



George Bellows
American, 1882 - 1925

Florence Sittenham Davey (Mrs. Randall Davey)

1914

oil on wood

overall: 96.5 x 76 cm (38 x 29 15/16 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Geo. Bellows; reverse in black crayon, "McCormick" in a hand other than the artist: Portrait Florence Davey McCormick / Geo Bellows / 146 E 19 St / New York.

Gift of Florence S. McCormick 1979.80.1

ENTRY

This portrait represents Florence Sittenham Davey, the wife of George Bellows's friend, the artist Randall Davey (1887–1964). Described as “beautiful, generous, and strong-willed,” [1] Florence Davey was a modernist sculptor who had been a pupil of Alexander Archipenko. [2] The Daveys' son William related the unusual circumstances that led Bellows to paint the portrait: “George Bellows and Randall Davey used to shoot a lot of pool together and although Bellows was a good baseball player he lost a lot of money to Randall Davey attempting to beat him at pool. That is why he painted a portrait of Randall Davey's wife and ‘presented’ it to him. It was in payment of a gambling debt.” [3]

In this work Bellows has created a fresh and direct likeness in which he has emphasized his elegantly attired sitter's charm. Represented in three-quarter length and seated in a wicker chair, Florence looks directly at the viewer from under her fashionable wide-brimmed hat. The bravura brushwork treatment of the white dress is illuminated by a harsh light that enters the composition from an unseen source on the left. The bright whites of the dress and the vivid flesh tones of the face are heightened by the darker turquoise drapery in the background, the sitter's green belt, and her blue and green striped hatband.

Bellows had been prompted to reevaluate his approach to color in part after seeing works by Henri Matisse and the European avant-garde at the 1913 Armory Show the previous year. In a shift that mirrored changes in his mentor Robert

Henri's style, [4] by early 1913 Bellows was already moving away from the system of musical equivalents advocated by the color theoretician Hardesty Gillmore Maratta and had begun to experiment with theories developed by the Harvard University professor Denman Waldo Ross. In his book *On Drawing and Painting* (1912) Ross explicates the “set-palette” system of a limited selection of colors and emphasizes the importance of value—a color's range of lightness and darkness. [5] A critic remarked on the color of this work when it was exhibited at the Hackley Art Gallery in 1915: “In the portrait of Mrs. Randall Davey, a young woman in white seated against a dark background of green and purple, the green in the background and in the belt of the dress is assertive to the extent that it carries a delicious coolness throughout the portrait.” [6]

Florence Sittenham Davey is one of more than 15 portraits of women that Bellows completed while staying on Monhegan Island in Maine in 1914. That summer Bellows counted among his sitters his wife and personal friends, as well as local residents of the small, isolated outpost. Among this remarkable outpouring of images are *Emma at the Piano* (Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA), *Geraldine Lee No. 2* (Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH), and *Julie Hudson* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). In this extensive group of paintings the artist achieved a new expressive power and intensity through the use of assertive frontal poses, geometric compositions, brilliant color, and intense light. [7]

Robert Torchia

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NOTES

- [1] Julie Phillips, *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon* (New York, 2006), 79.
- [2] She lived with her husband in Santa Fe, New Mexico, until they divorced in 1930. The following year Florence moved to New York and married Cyrus McCormick III, son of the noted inventor Cyrus Hall McCormick and vice president of the International Harvester Company of Chicago.
- [3] William Davey to Deborah Chotner, Dec. 15, 1980, NGA curatorial records.
- [4] For a discussion of Henri's work at this time see Valerie Ann Leeds, *My People: The Portraits of Robert Henri* (Orlando, FL, 1994), 52–55.
- [5] For a summary of Ross's influence on Bellows 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* (New York, 1992), 47–49.

[6] “The Art of George Bellows,” *Aesthetics* 3 (Oct. 1914–July 1915): 53.

[7] For a discussion of Bellows’s work at this time see Jane Myers, “The Most Searching Place in the World’: Bellows’s Portraiture,” in Michael Quick, Jane Myers, Marianne Doezema, and Franklin Kelly, *The Paintings of George Bellows* (New York, 1992), 193–201.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on what appears to be a large single piece of wood. Although such a flat regular panel would usually consist of some sort of plywood, the material cannot be confirmed because the back and all of the edges are covered with ground, obscuring any laminations of the wood. The x-radiograph also shows no joins, indicating that several pieces of wood were glued together, which would typically be necessary to construct such a wide wood support. The artist applied the smooth, gray ground to both the front and back of the panel and all of its sides. Examination of the painting with infrared reflectography shows a free-form drawing executed in what appears to be black crayon. [1] It outlines most of the edges in the garment and hat and many of the facial features, but curiously seems to omit the mouth. The drawing in the area of the sitter’s left hand is sketchy and not very precise. Over this preparation, the paint has been applied thickly in wide brushstrokes of impastoed paint. The figure was painted in first and the background added in later, up to and sometimes a little over the figure’s edges. The paint in the face is a little more blended. In the x-radiograph there are some contour changes visible in the lower portions of the hat and at the top of both shoulders. Under ultraviolet examination it appears that the painting is coated with a synthetic resin varnish. Also using this illumination, two wide, highly fluorescing brushstrokes are visible; these probably primarily consist of zinc white.

The condition of the painting is excellent with only a little frame abrasion on all four edges. Some of this is inpainted and is dark under ultraviolet examination and some of it remains untouched. The varnish coating has gone gray and is probably covered with grime. An inscription on the back of the painting in black crayon identifies the subject: “Portrait Florence Davey McCormick, Geo Bellows, 146 E 19 St, New York.” This inscription is all in the artist’s hand except for “McCormick,”

which appears to have been added later by someone else.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1882-1925]; presented 1922 to the sitter's first husband, Randall Davey [1887-1964], until 1930;[1] Florence Sittenham Davey (1888-1979, later Mrs. Cyrus Hall McCormick III); bequest 1979 to NGA.

[1] The artist's Record Book notes the date the painting was presented to Randall Davey. According to a 15 December 1980 letter to NGA curator Deborah Chotner, in NGA curatorial files, from William Davey, son of Randall and Florence Davey, the couple were divorced in 1930. While unsure whether ownership of the painting was specified in the terms of the divorce, William assumed that his father gave the work to his mother. He also related the following: "George Bellows and Randall Davey used to shoot a lot of pool together and although Bellows was a good baseball player he lost a lot of money to Randall Davey attempting to beat him at pool. That is why he painted a portrait of Randall Davey's wife and 'presented' it to him. It was in payment of a gambling debt."

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1914 Paintings by George Bellows, Art Institute of Chicago, 1914-1915, no. 25, as Portrait: Mrs. Randall Davey.

1915 Exhibition of Paintings By George Bellows, Detroit Museum of Art, January 1915, no. 24, as Portrait: Mrs. Randall Davey.

1915 Exhibition of Paintings by George Bellows, Worcester Art Museum, September 1915, no. 9, as Portrait of Mrs. Randall Davey.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

1915 [Paintings by George Bellows], Hackley Art Gallery, Muskegon, Michigan, June-August 1915, no cat.

1915 Paintings by George Bellows, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, May 1915, no. 47, as Portrait of Mrs. Randall Davey.

1915 Paintings by George Bellows, N.A., Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art, Exposition Park, February 1915, no. 26, as Portrait of Mrs. Randall Davey.

1915 Paintings by George Bellows, N.A., San Francisco Institute of Art, March 1915, no. 26, as Portrait of Mrs. Randall Davey.

1915 Special Exhibition of Paintings by Mr. George Bellows, Cincinnati Museum, October 1915, no. 23, as Mrs. Randall Davey.

1916 Exhibition of Oil Paintings by George W. Bellows, N.A. and Clarence K. Chatterton, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, 1916, no. 7, as Mrs. Davey.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 27, repro.
- 1981 Southgate, M. Therese. "The Cover: George Bellows: *Florence Davey*." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 246, no. 11 (11 September 1981): cover repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 30, repro.
- 1992 Quick, Michael, Jane Myers, Marianne Doezema, and Franklin Kelly. *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. New York, 1992: 194-195, fig. 22.
- 2009 Peck, Glenn C. *George Bellows' Catalogue Raisonné*. H.V. Allison & Co., 2009. Online resource, URL: <http://www.hvallison.com>. Accessed 16 August 2016.

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