

MY MOTHER (1921)

George Wesley Bellows, American, 1882-1925
The Frank R. Wadsworth Memorial Collection

An excellent example of George Bellows' sympathetic and vigorous portraiture, his dynamic composition, and his low-keyed color harmonies is found in this famous portrait of his mother. In the summer of 1919 at Woodstock, New York, he had made an oil sketch of the subject and it is in comparing this preliminary study (now in the Columbus (Ohio) Gallery of Fine Arts and shown here in a photograph) with the Masterpiece of the Month that we appreciate the artist's ability to add design to reality. In both cases the background of his Columbus boyhood home was reconstructed from memory and in both he has arranged the details of the Victorian interior around the figure in an interesting pattern of curves and straight lines. In our painting, however, the emphasis on strong straight lines and rectangles, relieved only rarely by the curve of mirror, gold fish bowl, and balustrade, lends vigor to the painting and to Mrs. Bellows herself. His manipulation of elements in the composition changes her from a rather comfortable, plump, inert old lady to a powerful personality whose character and energy one cannot doubt.

Note in our painting the suggestion of rectangles in the chair back, the fold in the silk as it falls over the knees, the set of the shoulders, and even the shadow in the hair at the top of the pompadour. The chin and mouth are straighter, the V at neck of the dress is more pronounced than in the earlier version and even the checks on the tablecloth repeat the rectangles which fill the composition. At this period Bellows was interested in the formulations of Dynamic Symmetry as expounded by Jay Hambidge and his earlier interest in geometric frameworks for his compositions was enhanced by this scientific study of the dynamic rectangles found in the compositions of so many of the greatest works of all ages.

His color, so subdued, is in perfect harmony with the dignity of the subject and adds to the impression of the dimly lighted Victorian sitting room he wished to recreate. Bellows it was who at this early date started that new movement in the art of the United States in which ugly Victorian objects take on a nostalgic glow.

The painting assuredly records for all time a type of American womanhood and an era now gone and a son's sincere appreciation of the qualities of a mother of whom he was justly proud.

HTM

Supplementary Material for Masterpiece

1. Photograph of My Mother, oil painting by George Bellows, 1919
Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, Ohio
2. Photograph of Eleanor, Jean, and Anna, oil painting by George Bellows of his elderly aunt, his daughter, and his mother, 1920
Buffalo Fine Arts Academy (Albright Art Gallery)
3. Pencil Drawing of the figure, preparatory to the painting, My Mother, by George Bellows
Owned by The Art Institute of Chicago
4. Lithograph after the painting, My Mother, by George Bellows, 1921
Lent by

Bellows lived to regard the vigorous setting of American life and many phases of that life itself: the rocky coast, the black hills, and the farms as well as the hard labor, the sports, and the pastimes of the American of his time. In his portraits of the elders in his family as in this portrait of his mother he records and evokes our respect for that vigorous American manhood which he admired.

Bellows was a pioneer in bringing back to honor the techniques of lithography and in that medium he chose to advantage his excellent draftsmanship and his ability to create dynamic compositions in black and white.

His early death in 1925 at the age of forty-three brought to an end the career of an artist already renowned. Of him it has been said, "His work will take its place beside the poetry of Whitman and the melodies of Beethoven. The three will be

Masterpiece of the Month for October 1941

Page 2

George Wesley Bellows, American, 1882-1925

The outstanding trait of George Bellows, his Americanism, is explained by his heritage and training. He was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1882 of parents who had gone to the Middle West from the East coast. His mother's father had been a Long Island whaling captain and his father was descended from the Englishman who founded Bellows Falls, Vermont. Entering Ohio State University in 1901 George became a typical versatile and vigorous American student, a great athlete, a member of the Glee Club, and art editor of the year book.

In 1904 he moved to New York where except for summer sojourns in various coastal and country resorts he lived the rest of his life. For three years he studied painting with Robert Henri and soon came to share with him and with Sloan, Glackens and Luks the determination to free American art from the trite and sentimental refinements of the day. The truly American gaiety and originality which marked Bellows' works began at this time. In 1910 he married Emma Story and thereafter his wife and his two daughters, Jean and Anne, appear often in his portraits and as figures in his landscape compositions.

Bellows liked to record the vigorous setting of American life and many phases of that life itself: the rocky coast, the bleak hills, and the farms as well as the hard labor, the sports, and the pastimes of the American of his time. In his portraits of the elders in his family as in this portrait of his mother he records and rouses our respect for that vigorous American womanhood which he admired.

Bellows was a pioneer in bringing back to honor the technique of lithography and in that medium he showed to advantage his excellent draftsmanship and his ability to create dynamic compositions in black and white.

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Page 2

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH

seen to constitute the most inspiring, the most native, and the most deeply flavored performances in American art."

GEORGE WESLEY BELLOW'S: MY MOTHER (1921)

Books on display table in Reference Room - Ryerson Library.

- 708.1
B87q Bailey, Harold J. George Bellows' painting: My Mother.
(Brooklyn museum quarterly 23:74-78, April 1935.)
- 753
B44 Bellows, George Wesley. George Bellows: his lithographs.
New York and London, Alfred A. Knopf, 1938.
- 759.1
B44p Bellows, George Wesley. The paintings of George Bellows.
New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1929.
- 705.1
A51s Bellows, George Wesley. What dynamic symmetry means to me.
(American art student 3:4-5, June 1921.)
- 706.1
G53gp
1932 Chicago art institute. A guide to the paintings in the
permanent collection. Chicago, 1932. p.135-138
- 759.1
B44e Eggers, George William. George Bellows. New York,
Whitney museum, 1931. (American artists series).
- 705.1
A781 Gulman, Walter. George Bellows. (Art in America and
elsewhere 17:103-112, February 1939).
- Q16.7
I38 Index of twentieth century artists v.1 no.8, March 1934,
p.81-84: George Wesley Bellows, painter and
sculptor, 1862-1935.

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH OCTOBER 1941

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- 708.1 Bailey, Harold J. George Bellows' painting: My Mother.
B87q (Brooklyn museum quarterly 22:74-79, April 1935.)
- 763 Bellows, George Wesley. George Bellows: his lithographs.
B44 New York and London, Alfred A. Knopf, 1928.
- 759.1 Bellows, George Wesley. The paintings of George Bellows.
B44p New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1929.
- 705.1 Bellows, George Wesley. What dynamic symmetry means to me.
A51s (American art student 3:4-6, June 1921.)
- 708.1 Chicago art institute. A guide to the paintings in the
C53gp permanent collection. Chicago, 1932. p.135-136
1932
- 759.1 Eggers, George William. George Bellows. New York,
B44e Whitney museum, [1931]. (American artists series).
- 705.1 Gutman, Walter. George Bellows. (Art in America and
A78i elsewhere 17:103-112, February 1929).
- 016.7 Index of twentieth century artists v.1 no.6, March 1934,
I38 p.[81]-94: George Wesley Bellows, painter and
graver, 1882-1925.