



George Bellows

American, 1882 - 1925

New York

1911

oil on canvas

overall: 106.7 x 152.4 cm (42 x 60 in.)

framed: 134.6 x 181.8 x 10.1 cm (53 x 71 9/16 x 4 in.)

Inscription: across bottom: Geo Bellows; upper left reverse: "NEW YORK" / GEO BELLOWS / 146 E 19 / N.Y.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1986.72.1

ENTRY

Bellows scholar Charles H. Morgan described this congested urban scene as “a remembered synthesis of a midsummer traffic jam, the Madison Square area packed with heavy delivery carts, patient Percherons, and crowds of pedestrians, the stolid buildings closing in on the sweltering scene.” [1] The scene is actually set in the winter, and although it is based on a viewpoint looking uptown toward Madison Square from the intersection of Broadway and 23rd Street, Bellows did not intend it to represent a specific, identifiable place in the city. He instead drew on several such bustling commercial districts to create an imaginary composite, impossibly crowded image that would best convey a sense of the city’s frenetic pace of life. [2] Completed in February 1911, *New York* is a remarkably ambitious painting in which visual details give way to the overwhelming movement and dizzying complexity of the modern metropolis as Bellows seeks to capture the dynamic, elusive essence of New York City [fig. 1].

The bird’s-eye view presents modern skyscrapers towering in the distance behind a row of 19th-century structures. Hoards of pedestrians stream across the foreground amid a profusion of horse-drawn carts and trolleys. They are caught in

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a variety of attitudes, some purposefully striding forward, others trying to cram themselves into a crowded trolley at the left, and yet others resigned to being stuck in an endless stream of traffic that seems to flow both to and from the congested avenue at the upper right. Although most of the faceless figures have lost their individuality in the crowd, some stand out by virtue of their gestures, such as the policeman directing traffic, the man shoveling snow, and the driver perched high on his cart. The compressed perspective contributes to the scene's unrelenting claustrophobia. The only area of open space—as well as the sole manifestation of nature—is the small, snow-covered park in the middle ground that is punctuated by barren, leafless trees. Bellows has enlivened the gray wintery haze that pervades the scene with occasional bright patches of green, red, and yellow. Especially noteworthy in this respect are his depictions of advertising signs on the sides of buildings and vehicles, the majority of which are tantalizingly almost legible.

New York conveys a sense of the contemporary urban ambience of New York. In 1907 a writer for *Harper's Magazine* described Madison Square as "an incessant progression: carriages and cabs, stages, drays, policemen on horseback, automobiles uncountable, ladies driving down to shops or on social errands in lower Fifth Avenue, all kinds of interesting people . . . a ceaseless and spirited panorama." [3] Some critics who saw *New York* at the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition in 1911 found it harsh and confusing, yet discerned some redeeming characteristics. James Huneker of the *New York Sun* reflected this ambivalence:

The amazing transcription of New York life, an ugly, grimy, cross section thereof, by George Bellows . . . is crudely realistic, an almost impossible attempt by a painter with an eye that envisages a thousand details to make out of the jumble of oppositions a picture. But the synthetical grasp is lacking. There is too much portrayed, too much literalism, too little left to the imagination, too harsh an insistence upon the raw facts of a street scene. . . . We presume to call this 'New York' of his 'amazing,' we only wish it were composed of finer art. Naturally Mr. Bellows refuses to see his city through the rose colored glasses of Childe Hassam or Colin Campbell Cooper, or the matter-of-fact manner of robust Paul Cornoyer. We applaud his individual attitude. The thrice confused life of a local quarter is tempting to a realist's brush, but to get it all into one picture and

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then compel it to come out at you across the frame is a well nigh impossible task. One applauds George Bellows and at the same time shudders at his truth-telling ugliness. If New York is really such a dirty, vile Gehenna as he pictures, then it is time the Fathers saw his pictorial arrangement and hastened to remedy so disgusting a state of affairs. Just how far truth should dominate a work of art we dare not say; even the doctors of aesthetics disagree on this point. . . . One thing is certain, if this canvas of Bellows is not very alluring it hums with life; not the overtones, but the noises and smells and disillusionizing sights. [4]

A critic for the *New York Times* declared that *New York* was an example of Bellows “at his worst,” and opined that it “is very much the inchoate mass of unrelated types and objects that the poor old city is in reality when stripped of all her fascinating atmospheric disguises. It is a picture to move a beauty-loving observer to bleak despair, so devoid is it of the element of charm. Nor has it the austerity of pure truth.” Despite these strongly worded objections, the writer concluded that “it blusters around a turmoil of trucks, cars, vegetable carts, and pedestrians, and whatever aesthetic message it may have is indistinguishable in the hubbub, nevertheless there are both solidity and movement there, and there is freshness of color, and 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.” [5]

Other critics were more receptive. A writer for the *Craftsman* had trouble finding the correct distance from which to view the painting, but concluded:

If you are fortunate enough to strike just the middle distance when you first see it you are filled with amazement, so full is it of motion, of stirring existence. Trucks are darting through the crowd. Men and women are hurrying across the streets, trolleys are clanging their way in and out, a policeman is keeping people from being run over, you feel the rush, you hear the noise, and you wish you were safely home. [6]

New York was greeted with enthusiasm when it was exhibited at the Marshall Field & Company department store in Chicago in October 1911. The perceptive H. Effa

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Webster of the *Examiner* described it as

crowded with giant architecture, crowds of people, lines of vehicles, all environing a street and surging over the highway; it's the story of tumultuous life in a stupendously built city. This picture is not so attractive as some other examples, but it shows the wonderful truth of the artist in depiction, and he paints truth in all these sweeps and details. This picture rings with sincerity in a marvelous combination of big and little reflections that are actual, although clothed with subtle art. [7]

Another Chicago critic observed that *New York* “rings with sincerity. . . . No wonder Bellows is tagged with the Gotham personality. . . . This artist’s work is worth going to see: it is a lesson in individuality in art.” [8]

The scholarly literature has emphasized that *New York* is the preeminent painting that deals with the theme of modern urban life. Recently one art historian characterized it as “the painted apotheosis of the early 20th-century city,” a “picture of modernity in excess.” [9] More accurately, it addresses New York City, specifically midtown Manhattan, as a city transitioning from 19th-century gentility to 20th-century hustle and bustle. Quiet, upper-class, residential neighborhoods like Madison Square and Union Square became commercial districts bordered by skyscrapers and teeming with activity. By embracing contemporary life and representing what is now an all too familiar sight in places like Times Square, Bellows revolutionized the New York urban landscape tradition. To use Samuel Isham’s phrase, conventional painters, and even the progressive realists among the Eight such as George Luks (American, 1866 - 1933), William Glackens (American, 1870 - 1938), and John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951), often idealized their urban subjects to create “beauty removed from urban realities.” [10] A perceptive critic like Huneker recognized that Bellows had rejected the standard formula used by American impressionist and tonalist artists for their numerous site-specific urban park scenes. Bellows’s novel interpretation of the modern urban environment, along with its implicit message of questioning the idea of progress, was a shock to conservative critics who were accustomed to idealized works such as Childe Hassam’s *Union Square in Spring* [fig. 2], or any of a number of such scenes by Colin Campbell Cooper. The prediction that the *New York Times* critic had made in 1911 has come true, and Bellows’s *New York* can indeed be regarded

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as “the best description of the casual New York scene left by the reporters of the present day.” Vik Muniz’s *New York City, after George Bellows (Pictures of Magazines 2)* (2011) is one measure of its continuing currency.

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

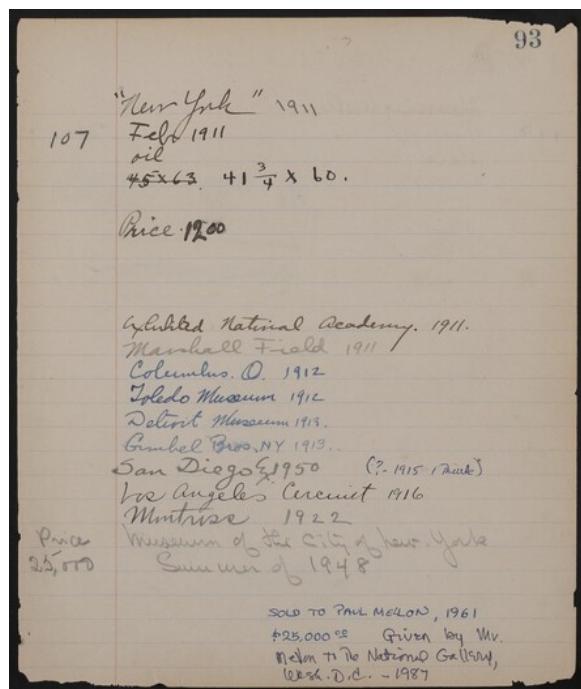


fig. 1 Entry from artist's Record Book about New York, The Ohio State University Libraries' Rare Books and Manuscripts Library and the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio

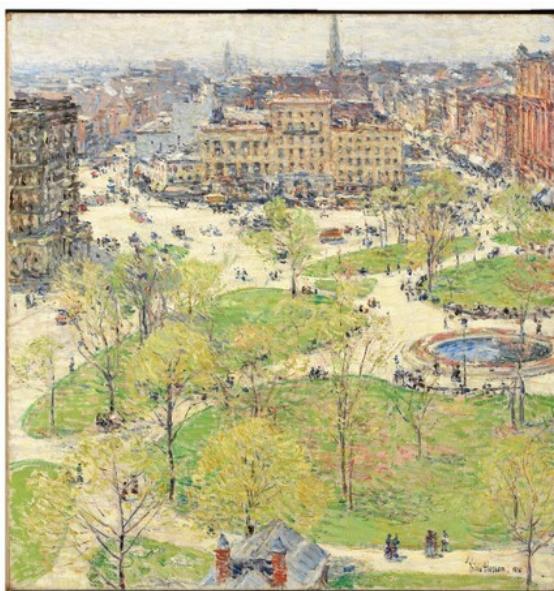


fig. 2 Childe Hassam, *Union Square in Spring*, 1896, oil on canvas, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, purchased with the Winthrop Hillyer Fund

NOTES

- [1] Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 129–130.

- [2] See Marianne Doezeema, “The ‘Real’ New York,” in Michael Quick, Jane Myers, Marianne Doezeema, and Franklin Kelly, *The Paintings of George Bellows* (Fort Worth, TX, 1992), 111–114, for a discussion of the painting’s composite nature.
 - [3] E. S. Martin, “Moods of a City Square,” *Harper’s Magazine* 115 (August 1907): 406.
 - [4] [James Gibbons Huneker], “The Spring Academy,” *New York Sun*, March 17, 1911.
 - [5] “Art at Home and Abroad: Academicians and Associates Show Excellent Pictures at the Spring Exhibition,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1911.
 - [6] “An Impression of the Spring Academy of Nineteen Hundred and Eleven: Some Young Men Prize-Winners,” *The Craftsman* 20 (May 1911): 146, 151.
 - [7] H. Effa Webster, “19 Paintings of City Life,” *Chicago Examiner*, Oct. 24, 1911.
 - [8] Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 132.
 - [9] Sarah Newman, “Working Life: Pennsylvania Station Excavation, 1907–1909,” in Charles Brock, et al., *George Bellows* (Washington, DC, 2012), 87.
 - [10] Samuel Isham, *The History of American Painting* (New York, 1905), 500. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885–1915* (New York, 1994), 180–199.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support is unlined and remains mounted on its original stretcher, although the stretcher has numerous sets of tack holes and one-inch extensions made of wood on both top and bottom, suggesting that it was salvaged by the artist for use on this painting. The artist applied the oil paint thickly, in a complex system of layers, over a thin, commercially prepared, off-white ground. The artist used brushes of various sizes, often blending paint wet into wet and utilizing the end of the brush, or another hard, flat object, to push the paint into highly impastoed configurations. The impastos are well preserved. The painting has been cut from a larger image, evidenced by the continuation of the painted image into the top and left tacking margins. [1] The fact that the painted tacking margins are unvarnished suggests that the coating was applied after the dimensions were reduced. Visual inspection under raking light reveals areas where

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the impasto runs counter to the image. This indicates that the artist made alterations in the composition, especially in the buildings at the left. Infrared examination does not reveal any more information about these changes, nor does it show any underdrawing. [2] Neither do the x-radiographs show the artist's changes with any more clarity. Other than some minor paint losses in the lower right foreground, the painting is in good condition. The very discolored varnish described above as having been applied after restretching was removed and replaced with a clear synthetic resin varnish in 2008. Some small losses were also retouched at this time.

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] At these two edges, paint covers the entire tacking margin, so it is not possible to tell how much the painting may have been cut along these edges. The bottom edge is also painted approximately half an inch into the tacking margin, but beyond that the primed fabric remains visible.
 - [2] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with a K astronomy filter.
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PROVENANCE

The artist [1882-1925]; by inheritance to his wife, Emma S. Bellows [1884-1959]; her estate; purchased 1961 through (H.V. Allison & Co., New York) by Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia; gift 1986 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1911 Eighty-Sixth Annual Exhibition, National Academy of Design, New York, March-April 1911, no. 2.

1911 Special Exhibition and Sale of Oil Paintings by George Bellows, Marshall Field & Company, Chicago, October 1911, no. 9.

1912 A Catalogue of Paintings by George Bellows, Art Students League of Columbus, Public Library, Columbus, Ohio, November 1912, no. 17, repro.

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1912 Paintings by George Bellows, N.A., Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, December 1912, no. 17.

1913 Gimbel Brothers, New York, 1913 [according to the artist's Record Book].

1913 Special Exhibition of Paintings by George Bellows, N.A., Detroit Museum of Art, 1913, no. 17.

1915 A Catalogue of Paintings, Gallery of Fine Arts, Panama-California Exposition, San Diego, 1915, no. 47, repro.

1916 "Los Angeles Circuit", 1916 [according to the artist's Record Book].

1921 Paintings and Drawings by George Bellows, Montross Gallery, New York, 1921, no. 2.

1925 Memorial Exhibition of Paintings by George Wesley Bellows, Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, December 1925, no. 5 (travelled to six venues, including Denver, and probably Buffalo, listed separately under 1926 in this exhibition history).

1925 Memorial Exhibition of the Work of George Bellows, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October-November 1925, no. 13, repro.

1926 Memorial Exhibition of the Work of George Bellows, 1882-1925, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1926, no. 5.

1948 Museum of the City of New York, Summer 1948.[1]

1962 Modern American Painting: 1915, The Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, 1962-1963, no. 3, repro.

1986 Gifts to the Nation: Selected Acquisitions from the Collections of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1986, unnumbered checklist.

1992 The Paintings of George Bellows, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, 1992-1993, fig. 12.

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1995 *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York*, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; New-York Historical Society, 1995-

1996, unnumbered catalogue, figs. 1 and 82, frontispiece (shown only in Washington).

1997 *George Bellows: Love of Winter*, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach; The Newark Museum; Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art, 1997-1998, no. 21, fig. 38.

1999 *An Enduring Legacy: Masterpieces from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1999-2000, no catalogue.

2005 *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film, 1880-1910*, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown; Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem; The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., 2005-2007, unnumbered catalogue, fig. 200.

2012 *George Bellows*, National Gallery of Art, Washington; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2012-2013, pl. 24.

2013 *George Bellows and the American Experience*, Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art, 2013-2014, no catalogue.

EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES

[1] This is according to the artist's Record Book. There are no details provided by the museum's records except that Mrs. Bellows is listed as a lender in the 1948 annual report.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 1971 Braider, Donald. *George Bellows and the Ashcan School of Painting*. New York, 1971: 69.
- 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, Franklin. "George Bellows' Shore House." *Studies in the History of Art* 37 (1990): 131, repro. no. 20.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, New York

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- Washington, 1992: 30, repro.
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- 1997 Setford, David, and John Wilmerding. *George Bellows: Love of Winter*. Exh. cat. Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach; The Newark Museum, New Jersey; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, 1997: fig. 3, no. 21.
- 2001 Southgate, M. Therese. *The Art of JAMA II: Covers and Essays from The Journal of the American Medical Association*. Chicago, 2001: 2-3, 206, color repro.
- 2004 Newman, Sarah. "George Bellows's New York and the Spectacular Reality of the City." *American Art* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 92-99, color fig. 1.
- 2006 Zurier, Rebecca. *Picture the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*. Berkeley, 2006: 32-33, 56, pl. 2.
- 2007 Haverstock, Mary Sayre. *George Bellows: An Artist in Action*. Columbus, Ohio, 2007: 70, color repro.
- 2009 Peck, Glenn C. *George Bellows' Catalogue Raisonné*. H.V. Allison & Co., 2009. Online resource, URL: <http://www.hvallison.com>. Accessed 16 August 2016.
- 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, 24, 26, 31, 40, 41, 87, 95, 111, pl. 24.
- 2013 McClew, Mason. "George Bellows and the American Experience (Columbus, Ohio)." *American Art Review* 25, no. 5 (September-October 2013): 133, color ill.
- 2013 Smith, Roberta. "The Listings: Jan. 25-31." *New York Times* 162, no. 56,027 (January 25, 2013): C-16, color repro.
- 2015 Wolner, Edward W. "George Bellows, Georg Simmel, and Modernizing New York." *American Art* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 109-113, 120 nn. 8 and 11, color fig. 2.
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