

New Sources for the Study of *A Grandmother*

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Fig. 1
George Bellows
A Grandmother, 1914
Oil on panel, 94 × 74.5 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 2
Views of the first room of the exhibition *Hopper*, held
at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in the summer of 2012

A Grandmother, by George Wesley Bellows [fig. 1], is one of those American paintings that are a rarity in Europe and that have made it to these shores thanks to Baron Thyssen's interest in North American art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This interest distinguishes him from other collectors who were his contemporaries, making the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza an exceptional bastion of such art on this side of the Atlantic. But what brings us to consider George Bellows in particular at this juncture?

The constant updating of the collection's documentation still affords us occasional surprises. This is precisely what has occurred in the case of *A Grandmother*, whose latest re-examination has led to the inclusion of the recent catalogue raisonné and the artist's own ledger book in the bibliography on the work, providing information that sheds new light on it and significantly expanding our knowledge of the painting. In the process of reassessing the work, we inevitably immersed ourselves in the question of Bellows' critical reception and in his current reputation. What follows is a summary of our findings.

Bellows and Hopper

When he died at the young age of forty-two, Bellows enjoyed greater popularity and recognition than his colleague Edward Hopper, yet he was soon relegated to a secondary status; in Europe he has remained practically unknown.¹ One of the few occasions on which *A Grandmother* has been exhibited since the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza opened its doors to the public was in fact as part of the successful exhibition *Edward Hopper* in the summer of 2012. Visitors to the museum encountered her in the first room [fig. 2], devoted to Hopper's formative years, when, together with Bellows, he studied under Robert Henri.²

Bellows' re-emergence

At nearly the same time that *A Grandmother* was being shown in the Edward Hopper exhibition in Madrid, the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., presented an ambitious retrospective of Bellows' work, which travelled to the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Royal Academy in London³. This exhibition, curated by Charles Brock, argued for Bellows' fundamental place in American Modernism at the same time that it established his connection to the European artistic tradition.

A year later, in February 2014, the National Gallery in London announced the acquisition of an American masterwork for the sum of 25.5 million dollars—George Bellows' *Men of the Docks* [fig. 3], painted in 1912—the first major American painting in the museum's collections.⁴ The director of the museum, Nicholas Penny, explained the effect of situating Bellows' work in this new European setting: "Bellows has



Fig. 3
George Bellows
Men of the Docks, 1912
Oil on canvas, 114.3 × 161.3 cm
The National Gallery, London

almost always been seen in the context of American painting, but the way he painted owed much to Manet, and his depiction of the violence and victims of New York derived from Goya and earlier Spanish art”.⁵

New sources

The exhibitions of Bellows’ work and his re-evaluation in the art market have been accompanied by symposia and publications that have brought to light new sources for the study of his oeuvre. H. V. Allison and Co., which has managed the artist’s estate since 1941, published an online catalogue raisonné of his work in 2011.⁶ That same year, The Ohio State University (which Bellows attended from 1901 to 1904) and The Columbus Museum of Art acquired the notebooks in which the artist recorded information pertaining to his artistic output. These institutions have begun a project to digitize these sources in order to make them available to anyone interested in their study.⁷ We have been able to include this new documentation in our own files on the work, further clarifying what we already knew about it and considerably expanding our information on the work’s exhibition history, for which previously we had details only as far back as 1978.

A Grandmother’s earliest years—Bellows indicates that he painted it in August 1914—were especially intense. His notes [fig. 4] record thirteen exhibitions between 1914 and 1916, in cities like Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York [fig. 5]. To this list, the catalogue raisonné adds exhibitions in the Milwaukee Art Institute and the Carnegie Institute in 1923. After that, it is not until 1965 that we find another exhibition in which the work appeared.

Bellows’ notes in his ledger books, which his family and the Bellows Trust continued to expand after his death in 1925, also provide information about the work’s ownership, including sales prices. We know that *A Grandmother* was valued at 1,500 dollars according to Bellows’ own indications and that on 24 October 1977 it was sold to Kennedy Galleries for 20,000 dollars. Some of the text has been crossed out, such as the allusion to an exhibition in 1917 and, curiously, a word from the title, “Wells”. It would seem that a possible original title identifying the sitter, “Grandmother Wells”, was thus modified, along with the addition of an indefinite article in the margin of the page, returning her to anonymity. Nevertheless, we have not been able to determine who she might have been. Those who have studied the work suggest that she was probably an inhabitant of Monhegan, on the coast of Maine, where the artist spent the summer of 1914.

Thanks to the catalogue raisonné, we have access to the collection of works presented at each exhibition and can imagine what members of the public experienced and how they may have

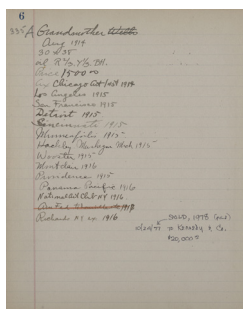


Fig. 4
A Grandmother, 1914,
George Bellows Record
Books. The Ohio State
University Libraries and
The Columbus Museum of
Art, Columbus, Ohio,
vol. B, p. 6

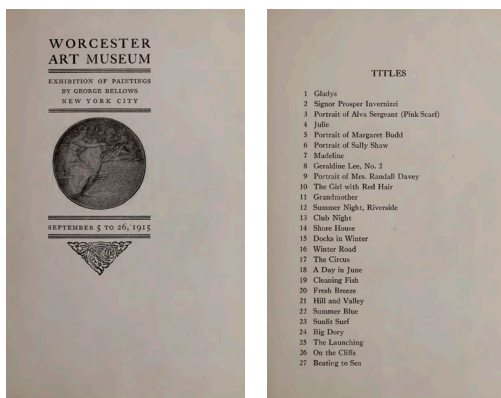


Fig. 5
Exhibition of Paintings by George Bellows, Worcester Art
Museum, 1915. *A Grandmother* is number 11 in the list of works



Fig. 6
George Bellows
Spanish Shawl, 1914
Oil on canvas,
96.5 × 76.2 cm
Private collection



Fig. 7
George Bellows
The Pink Scarf, 1914
Oil on panel, 96.5 × 76.2 cm
Mr. and Mrs. J. Kermit
Birchfield, Gloucester,
Massachusetts

perceived Bellows' work. In Chicago and the other cities where he exhibited in 1914 and 1915, almost half of the works on display were portraits. The rest were landscapes from the New York coastline and his famous boxing scene, *Stag at Sharkey's* (1909)⁸.

The gallery of portraits reveals a repeating compositional arrangement. The majority, painted in July and August of 1914, are three-quarter length portraits of women seated before neutral or two-toned backgrounds with curtains, a scheme that repeats the austere composition of our painting here. In many of these portraits, Bellows includes an accessory that ultimately provides the title for the works, like *Spanish Shawl* [fig. 6] or *The Pink Scarf* [fig. 7], both from 1914. In late 1915, a review in *The New York Times* on the exhibition at the Whitney-Richards Gallery described the painting now in the Museo Thyssen, among "a number [of paintings and drawings] not before exhibited, and one at least, *The Grandmother*, in which he is at his highest level. A subject which opens out to every artist attempting it the opportunity for sentimentality is treated by him with the reserve and dignity due to its character [...] A quiet brush and a simple palette, a serene arrangement of the figure on the canvas, and the atmosphere evoked is that for which the subject calls".⁹

Bellows at the Thyssen

After these intense first months of its existence, *A Grandmother* remained in Bellows' and his heirs' collection until 1977. Baron Thyssen acquired the painting in 1980, and it has resided in Madrid since 1992. The incorporation of *Men of the Docks* into the collections of the National Gallery in London may well attract more attention to this painter now on this side of the ocean. And it may also encourage us—as the National Gallery's director Nicholas Penny proposes—to view our painting by Bellows in a new light, in dialogue with the European paintings in our own collections. In that spirit, I shall leave you with two suggestions:

Fig. 8
Anton van Dyck
Portrait of Jacques Le Roy, 1631
Oil on canvas, 117.8 × 100.6 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

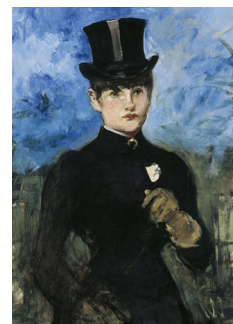
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Fig. 9
Édouard Manet
Horsewoman, Fullface, ca. 1882
Oil on canvas, 73 × 52 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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Fig. 10
George Bellows
A Grandmother, 1914
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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Notes

- 1 See <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/mar/12/royal-academy-retrospective-george-bellows>.
- 2 At this point in their careers, Bellows and Hopper steeped themselves in the social realism eventually championed by the Ashcan School, with which Bellows is customarily associated.
- 3 *George Bellows*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 10 June-8 October 2012; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 15 November 2012-18 February 2013; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 16 March-9 June 2013.
- 4 This is the second-highest price to date for a work by Bellows. The record is held by the 27.7 million dollars spent on *Polo Crowd* in 1999, which surpasses the maximum price ever fetched by a work by Hopper, whose *Hotel Window* sold for 26.8 million dollars at auction in 2006. See <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303807404577434393637443940>.
- 5 See <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/content/conWebDoc/3262>.
- 6 See <http://www.hvallison.com/Default.aspx>.
- 7 We should like to express our gratitude to Lisa Daugherty Iacobellis, Assistant Curator in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at The Ohio State University, for providing us with a copy of the page from Bellows' notebook on which he recorded information regarding *A Grandmother*.
- 8 The title of this work refers to Sharkey's, a private athletic club whose members participated in boxing matches and other activities. "Stags" were non-members who were occasionally allowed to compete.
- 9 "Art Notes: George Bellows' Paintings in the Whitney-Richards Gallery", *The New York Times*, 25 December 1915.