



George Bellows
American, 1882 - 1925

Nude with Red Hair

1920

oil on canvas

overall: 110.9 x 86.5 cm (43 11/16 x 34 1/16 in.)

framed: 138.4 x 113 x 7.6 cm (54 1/2 x 44 1/2 x 3 in.)

Inscription: by Emma S. Bellows, lower left: Geo. Bellows / E. S. B.[1]

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.84

ENTRY

George Bellows painted his first female nude in the fall of 1906 and titled it simply *Nude, Miss Bentham* (Barber Institute of Fine Arts). Bellows's biographer, Charles H. Morgan, characterized this early effort as "academic in its dedication to anatomy and puritanic in its stark realism," and noted that the artist "hung it prominently in the studio, but rarely exhibited it." [1] As early as 1905 Bellows had received recognition for his skill in life drawing as a student at the New York School of Art, and by 1910 he was teaching life classes at the Art Students League. That year Bellows affirmed that such classes were a well-established and legitimate means to develop sound draftsmanship. He also acknowledged the prominence of the male body in many of his most famous works, such as *Both Members of This Club* and *Forty-two Kids*, when he emphasized how, as opposed to inherently static subjects like *Nude with Red Hair*, "prize fighters and swimmers are the only types whose muscular action can be painted in the nude legitimately." [2]

While continuing to teach, Bellows did not produce any paintings of nudes from 1911 to 1914. In 1915, inspired by the example of his mentor Robert Henri, he painted *Nude with a Parrot* (private collection) and the semiclothed *Torso of a Girl with Flowers* (Union League Club of Chicago, IL). [3] In 1916 and 1917 Bellows produced a series of lithographs representing single female figures in various poses that resemble studio drawings, as well as a print showing a provocative encounter between two female nudes titled simply *Two Girls*. His preoccupation at the time with the practice of life drawing is evident in the lithograph *The Life Class (The Model, Life Class)* (1917, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), a reminiscence of his classes with Henri. [4]

Bellows painted two half-length, seated female nudes in November 1919: *Nude Girl with Fruit* (private collection) and the striking *Nude with a White Shawl* (Collection of Dr. and Mrs. David A. Skier, Birmingham, AL). The latter was deemed “immoral” when it was exhibited at the National Arts Club’s annual exhibition in New York in 1922. This controversy reflected the persistent concerns regarding the depiction and censorship of the female nude in American society espoused in the late Victorian period by powerful figures such as Anthony Comstock, whom Bellows had mocked in a 1915 illustration for *The Masses* titled *Exposed at Last!—The Nude is Repulsive to This Man*. [5]

Nude with Red Hair was painted at Bellows’s rural studio in Woodstock, New York, in July 1920, as was another half-length nude, *Nude with Fan* (North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh). The artist described the Gallery’s painting in his Record Book B as “B558 Woman with Red Hair--semi nude with Black Shawl.” [6] The model has been identified as Agnes Tait, a young art student who was attending the Art Students League’s summer school in Woodstock. [7] Both the model’s pose, modestly covering her breasts with her raised left forearm and hand, and the use of light are strongly reminiscent of Titian’s famous *Venus with a Mirror* [fig. 1]. Bellows may have known that painting through a reproduction or the many early copies or variants after it, some of them representing only the figure of Venus. He lessened the eroticism implicit in Titian’s classical *Venus Pudica* pose by shifting the model’s right hand so that it rests on her leg. Bellows’s keen awareness of old master precedents can be traced to his education with Henri and remained in evidence throughout his career, including his final nude subject *Two Women* (1924, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas), which he based on *Sacred and Profane Love* (c. 1515, Galleria Borghese, Rome), another famous painting by the great Venetian master of the High Renaissance. *Nude with Red Hair* and the other late nudes depicting women shuttered away from the outside world in Bellows’s Woodstock studio stand in stark contrast to the public spectacles featured in Bellows’s early, aggressively masculine, and better known boxing scenes.

Robert Torchia

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*, c. 1555, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.34

NOTES

- [1] Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 66. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts organized a small exhibition, *Bellows and the Body: The Real, the Ideal, and the Nude*, and a symposium in 2016 to mark their acquisition of *Nude, Miss Bentham*. The two events represented the first serious scholarly appraisal of Bellows's depictions of the nude.
- [2] Bellows to Katherine Hiller, 1910, quoted in Thomas Beer, Eugene Spreicher, and Atherton Curtis, *George W. Bellows: His Lithographs* (New York, 1927), 16. For a brief discussion of Bellows and the nude, see William H. Gerdtz, *The Great American Nude* (New York, 1974), 162. Bellows's interest in the male homosocial worlds of boxing and bathing is explored in Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, *Hide and Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington, 2010).

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- [3] The artist's mother remarked of the latter painting: "It's bad enough, George, to paint a girl with both of her breasts bare, but to show only one is nasty." Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 191.
- [4] Lauris Mason, *The Lithographs of George Bellows: A Catalogue Raisonné*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, 1992), cat. no. 43.
- [5] Apparently some members of the Arts Committee deemed the painting "immoral" and others accused Bellows of deliberately orchestrating the incident as a publicity stunt. The unknown author of "Art Club to Hear Protest on Nude," *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1922, paraphrased the opinion of an unidentified artist who was sympathetic to Bellows: "There would have been no objection had Mr. Bellows painted an entire nude; that the trouble seemed to be that he had painted a décolleté gown and cut it too low." On Comstock, see Amy Werbel, "The Crime of the Nude: Anthony Comstock, the Art Students League of New York, and the Origins of Modern American Obscenity," *Winterthur Portfolio* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 249–282.
- [6] George Bellows, Record Book B, 217, The Ohio State University Libraries' Rare Books & Manuscripts Library and the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio.
- [7] According to the H. V. Allison & Co. invoice to Chester Dale, May 1, 1945, NGA curatorial files.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support was lined with a similar fabric using an aqueous adhesive and mounted on a new stretcher in 1958. [1] The tacking margins were removed in the process. The artist applied paint rapidly and mostly wet into wet over a thin, off-white ground. For the most part the paint has been applied in broad strokes, as seen in the thick green outlining of the figure. However in some limited areas the paint consists only of thin scumbles with the ground showing through. X-radiographs do not reveal any artist's alterations. Infrared examination revealed the presence of a grid configuration, which may have been used to transfer the composition from a drawing to the larger fabric support. [2] Other than some recurring flaking in the upper background that has led to many small inpainted losses, the paint surface is in good condition. The surface is coated with a slightly uneven layer of Damar varnish applied in 1958.

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The original stretcher was signed “Geo. Bellows” by the artist.
- [2] Infrared examination was conducted with the Kodak 310-21x, a platinum silicidic camera with a 55 mm macro lens and a 1.5–2.0 micron filter.
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PROVENANCE

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

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1926 Forty-Sixth Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture, Providence Art Club, Rhode Island, 1926, no. 1, repro., as Woman with Red Hair.

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

1957 George Bellows: A Retrospective Exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., January-February 1957, no. 46, repro.

1957 Paintings by George Bellows, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio, March-April 1957, no. 49.

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

INSCRIPTION FOOTNOTES

- [1] The painting's original stretcher, which was replaced during conservation treatment in 1958, was signed by the artist: Geo. Bellows.
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BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1929 Bellows, Emma Louise Story. *The Paintings of George Bellows*. New York, 1929: 102.
- 1965 Morgan, Charles H. *George Bellows. Painter of America*. New York, 1965: 238.
- 1965 *Paintings other than French in the Chester Dale Collection*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 51, repro.
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- 1973 Young, Mahonri Sharp. *The Eight*. New York, 1973: 44, color pl. 55.
- 1974 Gerdtz, William H. *The Great American Nude: A History in Art*. New York, 1974: 162.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 27, repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: repro. 203, 205.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 31, repro.
- Peck, Glenn C. *George Bellows' Catalogue Raisonné*. H.V. Allison & Co.
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