



George Bellows  
American, 1882 - 1925

# *Nude with Hexagonal Quilt*

1924

oil on canvas

overall: 129.5 x 160 cm (51 x 63 in.)

framed: 154.9 x 185.1 x 8.3 cm (61 x 72 7/8 x 3 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Geo Bellows.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.4

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## ENTRY

George Bellows completed *Nude with Hexagonal Quilt* at his studio in Woodstock, New York, in July 1924. It is among his most ambitious nude compositions and one of the last paintings that he finished before his premature death from appendicitis. He had become preoccupied with the female nude and, from 1923 to 1924, made a series of eight lithographs devoted to the subject. [1] Charles H. Morgan reported that Bellows had originally titled the painting *Venus*, but his wife “changed his mind.” [2] His first mythological title may have been in response to the reception of *Nude with a White Shawl* (1919, private collection), which had engendered a controversy at the National Arts Club’s annual exhibition in New York in 1922. Some members objected to the topless model and called the picture “immoral,” and others speculated that the artist had deliberately orchestrated the incident to gain publicity. [3]

The artist’s daughter Jean Bellows Booth recollected that she had peeked through the louvered blinds into her father’s studio while he was at work on this painting and was fascinated by the sight of the nude sitter. The quilt may have served a utilitarian rather than a purely decorative function; Jean remembered that she and

her sister, Anne, disliked the carved walnut Victorian loveseat because its horsehair upholstery stuck into their legs. She also noted that the patterned wallpaper never existed in the Woodstock studio. [4]

The nude reclines on a loveseat that appears in six of Bellows's late figural paintings. [5] She presides over the panoply of textures and patterns that surrounds her, consisting of the drapery on the left side of the loveseat, the floral wallpaper, the transparent lace curtains, and the quilt on which her massive sculptural form rests. Her rather disconcerting presence suggests that she is indeed the mythological Roman goddess of love and not merely a nude model posing in an artist's studio. The presence of the traditional Victorian pieced hexagonal silk quilt reinforces the initial impression that Venus has inexplicably strayed into a middle-class American domestic interior. [6]

Although other sources have been suggested in the recent literature, the nude's meditative attitude and pose are clearly derived from Michelangelo's famous sculpture *Night* from the tomb of Giuliano de' Medici [fig. 1]. [7] Bellows may have made a subtle reference to this source by representing the shutter slats closed, thereby darkening the room as if it were night. His preparatory charcoal and black crayon *Study for Nude with Hexagonal Quilt* [fig. 2] shows that he changed the position of the windows to make them more prominent in the painting.

Like other female nudes by Bellows, the figure is not idealized. This quality brings to mind the severe criticism that Royal Cortissoz had leveled the previous year at the artist's lithograph *Reducing, Small, Third Stone*, in which a seminude woman exercises on the floor while her husband sleeps in the couple's bed:

It is the mere ugliness of form, an ugliness unredeemed by beauty of drawing or style, which repels, and I speak here not of a quality which is accidental, belonging only to this print, but to a quality running through practically all the lithographs. It crops out even in the studies from the nude. Life, as Bellows sees it, is singularly barren of charm. Whether he is studying the nude model or drawing the heroes of the prize-ring, he appears to find form an affair of brute strength, never of beauty, and this view of the matter enters the very grain of his art. [8]

Although Bellows, in response to Cortissoz and others, may have taken a more traditional, monumental, and classicizing approach in *Nude with Hexagonal Quilt*, including allusions to the Italian Renaissance, he nevertheless persisted in emphasizing the physical, visceral realities of the female model.

Morgan remarked that *Nude with Hexagonal Quilt* was “obscurely reminiscent” of Bellows’s mentor Robert Henri’s well-known nude *Figure in Motion* [fig. 3] that had been exhibited at the 1913 Armory Show and noted that “Bellows probed into the subtle problems of weight and texture, exploiting in more graphic form Matisse’s absorption with geometric pattern.” [9] Bellows’s nudes lack the ease and sensuality of those by Henri, although Bellows may possibly have been responding to Henri Matisse’s emphasis on two-dimensional decorative pattern.

*Nude with Hexagonal Quilt* is closely related to Bellows’s final female nude subject, *Two Women* [fig. 4], a mysterious juxtaposition of a nude and a fully clothed woman seated on the same Victorian loveseat in his Woodstock house. Once again he quoted a well-known High Renaissance source by basing the composition on Titian’s allegorical painting commonly known as *Sacred and Profane Love* (c. 1515, Galleria Borghese, Rome). [10] As Mark Cole has shown, the curious melding of classical allusions and homespun Americana that characterized Bellows’s last paintings would persist in the work of American regionalist painters like Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889 - 1975), Grant Wood (American, 1891 - 1942), John Steuart Curry (American, 1897 - 1946), and others into the 1930s and beyond. [11]

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Michelangelo, *Night*, detail from the tomb of Giuliano de' Medici, 1519–1534, marble, Medici Chapel, Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence. Scala/Art Resource, NY



**fig. 2** George Bellows, *Study for Nude with Hexagonal Quilt*, 1924, charcoal and black crayon on wove paper mounted to paperboard, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz, 1986.82.1



**fig. 3** Robert Henri, *Figure in Motion*, 1913, oil on canvas, Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1999.69

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**fig. 4** George Bellows, *Two Women*, 1924, oil on canvas, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2014.25. Photography by Edward C. Robison III

## NOTES

- [1] Lauris Mason and Joan Ludman, *The Lithographs of George Bellows: A Catalogue Raisonné*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, 1992), 242–249, M. 170–177.
- [2] Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965),

278.

- [3] “Art Club to Hear Protest on Nude,” *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1922.
- [4] Linda L. Ayres, memo, 1983, NGA curatorial files.
- [5] Marjorie B. Searl, “An Old Master in a Woodstock Studio,” in *Leaving for the Country: George Bellows at Woodstock*, ed. Marjorie B. Searl and Ronald Netsky (Rochester, NY, 2003), 45, suggested that Bellows may have appreciated the loveseat’s value “as a structural element, providing a strong horizontal platform and backdrop for his figures, but in addition, the piece was a powerful symbol of his personal and cultural past, and his mother, from whom it was inherited.”
- [6] Bellows had previously included a quilt with a checkerboard pattern as an accessory to nude female subjects in such lithographs as the three states of *Reducing* (M. 21 and M. 22, both of 1916, and M. 79, 1921), the two states of *Morning, Nude on Bed* (M. 76 and M. 77, both of 1921), and *Evening, Nude on Bed* (M. 78, 1921).
- [7] Marjorie B. Searl, “An Old Master in a Woodstock Studio,” in *Leaving for the Country: George Bellows at Woodstock*, ed. Marjorie B. Searl and Ronald Netsky (Rochester, NY, 2003), 46, suggested Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* (1510, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden) as the source, commenting that *Nude with Hexagonal Quilt* “appears to be a slightly awkward nod to Giorgione’s idealized and relaxed outdoor nude.”
- [8] Royal Cortissoz, *American Artists* (New York, 1923), 178–179. *Reducing, Small, Third Stone* (1921) is number M. 79 in the catalogue raisonné.
- [9] Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 278.
- [10] Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 278, noted that *Two Women* was originally titled *Sacred and Profane Love* after Titian’s painting, but Bellows changed the name “partly because of [his wife] Emma and also with a piquant eye toward Anthony Comstock’s ‘League of Decency.’”
- [11] Mark Cole, “A Life Cut Short, 1924,” in *George Bellows*, ed. Charles Brock (Washington, DC, 2012), 277–285.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is on a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric that is unlined and remains stretched on its original stretcher. It appears that at one point the preprimed canvas had been stretched on a larger stretcher because there are very wide

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tacking margins at the top and bottom that have an extra set of tack holes beneath the ones that hold the painting. [1] No paint extends over the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was restretched to its current size before painting. The priming is a single, thin white layer. The fluid and rich paint is blended wet into wet with high impasto in some areas. Wide brushes were utilized for depicting the flesh while smaller, thinner brushes were used in the more detailed curtains. Ridges of paint that do not correspond to the composition suggest that the position of the head was changed during the painting process. Infrared examination did not lend evidence to any artist's changes or reveal any underdrawing. For the most part, the painting is in good condition with only small retouched losses scattered throughout. The painting has a long history of problems with the adhesion of the paint to the ground. It was last consolidated with microcrystalline wax in 1982. The painting is varnished with a thick coating of natural resin varnish that has yellowed appreciably.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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### TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The priming covers all the tacking margins. This usually indicates that the priming was commercially prepared rather than artist applied.

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### PROVENANCE

The artist [1882-1925]; by inheritance to his wife, Emma S. Bellows [1884-1959]; her estate; purchased July 1961 through (H.V. Allison & Co., New York) by Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia; gift 1983 to NGA.

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1924 Special Exhibition of Paintings by George Bellows, Leon Kroll, Eugene F. Savage, Walter Ufer, Paul Bartlett, Edgar S. Cameron, H. Aimard Oberteuffer, and George Oberteuffer, Art Institute of Chicago, 1924-1925, no. 16, as Venus.

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1925 Bellows Exhibition, Durand-Ruel Galleries, February 1925, no. 3, as Nude.

1925 Exhibition of Paintings by George Bellows, Charles Hopkinson, Eugene Speicer, Boston Art Club, March 1925, no. 3, as Nude.

1925 Exhibition of Paintings by George Bellows, Charles Hopkinson, Robert Henri, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, April 1925, no. 3, as Nude.

1925 Exhibition of Paintings by George Bellows, Worcester Art Museum, February-March 1925, no. 11, as Nude.

1925 Memorial Exhibition of the Work of George Bellows, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October-November 1925, no. 59, repro., as Venus.

1958 George Bellows, H.V. Allison & Co., New York, 1958, no. 14.

1961 George Bellows, H.V. Allison & Co., New York, May 1961, no. 15, cover repro.

1961 The Nude in American Painting, Brooklyn Museum, October-November 1961, no. 34.

2003 Leaving for the Country: George Bellows at Woodstock, Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, 2003, fig. 47, color plate 32.

2012 George Bellows, National Gallery of Art, Washington; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2012-2013, pl. 148 (shown only in New York).

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1929 Bellows, Emma Louise Story. *The Paintings of George Bellows*. New York, 1929: 138, as *Venus*.
- 1965 Morgan, Charles H. *George Bellows. Painter of America*. New York, 1965: 278.
- 1971 Braider, Donald. *George Bellows and the Ashcan School of Painting*. New York, 1971: 140.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 32, 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)



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Museum of Art; Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, 1992–1993. New York, 1992: 87, fig. 88.

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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