

NEWS RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
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The largest retrospective collection of works by American painter and lithographer George Bellows ever assembled will open at the National Gallery of Art in Washington on the afternoon of January 19, Director John Walker announced today.

The exhibition will be the first one-man show given an artist by the Gallery and represents a new focus upon the Gallery's American collection.

"We feel it is fitting that one of our most significant painters and most interesting recorders of the American scene will inaugurate this new policy," Walker said. He explained that occasional exhibitions in the future would honor other American painters.

"The Gallery, with its extraordinary representation of European masterpieces, wishes at this time to direct more attention to its increasingly great collection of American paintings," said Walker. "We feel that through such retrospective exhibitions as Bellows' we may present a more balanced view of the entire Gallery."

Bellows, who died in 1925 at the age of forty-two, will be represented by sixty-three paintings and eighty-nine drawings and lithographs. The collection has been gathered from over forty museums and private sources.

The National Gallery exhibition will be the first major showing of Bellows in a decade. The first Bellows added to the permanent collection of the Gallery was "Both Members of This Club" presented by Chester Dale in 1945. The Gallery's policy is that twenty years must elapse after an artist's death before his work may be placed in the permanent collection.

Bellows, the most popular painter of his day, was born in 1882 in Columbus, Ohio, the son of an architect and builder. After high school where he gained a reputation as an athlete and school paper artist, Bellows attended Ohio State which he left at the end of his junior year to study art in New York.

In the fall of 1904 the twenty-two year old artist began to study art under the exciting and energetic Robert Henri, supporting himself as a church soloist and playing professional baseball. These outside jobs were not necessary long, for rapid success came to Bellows. By 1908 he had been accepted by the Carnegie International and had been a prize winner at the National Academy of Design. In 1909 Bellows became the youngest associate member ever to be elected to the National Academy of Design. His career was made and he soon became one of the best known American artists of the first quarter of this century.

In the catalogue prepared for the Bellows exhibition, art critic Henry McBride says of the mature Bellows, "One had but to take a look at George Bellows to know the manner of man he was. He was eminently trustworthy, a stalwart personification of masculine integrity. His clear and singularly candid eyes suggested a confirmed and continual inquiry into the facts of life that was fearlessly based upon his own essential honesty and habit of straight thinking."

Of the sudden success which greeted Bellows, McBride points out, "Business men and other citizens not especially instructed in the arts who happened to meet him were surprised and delighted to find they could meet an artist on even terms..."

Even more satisfactory, when, emboldened to go see the pictures by this he-man acquaintance, they found there was no nonsense in them, either. They actually understood them."

McBride says of Bellows' sudden end, "But, tragically, just as it began to be acknowledged by the world at large, that there was a 'Bellows influence,' death cut it short. Just when professional opinion agreed that Bellows was the chief ornament of the contemporary school he died, after a very short illness, at the age of forty-two, leaving a void that somehow has never been filled."

The paintings and drawings by Bellows to be exhibited at the Gallery not only span the professional life of the artist but also represent a portrait of the America he saw in his twenty years of painting. Among the earliest of his paintings is the tender but forceful "Portrait of My Father," done in 1906; among the last is the charming "Lady Jean," a portrait of his daughter dressed in the style of the 1870s and done but six months before his sudden death.

Bellows' vigorous hand catalogued the world about him in brilliant commentary. In his subject matter Bellows ranged from the violence of such well-known boxing paintings as "Both Members Of This Club" and "Dempsey and Firpo" to such lyric landscapes as "The Picnic" and "North River." His early "Pennsylvania Excavation" captures the changing face of New York in the early years of this century when ground was being broken for the now familiar station; "The Lone Tenement," showing the demolition for an approach to the Queensboro Bridge is also a sociological look at the City's people.

Following such members of "The Eight" as John Sloan and George Luks, Bellows also painted "slice of life" scenes. In his drawings and lithographs the artist turned to the frenzy of religious revivals, the harsh life about the tenements, the quick excitement of the polo field and tennis court, and even dancers in a madhouse to find material for his paper.

In concluding his appraisal of Bellows, McBride praised his straightforward approach to his subjects and his "take them or leave them" statement of the facts. He ends, "Transcribing a pretty scene, for this artist, was not the idea. For him, something had to be doing. Stupendous clouds threatening the very mountain tops, a fierce crack of lightning, perhaps one of our famous hurricanes -- and the artist's attention was enchained. The picture had to be painted. The difficulties were as nothing. For sheer courage Bellows challenges any artist we have so far produced."