



George Bellows
American, 1882 - 1925

Both Members of This Club

1909

oil on canvas

overall: 115 x 160.5 cm (45 1/4 x 63 3/16 in.)

framed: 133 x 177.8 cm (52 3/8 x 70 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Geo Bellows

Chester Dale Collection 1944.13.1

ENTRY

Painted in October 1909, two months after *Stag at Sharkey's* [fig. 1], *Both Members of This Club* is the third and largest of Bellows's early prizefighting subjects (the first being *Club Night*). When initially seen by the public at the 105th Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1910 (in which *Stag at Sharkey's* also appeared), a critic declared it "a powerful piece of work . . . a masterpiece of portrayal." [1] Bellows adhered to the same basic triangular composition that he had used so effectively in *Club Night* and *Stag at Sharkey's* by representing the two protagonists locked in a ferocious struggle on an elevated platform, towering over the audience below. [2] Silhouetted against a black background, they are dramatically illuminated by a harsh electric light. The presence of *Stag at Sharkey's* and *Both Members of this Club* at the Academy exhibition prompted one critic to imply that Bellows was guilty of repetitiveness: "To persuade Mr. George Bellows that the demonic energy and reality of his ring fights are excesses of a good thing . . . would be a public service, but he will doubtless find it out for himself without the assistance of any literary fellows." [3] In one important respect, *Both Members of this Club* marks a reversion to the

unmitigated savagery with which Bellows imbued his first prizefight painting, *Club Night*: he deleted the referee who mediates the proceedings in *Stag at Sharkey's*.

Tom Sharkey's Athletic Club was a bar across the street from Bellows's studio in the Lincoln Arcade Building at Broadway and 66th Street in New York City. The Irish-born proprietor, Tom "Sailor Tom" Sharkey, was a former heavyweight champion who staged private boxing contests in the back room of his saloon. Boxing had been legalized in New York State with the passage of the Horton Law in 1896. But that act was repealed in 1900 and replaced by the Lewis Law, which prohibited the sport. [4] Sharkey and others circumvented the Lewis Law by staging bouts in their private "clubs," where attendees paid membership dues instead of admission fees so that they could gamble on the outcome of the events. To maintain the act, boxers were announced in the ring as "both members of this club." Professional boxing was a proletarian sport, and its practitioners were mainly poor immigrants who lived in squalid urban neighborhoods. Habitues of places like Sharkey's were from more socially diverse groups, such as neighborhood regulars and middle- and upper-class men who frequented New York's demimonde [fig. 2]. Only men were admitted to prizefights at this time. [5]

The boxer on the right, whose pose is reminiscent of the Roman sculpture *Borghese Gladiator* (Louvre, Paris), [6] indisputably has the advantage, as he thrusts himself into his adversary. The white boxer shows all the signs of imminent defeat: his knee has begun to buckle, his body tilts precariously backward, his face and ribs are bloodied, and his head is oriented upward. The frenzied crowd below, sensing that the decisive moment in the contest has arrived, is completely absorbed in the action. Two figures at the far left have climbed up from their seats and peer through the ropes to get a better view of the fight. The spectators' faces are noticeably more caricatured than those in Bellows's first two prizefighting pictures, and it has been suggested that he was influenced by Francisco José de Goya's *The Vision of the Pilgrims of San Isidro* (1820–1823, Prado, Madrid). [7] The contrast between the colossal, straining figures of the contestants and the leering, distorted faces around the ring remind one of Bellows's statement that "I am not interested in the morality of prize fighting. But let me say that the atmosphere around the fighters is a lot more immoral than the fighters themselves." [8]

Bellows first called the painting "A Nigger and a White Man," but soon changed this blunt and racially charged title to the more complex and allusive *Both Members of This Club* [fig. 3]. The term "both members" is foremost a reference to the requirement that the contestants be declared members of the private athletic

clubs where they fought to circumvent the Lewis Law. While indicating that both fighters are members of an integrated, if rather dubious, fraternity, the second title further points with caustic irony to the fact that, during this era of institutionalized racism, the boxing ring was one of the few places where whites and blacks could ostensibly play by the same rules and interact on equal terms. Sometimes pitting the white Irish and black African American underclasses against each other, violent competitions such as illicit prizefighting offered both groups an avenue for achieving at least some measure of fame and a degree of racial equality within a segregated, prejudiced society. Finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, Bellows's title suggests the underlying violence of boxers and spectators alike and, by extension, all of humanity. [9]

Certainly Bellows intended this painting as a commentary on a much publicized recent phenomenon: the rise of the African American professional prizefighter. There were outbursts of racial antagonism after Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight champion by defeating the white fighter Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia, in 1908. Marianne Doezema has demonstrated at length that, after Johnson's win, the boxing world was "increasingly caught up in the vicissitudes of the 'white hopes.'" [10] The idea of a black boxing champion was so unsettling to the social order of the time that some people thought interracial bouts should be prohibited. One writer reflected: "It is really a serious matter that, if the negro wins, thousands and thousands of other negroes will wonder whether, in claiming equality with the whites, they have not been too modest." [11] Bellows's powerful delineation of a white fighter who is about to be defeated by a black opponent was a daring social commentary that challenged prevailing notions about white superiority and supremacy at the height of the Jim Crow era.

Some historians have attempted to identify *Both Members of This Club* with a specific match, but none of their suggestions are convincing. [12] Although the ambience is similar to Bellows's two previous boxing subjects set at Sharkey's Athletic Club, interracial fights were rare at the venue. Doezema has made a plausible argument, suggesting that the painting "may represent a bout witnessed at an athletic club in another part of the city, which the artist then set in the environment he knew well from repeated visits to Sharkey's." [13] While Bellows was working on *Both Members of This Club*, promoters were trying to lure the aging white heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries out of retirement to defeat Johnson. The anxiously awaited bout was a major news story when Bellows's painting was included in the Exhibition of Independent Artists in New York

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(organized by Bellows's mentor Robert Henri). Much later, Bellows returned to the prizefight theme in his lithograph *The White Hope* [fig. 4], which specifically depicts Johnson's defeat of Jeffries in Reno, Nevada, on July 4, 1910. [14] The artist's drawing *The Savior of His Race* [fig. 5], the source of an illustration in the May 1915 issue of *The Masses* magazine, alludes to Johnson's loss to Jess Willard on April 5, 1915, in Havana, Cuba. [15] In her insightful study of Bellows's boxing prints, Rachel Schreiber observes: "The cartoon and its caption mock the ways that Willard's defeat of Johnson was touted as a triumphant contest of race. Bellows exposes the speciousness of Christian evangelism's assumptions of white superiority." [16]

Both Members of This Club is arguably the most expressive and dynamic of the first three major oil paintings that Bellows devoted to the sport of prizefighting. When he returned to the boxing theme with three more paintings in the early 1920s, the sport had been legalized and was more socially acceptable. In these later works, the savagery, brutality, and raw excitement that characterize the first series is absent. Because of its controversial overtones of racial antagonism, *Both Members of This Club*, perhaps more than any other painting of its generation, best exemplifies Robert Henri's aesthetic dicta to depict the harsher, more vital realities of contemporary life. More than a century later, an early critic's summation of Bellows's early boxing paintings is still valid: "Call them brutal if you will, they hit you between the eyes with the vigor that few living artists known to us can command." [17]

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES

- [1] *New York Evening Mail*, quoted in Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 104.
- [2] For a brief discussion of the compositional nuances of the three early boxing subjects, see Michael Quick, "Technique and Theory: The Evolution of George Bellows's Painting Style," in Michael Quick, Jane Myers, Marianne Doezema, and Franklin Kelly, *The Paintings of George Bellows* (Fort Worth,

TX, 1992), 21–24, figs. 14 and 15.

- [3] “Art and Artists: Pennsylvania Academy—Second Article,” *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, Jan. 27, 1910; quoted in Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 104. Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New York, 1992), 97, found fault with the painting’s spatial construction, saying that it belonged “to Never Neverland, and not to this mundane sphere, where such trifles as perspective have to be settled by scientific rules.”
- [4] Boxing remained illegal until the passage of the Frawley Act in 1911, but even then only ten-round, no-decision bouts were allowed, in which the contestants used eight-ounce gloves.
- [5] This had changed by 1916, when Bellows represented a group of upper-class women and their escorts attending a boxing match at Madison Square Garden in his lithograph *Preliminaries* (see Lauris Mason, *The Lithographs of George Bellows: A Catalogue Raisonné*, rev. ed. [San Francisco, 1992], cat. 24).
- [6] E. A. Carmean, John Wilmerding, Linda Ayres, and Deborah Chotner, *Bellows: The Boxing Pictures* (Washington, DC, 1982), 33.
- [7] Eleanor M. Tufts, “Bellows and Goya,” *Art Journal* 30 (Summer 1971): 363.
- [8] Letter from Bellows to Katherine Hiller, 1910, quoted in Thomas Beer, *George W. Bellows: His Lithographs* (New York, 1927), 15.
- [9] Sean Wilentz, “Low Life, High Art,” *The New Republic* 207 (Sept. 28, 1992), 43.
- [10] Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New York, 1992), 104.
- [11] “Topics of the Times: And May the Best Man Win!” *New York Times*, Nov. 1, 1909; quoted in Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New York, 1992), 106–107.
- [12] E. A. Carmean, John Wilmerding, Linda Ayres, and Deborah Chotner, *Bellows: The Boxing Pictures* (Washington, DC, 1982), 78, have suggested that the painting “depicts a fight at Sharkey’s, possibly the one in March 1909 between the black Joe Gans, former lightweight champion, and Jabez White.” More recently, Charlene S. Engel, “George Bellows and Lithography: A Graphic Eye Containing Multitudes,” in D. Scott Atkinson and Charlene S. Engel, *An American Pulse: The Lithographs of George Wesley Bellows* (San Diego, CA, 1999), 32, n. 79, noted that “photographs of the fight between Johnson and Burns [the 1908 heavyweight championship in Sydney] show the similarities in height and physique of these fighters and those in *Both Members of This Club*.”
- [13] Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New York, 1992),

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106. An interracial boxing match was held at Sharkey's in August 1910, in which the African American fighter William Brown from San Francisco knocked William Ford from Philadelphia unconscious. "May Die from Fight Blows: William Ford Still Unconscious from Knockout at Sharkey A. C.," *New York Times*, Aug. 4, 1910.

- [14] Lauris Mason and Joan Ludman, *The Lithographs of George Bellows: A Catalogue Raisonné*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, 1997), 35, M. 96. For a biography of Jack Johnson, see Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York, 1983).
- [15] Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New York, 1992), 218, n. 127.
- [16] Rachel Schreiber, "George Bellows's Boxers in Print," *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010): 160.
- [17] Unidentified article in the *Sun*, quoted in Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 104.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support consists of a medium-weight, plain-weave, single-threaded fabric tacked to a five-member, key-type stretcher with a single vertical crossbar. The artist increased the size of this work early in the painting process. Filled tack holes seen in the x-radiographs reveal sections of the support that were once folded over a smaller stretcher and acted as tacking margins (8.5–9 cm at the left edge, 9.5–10.5 cm at the right edge, and 6–8 cm at the top). The filled tack holes are visible on the reverse of the unlined painting. The stretcher appears to be original, because of the inscriptions on it, [1] but the painting has been restretched several times. In the most recent remounting it was tacked in place out of square by approximately 2.5 cm below and to the left of its original position.

The paint was applied wet into wet as a thick paste with transparent washes. Much of the color in the torso of the figure at the right is due to a thin wash of brown paint through which the light ground is visible, adding luminescence to the tone. Most of the remaining paint is applied thickly with high impasto and with quickness and spontaneity. Many artist's changes are apparent in the texture of underlying impasto that does not match the design. Examples of these changes include a painted-out head in the lower left and a change of position in the right calf of the white fighter.

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The condition of the painting is good. There are several small, patched holes and tears found on the reverse with corresponding losses of paint on the front. The painting was cleaned and inpainted in 1982. Several coats of different synthetic resin varnishes were also applied at that time.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] It is inscribed on both the reverse of the original fabric and on the stretcher. On the fabric, in paint: “Geo Bellows, 1947 B’dway, NY”; in red pencil: “Both Members Of This Club”; in white chalk: “# 1000.00”. On the reverse of the stretcher, in red: “Do Not Put Any Varnish Or Oil Into This Canvas”; in pencil: “Mrs Geo Bellows, 146 E 19 St”.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1882-1925]; by inheritance to his wife, Emma S. Bellows [1884-1959]; purchased 29 September 1944 through (H.V. Allison & Co., New York) by Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; gift 1944 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1910 Exhibition of Independent Artists, Galleries at 29-31 West 35th Street, New York, April 1910, no. 53.

1910 Fifth Annual Exhibition of Selected Paintings by American Artists, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, May-September 1910, no. 12.

1910 Fifth Annual Exhibition of Selected Paintings by American Artists, The City Art Museum, St. Louis, September-November 1910, no. 11.

1910 One Hundred and Fifth Annual Exhibition, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, January-March 1910, no. 338.

1917 Exhibition of Paintings [by 12 different artists], The MacDowell Club, New York, 1917, no. 3.

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1925 Memorial Exhibition of the Work of George Bellows, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1925, no. 10, repro.

1940 Thirty-Six Paintings by George Bellows, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio, 1940, no catalogue.

1944 Art in Progress: Fifteenth Anniversary Exhibition: Painting, Sculpture, Prints, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May-October 1944, unnumbered catalogue, repro. 39.

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

1946 George Bellows: Paintings, Drawings and Prints, Art Institute of Chicago, January-March 1946, no. 6, repro.

1946 Robert Henri & Five of his Pupils, The Century Association, New York, April-June 1946, no. 6, repro.

1957 George Bellows: A Retrospective Exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1957, no. 14, repro.

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

1982 Bellows: The Boxing Pictures, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1982, no. 3, fig. 29, pl. 5.

2012 George Bellows, National Gallery of Art, Washington; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2012-2013, pl. 18 (shown only in Washington).

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- 1969 Young, Mahonri Sharp. "George Bellows: Master of the Prize Fight." *Apollo* 89 (February 1969): 138 fig. 8, 139.
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- 1973 Young, Mahonri Sharp. *The Eight*. New York, 1973: 42, color pl. 11.
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