8th Grade: MARCH

Dempsey and Firpo
George Bellows

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About the Artist
The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

George Wesley Bellows
George Wesley Bellows was born either August 12 or 19, 1882, in Columbus, Ohio, to George Bellows, Senior, and Anna Smith Bellows, his second wife. George Senior and his first wife had lived in Columbus, Ohio. When his wife died, he decided to return to his home town, Sag Harbor on the end of Long Island, New York, to select a new wife and mother for his daughter, Laura. Here, at age fifty-two, he met and married forty-year old Anna. Four years later, Anna gave birth to George Wesley Bellows. The couple gave him the middle name of Wesley out of respect for the founder of their Methodist faith, John Wesley, as their faith played a significant role in their lives. Since young Bellows’ favorite activity in school was drawing he soon earned the nickname, “The Artist.” Summer days were often spent on the front steps of his home or that of his neighbors’, drawing whatever anyone asked of him. He used a long roll of his father’s drafting paper that lent itself to horizontal subjects like trains, sailing ships or galloping horses. He also loved traditional activities such as marbles, climbing trees, flying kites, skating and fishing.

The national sport of baseball was Bellow’s youthful passion. He spent hours watching sandlot games and learned the game by endless self-imposed practice. Soon the sandlot games organized into a sport with regular teams and schedules. In 1897 Bellows’ East Side group emerged as the Brownie Athletic Club, giving him a broader audience. He soon earned a reputation as an outstanding infielder in the league. One year later, he was managing all three Brownie teams; baseball, basketball and football.

Bellows’ athleticism over-shadowed his artistic talent. Fortunately, Central High School which he attended was known for its rigorous curriculum, including art. Bellows excelled in art class earning a one-man exhibition of drawings displayed in the window of the town’s photography studio. After graduation, Bellows worked as an illustrator with the local newspaper until he attended Ohio State University where he played a variety of sports. During his third year of college his desire to be an artist conflicted with his education and Bellows made the radical decision to leave his schooling behind. Finally, with his father’s blessing and a $50 a month stipend, Bellows left for New York and the New York School of Art.

When Bellows came to the New York School of Art, two well-known American painters, William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri, were on the faculty. Henri served as Bellows’ mentor in art and in life. After formal lessons, Henri sent Bellows out into New York to see “real” contemporary life worth painting such as parks, broad avenues, docks and eventually the heart of crowded, graffiti-filled spaces. Rather than shying away from such subject matter, Bellows found inspiration for his art in the way the “other half” lived. New York’s Lower East Side’s environment gave Bellows the opportunity to sketch on-site and later execute his paintings back in his studio. Collections from this 1906 experience included Kids and River Rats, as well as some more mellow compositions such as Swans in Central Park and Basketball. Finally confident in his ability for a promising future, Bellows took a studio of his own in New York.

In 1907, Bellows’ artistic images included activities deemed undesirable such as boxing matches. Since these events were illegal, the matches took place in back rooms of neighborhood saloons. The fast-paced action and the physicality of each move delighted Bellows. His personal athletic experiences and knowledge of muscle structure supported this sensibility as he mentally captured the strength and power of each split-second move and then painted the canvas from memory.

Unfortunately for Bellows and eight of his like-minded peers, Academy exhibition juries scoffed at images reflecting the gritty, real life events, so in 1908, they rented two rooms and exhibited their own work independently, under the title of “The Eight,” also known as the “Ashcan School.” It was a great success giving them a reputation of realistic American painters who focused on scenes of daily life among the poor in urban slum areas, especially those of New York. The time period was the early twentieth century, before the first World War.

The National Academy jury had visited “The Eight” exhibition and publically deemed the work of all participants impressive in the New York Times, even though they had scoffed at it earlier. Bellows’ paintings were especially highlighted in the article. All of the eight artists were automatically admitted to the next Academy exhibition in spring.

At the spring Academy Exhibition, one of Bellow’s paintings, North River (1908), was awarded the Academy’s Second Hallgarten Prize, given to an artist under the age of thirty-five for an outstanding painting done in America. Bellows exhibited again at the 1909 National Academy Exhibition with two paintings, Rain on the River (1908) and a portrait called Paddy Flannigan (1908).
Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS

Literature that relates to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- Leaving for the Country: George Bellows at Woodstock by Marjorie B. Searl, George Bellows and Ronald Netsky
- The Paintings of George Bellows by Glenn Peck and Marjorie B. Searl
- Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School by Rebecca Zurier
- The Vibrant Metropolis: 88 Lithographs by George Bellows.

REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY


Miss Emma Louise Story was a proper girl from Montclair, New Jersey, who was a student of William Merritt Chase when she met Bellows. He was immediately taken by her but a visit with her family left the distinct message that Emma’s father did not approve. Emma, however, thought otherwise and continued to date Bellows. Their wedding took place after a five-year engagement when Bellows’ father purchased a beautiful house for the couple on Long Island. Bellows accepted a teaching position at the Art Students League for a while until he decided he wanted to paint full time. He continued to paint well enough to earn some prestigious honors including membership in the Association of American Painters and Sculptors in 1913, but withdrew when the Association shifted towards trends in modern art. He was also named as Associate of the National Academy of Design at the age of thirty, the youngest artist to receive this honor.

After many sketching trips in the United States, especially to the eastern coastline, Bellows accepted a teaching position at the Artist Colony in Carmel, California. Later, in 1919, he accepted an offer to teach at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. New York City always had a hold on Bellows as it was the urban location that first inspired him as an artist. He purchased a second home just north of New York City in the small town of Woodstock, so he and his family could spend time in his favorite location among friends.

During the summer of 1924, Bellows began to experience stomach pain and sought the advice of his doctor who indicated he had an inflamed appendix. Bellows shrugged this off and dealt with periodic stomach pain until early January of 1925 when he died at the age of forty-two. His appendix had ruptured causing peritonitis. Six days later, he died at the age of forty-two.

About the Art

Dempsey and Firpo is one of Bellows’ most famous paintings. It was painted in 1924, oil on canvas, and is in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. This painting measures 51 inches high and 63 1/4 wide. Bellows painted three canvases featuring the same match between the two boxers. Dempsey and Firpo is the last of the three.

Directed Observation

Show students an image of Dempsey and Firpo. Tell them it was painted, oil on canvas, in 1924 by George Bellows. Offer students biographical information about Bellows. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Discuss Bellows’ interest in athletics and how this might have influenced both his interest in boxing as well as his ability to visually communicate the physical power of the athletes.
2. Compare and contrast another painting, Stag at Starkey’s, which was painted seventeen years earlier. Which painting is more successful? Defend your answer.

3. Notice Bellows’ rough brush strokes. How does this reflect on the subject matter? How does it reflect on the quick pace of a boxing match and Bellows’ ability to capture a moment of the match?
4. Physical strength is a difficult image to capture in a drawing or painting. How would you go about portraying physical strength on a canvas or in a sculpture?
5. Discuss the importance of capturing the expressions of the audience who are experiencing the match unfold before them.
6. Notice how the strong beige lines of the body stand out from the grey and black tones of the crowd. This emphasizes the fighters and takes your eyes around the canvas.

Things to Do

1. Share your favorite sport either as a participant or a viewer and then get together with others who share your sport. Take a few minutes as a group to further discuss the sport, listing the emotional qualities and physical abilities required.
2. Create some sketches of your favorite sport in action, then crop one sketch to zero in on one to three players in action. Enlarge this image onto paper, canvas or consider using clay for a 3D sculpture.
3. Create your imagery in a way that captures the strength and ability of the athletes as well as some of the viewers. The event’s environment can be minimalized.