

## 50: Mahonri M. Young *Right to the Jaw* (ca. 1926)

Roberta K. Tarbell

In 1926, Mahonri Young was best known for his statuettes of urban and rural laborers, which he had exhibited internationally for twenty-five years.<sup>1</sup> *Right to the Jaw* was the first of his series of professional fighters. While precedents for Young's works include paintings by Thomas Eakins and George Bellows,<sup>2</sup> the depiction of the ancient sport of boxing in art had been relatively rare.

Mahonri Young was born and raised in Salt Lake City, a theocracy founded in 1847 in the Utah Territory by his grandfather, the Mormon patriarch Brigham Young.<sup>3</sup> As a youth the artist regularly sketched farmers and the workers who were building the transcontinental railroads.<sup>4</sup> He was inspired by other western artists—the brothers Gutzon and Solon Borglum and Cyrus E. Dallin—who also studied in Paris. Young's interest in sculpture was probably kindled by Dallin's important Salt Lake City sculptures of the Angel Moroni and Brigham Young.

Intermittently, between 1894 and 1901, Young studied art and worked as a sketch artist and engraver for the *Salt Lake Herald*, the *Salt Lake Tribune*, and the *Deseret News*. This experience remarkably parallels that of four Philadelphia artist/reporters—John Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and William Glackens—who came to be known as the “Ashcan” painters in New York City. Like these urban realists, who later became his friends, Young favored genre subjects and realist stances and gestures. But unlike them, he also retained the anatomical correctness and beautiful bodies of the academic tradition.<sup>5</sup> Although Young's style invariably is labeled realism, his images are not documentary, but rather are subjected to his strong bias for idealized naturalism.

Later, Young studied life drawing, anatomy, and illustration at the Art Students League in New York in 1899.<sup>6</sup> In Paris, from 1901 to 1905, he was a student of drawing, painting, and sculpture at the Académies Julian, Colarossi, and Delécluse. There he began to model clay figures of rugged muscular French workers whose indomitable spirits sustained them through protracted manual labor. Young had in mind both the social types of the sculptures of miners by the Belgian artist Constantin Meunier and the classical monumentality of the peasants of the French realist Jean-François Millet, though in Young's work, his consummate craftsmanship and serene compositions contradict the agony of the idealized muscles and the harsh conditions of these laborers' lives. He was particularly intrigued and influenced by Millet, whose paintings he first had seen in 1899 in Chicago and New York. Young visited Millet at his studio, acquired several of his drawings and etchings, collected and read books about him, and compiled five scrapbooks of reproductions of and articles about him and his work.<sup>7</sup> Later Young recollected:

*Since those early days when Millet discovered for me form, space, light and movement, I have never ceased to love and admire his work and the more I have studied it and the more I have seen of it the greater and more profound it has become. Though I studied him, I did not try to imitate him. He sent me to nature. I understood that, though I must get my material from nature, it was my job as an artist to make of it an ordered, composed work of art no matter in what medium I worked.<sup>8</sup>*

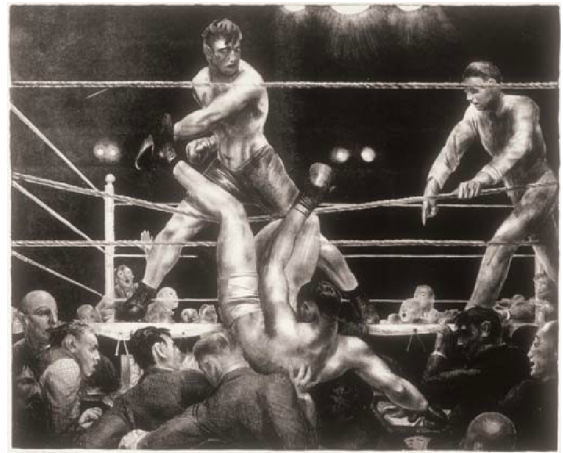
Artists and critics recognized the quality of these bronze statuettes when he exhibited them in 1902 at the American Art Association in Paris. When he showed them in New York in 1912, J. Lester Lewine wrote that one figure, *Bovet Arthur—A Laborer*, had “the virility of masculine prime” and that others were “types of vital energy in action and repose.” In 1918, Guy Pène du Bois observed:



"Mr. Young's laborers exist as men rather than as symbols of a downtrodden class." In 1924, Young said that these figures were his "tribute to honest toil" and represented years of sympathetically observing, sketching, and modeling "the long procession of unskilled labor that has been the means of changing the face of the earth in the first quarter of the twentieth century."<sup>9</sup> Although his figures do not appear to proselytize for a political point of view, Young honored the dignity possible for workers and athletes in democratic countries.

From his bronzes it was a short step to Young's monuments honoring frontier and Mormon heroes. In 1913 his granite and marble *Sea Gull Monument* was erected in Temple Square, Salt Lake City. In 1947, he was commissioned to create for the U.S. Capitol Rotunda the marble seated portrait of Brigham Young. In the same year another of his monumental sculptures, *This is the Place*, was dedicated in Emigration Canyon in the Utah desert valley. The American Museum of Natural History in New York commissioned Young to create plaster sculptures for their dioramas of the habitats of the Hopi, the Apache, and the Navajo. For this project Young spent months in the Southwest sketching Native Americans, models for the thirty-five life-size figures he sculpted in a studio in the museum. His training as an artist/reporter helped him to record details accurately, but other artists' interpretations of the subjects and countless images from popular culture also shaped the forms he created.<sup>10</sup> Throughout his life, Young avoided traditional Roman and Greek mythological iconography, and celebrated instead the intensely physical people found in the West of his youth or in international modern society.

From August 1925 to January 1928 Young lived in Paris, where he created his first extant sculptures of prizefighters, *Right to the Jaw*, *On the Button*, and *Groggy* (adapted from one of the two figures in *Right to the Jaw*).<sup>11</sup> A combination of factors probably led him to this subject. Trained athletes of various races increasingly had become modern heroes, admired for their disciplined, skillful performances. Young had attended boxing matches in Utah, New York, and Paris, and loved to discuss the sport with his brother, Wally Young, a sportswriter. He admired the iconic power of the taut prizefighters in action painted by his friend George Bellows.<sup>12</sup> Leo Stein and Young reminisced about their student years in Paris when they had attended matches together and Young had broken his thumb sparring with Stein.<sup>13</sup> Although boxing had started for Young as physical exercise and a spectator sport, *Right to the Jaw* and the other prizefight sculptures established him as the premier creator of the genre. In *Right to the Jaw* one of the muscular athletes is poised precariously, deciding whether to succumb to unconsciousness or to resume the bout instantly after his opponent has landed a right overhand blow to his chin.<sup>14</sup> It is a climactic moment of intense interaction between the belligerents, and a clear addition to Young's well-known vocabulary of solo active workers and contrapposto figures in repose. With such a "pas de deux" he has choreographed geometric forms and volumes of space—a hallmark of Bellows's boxing pictures—the tense action balanced by the structure's gentle undulating planes.



George Bellows  
1882–1925  
*Dempsey and Firpo, 1923–24*  
Lithograph, 18 x 22½ in.  
Bequest of Louis W. Black, 59.31

(Facing page)  
Mahonri M. Young,  
1877–1957  
*Right to the Jaw*, ca. 1926  
Bronze, 14 x 21 x 10 in.  
Gift of Thomas and Marion  
Hawks, by exchange, 98.38

Before he left Paris, Young modeled two other boxing scenes—*Da Winnah!* (featuring the Madison Square Garden announcer Joe Humphries, the winner Jack Dempsey, and an anonymous loser) and *The Knockdown*, which depicts the Jack Dempsey/Luis Firpo heavyweight title fight of September 1923 that Bellows had painted in *Dempsey and Firpo* (1924, Whitney Museum of American Art). Young's interest in boxing rode the crest of a wave of popularity for the sport that culminated in the organization of intramural and collegiate athletic associations and, in 1928, the American national



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

Mahonri M. Young,

1877–1957

*Riggers/Riveters Medal*, 1943

Bronze, 2 7/8 x 2 7/8 in.

Gift of Edward G. Miner, 45.37

amateur championships, the “Golden Gloves Tournaments.” He exhibited his new sculptures of prizefighters at Rehn Gallery in New York in 1928 to universal acclaim. In his review, Royal Cortissoz celebrated Young’s “clairvoyancy” and “the warm human tie” between the artist and his subjects.<sup>15</sup>

In Hollywood in 1929 Young created a portrait of African American lightweight champion Joe Gans and wax effigies of five other notables for Twentieth Century Fox Studio’s “Seven Faces,” one of the earliest talking pictures, which starred Paul Muni as the elderly caretaker of a Parisian wax museum. Young’s life-sized bronze cast of Gans was prominently displayed in the main entrance of New York’s Madison Square Garden and later moved to its Hall of Fame Club.<sup>16</sup>

In 1932 Young won the gold medal at the Olympic Games Exhibition in Los Angeles for *The Knockdown*.

Throughout his career, Young consistently honored the power of hardworking people. *Right to the Jaw* and his other fine and original images of boxers remain the most varied set of sculptures of prizefighters ever created. Together with the work of Thomas Eakins and George Bellows they elevate the modern athlete to heroic stature.

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