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

George Bellows
American, 1882 - 1925

The Lone Tenement

1909

oil on canvas
overall: 91.8 x 122.3 cm (36 1/8 x 48 1/8 in.)
framed: 123.2 x 153.4 x 12.7 cm (48 1/2 x 60 3/8 x 5 in.)
Inscription: lower left: Geo Bellows
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.83

ENTRY

In December 1909, Bellows executed two Manhattan cityscapes (this one and *The Bridge, Blackwell's Island* [fig. 1]) depicting the nearly completed Blackwell's Island Bridge, now known as the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge or 59th Street Bridge [fig. 2]. These paintings, displaying the artist's bravura style, are thematically linked to his four views of the Pennsylvania Station excavation site (e.g., the Gallery's *Blue Morning*) in that they depict a major construction project in the modernization of New York City. The third of eight structures built across the East River, the Queensboro Bridge passes over Blackwell's Island (now known as Roosevelt Island), linking midtown Manhattan with Long Island City in the borough of Queens. It was designed by the municipal department of bridges and completed in 1909 at a cost of about $20.8 million. The steel, two-tier bridge with two cantilevered spans was designed by Gustav Lindenthal and decorated with ornate ironwork and finials by the architect Henry Hornbostel. It is noteworthy as the first major bridge in New York City to depart from the suspension form.[1]

The Bridge, Blackwell's Island, with a view from beneath and slightly south of the bridge, looking across the East River over Blackwell's Island toward Long Island

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City, was painted first. Bellows then produced *The Lone Tenement*, which depicts a solitary, six-story tenement building at the base of the bridge on the Manhattan side of the East River that, for some reason, had not been demolished when the area was razed. The tenement stands in the center of the composition, to the left of one of the bridge's supporting piers, and is shown in a three-quarter view so that its front, distinguishable by the fire escape, and windowless sidewall, bearing the remnants of old advertising posters, face the viewer. The fence around the structure's entrance indicates that it has been abandoned and may be awaiting demolition. A cluster of sketchily delineated human figures are gathered in the left foreground amid the expanse of muddy, half-melted snow, warming themselves before a fire. Two bare, narrow trees on the left echo the dilapidated state of the tenement building and contribute to the scene's aura of desolation and abandonment. The bird's-eye vista is oriented toward the northeast, encompassing Manhattan on the left, the East River, Blackwell's Island, and the borough of Queens on the opposite shore.

Tenements were multiunit residential buildings first designed in the middle of the 19th century to serve as cheap rental housing for New York's growing population of poor and working-class immigrants. These dank, dreary, and overcrowded dwellings soon became notorious for their unsanitary conditions. Social reformers identified tenements as breeding places of crime, disease, and poverty, and sought legislation to improve their conditions.[2] The Tenement House Law of 1901 established higher standards of construction for new buildings and created the Tenement House Department to modernize what were thenceforward called "old law" tenements. Bellows, like his Ashcan School colleagues, often used tenement buildings in his views of impoverished neighborhoods like Manhattan's Lower East Side and was certainly aware of their more sinister connotations. When the artist was asked about the tenements in his *Excavation at Night* (1908, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR), he responded: "Those tenement houses behind the excavation always give me the creeps. They're just ordinary houses—but there is something about them that gets me."[3] He later used tenements as the setting in *Cliff Dwellers* [fig. 3].

Blackwell's Island also had numerous negative associations, because it was the site of an almshouse, a workhouse, and a penitentiary. By 1921, these institutions had become so notorious for overcrowding, violence, and drug trafficking that the city tried to improve the island's reputation by renaming it Welfare Island.[4] But despite its ominous allusions, *The Lone Tenement* is a remarkably expressive and

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appealing composition, in which mystery and an aura of plaintive eloquence is communicated through the artist's exceptionally fluid brushwork and manipulation of light and color. Paint is applied in a variety of ways, from passages of thick impasto just to the left of the tenement building to a series of quick calligraphic marks used to describe a group of figures milling outside the building to the right. Bellows's bold, expressive palette of oranges, golds, and violets, especially evident in the upper left quadrant of the canvas, is also distinctive.

When *The Lone Tenement* was exhibited in Bellows's first one-man show at the Madison Art Galleries in 1911, a reviewer characterized it as "a lonely tenement house in a squalid district," and remarked on the artist's habit of depicting "the rough and raw side of the Metropolis."[5] Bellows may have wanted to convey a sense of the despoliation and lost communities that progress often leaves in its wake, or show that the status of the disenfranchised remains unaltered, and is perhaps even worsened, by urban modernization. The faceless wraiths cut adrift in the foreground seem as outmoded as the three-masted ship docked at the left, which had been rendered obsolete by such vessels as the steam-powered tugboat that churns along in the river.[6] If it is not possible to fully discern Bellows's attitude to the dispossessed underclasses depicted in *The Lone Tenement*, it is clear that he was responding to his teacher Robert Henri's plea to make the neglected and overlooked areas of New York, where so many lived, worked, and died, primary subjects of modern art.

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 George Bellows, *The Bridge, Blackwell's Island*, 1909, oil on canvas, Toledo Museum of Art, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey. Image: Photography Incorporated, Toledo

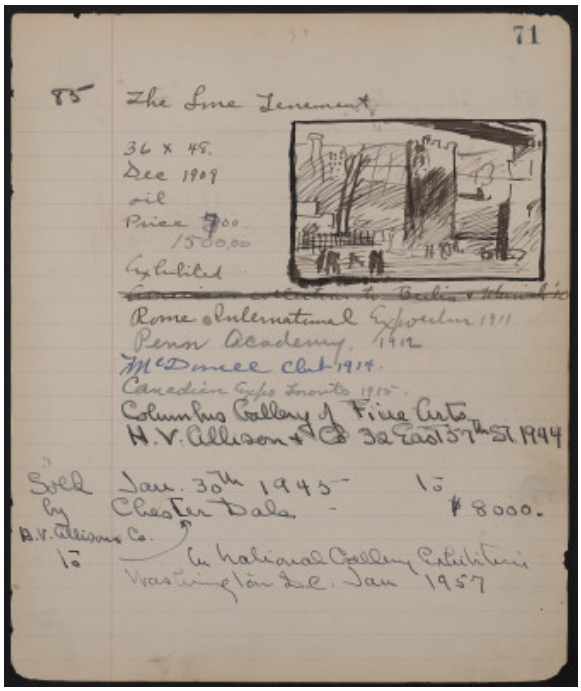

fig. 2 Entry from artist's Record Book about *Lone Tenement*, The Ohio State University Libraries' Rare Books & Manuscripts Library and the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio

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fig. 3 George Bellows, *Cliff Dwellers*, 1913, oil on canvas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Fund (16.4)

NOTES

[1] The bridge and its surrounding area are discussed in Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, CT, 1995), 211–212, 970, and 1020.

[2] For an early survey of the matter, see Robert W. Deforest and Lawrence Veiller, *The Tenement House Problem*, 2 vols. (New York, 1903). See also *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, CT), 1161–1163.

[3] "Began Career as Illustrator on Makio," *Lantern*, undated clipping in Bellows's scrapbook, George Bellows Papers, Special Collections Department, Amherst College Library, Amherst, MA; quoted in Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New Haven, 1992), 44.

[4] Blackwell's Island has had a long history. Captain John Manning bought it in 1668 and retired there in disgrace after surrendering New York to the Dutch in 1673. Early in the 18th century it passed to Manning's son-in-law, Robert Blackwell, after whom it was named. Blackwell's Island was acquired by the city in 1828. The prison was relocated to Riker's Island in 1934. The Urban Development Corporation of New York State undertook a project to

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transform Welfare Island into a residential community in 1971 and renamed it Roosevelt Island.

[5] "Matters of Art," *New York Daily Tribune*, Jan. 29, 1911, section II, p. 5; quoted in Marianne Doezema, "The Real New York," in Michael Quick, Jane Myers, Marianne Doezema, and Franklin Kelly, *The Paintings of George Bellows* (Fort Worth, TX, 1992), 109.

[6] Bellows similarly juxtaposed an old ship and a steam tug in *Silver Day* (1912, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, FL).

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The plain-weave, medium-weight fabric support has been glue lined to a heavier plain-weave fabric and mounted on a nonoriginal stretcher. The artist applied paint in multiple layers of thick, impastoed brushstrokes, sometimes using a palette knife as well. He employed both translucent and opaque paint mixtures, alternating between wet-into-wet and wet-into-dry techniques. In raking light it is possible to see large brushstrokes beneath the area of the tenement building that do not correspond to the design on the surface. No infrared or x-radiograph examination has been conducted to explain this aberrant brushwork; perhaps there is another painting beneath. Craquelure has developed in the most thickly applied passages, and extensive areas of wrinkling appear throughout the surface. A thick, glossy, discolored surface coating was removed in a 2009 conservation treatment. At that time, small losses concentrated in the light areas of the sky, the blue of the river, and the trees on the left were inpainted, and a new synthetic varnish was applied.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1882-1925]; by inheritance to his wife, Emma S. Bellows [1884-1959]; purchased 3 February 1945 through (H.V. Allison & Co., New York) by Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; bequest 1963 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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1911 Collection of Pictures and Sculpture in the Pavilion of the United States of America, Roman Art Exposition, Rome, 1911, no. 135.

1911 [George Bellows Exhibition], Madison Gallery, New York, 1911.

1912 One Hundred and Seventh Annual Exhibition, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1912, no. 57.

1914 The MacDowell Club, New York, 1914 [according to the artist's Record Book].

1915 Department of Fine Arts, Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, 1915, no. 82.

1931 Important Paintings by George Wesley Bellows, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio, 1931, no. 268.

1944 Paintings by George Bellows, H.V. Allison & Co., New York, 1944, unnumbered checklist.

1946 George Bellows: Paintings, Drawings and Prints, Art Institute of Chicago, 1946, no. 8, repro.

1957 George Bellows: A Retrospective Exhibition, National Gallery of Art, January-February 1957, no. 15, repro.

1957 Paintings by George Bellows, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio, March-April 1957, no. 12.

1965 The Chester Dale Bequest, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1965, unnumbered checklist.

2012 George Bellows, National Gallery of Art, Washington; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2012-2013, pl. 31 (shown only in Washington).

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1962 Cairns, Huntington, and John Walker, eds., *Treasures from the National Gallery of Art*, New York, 1962: 174, color repro.

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1965 Morgan, Charles H. *George Bellows. Painter of America*. New York, 1965: 102, repro. 318.

1965 *Paintings other than French in the Chester Dale Collection*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 49, repro.

1969 Young, Mahonri Sharp. "George Bellows: Master of the Prize Fight." *Apollo* 89 (February 1969): 135, repro.

1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 16, repro.

1971 Baigell, Matthew. *A History of American Painting*. New York, 1971: 184, repro.

1971 Braider, Donald. *George Bellows and the Ashcan School of Painting*. New York, 1971: 54, 67.

1973 Young, Mahonri Sharp. *The Eight*. New York, 1973: 44, color pl. 12.

1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue.* National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 27, repro.

1980 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1980: 17, 146, repro.

1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: repro. 201, 202, 205.

1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 572, no. 871, color repro.

1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 168, repro.

1990 Kelly, Frankin. "George Bellows' Shore House." *Studies in the History of Art* 37 (1990): 131, repro. no. 19.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 29, repro.

1992 *Timeline: A Publication of the Ohio Historical Society*. October-December 1992:19, repro.

1995 Oates, Joyce Carol. *George Bellows: American Artist*. Hopewell, New Jersey, 1995: repro.

2004 Hand, John Oliver. *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*. Washington and New York, 2004: 404, no. 332, color repro.

2007 Haverstock, Mary Sayre. *George Bellows: An Artist in Action*. Columbus, Ohio, 2007: 56, color repro.

2012 Brock, Charles, et al. *George Bellows*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2012-2013. Washington and New York, 2012: 9, 26, 94, 108, 109, 112, 299, pl. 31.

2013 Corbett, David Peters. *The American Experiment: George Bellows and the Ashcan Painters*, with Katherine Bourguignon and Christopher Riopelle. London, 2013: 28-31, 46, color fig. 12.

2015 Wolner, Edward W. "George Bellows, Georg Simmel, and Modernizing New York." *American Art* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 119.

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2016 National Gallery of Art. *Highlights from the National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Washington, 2016: 274-275, repro.
Peck, Glenn C. *George Bellows' Catalogue Raisonné*. H.V. Allison & Co. URL: http://www.hvallison.com. Accessed 16 August 2016.

To cite: Robert Torchia, "George Bellows/*The Lone Tenement*/1909," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, http://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/46558 (accessed December 21, 2016).

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