

THE PAINTINGS OF George Bellows

BY HENRY ADAMS

American painter George Bellows achieved great success at a young age and went on to earn countless honors during his brief lifetime. Here, in an article timed to coincide with an important traveling retrospective of Bellows's work, the curator of American art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, discusses the artist's life and his interest in systems of color and composition.



The career of George Bellows (1882-1925) is one of the great success stories of American art. Most other prominent American realists, even such giants as Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins, struggled for years to gain recognition and achieved real fame only after their death. Bellows, however, was recognized as a major figure almost from the moment he arrived in New York City at the age of twenty-four. He had received every imaginable artistic honor before he was thirty and, unlike many prodigies, he continued to produce masterworks up to the time of his early death.

THE EARLY YEARS

Early in the fall of 1905, Bellows packed a carpetbag and boarded the train from his hometown of Columbus, Ohio, to New York City, where he rented a room at the YMCA for \$4 a week and enrolled in the New York School of Art. There, two experiences revolutionized his outlook. The first was his encounter with New York City, which was rapidly being transformed into the world's largest city—this was a period of explosive growth, marked by the construction of the first skyscrapers as well as other huge building projects. The heroic scale of the city, its dynamic energy, and the pathos of its poverty all made an indelible impression on this young man from the Midwest.

Equally significant was Bellows's encounter with Robert Henri, the most charismatic and effective teacher of the time. A foe of the fashionable society portraiture then dominating American painting, Henri was the leader of a group of former newspaper illustrators from Philadelphia who applied to painting the sort of quickly observed, tough-minded realism they had developed in their newspaper work. It is said that when Henri first looked through the drawings Bellows had brought with him from Ohio—elegant little cartoons and sketches in the style of Charles Dana Gibson—his comment was, "Haven't I seen these before?" It didn't take Bellows long to get the message. Under Henri's prodding, he abruptly turned from drawing Gibson Girls to



Frankie, the Organ Boy, 1907, oil, 48 x 34 $\frac{1}{4}$. Collection the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. The artist evokes a whole world through the face of this awkward, adolescent street urchin. Bellows himself was long-limbed and gangling and had an odd-shaped face, and this painting could represent a kind of surrogate self-portrait.



Opposite page: *Forty-Two Kids*, 1907, oil, 42 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 60 $\frac{1}{4}$. Collection The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. William A. Clark Fund. Perhaps no other American painter—certainly none so young—has succeeded in creating aesthetic unity out of forty-two active, clearly lit, well-characterized figures. The key to the unity of this painting lies in the central line of five kids preparing to dive off the pier, which becomes a kind of study in sequential movement, like one of Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of human locomotion. It is as if a single boy was first looking down at the ground, then turning toward the water, then running toward it, then taking the cold plunge, and finally bobbing to the surface.

Above: *The Bridge, Blackwell's Island*, 1909, oil, 34 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 44 $\frac{1}{16}$. Collection Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio. Gift of Edward Drummond Library. This painting shows the Queensborough Bridge soaring overhead like a cathedral, making the ships beneath it seem like small toys.



Stag at Sharkey's, 1909, oil, 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{4}$. Collection Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio. Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection. Looking closely, we can recognize the remarkable liberties that Bellows took with rendering the human figure, yet in some mysterious way he captured perfectly the savage spirit of these bouts, the animal violence of two muscular men pounding away at each other with full force. When someone once criticized the anatomy, Bellows countered: "I don't know anything about boxing. I'm just painting two men trying to kill each other."

sketching the life of the streets. Within a year of his arrival, he was rapidly turning out paintings that remain landmarks in the history of American art.

In 1908, Henri, along with seven of his followers, organized an exhibition entitled "The Eight" at Manhattan's Macbeth Galleries. Combining Social Realism and a new freedom of execution with social radicalism, the show created a sensation. While the artists were denounced as "Apostles of Ugliness," crowds streamed in to see their work and the exhibition was a huge commercial success. As it happened, Bellows was too young to be included in the exhibition of the Eight, but he was friendly with all the participants and soon, in the words of one New York newspaper, "out-eighted the Eight."

Both timing and talent made Bellows's success possible. The Eight had already prepared people for the kind of subject matter that he depicted, but none of the other members of the Eight could match Bellows as

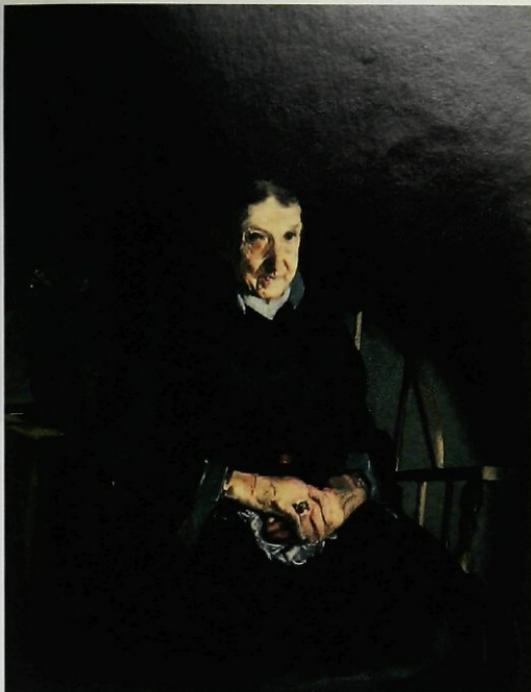
a painter. With astonishing speed, Bellows progressed from portrait studies to complex figure compositions. While his early works closely followed Henri and other members of the Eight, within a few years he had artistically surpassed his teachers in terms of both technical and emotional power.

Bellows achieved fame far more quickly than any of Henri's followers. John Sloan, who was over forty before he sold his first oil painting, could never quite hide his annoyance at Bellows's success. While Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, William Glackens, Maurice Prendergast, and even Henri himself had great difficulty getting their work into juried exhibitions, Bellows did not, since his technical bravura impressed even conservative landscape painters. Within a year of his arrival in Manhattan, Bellows had his paintings hanging at the Annual Exhibition of the National Academy of Design, a highly competitive juried exhibition; within two years

he had begun to gather awards, such as the prestigious Hallgarten prize; within three years he was elected to the National Academy of Design, the youngest person ever to receive such recognition; within four years he had sold a painting to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; and within five years one of his paintings had been purchased for the permanent collection of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art—as great an honor then as it is today.

Bellows's first significant paintings were studies of children, such as *Frankie, the Organ Boy*, a portrait of an awkward, adolescent street urchin. These canvases are similar to the work of Robert Henri but are generally more powerful—less sentimental. Henri, for example, would surely have attempted to sweeten or tone down Frankie's adolescent awkwardness. After these portraits, Bellows moved on to a series of paintings showing figures in a setting. His first were two canvases of boys skinny-dipping in the East River. The second of these swimming scenes is a masterpiece, *Forty-Two Kids*, which does indeed contain forty-two kids—it makes an interesting game to locate and count them. Very often with Bellows these figure compositions seem to refer back to the early portraits—to draw their inspiration from them. *Forty-Two Kids*, for example, shows boys whose gangling physique is identical to that of *Frankie*; it is as though we are suddenly confronted with forty-two little "Frankies" in various stages of undress.

Not everyone liked *Forty-Two Kids* when it was first exhibited, but it attracted considerable attention. One critic complained that the boys looked "more like maggots than humans," and labeled the painting "a tour de force in absurdity." The *New York Herald*, however, called the work "one of the most original and vivacious canvases in the show" and added that "an artist need never leave Manhattan Island if it yields him pictures like this." Bellows's career was launched. *Forty-Two Kids* was followed by a series of remarkable paintings of the Hudson River,



Left: Aunt Fanny (*Old Lady in Black*), 1920, oil, 44 1/8 x 34 1/4. Collection Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa. The composition for this work was derived from a division of the canvas according to the methods of Jay Hambridge's book *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition*. Close values, combined with an increased use of glazing for shadows, enhance the sense of intimacy in this intensely alive painting of Bellows's mother's sister, who did not marry until extremely late in life.

Right: Katherine Rosen, 1921, oil, 53 x 43 1/8. Collection Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark. After Bellows's marriage, his subject matter shifted from tough, urban scenes to intimate portraits and genre scenes of his friends and family. Most of his best late portraits depict women rather than men, and this wonderfully graceful and romantic work portrays the daughter of his neighbor in Woodstock, New York.





Above: *Mrs. T. in Wine Silk*, 1919, oil, 48 x 38. Collection Mitchell Museum, Mt. Vernon, Illinois. Gift of John and Eleanor R. Mitchell. In two closely related paintings of a Chicago woman, Mrs. Mary Brown Tyler, whom he met at a dinner party in 1919, Bellows interestingly combined the effects of age and romantic beauty. In this first portrait, Mrs. Tyler wears a wonderful dress of purple silk; in the second *Mrs. T. in Cream Silk* (not shown), she appears in the same dress she had worn at her wedding forty-two years earlier. In both, Bellows very movingly suggests how attractive Mrs. Tyler must have been as a young woman while at the same time suggesting her vivacity and intelligence in old age. Her pose and hands convey a sense of graciousness and almost birdlike delicacy, and her face shows both intelligence and fortitude.



including *The Bridge*, *Blackwell's Island*, which shows the Queensborough Bridge soaring overhead like a cathedral, making the ships beneath it seem like small toys.

Last come Bellows's most famous works—his boxing pictures such as *Stag at Sharkey's*. Sharkey, once a professional boxer, ran a saloon where prizefights were held. Public boxing matches were illegal in New York City at the time, but Sharkey got around this regulation by calling his saloon a private club and describing the tickets to the fight as membership certificates for the club. Bellows wonderfully evokes the wisecracks and gestures of the audience and the stale, smoky air. The boxing paintings, all landmarks

Right: *The Crucifixion*, 1923, oil, 59 1/2 x 68 1/2. Collection Lutheran Brotherhood, Minneapolis, Minnesota. While Bellows used only three colors in this work, the effect is surprisingly complete. Using an indirect painting method, he under-painted not in one color but in two complementary colors. He then completed the painting by working over portion of the design with a third.



Left: *Lady Jean*, 1924, oil, 72 x 36. Collection Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark. The history of art provides no more wonderful expression of the fantasy of childhood, as well as of the desire of children to be taken seriously, than this portrait. The color system used for this painting is based on the relationships of the three primary colors—red, yellow, and blue.

of American painting, were executed in less than five years, when Bellows was not yet thirty.

THE LATER PHASE

Around 1910, Bellows began to experience a significant change of style. His technique, his subject matter, and his interests shifted in response to new factors both in his personal life and in the American art world. A major factor was his marriage in September of 1910 to Emma Story, a handsome, strong-willed young woman from Upper Montclair, New Jersey. In 1911, his first daughter, Anne, was born; in 1915, a second daughter followed, named Jean, after painter Eugene Speicher, a close friend of the artist's.

Marriage altered both the mood and subject matter of Bellows's work. His early canvases had been the work of an unattached young man living in rented rooms in the big city. His favorite subjects—tough street kids, boxing matches, boys swimming, overpowering buildings, and dark streets—were all part of a predominantly masculine, often violent world. Suddenly Bellows was a family man with domestic responsibilities in a household comprised entirely of women—his wife, mother, aunt, and two daughters—and the subject matter of his paintings began to shift from tough urban scenes to country landscapes and intimate portraits or genre scenes of friends and family.

A second change had to do with a new artistic awareness that represented a kind of loss of innocence. In 1913, Bellows saw the Armory Show in New York City, a huge exhibition that introduced modernist European art to Americans for the first time. In 1912, a realist painter such as Bellows could view himself as a member of the artistic vanguard; after 1913, he was thrust into the role of conservative and forced to come to terms with new and perplexing modernist developments.

Like most artists of his generation, Bellows was too rooted in nineteenth-century methods to adopt modernist styles but too startled by the new ideas to continue unshaken in his old ways. As a kind of compromise with modernism, he focused on new techniques for presenting realist subject matter so that the

underlying color organization and compositional design would conform to abstract principles. Bellows had already begun to experiment with color and design systems, but after 1913, his experiments became increasingly intricate, especially in his portraits and his paintings of the sea. The following is a brief summary of the principal systems he used. A word of caution: Some of the systems Bellows used are too complicated to describe in detail, and this account can indicate only the central ideas behind some of them. Michael Quick's wonderful catalog essay for the current Bellows exhibition analyzes these systems in detail and suggests further readings.

GEOMETRIC SYSTEMS

The Rebatment. For the most part, Bellows derived the geometry of his compositions from the shape of the canvas. Many of his early paintings use a compositional system based on the rebatment of the canvas—that is, the painting's short side. He used this measurement to divide the long side, creating a square. He

then used diagonals or subdivisions of this square to generate further shapes. This relatively simple geometric system tended to produce strong, powerful compositions.

There are many variations on this approach, one of which was employed for *Stag at Sharkey's*. First, the painting is divided vertically through the middle of the painting, along the central figure. If diagonals are drawn along the top of this line to both rebatments (the short sides of the painting) and verticals are drawn at the intersections of these diagonals, many of the lines seem to conform to the painting's composition. This occurs most closely in the bent leg of the right-hand boxer.

The Golden Section. The Golden Section is an incommensurable proportion approximately equal to 0.618 to one. Celebrated since ancient Greek times, it is the proportion of regular and continuous growth and is found in such shapes as the spiral of sea shells and animal horns. Bellows used this ratio through much

of his career, often using a specially designed compass to establish his principle measurements. In *A Morning Snow—Hudson River*, Bellows used Golden Section points on the edge of the canvas to define the placement of key verticals and horizontal elements. The position of the ice in the front of the picture, the far banks of the river, the rail fence, and the left side of the pile driver are all defined by Golden Section ratios.

Dynamic Symmetry. Dynamic symmetry was devised by Jay Hambridge, a Canadian-born painter and illustrator who claimed that the technique had been used by the ancient Greeks and others. This complex system, which offers

A Morning Snow—Hudson River, 1910, oil, 45 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 63 $\frac{1}{4}$. Collection Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York. Gift of Mrs. Daniel Catlin. Bellows used Golden Section points on the edge of the canvas to define the placement of key verticals and horizontal elements. The position of the ice near the front of the picture, the far banks of the river, the rail fence, and the left side of the pile driver are all defined by Golden Section ratios.





Top: *Dempsey and Firpo*, 1924, oil, 51 x 62 1/4. Collection The Whitney Museum of Art, New York, New York. Here, the primary method of creating form is through the pairing of the colors green and orange. This basic interaction can be seen most clearly in the way the background figures are modeled. Note how flat and insubstantial the fighters in *Stag at Sharkey's* appear when compared with the solid, monumental figures in this work.



Above: *My House, Woodstock*, 1924, oil, 17 3/4 x 22. Courtesy the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. Diana and Sid Avery Trust. Painted in brilliant, clear, harmonious color, this late work has a joyous quality quite unlike the tense energy of Bellows's early landscapes. The picture clearly reveals his skill, his stylistic sophistication, and his knowledge of painting methods.

almost infinite compositional possibilities, divides the rectangle into parts that bear a relationship both to each other and to the whole. The system's basic proportions are one, the square root of two, the square root of three, and the square root of five. The fascinating aspect of the system is that it can create subdivisions directly proportional to larger units of the design. Use of dynamic symmetry tends to lead to planar designs with a strong demarcation into sections. Bellows's paintings using this approach tend toward stiffness and bilateral symmetry.

The Maratta Compositional System. Unlike other systems that Bellows used, the compositional system of Hardesty Maratta was based not upon the shape of the canvas but upon an internal system of regular equilateral triangles. Essentially, Bellows would draw a grid of equilateral triangles and place the main elements of his composition on this web of diagonal lines.

COLOR SYSTEMS

The Palette of Denman Ross. In 1912, Denman Ross, a teacher at Harvard University, published *On Drawing and Painting*, proposing a different type of predetermined palette. Ross was most interested in value—the relative darkness or lightness of a color—and proposed laying out a set palette with seven variations of value, from the lightest at the top to the darkest at the bottom. These variations were created by mixing white or black into the color, resulting in color that achieved its greatest intensity at the middle level of value and grew duller in the darks and paler in the whites. Although it offered a useful scheme for organizing values, this approach had disadvantages—the color choice was limited; the lights tended to get too pale and the darks, too dull. Bellows used this system principally for portraits.

The Maratta Color System. The color system of Hardesty Maratta is based on the traditional color triangle formed by the primary colors—red, blue, and yellow. Every other color is made by combining two or more of these three. Maratta had manufacturers mix every one of the

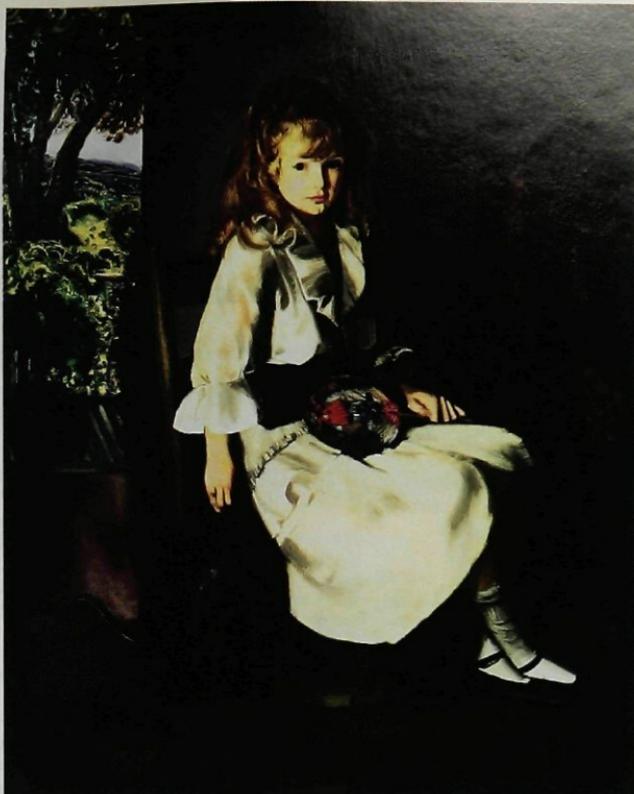
twelve primary, secondary, and tertiary colors and precisely grayed shades of each, all of which were individually packaged and numbered.

Maratta assigned a specific musical note to each color and then recommended systems to guide artists in choosing harmonious combinations using his range of premixed colors. The value of the system was that artists could predetermine harmonious "chords" of color much as a composer of music does. Since the colors were theoretically created at equal intervals from one another, it was easy for an artist to almost mathematically choose precise and unusual relationships. As he worked with this

system, Bellows grew freer and bolder with the use of color, often departing from strict adherence to Maratta's system. The system, however, seems to have encouraged him to work with unusual color combinations.

Bellows originally used the Maratta system. He later tried the Denman Ross system but was disappointed by the paleness and dullness of the colors. He returned to the Maratta method but systematically chose those color chords that contained hues of peak or near-peak intensity. By the summer of 1916, when he painted *The Dock Builders* in Maine, Bellows was in complete command of this color system. With tints, he achieved a convincing effect of bright sunlight on the foreground. In contrast, he only partially blended the colors used in the foreground rocks and logs since mixing colors would neutralize them.

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Anne in White, 1920, oil, 53 x 43. Collection Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Patrons Art Fund. In his later paintings, Bellows became quite interested in the rich darks and the sense of modeling in Old Master paintings. Here, the strong light on Bellows's daughter in her summer dress, which would have flattened the forms in Bellows's early works, increases the sense of the figure's volume.

The Dock Builders, 1916, oil, 30 x 38. Collection Isaac Arnold, Houston, Texas. Courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. By the summer of 1916, when he painted this picture in Maine, Bellows was in complete command of the Maratta color system. Using tints, he achieved a convincing effect of bright sunlight on the foreground. In contrast, he only partially blended the colors used in the foreground rocks and logs since mixing colors would have neutralized them.



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A SAMPLING OF WORKSHOP PROGRAMS

Summer workshops offer a more focused and organized opportunity to live and work in France, and we selected a sampling of those being offered this year to profile.

Antibes, France

The beautiful seaside town of Antibes becomes quite crowded during the summer months, but the Picasso Museum located there is worth struggling to see. In addition, there are the Dominique Prevost Art Workshops at the Atelier du Safranier, which bring together artists who want to absorb the influence of the historic town and learn new techniques. Write: Dominique Prevost Art Workshops, Atelier du Safranier, No. 2 bis, rue du Cannet, 06600 Vieil Antibes, France; call: 93-34-53-72.

Cannes, France

Just west of the town known for its annual film festival is the small village of La Napoule, where an American-based foundation maintains a château and gardens for use by artists. The château was once the home and studio of the American sculptor Henry Clews and his wife Marie, and their descendants have maintained the facility as a place where French and American artists can work. The foundation also hosts workshops in landscape architecture, painting, and art history. Write: La Napoule Foundation, Suite 411, 217 East 85th Street, New York, NY 10028

Nimes, France

Summer workshops are offered at: Atelier de Calvinsson, 304420 Calvinsson (Nimes), France.

Resources

If you want to exchange your studio/home for one in France, you can advertise in French publications read by artists. Monsieur Soullillou estimated that a 6-line, 40-character advertisement would cost about \$40 or \$50. If possible, provide the text of the advertisement in French. For information, contact: *Libération*, 11 rue Berenger, 7515 Paris, France; call: 76-19-56; fax: 42-72-94-93. Another publication is: *Art Press*, 2 rue St. Simon, 75007 Paris,

France; fax: 42-22-12-36.

The Gite guide for farmhouse rentals, sold in the United States, is called *The French Farm and Village Holiday Guide*. It is distributed by Hunter Publishing, 300 Raritan Center Parkway, P.O. Box 7816, Edison, NJ 08818-7816; call: (201) 225-1900. ■

Pat Van Gelder is a New York City based freelance writer who studied at the Art Students League. She is the author of the book Wildlife Artists at Work (Watson-Guptill Publications).

BELLOWS

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Indirect Painting. Throughout most of his career, Bellows used the method of direct painting—that is, he did not use underpainting. In the last few years of his life, however, he began to experiment with underpainting. He was inspired by the book *Secrets of the Old Masters*, by Albert Abendschein. The author argued that the color of the famous Venetian painters had been created by first modeling the forms in grisaille, or “dead color,” and then going over this underpainting with translucent glazes. Bellows devised several interesting variations on this technique. In 1923, for example, in *The Crucifixion*, he underpainted not in one color but in two complementary colors and then completed the painting by working over portions of the design with a third. Although he used only three colors, the effect is surprisingly complete.

THE FINAL YEARS

The most impressive aspect of Bellows's late work is his portraits. In keeping with the shift in his subject matter, most of his best late portraits depict women rather than men. His women are not simply decorative; he suggests their temperament and their experience. In depicting women, Bellows's range extended from the almost grotesque but intensely alive portrait of *Aunt Fanny*, his mother's sister (who did not marry until extremely late in life), to a wonderfully graceful and romantic portrait of *Katherine Rosen*, the daughter of his neighbor in Woodstock, New York.

Certainly one of the most moving of these pictures is virtually the last pic-

ture that Bellows completed before his death—the delightful study entitled *Lady Jean*, in which he shows his daughter, Jean, dressed up in old Victorian clothes. The history of art provides no more wonderful expression of the fantasy of childhood, as well as of the desire of children to be taken seriously. Looking at this painting, it comes as no surprise to learn that Jean later became an actress and performed on Broadway in New York opposite Helen Hayes.

Bellows died rather suddenly at the age of forty-two of appendicitis. He had been in pain for several weeks but didn't see a doctor, probably because he thought it would offend his wife, who was a Christian Scientist. When her husband fell unconscious, Emma did call a doctor, but by then it was too late. It's interesting to speculate about what Bellows would have accomplished if he had lived longer and had died, say, in 1967, as did his classmate Edward Hopper, rather than in 1925. Would he have floundered or would he have pulled his work together and made more remarkable paintings? Bellows's death came at an ambiguous period in his work and caused him to miss many of the difficulties of his generation, such as the Great Depression and the style change to abstraction shortly afterward.

Such speculation, of course, will always remain mere speculation—there's no way we will ever know. What we do know is that shortly after Bellows's death, a huge retrospective of his work was held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and that, rather than killing his reputation, as is often the case, it solidified his fame. Perhaps the final verdict of his worth was given by Robert Henri, who squirmed Emma Bellows through the show. When he came to the end, he turned to her, very close to tears, and said, "I always gave him my most severe criticism because I thought he was my best pupil. Now I am sure of it." ■

A retrospective of Bellows's paintings—one of the largest groups of his works ever assembled—currently provides a rare opportunity to see sixty of Bellows's masterworks at one time. The show, which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California, is at The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City until August 3, after which it travels to the Columbus Mu-

seum of Art in Ohio (October 11-January 3, 1993) and the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas (February 20, 1993-May 9, 1993). The show was curated by Michael Quick, the curator of American Art at the Los Angeles County Museum, and Jane Myers, the associate curator of American Art at the Amon Carter Museum. For information on the show or catalog, contact: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90036.

Henry Adams is the Samuel Sosland Curator of American Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

FAEGRE

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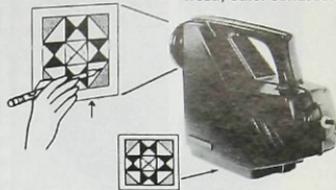
Color is very significant to me because I don't always portray the colors of my subjects as they really are. Although I want the pictures to seem realistic, I also want them to communicate my feelings. If I want the painting to be melancholy, for example, I use cool tones; if I want to express joy, I use warm hues.

No matter how lightly I spray fixative on pastel, I find that it darkens values and deadens color intensity, so I use it sparingly. However, I sometimes use it in limited ways to intentionally darken areas that appear too light or too intense. I also rely on fixative when a painting surface becomes so saturated with pastel that marks become increasingly difficult to make; a little bit of fixative sprayed on the area will create a more cooperative bed on which to lay new color.

Some pastel artists use fixative as a final step to "glue down" pastel particles that have not impregnated the fiber of the paper or the grit of the board. By doing this, they hope to insure that framing materials won't be discolored by loose pastel dust once they have been framed under glass. However, I have found another method that works well without undermining the longevity of the pastel: I begin by firmly tapping the edge of a finished painting on the tray of my easel, vacuuming up whatever dust falls. Next, I take my painting outside and spray it with air from a small compressor. The force of the air dislodges particles that are not thor-

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