coming from a "wholesome disregard of the old, musty conventions." This new direction he said "has already begun to make itself felt to the consternation of all that's formal and academic, and one of the most interesting groups of painters in this country today is composed of a number of the younger men who use the material of life that lies ready close at hand." He was clearly speaking about the Henri circle, and then he went on: "Nothing in the whole exhibition illustrates this better than the three paintings by George Bellows, which demonstrates both the power and the shortcomings of this new school."²

Thus, when George Bellows began showing his art in New York City, his paintings stood out from much of what the arts audience was seeing. Bellows's paintings were not only dramatically different from the usual academy fare, they also tended to be more hard-hitting in their self-conscious, almost aggressive realism than was the work of many other members of that loosely knit group now known as the Ash Can School. Henri himself was showing primarily portraits during this period. If he painted a figure from the Lower East Side, it was usually a rosy-cheeked, smiling child. John Sloan painted vignettes of city life and saved his socialism for his magazine illustrations. William Glackens seldom painted anything unseemly.

And the art commentary of the period makes clear that Bellows did create a sensation. In the space of a very few years, despite his reputation for painting the underside of the city, or because of it, Bellows achieved remarkable success. He began selling work in 1909 and that same year, at age twenty-six, became one of the youngest members ever elected to the National Academy. Only Frederic Church had been similarly honored at such a young age. Exhibition reviews throughout this period routinely devoted more column space to Bellows than to any other artist, with the exception of John Singer Sargent.

It was Bellows's paintings of urban life—the excavation for Pennsylvania Station, street life on the Lower East Side, and the boxing arena—that established his reputation, and they are the images that are synonymous with his name today. Virtually all of those canonical pictures were produced within a period of merely five years, approximately one-fourth of his professional career. And urban subject pictures account for an even smaller fraction of the artist's overall oeuvre, which also included scores of landscapes, seascapes, and portraits, that merit more attention than they have been given.

* * *

2. J. Nilsen Laurvik, "Art at Home and Abroad: Significance of the Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy," *New York Times*, 26 January 1908: sec. 10, p. 8. The review was reprinted in *International Studio* 34 (March 1908): xxxi-xxxvi.

BELLOWS FINALLY CONVINCED Emma Story to marry him in the spring of 1910. Though their fortunes were in decline by the time he knew them, the Story's were a family with social pretensions and held firmly to the rules of decorum for upper-class society. Bellows's instinctual informality and his refusal to heed artificial rituals of behavior would be an occasional source of friction for the couple.

The wedding took place on September 23 of that year. That night they took a train to Montauk, Long Island. The location was certainly chosen because Bellows's ancestors came from the eastern end of Long Island; it was where his grandfather had been a whaler of some renown.³ It was at this location that Bellows began his life as a married man and where he began making paintings of the sea as it meets the land.

Bellows did one small painted sketch. But after his return, he created a major painting that he titled *Shore House* (Plate 3, right). Like all his large-scale canvases, *Shore House* was painted in the studio, and the process of filtering visual and emotional experience over time was very much a part of the process of developing a painting of this scale and substance. The sketch done on the site was a minor visual aid to an artist who possessed a powerful visual memory.

As Franklin Kelly has pointed out, *Shore House* is remarkably calm and reserved in comparison to Bellows's paintings of New York City. He seems instinctively to have turned to Winslow Homer for inspiration, and indeed a critic said of this picture that Bellows had arrived "at mastery by simple means in the 'Shore House,' a square house with a massive blue sea beyond as gaunt and dignified in arrangement as a Winslow Homer."⁴

In his late work Homer had come to reduce his compositional elements to a minimum and to concentrate their effect powerfully. *On a Lee Shore* (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design), for example, brings us right up to the rocks that fill the bottom half of the canvas. In *Shore House*, Bellows also uses broadly simplified planes of land and sea, along with the single motif of the house. He also employs the square format, which was used in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American art to a particular effect, to emphasize the flatness of the picture plane. Without a long horizon to emphasize the relation to the horizon of the landscape, the square format tends to work against spatial recession—and flatness is an expressly modernist aesthetic.

This picture was an ambitious endeavor for Bellows, and very likely it carried a great deal of emotional resonance for the artist. The simple monumen-

3. Frank Crowninshield, introduction, *Memorial Exhibition of the Works of George Bellows* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1925) 12.

4. "News and Notes of the Art World," *New York Times*, January 29, 1911: sec. 5, p. 15, quoted in Franklin Kelly, "'So Clean and Cold': Bellows and the Sea," *The Paintings of George Bellows* (New York: Harry N. Abrams with the Amon Carter Museum and Los Angeles Country Museum of Art, 1992) 140. See also Franklin Kelly's "George Bellows' Shore House," *American Art Around 1900: Lectures in Memory of Daniel Fraad*, ed. Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., and Doreen Bolger (New York and Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990) 119-35.



Plate 3

George Bellows, *Shore House*, 1911.

Oil on canvas, 40 x 42 inches.

Collection of Rita and Daniel Fraad,
New York, New York.

tality of that single house, situated on the land of his own forefathers, at the edge of the sea, seems to have associations with Bellows's feelings about home and family.

The following summer, Emma was expecting their first child. Bellows's biographer, George Morgan, reports that the artist was nervous, worried about Emma's health, and unable to paint.⁵ Henri invited him to join himself and another young painter, Randall Davey, on Monhegan Island. Emma quickly agreed he should go.

It was his chance to respond to a perceived challenge from his former classmate Rockwell Kent. Kent had captured the dramatic scenery of the island in a powerful series of landscapes that were shown in New York in 1907. The broadly simplified planes in *Toilers of the Sea* (New Britain Museum of American Art) reveal Kent's debt to Homer, a debt Bellows could well understand. Colby's *Blackhead, Monhegan* (Plate 4, right) probably dates from a later visit to the island. Beautifully nurtured paint surfaces and strong contrasts of light and dark added a power to Kent's designs that left Bellows envious. He vowed he would go to Monhegan himself one day and outdo his colleague.⁶

He worked furiously for four weeks, writing home to Emma almost nightly. He wrote often of his devotion to her and enthused about various sites on the island, marveling that an island so small (two and one-half miles long and a mile wide) could contain such extraordinary terrain. The letters also record mood swings and depression and suggest that the sea inspired contemplation of the larger issues of life.

Bellows was not facile with words and wrote little. Passages in the letters from Monhegan convey palpably Bellows's attempts to express emotions that were welling up inside, inchoate, his writing skills outstripped by his feelings:

If you were with me we could tramp the wild places all day and be alone together again; and sit by the sea in the night wind; and watch the moon lay a silver carpet over the ocean. We could slip over the velvet rocks down at the Sea's brink and watch the waves reach for us, and you could laugh at me for being timid and afraid of those crystal green hands which are so clean and cold.... We two and the great sea and the mighty rocks greater than the sea, and we two greater than the rocks and the sea. Four eternities....⁷

One letter was so despondent, Emma threw it away. In another, he wrote about climbing into the lair of an eagle in high rock ledges overlooking the sea. Momentarily he mused about hurling over the edge of the precipice. In spite of his moods, he was prolific with his paintbrush. Thirty small panels and a dozen canvases were brought back to New York.

5. Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York: Reynal and Company, 1965) 132-33.

6. Morgan 68.

7. Morgan 137, quoted in Kelly, "'So Clean and Cold': Bellows and the Sea," 135.

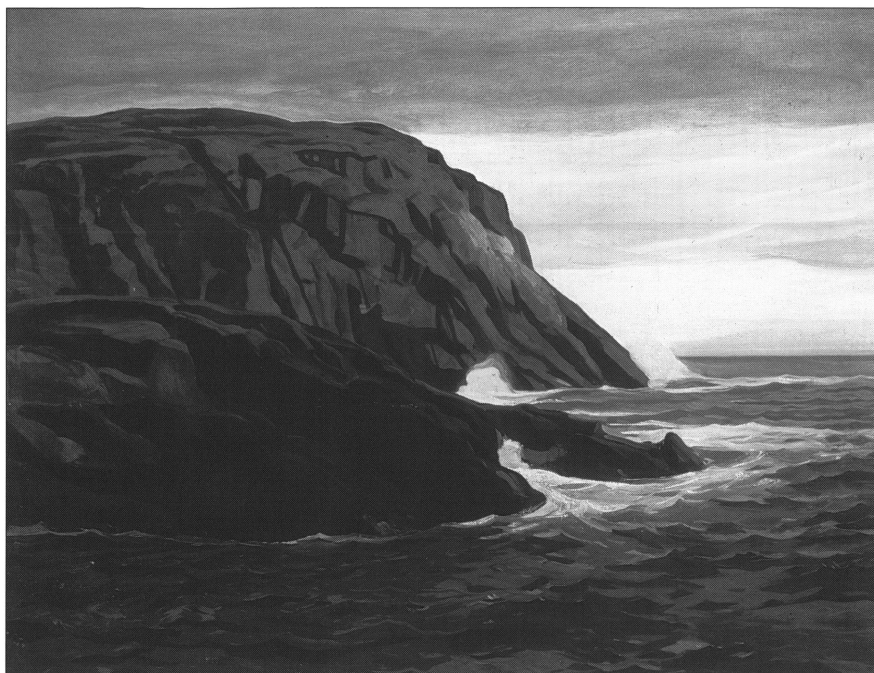


Plate 4

(For color plate, see back cover)

Rockwell Kent, *Blackhead, Monhegan*, ca. 1909. Oil on canvas,
34 x 44 inches. Colby College Museum of Art.

Gift of Phillips Collection. By permission of the Plattsburgh State
Art Museum, Rockwell Kent Gallery and Collection.

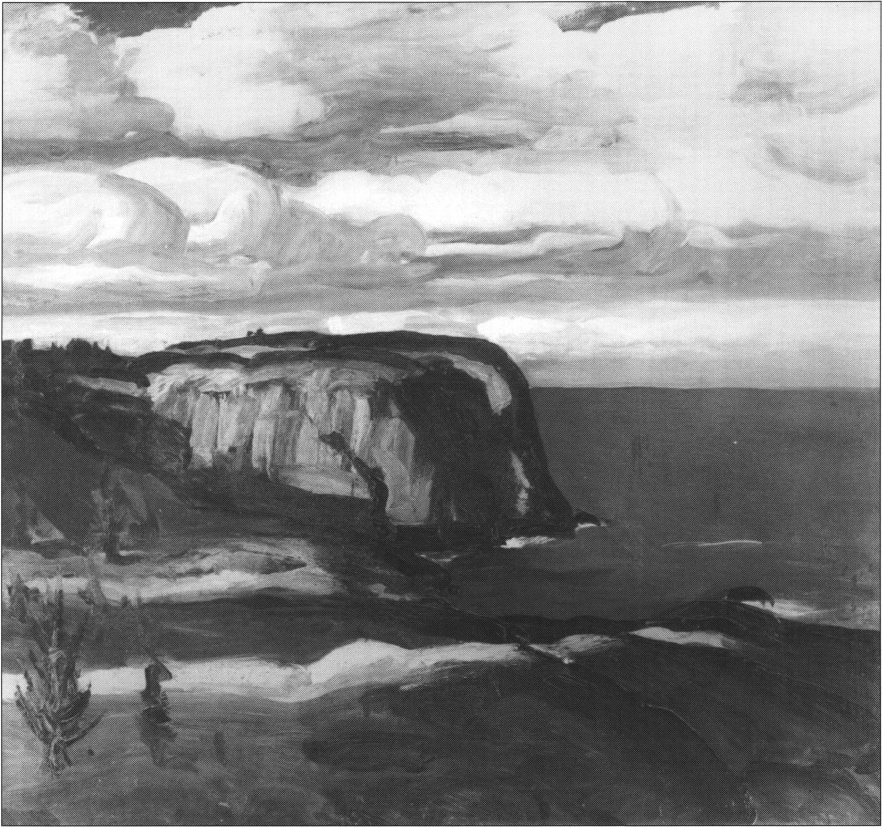


Plate 5

George Bellows, *Three Rollers*, 1911. Oil on canvas,
39 ⁵/₈ x 41 ³/₄ inches. National Academy of Design,
New York, New York.

After the birth of his daughter Anne, Bellows painted four larger canvases, based on his summer experience. *Three Rollers* (Plate 5, left) uses large simple forms, created with great sweeps of a loaded brush. The square canvas suggests that Bellows might have been thinking once again about *Shore House*. This time he emphasized the geometry of the square by placing the horizon, the meeting of the ocean and sky, at nearly the exact center. When it came time for Bellows to select an example of his work for the permanent collection of the National Academy of Design, he decided that he should be represented for posterity by *Three Rollers*.

The following summer, Bellows wanted to return to Monhegan, but Emma refused to go—it seems she was afraid of the water and the requisite ferry crossing over to the island. But the next summer she consented to go Monhegan again. The months of July through October of 1913 proved to be among the most productive periods of Bellows's career. He produced over one hundred paintings.

The evocative and brooding moods of his seascapes of 1911 were replaced with an exuberant celebration of the energy of the sea. Often using broad strokes, with an inch-wide brush, Bellows virtually modeled the shapes of the ocean and rocks, creating paint surfaces that are at once “juicy” and architectonic. *Churn and Break* (Columbus Museum of Art) and *Tumble of Waters* (private collection) are still indebted to Homer, but their surfaces are more aggressive and animated than Homer's.

In a few of these pictures we get a hint of his new use of color—which would on occasion explode into brilliant coloration. This is a sharp departure from a color scheme that had been based on Henri's admiration for painters ranging from Velasquez to Manet. Bellows, for the most part, had painted in dark, earth tones during the early period of his career.

This brighter palette seems to have been the result of his experience at the famous Armory Show, where modern European art was introduced to American audiences. This show, which he saw in spring of 1913, was a decisive moment in Bellows's career. He never fully embraced the tenets of modernism he discovered there, but he was forced by the attention focused on the moderns, not only by the art critics but by the entire art world, to gauge his work against Cubism, Fauvism, and all the other “isms” that were on everyone's tongues. Practically speaking, Bellows and the entire Henri circle had to come to grips with the fact that they had been displaced by the modernists. For several years, especially since the exhibition of 1908, they enjoyed a center stage position in the New York art scene. The Armory Show reconfigured that stage—Henri and his compatriots were no longer at the vanguard of artistic trends. In succeeding months and years, Bellows seems to have repeatedly reassessed and reevaluated his own position in relation to the art world as he perceived it. It is not surprising that he would seek to affirm the validity of his own work in response to the influx of new ideas associated with Cubism and the other European modernist styles.

During his stay at Mongegan in 1913, Bellows created a group of paintings that represent a turning point in his career, a point at which he was poised to move beyond the slashing bravura brushwork that marked his emergence on the New York art scene. Having achieved acclaim and recognition as one of Henri's insurgent realists, moved into the state of husband and father, and confronted the challenge presented by the Armory Show, Bellows was determined to launch a new phase of his life as a man and as an artist.

Hill and Valley (Monhegan) (Plate 6, right) is a stunning example of the painter's art. On a diminutive panel, Bellows succinctly captured the essence of the ocean side of Monhegan Island, the stark contrast between the open ocean and the dramatic rock faces that oppose the sea, and the dense forests that create magically secluded and shady hideaways. He was looking at Blackhead from the northeast, virtually the opposite direction from which Kent painted *Blackhead, Monhegan* (see Plate 4, p. 391). In order to see the landmark from the perspective Bellows chose, he had to have been some distance away. Thus, the painting represents a process of cropping, editing, repositioning, while at the same time it served as a poignant memory of a dramatically beautiful place. The paint itself, the very surface of the panel is dazzling. Gone is the scumbled, slashing brushwork of the early boxing paintings and street scenes. With an equally sure hand, the brush loaded with slightly wetter pigment, he applied quick marks as elegant as the finest calligraphy. Indulging his love of the materials of his craft, he created a picture that is homage to the rich texture of oil pigment. Intense blues and greens, as bright as in any modernist painting, conspire to offer a most ingratiating harmony. The entire effect is at once stunning and sumptuous, dramatic and exquisite.



Plate 6

(For color plate, see p. 362)

George Bellows, *Hill and Valley (Monhegan)*, 1913.

Oil on panel, 15 x 19 1/2 inches.

Colby College Museum of Art. Museum purchase.