

Out of Hours

Art

MODERN AMERICAN LIFE GEORGE BELLOWS (1882–1925)

16 March–9 June 2013

In the Sackler Wing of Galleries,
Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House

George Bellows came to New York from a comfortable family background in Columbus, Ohio in 1904 and worked with Robert Henri at the New York School of Art. He became a member of a group of young artists who called themselves the Ashcan painters and began to create his energetic scenes of life in the Lower East Side of Manhattan — the river front and the docks, the streets and tenements, great construction projects such as Penn Station, and the illegal prize fights known as stags.

As his reputation grew, he went on to produce commissioned portraits, Maine seascapes and, although he never left America, some controversial paintings and lithographs of the brutalities carried out in Belgium by invading German forces in the First World War.

Later he began to divide his time between Chicago and Woodstock. He died, aged only 42, in New York City, from peritonitis due to a ruptured appendix for which he had not, apparently, sought prompt medical attention.

If you have ever seen Bellows' extraordinary painting of a boxing match entitled *Both Members of this Club*, then you will be eager to see this exhibition at the Royal Academy. Sure enough, the boxing paintings and drawings do not disappoint: *Stag at Sharkey's* in the first room is spectacularly powerful and energetic, the boxers like slabs of raw meat clenched in a pyramidal formation, surrounded by braying caricatures in the ringside seats. He wrote about the sympathy he felt for the boxers as opposed to the dislike he felt for the spectators, and the painting makes this very clear. Later in his career he returned to the subject, and a clever piece of placement means you can look at the drawing of Jack Dempsey being knocked out of the ring and then at the full size oil painting of the same topic. What the large piece emphasises is, to put it bluntly, Bellows' fundamental incompetence in portraying the human figure.

This weakness mars an awfully large proportion of his works: it is less apparent in the drawings and lithographs, I suppose because of the smaller scale, but in a full size oil it is blatant. The large scale landscapes or the city views where the subject dwarfs the human beings are far more successful, notably the wonderful series of the vast

excavations that accompanied the building of Penn Station, or the fine seascapes, painted in Massachusetts and so reminiscent of Winslow Homer's paintings from Prout's Neck. *Snow Dumpers* offers an especially painful contrast: the men and horses in the foreground, monumental as they are, look amateurish compared to the quality of the river scene behind, so much more convincing and lively. Even more disappointing are the paintings of the 1920s (I will pass quickly by the dire series depicting German atrocities in WW1), where some kind of weird symbolism of the Khnopff type alternates with sub-Manet portraiture. There is no doubt he paints women much better than men, but I rather doubt most galleries would be very bothered about any of this stuff if it weren't for his pre-War works.

Bellows could draw the human figure brilliantly when he veered towards caricature. Even then though the style reminds one, tellingly, of the Punch cartoon of the Curate's Egg, and so does the whole exhibition: brilliant — rather than merely good — in parts.

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George Bellows, Stag at Sharkey's, 1909, oil on canvas, 92 x 112.6 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection, © The Cleveland Museum of Art.

