

42: George Bellows *Evening Group* (1914) *Autumn Brook* (1922)

Ronald Netsky

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hen considering the paintings of George Bellows our thoughts may first turn to images of brutal boxing matches or teeming New York City tenements. Works like *Stag at Sharkey's* (1909) and *Cliff Dwellers* (1913) have become iconic images, capturing the zeitgeist of early twentieth-century American life. But there was another side of Bellows's oeuvre, a more serene body of works that constitute an antidote to the bustle and brutality of city life.¹

Bellows painted his family and friends and the pastoral scenery that surrounded him during his respites away from the city. *Evening Group* and *Autumn Brook*, the two Bellows paintings in the Memorial Art Gallery collection, are in many ways quintessential examples of Bellows's lesser-known works. Painted on Monhegan (an island off the coast of Maine), and in Woodstock, New York, the two rural locales where Bellows was most productive, both works deal with Bellows's reaction to the landscape. *Evening Group* also focuses on Bellows's family.

In his rural works viewers can almost feel Bellows's need for more open spaces and a retreat to a quieter location. The action of the streets, the angles of the buildings, and the plight of the city's people are replaced by the rustle of trees, the flow of water, and the drama of the mountains. Bellows reacted with immediacy to the landscape, producing paintings with expressionistic brush strokes and vibrant color.

In July 1911, when Bellows first traveled to Monhegan at the behest of his mentor and friend Robert Henri, he was awed by the drama of the island, a rock rising from the sea. "The island is only a mile wide and two miles long, but it looks as large as the Rocky Mountains," Bellows wrote. "My head is full of millions of great pictures which I will never have time to paint."² When he made his final trip to Monhegan in the summer of 1914, Bellows brought his wife, Emma, and their two-year-old daughter, Anne. Among the works Bellows painted that summer were two of the earliest images portraying his family, a major theme of the last half of his career: *Fisherman's Family* and *Evening Group*.

While *Fisherman's Family* (the first version of which was completed in 1915) offers an idealized, symbolic treatment of this theme, with the family based on Bellows, his wife, and daughter, *Evening Group* is a more accurate depiction of Bellows's family along with two other children. They are shown in a slice-of-life scene behind the house where the family was residing, against a dramatic landscape falling off to the sea. In the background sailboats pass between the island and Nigh Duck Rock, which rises from the sea like a great whale. The late-day light strikes the figures, illuminating them against surrounding darker tones. Emma sits on a chair with arms crossed, while Anne gazes at a red flower in the left foreground. Her playmates occupy the opposite corner. Bellows himself is in the center carrying a cat in his arms. A washer-woman, barely visible in the background, hangs clothes on a line while a lone sailor occupies a small boat in the distance.

The Memorial Art Gallery also owns the preliminary drawing Bellows executed for *Evening Group*, providing a fascinating glimpse of Bellows's working methods. Bellows was interested in compositional and color systems from the beginning of his career, as evidenced by the triangular structure of early compositions like *Stag at Sharkey's*. The embrace of these systems was common early in the twentieth century and Bellows was enthusiastic about the work of several prominent theorists.



Many of his later paintings were influenced by Jay Hambidge's theory of Dynamic Symmetry, a system based on structures found in nature. However, *Evening Group* demonstrates his experimentation with the compositional ideas of Hardesty Maratta and the color systems of Denman Ross.³

Evening Group's preliminary drawing is done on paper crisscrossed by 1½-inch-high watermarked diamonds. Using this subtle grid, Bellows planned his composition to be subliminally pleasing by undergirding it with a dominating equilateral triangle. The painting, Bellows noted in his record book, is done with a palette from Ross's 1912 book, *On Drawing and Painting*. The "Rubens Palette," named for a color range observed by Ross in the paintings of old masters, offered a complex arrangement of hues of primary colors red, blue, and yellow in seven sets of values from light to dark.



George Bellows,
1882–1925
Study for Evening Group,
ca. 1914
Graphite, charcoal, and black
crayon on tissue paper,
17 1/16 x 21 3/16 in.
Bennett Fund, 93.23

In the drawing, the largest sail of a background boat aligns with the roof of a middleground house; other compositional lines carry over into the shapes of children at bottom right and left. The central figure—clearly not Bellows—is most likely a Monhegan fisherman standing in for the artist while he composed the image. In the drawing this figure carries a lamb instead of a cat. The background washerwoman is more distinct in the drawing, the cat is on ground, and additional islands are visible in the distance. The drawing is, in general, more realistic than the painting, with a horizon line between the sea and the sky. In the painting, sea and sky are merged in the hazy background.

There are also differences between the final painting and an earlier stage of it that was reproduced in the August 1915 issue of *Arts and Decoration* magazine.⁴ In the reproduction, the Bellows figure directs his attention at his wife, Emma. The white cat is not cradled, but held more precariously in his arms. In the finished painting, Bellows gazes downward as he strides up the hill. The marks indicating the changes Bellows made are visible under the current brush strokes surrounding the self-portrait figure. The completed painting is both the product and depiction of a great city painter's idyll in the country.

By the time Bellows arrived in Woodstock, the Catskill Mountains had attracted painters—notably those of the Hudson River School—for over a century. In 1912 Bellows had visited Onteora, an artists' colony in the mountains about twelve miles north of Woodstock, where he produced ten small oil-on-panel landscape studies. During the years before he revisited the region in 1920, the world around him had changed. When he read about the atrocities of World War I in "The Bryce Report," published in the *New York Times* in 1915, Bellows was deeply shaken. In the following years he created a group of paintings and lithographs known as *The War Series*. Over the next several years Bellows seemed to be in search of a secure life for his family in an atmosphere less hectic than that of New York City.

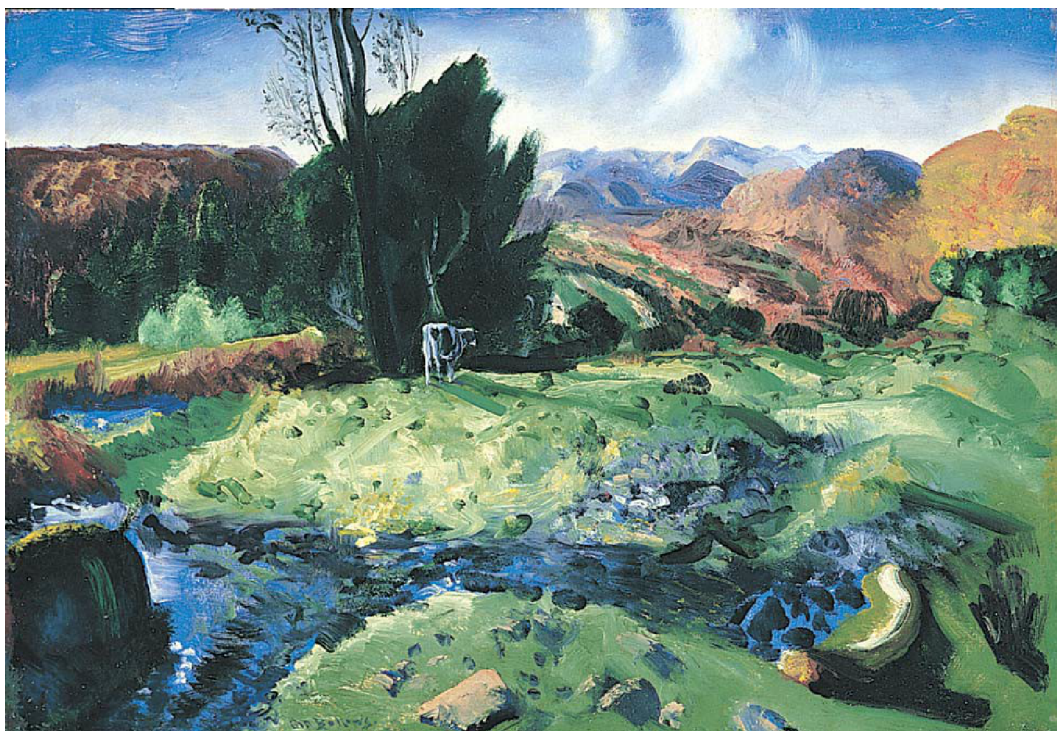
Bellows had visited Santa Fe in 1917 and Middletown, Rhode Island in 1918 and 1919. He created wonderful paintings at each of these locations, but did not choose to stay. It was not until he visited Woodstock, at the suggestion of his friend, painter Eugene Speicher, that he found a landscape intriguing enough, and an artists' community culturally rich enough, to inspire him to settle there. *Autumn Brook* is a lovely vignette, emblematic of his relationship to the landscape around Woodstock, where Bellows painted most of his major works from 1920 until his untimely death early in 1925.

(Facing page)
George Bellows,
1882–1925
Evening Group, 1914
Oil on composition board,
25 x 30 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
47.13

No small part of the attraction of Woodstock to Bellows was the full-blown community of artists he found when he arrived. Many of them also lived and worked in Manhattan, about one hundred miles to the south. An arts colony, called Byrdcliffe, had been built in 1902, luring a steady stream of artists,



George Bellows in hiking
clothes, ca. 1920
George Bellows Papers,
Box 5, Folder I,
Amherst College Archives
and Special Collections.
Reproduced by permission
of Jean Bellows Booth



writers, and intellectuals to Woodstock. By the 1920s residents included his friend Leon Kroll, Peggy Bacon, Alexander Brook, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and many more established artists.

During the summers of 1920 and 1921 Bellows rented the Shotwell House, which possessed one of the most beautiful mountain views in Woodstock. He felt at home in the town. He had been an athlete all his life and in Woodstock he managed the baseball team. The local Maverick Festival was a wild Bacchanal with costumes and stage productions; Bellows was an enthusiastic participant. And nothing beat the company of artists. Bellows would often drive into the countryside with Speicher, searching the landscape for scenes to paint. In the evening there were poker games during which the artists sketched caricatures of one another. In 1921 Bellows, Kroll, Speicher, and Henri taught a class in painting the figure out-of-doors at the Art Students League's summer program in Woodstock.



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

George Bellows,

1882–1925

"Happy New Year":

from *George, Emma, and Anne*

Bellows to Robert Henri,

ca. 1913

Pen and ink on paper,

4½ x 2¾ in.

Marion Stratton Gould Fund

and Ackerman Foundation,

by exchange, 2005.32

When Bellows spent "summers" in Woodstock he did not just stay through July and August. He would sometimes arrive in April and stay until November. During the summer of 1922, the year he painted *Autumn Brook*, Bellows made a commitment to his new, rural surroundings. In a little cul-de-sac, already occupied by the homes and studios of Speicher and Charles Rosen, he designed (according to the principles of Dynamic Symmetry) and built his own home in Woodstock. The street where the house still stands is now called Bellows Lane.

(Facing page)

George Bellows,

1882–1925

Autumn Brook, 1922

Oil on panel,

16½ x 24 in.

Bequest of Muriel Englander

Klepper and Marion Stratton

Gould Fund, 2001.27

Autumn Brook depicts a lone cow surrounded by layer upon layer of natural splendor. From the foreground stream, through rolling hills, to the background mountains topped with wispy clouds—all painted energetically in heightened color—*Autumn Brook* contains all of the natural elements that drew Bellows from the city to his new country home.

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