



George Bellows
American, 1882 - 1925

My Family

1916

oil on canvas

overall: 151 x 167.8 cm (59 7/16 x 66 1/16 in.)

framed: 177.8 x 194 x 9.5 cm (70 x 76 3/8 x 3 3/4 in.)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.3

ENTRY

From 1915 to 1920 George Bellows participated in four exhibitions organized by the National Association of Portrait Painters, a group that had been founded in 1912 for the purpose of avoiding “the tiresomely conventional and perfunctory portrait.” [1] During the summer of 1916, when the artist and his family were staying in Camden, Maine, Bellows began to experiment with plein air portraiture in which he attempted to integrate the human figure with the outdoors. Bellows’s struggle to finalize this new style is confirmed by two monumental portraits that Bellows left unfinished: *My Family* and the nearly identical *Study of Emma and the Children* [fig. 1]. Although the relationship between the two versions is unclear, it is generally assumed that the latter was a preparatory study for the former. [2] While Bellows altered the palette from red and purple to green and purple, both show his wife, Emma, reclining in a hammock with their young daughter Jean by her side and their older daughter Anne, whose back is turned toward the viewer, about to climb in and join them. They are sheltered from the sun by a prominent striped awning that runs along the top margin of the composition. The figures are framed by dense foliage in the foreground and at the right and left, and the background comprises a verdant landscape with a house. The overall effect is one of warmth and

domesticity.

Jane Myers has noted that in these two paintings “Bellows daringly evoked a range of European sources, from the English ‘conversation piece’ of the 18th century to the avant-garde, tapestry-like paintings of the French Nabis, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard.” [3] The emphasis on geometric forms, however, suggests that Bellows was preoccupied by the example of Paul Cézanne. In this respect he was probably following the advice of fellow artist Leon Kroll, who, at the urging of Bellows’s mentor Robert Henri, had joined Bellows in Camden in the summer of 1916. Kroll rented a house next to the Bellows family, and the two artists worked together. [4] The former had just begun “to assimilate the French master’s lessons into his own work.” [5] Kroll encouraged his colleague to investigate impressionism and postimpressionism, and later recollected: “I gave Bellows some criticism every day. He was in a rut, and he loved the criticism.” [6] Kroll’s own forays into plein air portraiture that summer are documented by two paintings of the Bellows family: *Summer Days, Camden, Maine, The Bellows Family* (1916, Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, MA) and *In the Country* [fig. 2].

Bellows may have abandoned the two family portraits because he was unable to resolve the relationship between his human figures and their natural surroundings. His family is almost completely overwhelmed by their environment and fail to stand out as the proper subject. The culmination of Bellows’s experimentation with the impressionist plein air portrait in Maine that summer is *Emma in an Orchard* [fig. 3], a considerably smaller and more fully resolved portrait of his wife inspired in part by Édouard Manet’s *Madame Manet in the Conservatory* (1879, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo).

Bellows made a third version of *My Family* in the form of his 1916 lithograph *Mother and Children* [fig. 4] that was reproduced in the radical leftist magazine *The Masses* (June 1917) under the title *June Again*. [7] The contours of the forms are noticeably less geometric than in either of the paintings, and Jean is represented as an infant rather than a toddler. In 1923 Bellows returned to the subject in the magnificent, if far more conventional, portrait of his wife and daughters, *Emma and Her Children* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Bellows’s depictions of his family were in keeping with Henri’s belief that modernism was a capacious term encompassing not only radical political agendas and pictorial experimentation but also more conservative subject matter and a knowledge of and reverence for artistic precedents and traditions.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 George Bellows, *Study of Emma and the Children*, 1917, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, A. Shuman Collection—Abraham Shuman Fund. © 2017 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



fig. 2 Leon Kroll, *In the Country*, 1916, oil on canvas, Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Special Membership and Donations Fund with a contribution from Mr. J. J. Crowley. © Detroit Institute of Arts / Bridgeman Images



fig. 3 George Bellows, *Emma in an Orchard*, 1916, oil on canvas, Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville. Purchased with funds from the Cummer Council, AP.1980.11.



fig. 4 George Bellows, *Mother and Children*, lithograph published in *The Masses* (June 1917): 18, New York University. Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives

NOTES

- [1] Alice T. Searle, "Exhibition of the National Association of Portrait Painters," *International Studio* 46 (May 1912): 63.
- [2] The Boston version is divided into a grid pattern and the fabric support has been folded at the top and bottom, indicating that Bellows experimented with altering its dimensions. It also has a darker tonality than the Gallery's painting.
- [3] Jane Myers, "'The Most Searching Place in the World,' Bellows and Portraiture," in Michael Quick, Jane Myers, Marianne Doezema, and Franklin Kelly, *The Paintings of George Bellows* (New York, 1992), 203.
- [4] Valerie Ann Leeds, *Leon Kroll Revisited* (New York, 1998), 13.

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- [5] Valerie Ann Leeds, *Leon Kroll Revisited* (New York, 1998), 12.
- [6] Nancy Hale and Fredson Bowers, eds., *Leon Kroll: A Spoken Memoir* (Charlottesville, VA, 1983), 42, quoted in Jane Myers, “‘The Most Searching Place in the World,’ Bellows and Portraiture,” in Michael Quick, Jane Myers, Marianne Doezema, and Franklin Kelly, *The Paintings of George Bellows* (New York, 1992), 204.
- [7] Lauris Mason, with Joan Ludman, *The Lithographs of George Bellows: A Catalogue Raisonné* (1977; rev. ed. San Francisco, 1992), no. M. 16, 56–57.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, openly woven, plain-weave fabric support was lined and trimmed; all of the original tacking margins were removed. The artist applied paint thickly in multiple layers over the thin white ground, sometimes painting wet into wet and sometimes applying wet paint over dry. The noticeably textured surface was achieved with a variety of brush techniques and sizes and occasionally with a palette knife. All of this layering, particularly the application of wet paint over dry, indicates that the painting process extended over a long period of time. Some of the design elements were initially executed in different colors and then changed by the artist. The awning was originally painted in red, orange hued pink, and purple before Bellows altered it to the present green and yellow, and the woman’s dress was green before being changed to purple. The condition of the painting is marred by a general flattening of the impasto that occurred during the lining process and by severe wide aperture drying craquelure in the most thickly painted areas. Inpainting was applied to conceal extensive abrasion in the mother’s hair, the awning, and parts of the foliage. Additional losses include a 28 cm-long crack through the awning into the background and the mother’s arm. The surface was coated with an even, glossy, natural resin varnish that has not discolored.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1882-1925]; by inheritance to his wife, Emma S. Bellows [1884-1959]; her estate; purchased May 1967 through (H.V. Allison & Co., New York) by Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia; gift 1983 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1984 George Bellows: The Personal Side, Museum of Arts and Sciences, Macon, Georgia, 1984, fig. 15.

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.

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- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 31, 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: 201–202, fig. 29.
- 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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