





George Bellows, c. 1900, Peter A. Juley & Son Collection. Smithsonian American Art Museum

1 Bellows' New York

Throughout his childhood in Columbus, Ohio, George Bellows (1882–1925) divided much of his time between art and sports. While attending Ohio State University, he created illustrations for the school yearbooks, sang in the glee club, and played basketball and baseball. Bellows left college before graduating, and even turned down an offer to play professional baseball with the Cincinnati Reds, all because he wanted to become an artist.

In 1904 Bellows left the Midwest for Manhattan, where he enrolled in the New York School of Art. There he studied under the well-known teacher and artist Robert Henri, who encouraged students to be inspired by real life: “Draw your material from the life around you, from all of it. There is beauty in everything if it looks beautiful to your eyes.” Bellows became linked with a group of artists who were also inspired by Henri. Critics dubbed them the Ashcan School due to the way they showed the grittier side of life in the city.

Bellows' early paintings focused on dynamic city scenes: busy streets, boxing matches, construction sites, commercial docks, and poor neighborhoods. He eventually expanded his subjects to include seascapes, country scenes, and portraits of friends and family. His work met with popular success during his lifetime. Bellows died at age forty-two from a ruptured appendix.



2 Traffic Jam!

Bellows captured the whirlwind of activity on a winter day in his painting *New York*. The picture is a congestion of buildings, signage, and people and goods on the move. Motorcars mingle with horse-drawn conveyances and trolleys while pedestrians hurry along sidewalks. When Bellows created this work in 1911, the traffic light had not yet been invented. In the painting you can see a policeman trying to direct traffic, a street cleaner busy sweeping, and a woman stopping at a vegetable cart. Bellows' use of expressive brushstrokes adds to the energy of the scene.

3 Construction Zone

In the early twentieth century, New York was changing into a metropolis with vast building projects that included new bridges and skyscrapers. Construction of the Pennsylvania Railroad Station took place from 1906 to 1910. This complex endeavor required tearing down entire blocks of old buildings, digging giant pits, and boring several sets of large tunnels under the Hudson and East rivers. The energy, drama, and scope of the engineering project fascinated Bellows, and he began a series of paintings to study construction scenes by day and night, in summer and winter.

Blue Morning shows the nearly completed station enveloped in morning haze. Construction workers are busy in the excavated pit; a crane arm rises. The elevated train tracks and a vertical girder frame the scene. Bellows used tones of blue, lavender, and yellow to create a sense of the morning light.



George Bellows, *New York*, 1911, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

"Some day far in the future it will be pointed out, no doubt, as the best description of the casual New York scene left by the reporters of the present day." *New York Times*, 1911

Although the painting's general location is Madison Square at the intersection of Broadway and Twenty-third Street, Bellows imaginatively combined elements that could not be seen from a single viewpoint. Many of Manhattan's most famous features are seen: skyscrapers, apartment buildings, elevated train tracks, a subway entrance, electric signs, advertising billboards, and a tree-lined park. Although these features are familiar today, they represented an exciting, modern experience for most people at the beginning of the twentieth century.



George Bellows, *Blue Morning*, 1909, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection

"Be deliberate. Be spontaneous. Be thoughtful, and painstaking. Be abandoned, and impulsive. Learn your own possibilities." George Bellows

explore more

"I paint New York because I live in it and because the most essential thing for me to paint is the life about me, the things I feel to-day and that are part of the life of to-day." George Bellows



George Bellows, *The Lone Tenement*, 1909, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection

Capturing Urban Life

The Lone Tenement is set under the Queensboro Bridge, which was completed in 1909 to connect the boroughs of Manhattan and Queens. Dwarfed by the newly constructed bridge, the last remaining row house stands alone, the sole survivor of its former busy neighborhood. People gather around a fire to keep warm in the shadow of the bridge. Sunlight sparkles on the East River as a ship passes by. Instead of celebrating the bridge as an engineering accomplishment, Bellows focuses on the lives of ordinary people who were affected by its construction.

Documenting Changing Times

Many artists in the early twentieth century, including Bellows, worked as sketch reporters. In an era before the widespread use of photography, they drew illustrations for newspapers and magazines as a way to document events in the city. Along with many of the Ashcan School artists, Bellows was concerned about the social issues of his time, including poverty and the way large building projects changed neighborhoods.

Write a headline

Write a news story headline (for a newspaper, magazine, or website) for each of the paintings by Bellows in this section. Summarize the main idea of each picture in an interesting way to catch people's attention.

Be a sketch reporter

Choose a headline or news story from a newspaper, magazine, or television report. Make a drawing or painting that illustrates the story. Capture the key points of the story in one picture.