NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

George Bellows
American, 1882 - 1925

Forty-two Kids

1907

oil on canvas
overall: 106.7 × 153 cm (42 × 60 1/4 in.)
framed: 124.1 × 170 × 7.3 cm (48 7/8 × 66 15/16 × 2 7/8 in.)
Inscription: lower left: Geo Bellows
Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund) 2014.79.2

ENTRY

Forty-two Kids was painted in August 1907 [fig. 1], less than three years after George Wesley Bellows had left his home state of Ohio at the age of 22 to study art in New York City.[1] He enrolled at the New York School of Art under Robert Henri, the artist and influential teacher around whom congregated the so-called Ashcan school of urban realists. Bellows fully subscribed to his mentor's credo, creating work "full of vitality and the actual life of the time."[2] *Forty-two Kids* exemplifies Bellows's early work, much of which depicts metropolitan anecdotes, including the illegal boxing matches for which he would become best known.

In *Forty-two Kids*, nude and partially clothed boys engage in a variety of antics—swimming, diving, sunbathing, smoking, and possibly urinating—on and near a dilapidated wharf jutting out over New York City's East River [fig. 2].[3] The wharf is painted with broad, fluid strokes from a heavily laden paintbrush, and the "little scrawny-legged kids in their naively indecent movements" are sketched with Bellows's characteristic vigor and economy of means.[4] The vague grid formed by the wharf's rough-hewn planks provides a stable compositional platform for the jumble of "spindle-shanked little waifs" distributed seemingly at random across the

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foreground and middle ground of the canvas.[5]

Forty-two Kids elicited significant attention when it was first exhibited. It was recognized as “one of the most original and vivacious canvases” at the National Academy of Design’s 1908 exhibition,[6] where Bellows won the second-place Julius Hallgarten Prize for another painting, *North River* (1908, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia).[7] This was only the second year Bellows had submitted to the academy. It was an auspicious sign; in April 1909, the organization inducted Bellows as one of the youngest academicians in its history.

Although it was viewed with “a pleasurable sensation” and relished for its “humor” and “humanity,”[8] *Forty-two Kids* did not receive universally positive reviews. One critic condemned it for “the most inexcusable errors in drawing and general proportions,”[9] while another denounced it as “a tour de force in absurdity.”[10] It had been controversially denied the prestigious Lippincott Prize at the Pennsylvania Academy’s 1908 annual exhibition owing to the jury’s fear that the donor might be offended by the title and subject of the painting.[11]

Bellows was aware of this incident. He wanted Robert C. Hall, who purchased *Forty-two Kids* from the Thirteenth Annual Exhibition of the Carnegie Institute in 1909, to know that “the management, feeling that Mr. Lippincott would not like the decision, would not allow the award.”[12] When asked if he thought the jury feared Lippincott would object to the naked children, Bellows deflected attention by quipping: “No, it was the naked painting that they feared.”[13] He did not elaborate, leaving unclear whether he meant the painting’s sketchy appearance or its lowly subject.

Although Bellows’s painting appears innocent enough to viewers today, the mixed reception likely stemmed from the connotations of what one critic called the “curiously freakish subject.”[14] Even as Bellows’s scene recalls *Thomas Eakins’s* 1885 painting *Swimming* [fig. 3], it also echoes the lowbrow style and content of comic strips like *Hogan’s Alley*, which chronicled the capers of its slum-dwelling protagonist, the Yellow Kid.[15] Where Eakins evokes a tradition of Arcadian naturalism, aligning his nude, sun-dappled subjects with classical antiquity, Bellows’s undeniably modern kids are accorded no such nobility. Around 1900, the slang term “kid” connoted young hooligans with predilections for mischief and petty crime; its lower-class associations would have been clear to Bellows’s audience.[16] Bellows had used colloquial titles before, in his 1906 paintings *Kids* (now in the collection of James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin) and *River Rats*

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(private collection, Washington, DC). The latter employs an epithet for juvenile delinquents that draws on an established rhetorical link between immigrants and animals. This association was also applied to the kids in the Gallery's picture, who were described as "simian."[17] This was likely a reference to the then-popular caricature of Irish Americans as apelike,[18] although the varied skin tones of Bellows's kids appear to reflect the range of ethnicities—Italian, Russian, German, Polish, and Irish—represented in the poor neighborhoods of Manhattan's East Side.

The "simian" slur was surpassed by another critic, who declared: "most of the boys look more like maggots than like humans."[19] Another simultaneously likened Bellows's kids to insects and germs when he suggested that "the tangle of bodies and spidery limbs" was akin to "the antics of magnified animalculae."[20] Even Bellows's widow, Emma, used entomological vocabulary when she recalled the "old dock" north of the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge, from which her husband might have made preparatory sketches for *Forty-two Kids*, describing the area as a "dead end neighborhood—swarming with growing boys."[21]

Contemporaneous literary descriptions of New York City's tenements relied on metaphors that linked recently arrived immigrant slum dwellers and their dirty environments with all manner of unhygienic animals. The colorful similes applied to *Forty-two Kids* can be understood in this context.[22] From 1890 until the mid-1920s, some 25 million immigrants entered the United States. With the Immigration Act of 1891, the federal government established rigorous medical screening that, among other things, barred persons suffering from contagious diseases. Foreigners, in general, came to be judged as diseased and contagious.[23] Bathing, in municipal swimming pools and open-water floating baths, was endorsed as a healthy and hygienic form of exercise, a way of cleaning, quite literally, recently arrived immigrants. Bellows's swimming hole, however, is far from salubrious. As one critic noted, the painting has "a bituminous look ill assorted with the idea of bathing."[24] Although Bellows reportedly said, "One can only paint what one sees,"[25] *Forty-two Kids* elicited responses that went beyond the painting's superficial and purely visible subject and drew on the distasteful metaphors with which the city's immigrant populations were associated. Described as bacteria, maggots, and insects, Bellows's kids were characterized as vectors of contagion, an affiliation quite in keeping with the widely held belief, at the beginning of the 20th century, that unrestricted immigration posed a very real threat to individual Americans' well-being and the nation's social health.

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Adam Greenhalgh

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

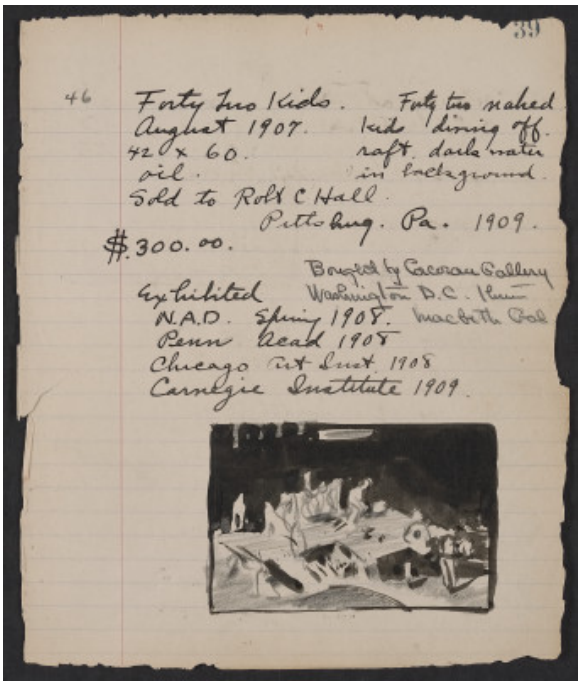

fig. 1 Entry from artist's Record Book about *Forty-two Kids*, The Ohio State University Libraries' Rare Books and Manuscripts Library and the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio

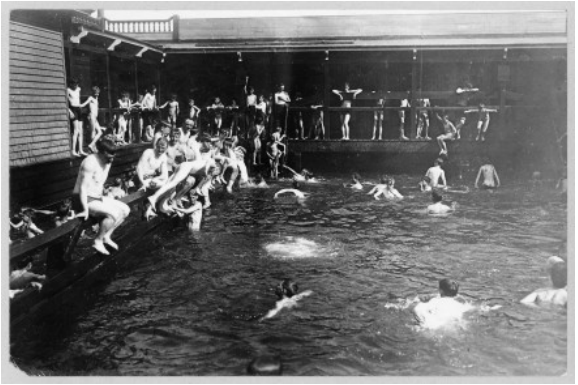

fig. 2 *City children—bathing for free at the Battery, New York City*, 1908/1916, photograph, George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

fig. 3 Thomas Eakins, *Swimming*, 1885, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of Art, Fort Worth, Texas

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NOTES

[1] The August 1907 date of completion for *Forty-two Kids* is recorded in Bellows's Record Book (Record Book A, p. 39). Thanks to Glenn Peck for providing a copy of the Record Book page (see fig. 1).
This entry is a revised version of text that was originally published in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011).

[2] "George Bellows, an Artist with 'Red Blood,'" *Current Literature* 53, no. 3 (Sept. 1912): 342.

[3] The setting is established by a letter from Bellows's widow, Emma, to Marian King, Jan. 23, 1959, NGA curatorial files.

[4] Philip L. Hale, "Boston Art Shown in Philadelphia," *Boston Herald*, Jan. 26, 1908, Special sec., 1.

[5] Charles L. Buchanan, "George Bellows: Painter of Democracy," *Arts and Decoration* 4, no. 10 (Aug. 1914): 371.

[6] *New York Herald*, quoted in Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 83.

[7] The Julius Hallgarten Prize was bestowed annually from 1884 to three domestically based American artists under the age of 35.

[8] John Cournos, "Three Painters of the New York School," *International Studio* 56, no. 224 (Oct. 1915): 244; and James Gibbons Huneker, "The Spring Academy: Second Notice," *New York Sun*, March 21, 1908, 6.

[9] Maude I. G. Oliver, "Art News of the Week," *Chicago Record-Herald*, November 8, 1908, sec. 6, 5.

[10] Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, "An Excellent Academy Show," *New York Evening Mail*, March 14, 1908, 6.

[11] The jury had originally voted 8 to 2 in favor of awarding *Forty-two Kids* the Lippincott Prize. Robert Henri, diary entry, Jan. 23, 1908, Robert Henri Papers, reel 886, frame 12, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[12] Bellows to John W. Beatty, c. May 24, 1909, Papers of the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA, reel 14, letter group 565, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[13] "Those Who Paint What They See," *New York Herald*, Feb. 23, 1908, Literary and Art sec., 4.

[14] C. H. C., "Carnegie Institute Exhibition, the Figure Subjects: First Notice,"

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New York Evening Post, May 1, 1909, sec. 1, 5.

[15] Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley, CA, 2006), 221.

[16] See Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New Haven, 1992), 147.

[17] John Cournos, "Three Painters of the New York School," *International Studio* 56, no. 224 (Oct. 1915): 244.

[18] L. Perry Curtis, Jr., *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington, DC, 1997).

[19] Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, "An Excellent Academy Show," *New York Evening Mail*, March 14, 1908.

[20] "George Bellows, an Artist with 'Red Blood,'" *Current Literature* 53, no. 3 (Sept. 1912): 345.

[21] Emma Bellows to Marian King, Jan. 23 and Feb. 6, 1959, NGA curatorial files.

[22] Molly Suzanne Hutton considers connections between Ashcan paintings, animals, and dirt in "The Ashcan City: Representational Strategies at the Turn of the Century" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2000), chap. 2.

[23] Howard Markel and Alexander Minna Stern, "The Foreignness of Germs: The Persistent Association of Immigrants and Disease in American Society," *Milbank Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (2002): 757. See also Ian Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace"* (Baltimore, MD, 1995).

[24] Philip L. Hale, "Boston Art Shown in Philadelphia," *Boston Herald*, Jan. 26, 1908, Special sec.

[25] "Those Who Paint What They See," *New York Herald*, Feb. 23, 1908, Literary and Art sec., 4.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas that was primed with a thin grayish-white ground that was commercially applied, evidenced by its presence on the still-intact tacking margins. The painting is lined with a plain-weave canvas using aqueous adhesive, and is stretched onto a nonoriginal keyable stretcher. The paint was applied very freely and spontaneously. In some places, especially in the lower part of the design, the paint is thin enough that the light ground color is visible and the texture of the fabric remains prominent. In other areas, however, the paint was applied more thickly, often with substantial brushmarks and points and ridges of impasto. The great majority of the paint was

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applied wet into wet and shows signs of blending and smearing of one color into another. In many places, the artist used a sizeable brush to define the larger design elements, such as the boards of the dock, with a few bold strokes. The paint that describes the deep blackish water in the background was slow-drying and quite liquid. Drip marks in this area are evident in the upper right, indicating that the painting was turned on its side and the black paint continued to flow. In many figures, the artist used a small, stiff, flat brush to produce his characteristic streaky, blended strokes of paint that define the boys' bodies with a great economy of means. Many random bumps of paint are visible throughout the surface, indicating that the artist scraped up dried paint from his palette and allowed it to become incorporated into his colors. The paint layer is in good condition, with only a few small inpainted paint losses scattered throughout, some areas of mild abrasion in the lower third of the painting, and some areas of prominent drying cracks. The edges are also heavily retouched. Corcoran conservation records show a number of treatments throughout the past century, and indicate that the varnish layer is complicated by the addition of a thin wax layer, followed by two successive synthetic resin coatings applied many years apart.[1]

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Lance Mayer prepared a comprehensive technical summary for *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011). A copy of this summary is available in NGA conservation files.

PROVENANCE

Collection of the artist, New York; purchased 1909 by Robert C. Hall [1865-1914], Pittsburgh;[1] on consignment by 26 February 1923 with (Wunderly Brothers, Pittsburgh);[2] purchased by 12 October 1925 by Mr. [1889-1962] and Mrs. Peter Glick, Pittsburgh;[3] purchased November 1931 through (William Macbeth, Inc., New York) by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington;[4] acquired 2014 by National Gallery of Art.

[1] The painting was purchased from Bellows during the painting's showing at the

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Carnegie International exhibition in 1909; see the Corcoran Gallery of Art Accession Record Sheet in NGA curatorial files. Bellows sold the work to Hall for $300; Jane Myers, "'The Most Searching Place in the World': Bellows's Portraiture," in Michael Quick et al., *The Paintings of George Bellows*, exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art; Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, 1992-1993; Fort Worth and Los Angeles, 1992: 232 n. 38.

[2] The painting was consigned to Wunderly Brothers at an unknown date after Hall died, and was "in and out of Carnegie Institute for a number of years;" Peyton Boswell, Jr., "Bellows' First Patron," *Art Digest* 17, no. 8 (15 January 1943): 3. According to the Corcoran Gallery of Art Accession Record Sheet (in NGA curatorial files), the painting was found in storage at the Carnegie Institute and sent from there to Wunderly Brothers. The dealer lent the painting to the 1923 Bellows exhibition at the Carnegie Institute, which opened on February 26.

[3] The Glicks bought the painting from the Wunderly Brothers at an unknown date, but Mrs. Peter Glick is listed as lender of the painting to the 1925 Bellows memorial exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which opened on October 12.

[4] Corcoran Gallery of Art Accession Card, in NGA curatorial files.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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1908 Eighty-third Annual Exhibition, National Academy of Design, New York, 14 March - 18 April 1908, no. 167.

1908 Fifteenth Annual Exhibition of American Art, Cincinnati Museum, 23 May - 20 July 1908, no. 26, repro.

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1908 Twenty-first Annual Exhibition of Oil Paintings and Sculpture by American Artistis, Art Institute of Chicago, 20 October - 29 November 1908, no. 21.

1909 Thirteenth Annual Exhibition, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 29 April - 30 June 1909, no. 20.

1923 Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Lithographs by George Wesley Bellows, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 26 February - 31 March 1923, no. 15.

1925 Memorial Exhibition of the Paintings of George Bellows, Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, December 1925, no. 2.

1925 Memorial Exhibition of the Work of George Bellows, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 12 October - 22 November 1925, no. 4, repro.

1926 Memorial Exhibition of the Work of George Bellows, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 10 January - 10 February 1926, no. 2.

1939 Art in Our Time: An Exhibition to Celebrate the Tenth Anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art and the Opening of Its New Building, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939, no. 137, repro.[1]

1939 Half a Century of American Art, Art Institute of Chicago, 16 November 1939 - 7 January 1940, no. 13, pl. 19.

1946 Robert Henri and Five of His Pupils, Century Association, New York, 5 April - 1 June 1946, no. 5, repro.

1949 De Gustibus: An Exhibition of American Paintings Illustrating a Century of Taste, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 9 January - 20 February 1949, no. 38.

1950 Canadian National Exhibition Art Exhibit, Art Gallery of Toronto, 25 August - 9 September 1950, no. 112.[2]

1955 Fifty Paintings 1905-1913, the Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibition, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 14 May - 12 June 1955, no. 2, repro.

1957 George Bellows: A Retrospective Exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 19 January - 24 February 1957, no. 4, repro.

1957 Paintings by George Bellows, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, 21 March - 21 April 1957, no. 3, repro.

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1959 Loan Exhibition. Masterpieces of the Corcoran Gallery of Art: A Benefit Exhibition in Honor of the Gallery's Centenary, Wildenstein, New York, 28 January - 7 March 1959, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

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1976 Corcoran [The American Genius], Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 24 January - 4 April 1976, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1978 The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 26 April - 16 July 1978, unnumbered catalogue.

1981 Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Cincinnati Art Museum; San Diego Museum of Art; University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington; Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga; Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Des Moines Art Center; Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, 23 September 1981 - 21 May 1983, no. 30, repro.

1981 Visions of New York City: American Paintings, Drawings and Prints of the 20th Century, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, 28 March - 24 May 1981, no. 15, repro.

1985 Centuries of Childhood in New York: A Celebration on the Occasion of the 275th Anniversary of Trinity School, New-York Historical Society and Trinity School, New York, 28 February - 25 August 1985, no. 41, repro.

1992 The Paintings of George Bellows, Los Angeles Country Museum of Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Columbus Museum of Art; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, 16 February 1992 - 9 May 1993, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2003 The Impressionist Tradition in America, 1770-1950, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 19 July 2003 - 18 October 2004, unpublished checklist.

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2004 Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art, 1770-1950, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 November 2004 - 7 August 2005, unpublished checklist.

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2007 Life's Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure 1895-1925, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville; New-York Historical Society; Detroit Institute of Arts, 2 August 2007 - 25 May 2008, no. 49, repro.

2009 American Paintings from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June - 18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.

2012 George Bellows, National Gallery of Art, Washington; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 10 June 2012 - 18 February 2013, pl. 7.

2013 American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES

[1] The exact dates of the exhibition are not given in the catalogue; the title page has only “held at the time of the New York World’s Fair.”
[2] A letter of 13 June 1950 (from Sydney Key, Curator, The Art Gallery of Toronto, to John Palmer Keeper, Curator, Corcoran Gallery of Art) and an undated letter of shortly thereafter (from the Corcoran's director to Sydney Key), confirms the loan (copies of both letters are in NGA curatorial files).

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