

GEORGE BELLOWS'S BOXERS IN PRINT



Rachel Schreiber

Ashcan artist George Bellows is perhaps most remembered for his widely reproduced paintings of boxers—one even appeared on a U.S. postage stamp issued in 1998. The paintings' celebrations of the virility of the athletic male body and their dynamic representation of the sport have made them extremely popular since their production in the early twentieth century. Less commonly known is that Bellows was committed to radical politics, and that his images of pugilism were vehicles for pointed social and cultural critique. In addition to exhibiting works in galleries, Bellows published his images in a range of periodicals, from mainstream magazines such as *Collier's*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, and *The American Magazine* to *The Masses*, a small-run socialist magazine published in Greenwich Village from 1911 to 1917. When all of his boxing images are read together, it becomes clear that for Bellows, these were not simply formal explorations of the athletic male body, but also sites for his class-inflected commentary on race, gender, and religion. Moreover, when studied alongside the full range of his production, his magazine illustrations and political cartoons—particularly those published in *The Masses*—help elucidate the full importance of these themes throughout his oeuvre.

One Bellows cartoon in particular, *The Savior of His Race* (figure 1), published in *The Masses* in May 1915, stands out as a key piece.¹ Reading Bellows's production through this image and its caption unlocks significant themes that reappear in much of his work. Bellows had been commissioned by another publication, the popular *Collier's* magazine, to produce drawings of white boxer Jess Willard's highly publicized defeat of African American



FIG. 1 George Bellows, *The Savior of His Race*, *The Masses*, May 1915.

boxer Jack Johnson. The drawing that appeared in *The Masses* is clearly based on one done for *Collier's*; however in *The Masses* it was printed not with any description of that particular fight, but simply with the title *The Savior of His Race*.

Unlike Bellows's paintings of boxers, here the drawing shows us the fighter between rounds, rather than mid action. Two assistants fan him with white towels while his trainer speaks with him in the corner of the ring. Willard appears Christlike, his arms stretched over the ropes, his torso and the post behind him completing the cruciform of his figure. The cartoon and its caption mock the ways that Willard's defeat of Johnson was touted as a triumphant contest of race. Bellows exposes the speciousness of Christian evangelism's assumptions of white superiority. In using boxing as the vehicle for this commentary, he also invokes a dimension of socioeconomic class. Formerly considered a vulgar, working-class sport,

boxing was, in the first decades of the twentieth century, appropriated by white middle- and upper-class men as a demonstration of manliness, an appropriation Bellows regularly critiqued in his boxing images.

We might therefore see *The Savior of His Race* as a decoder of Bellows's critiques of class, race, gender and evangelism in many of his works, even those which, at first glance, might not appear to be vehicles for his political or social commentary. Comparing this cartoon to Bellows's paintings and to his other published images will allow for a fuller exploration of these issues than has appeared in previous studies of Bellows's works, which have too often overlooked his participation in public discourse through publication in periodicals.

For many years, art historiography has rehearsed its bias both against print culture and against social or political content in the visual arts. The works of early twentieth-century American realists, including the Ashcan artists, have been discussed in purely formal terms, and their engagement with print culture often ignored altogether.² During the 1910s, many of the Ashcan artists, united in their distaste for academic subject matter and their desire to depict the economic underbelly of the industrializing city, were affiliated with radical politics—communist, socialist, and anarchist. But the Red scares that followed the extremely radical decade of the 1910s led most of them to disavow their previous affiliations with socialism and other leftist political movements. Concurrently, art historians delimited the canon of “modern art” to the abstractionist explorations of the European avant-garde, relegating American realists to secondary status by designating their work as “old-fashioned.” Even when the Ashcan artists' work did become a topic for catalogs, exhibitions, and critical essays, scholarly attention focused exclusively on their “fine art” pieces. Scholars have tended to regard the early illustrative and satirical work of these artists as trivial forays into politics, a world apart from cultural production. Despite many theoretical shifts in art historical methodology as well as the widely accepted dismantling of the high-low divide, a strict dichotomy persists between the realm of high art and that of print culture. As Johanna Drucker writes, “The theoretical discussion of fine art as a cultural practice is still largely dependent on out-moded ideas that ‘art’ defines itself in critical opposition to mass culture.”³

More recently, historians of visual culture have begun to reexamine this divide.⁴ Methodological shifts from “art history” to “visual culture” enable the historian to assemble all of an artist's production together with knowledge of the social and cultural history of that era in order to

understand the artist's contribution to contemporary discourse. This move positions the study of the visual culture of modern periodicals as central in two principal respects. Analysis of artists' work for periodicals provides a more complete context for understanding the themes and formal strategies that reappear in all their work. This is particularly so for the early twentieth-century American realists, among them the Ashcan artists; for many, their interest in topics that appear in their gallery paintings, prints, and drawings and the formal strategies they employed in them originated in their earlier work as journalist-illustrators. "There is a tendency," writes Drucker, "to be apologetic in assessing the illustrational quality of much American art of the early twentieth century, just as there is an unwillingness to assert that what has been long perceived as a liability in modern American art is in fact its strength: that it was conceived through formal strategies that partake of mass-media culture from the very outset."⁵ Rather than deny this connection, we can see it as germane not only to these artists' work but also to a specifically American form of visual modernism. The definition of modernism should be enlarged to include both aesthetic experimentation and images that document modernity.⁶

Serious consideration of these artists' work for periodicals also requires that we attend to the *textual* aspects of the work—be they the captions, titles, or articles that surround an image on a page in a periodical. Previously treated as inconsequential, the text and its relationship to the image are key to the meaning of visuals in print and often further indicate the artist's intended reading of the images. Attention to the visual culture of modern periodicals therefore offers a particularly apt site to reconsider the work of American realists from the first decades of the last century.

Bellows scholarship is a quintessential case in point. Though the writing on Bellows is prolific, historians have only begun to explore the themes outlined above. His paintings and prints have been carefully analyzed for their technique, their attention to the male figure, and their reliance on certain compositional strategies. While these emphases are somewhat predictable aspects of older historiography, surprisingly the author of a 2007 book on Bellows, Robert Conway, spends considerable time discussing Bellows's use of the compositional methods of "Dynamic Symmetry" and relegates discussion of the context and content of the images to anecdotes that accompany the illustrations in the book.⁷ Even when scholars do focus more on the content of the images than on their formal qualities, they have not fully understood the significance of Bellows's choice of topics. A recent

exhibition, for example, focused on the leisure images of the Ashcan artists and included a number of works by Bellows. Curator and catalog author James Tottis distinguishes the Ashcan artists' work on leisure from their work on class, overlooking the fact that, for the Ashcan artists and Bellows in particular, urban sites of leisure were arenas in which class distinctions were writ large onto the city's landscape.⁸

To be sure, several art historians, including Marianne Doezema, Robert Haywood, Jane Myers, and Rebecca Zurier, have explored Bellows's attention to race, religion, and masculinity.⁹ Yet more work remains to be done in seeing not only these discrete categories of identity, but their intersections and their relationship to socioeconomic class as well, with particular attention to the ways that early twentieth-century Americans viewed these categories. Too often, the meanings of masculinity are treated transhistorically, rather than as a fluid set of signifying practices that change over time and that correlate with race and class. Most often when race is explored in Bellows's work, it is in relation to the appearance of African American fighters in his images. But equally important to consider is how "whiteness" figures into Bellows's images and how it is concatenated with class and religion. To fully understand Bellows's images, we must therefore begin, in Doezema's words, with "the notion that artistic production is a social practice—that [an image] represents the ordering of visual data into meaning, which is in turn embedded in the artist's engagement with society."¹⁰ Bellows's interest in socialism, anarchism, and radical politics has been regularly swept under the rug, as if such affiliation would detract from his artistic prowess, whereas, in fact, his "engagement with society" was the wellspring of his imagery.

By the time Bellows published *The Savior of His Race*, he was known for his boxing images, all of which bring his intersecting perspectives on class, gender, and race into view.¹¹ Bellows's fascination with boxing, which others regularly dismissed as simply a masculine interest in sport, extended well beyond athleticism. When asked about one of his boxing images by a critic who claimed the scene depicted was physically impossible, Bellows replied, "I don't know anything about boxing. I am just painting two men trying to kill each other."¹² More than a simple interest in pugilism, Bellows was fascinated with the symbolic struggle between men.

Bellows's interest in boxing is also often connected to his biography because of his own early and ongoing participation in baseball. George Bellows grew up in Ohio and had been an athlete all his life. He was a serious baseball player while a student at Ohio State University, where he

was recruited at one point for the Cincinnati Reds.¹³ But he left Ohio State for New York City to study art. In 1904, Bellows moved into an apartment across the street from a boxing club called “Sharkey’s,” notorious for its membership of “toughs and bums.”¹⁴ Public prizefighting was still illegal at this time. To circumvent its illegality, private fight clubs were formed where only dues-paying members were admitted. Sharkey’s was one such club. These working-class establishments were seen as dangerous, squalid sites, frequented by immigrants and other types perceived to be unsavory.¹⁵ But they also became the haunts of middle- and upper-class boxing aficionados, who went downtown to partake of this working-class culture. Sharkey’s operated on the cusp of respectability—members of the gentry might frequent the establishment, but they were very aware that they were venturing into a world that was foreign to them. It would be another few years yet before boxing reached the level of acceptance (as well as legality) that would obviate the need for clubs such as Sharkey’s. In the meantime, attending working-class spaces of leisure was the quickest way uptown men might see and bet on a boxing match. For George Bellows, boxing was a quintessentially working-class sport, and uptown spectators who came downtown were fodder for ridicule.

Two of Bellows’s early and most dynamic boxing paintings, *Stag at Sharkey’s* (1909) and *Both Members of This Club* (1909), are set at Sharkey’s. Unlike *The Savior of His Race*, which was commissioned originally as a portrait, both of these canvases exhibit an interest in the raw physicality of the sport, which valorizes its participants even while imaging them engaged in violent struggle. Another feature that distinguishes these paintings from *The Masses* cartoon is the inclusion of spectators, whose grotesquely contorted faces lend a carnival-like atmosphere to the events depicted. The paintings offer a glimpse into the entire scene of the fight, providing the viewer with a sense of what it might be like to attend Sharkey’s.

In *Stag at Sharkey’s*, the bodies of the two boxers nearly meld into one as they form one graceful pyramid at the center of the composition.¹⁶ Thick impasto paint forms their muscles, sinewy and taut in the midst of their fight. Spectators, seated below the ring, look up to the focus of the action. One spectator, framed by the legs of the fighter on the right, smoking a cigar and wearing the white shirt and tie of an upper-class man, has opened his mouth in a wide grin that indicates his intense enjoyment of the scene before him. This spectator’s glee at the violence before him is a site of Bellows’s commentary. The man is “slumming”; he has come downtown

to revel in the violence of this working-class space. But his nearly prurient interest in the scene does not unhinge the heroic strokes with which Bellows images the boxers themselves.

Both Members of This Club, another of Bellows's rawest boxing paintings from this period, continues these themes.¹⁷ On this canvas, the spectators appear even more carnivalesque. The painting relies on the same triangular composition for the fighters as in *Stag at Sharkey's*. Here, though, the two men—one of whom is white and one of whom is African American—do not appear to meld into one another. The white fighter captures most of the light in the painting, whereas the black figure nearly disappears at times into the black background. The African American figure, however, seems about to completely dominate the white man, who struggles red-faced in response. The title of the painting is taken from the way fights at Sharkey's were often announced. The dues collected to circumvent the illegality of the sport were also collected from the fighters themselves—thus the announcer would introduce the fighters as “both members of this club.”¹⁸ Of course, on another level, the title refers to the fact that in this club, African Americans were undifferentiated from whites in their membership status.¹⁹ The title might also obliquely comment on the fact that, even though everyone in the room had to be a club member—the fighters included—the audience remained outside the circle. The use of the word “both” clearly indicates that the members to which the title refers are two in number, and therefore cannot include the audience. Though the boxers are of different races, they have more in common with each other than with the spectators, who remain interlopers.

To fully understand Bellows's commentaries in these paintings as well as in his other works, it is important to understand the discourses on “manliness,” race, and working-class culture that circulated among early twentieth-century Americans.²⁰ The meanings of manliness were changing in this era. The conflation of masculinity and muscularity was a relatively new pairing in the minds of Americans, having come about around the turn of the century.²¹ Where a lean, wiry, pale body had once signified the privilege of those removed from physical labor and had therefore been considered the male ideal, increasingly, emphasis was placed on the well-developed, muscular body as a site of male power—sexual power, physical might, and more.

Contradictions were inherent to this new model of masculinity. The new physical model for men drew on the strong physique of the working-class

male as well as the virility of nonwhite "primitives." Yet it was in opposition to these same groups that middle- and upper-class men strove to define themselves, claiming themselves to be more civilized, more evolved, and manlier. Even as it drew on attributes of Africans, African Americans, Native Americans, and other nonwhites, the new ideal of manhood regularly posited precisely the unmanliness of nonwhites in order to securely associate itself with whiteness. In the mainstream, representations of ideal manhood depicted strong, muscular white men who would take charge, in the home and beyond. "The metonymic process of turn-of-the-century manhood constructed bodily strength and social authority as identical," writes Gail Bederman, indicating the ways that physical ability came to represent male hegemony.²²

Socialists, communists, anarchists, and others who were critical of the increasingly reified orders of capitalist urban life appropriated the shifting ideal of manhood toward that of a physically superior male as a symbol for the moral rectitude of the working class. Having mobilized the new ideal of the muscular male to advance the strength of the proletariat, they satirized the attempts of the bourgeoisie to attain a strong physical male ideal. Challenging the masculinity (understood in this new way to be connected to physical prowess) of certain men was a way to challenge, as Bederman puts it, their "social authority." George Bellows made use of such men in his cartoons: effete businessmen, anti-suffragists, and self-righteous preachers came under his fire. All of these figures contrasted with boxers such as those found in *Stag at Sharkey's* and *Both Members of This Club*, working-class figures—white and African American—who embodied the new masculine ideal.

Boxing's popularity increased significantly in the first decades of the twentieth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, it had been considered violent and unacceptable for middle- or upper-class spectators or participants. But as middle-class men began to value physical ability and muscular physiques, they sought new activities that would reflect this interest, as well as strategies to remake manhood. Participation in pastimes such as boxing offered a means to accede to some of the manly attributes working-class men were thought to possess. Moreover, boxing became a symbol for manliness itself—an antidote to overcivilization and degeneracy perceived by many to be a problem with American men after the turn of the century.²³

Theodore Roosevelt, a man who epitomized the changing notions of masculinity, was one of boxing's major proponents over the course of the 1910s. Roosevelt linked the new definitions of masculinity, particularly in relation to the male body and its public display, to imperialism and civilization.²⁴ He placed great stock in eugenic ideas about how to ensure the nation's path toward economic, cultural, and political dominance. He valorized certain activities for (white) American men—these included sports such as boxing that would enhance their physical might, and consequently enable them to pursue their manly obligation to lead the nation forward.²⁵ Boxing fit squarely into what Roosevelt described as “the strenuous life,” a lifestyle in which men took risks (physical and otherwise), faced challenges, and constantly improved themselves in order to achieve their own betterment and, consequently, the betterment of the race. Roosevelt's own participation in boxing was widely noted and contributed greatly to the sport's popularity.

Appearing in the April 24, 1902, issue of *Life* magazine, the cartoon *A Cabinet Meeting* (figure 2) pokes fun at Roosevelt's elevation of the sport and postulates what the future will hold for the U.S. government given the rise in status of such pursuits. We see a cabinet meeting as it is run under Roosevelt's guidance and under the influence of the strenuous life. Men variously fence, box, or wrestle—one man is even shooting off guns. All of this action takes place under the watchful eyes of George Washington and other politicians who appear in portraits in the background. Roosevelt is one of the figures engaged in the boxing match.



FIG. 2 Anonymous, *A Cabinet Meeting*, *Life*, April 1902.

Roosevelt's attraction to boxing signified its great symbolic import in American culture. "Roosevelt longed to lead evolution's chosen race toward a perfect millennial future," writes Bederman, and American men had to bolster their physical strength in order to do so.²⁶ To describe Jess Willard as "the savior of his race," as Bellows does in his cartoon, can thus be understood to connect Willard, and his infamous victory over the African American Jack Johnson, to Roosevelt's discourse. But Bellows's image is satirical, communicating clearly to the viewer that to think of this man as a savior is preposterous—here, Bellows critiques Roosevelt's rhetoric.

The satire in this Bellows cartoon, as well as in many of his images, is achieved through the precise relationship between the text and the image. If a similar image were to be printed with a different caption, as we shall see, it would not convey nearly as complex or pointed a perspective. The caption, "The Savior of His Race," offers additional, extravisual meaning, creating a linguistic layer that complicates the image. In graphic satire, the caption often provides the critical meaning, as Roland Barthes describes in his analysis of the relationship between image and text.²⁷ Analyzing the text that accompanies an image in mass media, Barthes theorizes that text functions within processes he defines as "anchorage" or "relay," or through a combination of both. Anchorage tells us in words what we are looking at in the picture, delimiting the possible significations of the image and directing us toward an intended meaning. In relay, the text and image complement each other, so that meaning becomes more than a sum of the cartoon's parts. But even outside of mass media, text can serve these functions, as we have seen in the titles to Bellows's boxing paintings. Nevertheless, we might argue that the text in graphic satire, in the form of a caption, is more germane to the reader/viewer's experience of the work because, in print, the text and image share proximity and materiality, both appearing in ink, on the same paper, next to each other. Moreover, most political cartoons emphasize relay more heavily than anchorage, thus using the text to add an additional layer of information to the image. This is the case in *The Savior of His Race*, where the caption does not describe in any literal way what we see in the image.

By putting an image of Jess Willard together with a caption that invokes race, Bellows was responding to the contemporary fervor around mixed race fights. These fights occupied a central place in the American media in the early years of the twentieth century, the most infamous perhaps being the Johnson-Jeffries match of 1910, five years before Willard defeated the

African American Johnson. By 1902, Johnson had won numerous fights against white fighters, and in 1908 he had earned the world heavyweight title. White American men were claiming at this time to be strong and muscular themselves as well as intellectually superior to “primitive” races. In light of the social Darwinist ideology that was gaining widespread acceptance, the ability to topple a black man from the throne of heavyweight champion took on added significance. James Jeffries was a white heavyweight boxer who had refused to fight Johnson; he retired in 1905 rather than risk defeat at the hands of an African American man. Eventually, however, Jeffries was coaxed out of retirement; the Johnson-Jeffries fight became a symbolic, highly charged racial contest. When Johnson defeated Jeffries in January 1909, the perceived slap in the face to white American manhood was only exacerbated by Johnson’s frequent and visible habit of showing off his white girlfriends, who proudly wore the expensive clothing and jewelry he had bought them.²⁸

Bellows titled his 1921 lithograph of the Johnson-Jeffries match *The White Hope* (figure 3), lending the work sarcasm similar to *The Savior of His Race*.²⁹ A strong diagonal extends from Johnson’s outstretched arm to the slumped figure of the defeated Jeffries. Though triumphant, Johnson wears an expression of humility and surprise.³⁰ Neither Jeffries’s physical

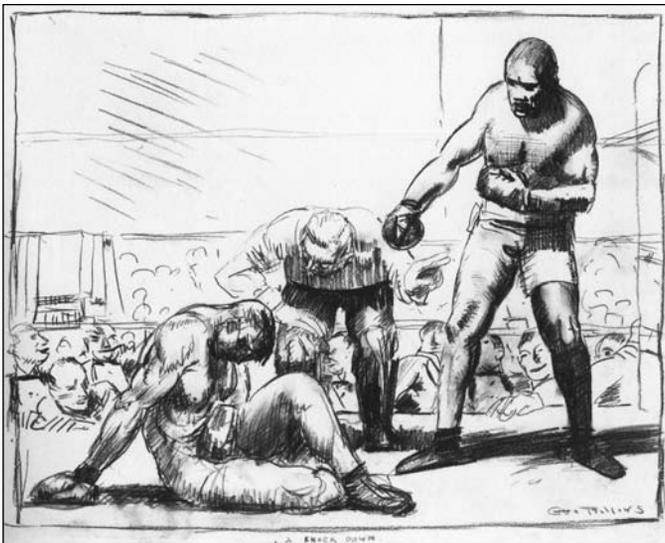


FIG. 3 George Bellows, *The White Hope*, 1921.

might nor the racial superiority his fans have vested in him is enough for him to triumph.

After Willard defeated Johnson in 1915, one of the three Bellows drawings *Collier's* commissioned became the basis for *The Savior of the Race*. It is worth comparing the figure of Jeffries in *The White Hope* with that of Willard in *The Savior of His Race*. Jeffries's body is set in relation to Johnson's and appears equally strong and muscular. Bellows uses pose and composition to signify the African American fighter as the winner. The difference between the visual meaning and the title produces satire, and ultimately the meaning of the piece. By contrast, Jess Willard, who stands alone in the ring, appears passive and spent, even though he is the actual winner of this fight. Through their titles/captions, both images criticize the conflation of a sporting match with larger ideas about racial superiority. In depicting Willard not as a victor but as a loser, Bellows aligns his victimization with that of Christ, and thus also critiques the unquestioned belief in a man as a savior.

Both images can be compared to four Bellows drew to illustrate "The Last Ounce," a short story written by L. C. Moïse and published in the April 1913 issue of *The American Magazine*, a popular magazine that eventually merged with *Collier's*.³¹ For story illustrations, artists are given detailed instructions on which parts of the stories to illustrate—they might even be given the specific captions that would accompany their illustrations. Art direction regarding the desired style or mood for the imagery is often provided as well. The production process for story illustrations is thus quite different than for political cartoons, where the artists more typically pursue topics of their own choosing. Even if completed in collaboration with a writer or editor, a work of graphic satire is more authorial than a work of story illustration.

Although Bellows produced very similar imagery for a range of periodicals, their social meaning and reception were necessarily quite different given the specific contexts in which they appeared. For example, the *Collier's* commission of portraits of Willard served to visualize a key newsworthy event of the day. The same image, published at about the same time in a socialist journal along with a biting caption, became satirical. Similarly, the four story illustrations for "The Last Ounce" published in *The American Magazine* differ in important ways from *The Masses* cartoon. The four drawings share much formally with *The Masses* cartoon. Indeed, one of the illustrations, *Between Rounds* (figure 3), on which Bellows based

a later lithograph by the same title, may even have served as a study for *The Savior of His Race*.³² The composition of *Between Rounds* is much like that of *The Savior of His Race*, the arm of one of the men attending the fighter in the foreground bisecting the picture plan vertically in contrast to the strong horizontal of the base of the ring and the ropes. *Between Rounds* images two fighters, both at a moment of respite. They mirror each other in their states of near collapse; neither appears to be the imminent winner. It is easy to imagine that the fighter in the background could be the same fighter as the one seen in *The Savior of His Race*. Even the mark making in the two images is similar, though *The Savior of His Race* uses more gestural strokes and dense blacks, lending it a more reportorial, immediate air. That said, none of the four story illustrations carries the satirical commentary of *The Masses* cartoon.

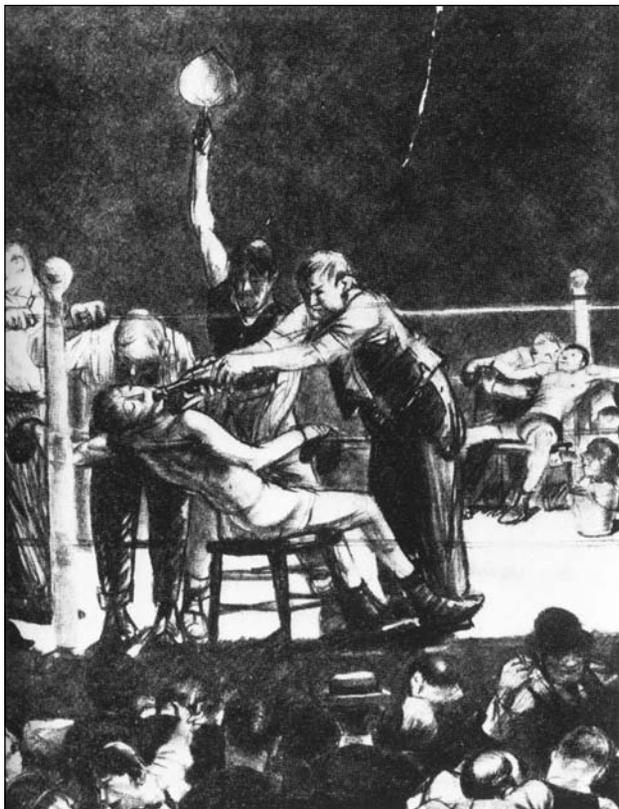


FIG. 4 George Bellows, *Between Rounds*, illustration for "The Last Ounce," *The American Magazine*, April 1913.

More significant than these formal comparisons is the difference in the relationship of the images to the accompanying texts. The illustrations for "The Last Ounce" put pictures to the words of a story about a fictional fighter named Jimmy Nolan who has lost a fight—and his wife—to his friend and sparring partner. The story recounts his comeback, and how he prevails by using his "last ounce" of energy to deliver the final punch. In *The American Magazine*, Bellows's drawings appear with captions that highlight key moments in the story. In the text below *Between Rounds*, the coach advises Nolan, "Quit playin' for a knock-out. Cut 'im up," anchoring the image, fixing its meaning as simply illustrative of the action in the story. The story itself might indicate the popularity of boxing in this era, but beyond that—and quite unlike the other Bellows works discussed above—it does not comment on this popularity nor on the possibility that the sport might be a site for contested identities.

By the time of the commission for *The American Magazine*, Bellows was producing illustrations for a wide range of periodicals, from the more mainstream *Harper's Weekly*, *The American Magazine* and *Collier's* to the small, radical *Masses*.³³ For the former, his commissioned works were fairly straightforward illustrations of boxing. For the latter, Bellows recycled some of the images and put them together with his trademark, biting captions or titles. Many of Bellows's colleagues who contributed to *The Masses*, including John Sloan, earned much of their living by publishing images in a range of publications. Unlike other publications such as *Collier's* and *The American Magazine*, *The Masses* did not pay its contributors. Nevertheless, these artists enjoyed the "free hand" they had had in their *Masses* imagery: the lack of pay meant that there were increased freedoms regarding content—there were no advertisers to offend, and the magazine's very purpose was political critique.³⁴

But, we might wonder, did George Bellows himself write the caption to *The Savior of His Race*? Typically, political cartoons—text and image—are the editorial creations of the cartoonist. But *The Masses* process often proceeded differently. Captions might be added to images by the entire editorial board at the infamously boisterous monthly meetings, and sometimes even after that point, editor Max Eastman would add or alter a caption. No detailed records exist of *The Masses* editorial meetings, so this question cannot be definitively answered.³⁵ Although it's impossible to know for certain, based on his other works, including *The White Hope*, it is reasonable to assume that Bellows at least approved this title, even if he didn't write it. Clearly, he

often employed the strategy of using the textual layer—caption or title—to direct his audience toward his intended meaning. This was true not only in Bellows's work for periodicals, but in his work for galleries as well.

Another difference between Bellows's commissioned images in *The American Magazine* and *Collier's* and his other images of boxing is that the illustrations in these magazines did not ridicule the spectators of the sport—perhaps because the readers of these publications might have been among them. As we have seen in his paintings, the audiences of the boxing matches provided an important counterpoint to the boxers. His emphasis on the audience attests to the fact that Bellows's interest in boxing owed as much to the cross-class social scene as it did to the athletes themselves, perhaps even more. This interest is further articulated in other Bellows images. In his brief lifetime, the nature of boxing culture would change considerably. By mid-decade, prizefights were legal, and on March 25, 1916, the first U.S. prizefight that allowed women as spectators was held at Madison Square Garden. Bellows commemorated the event with the lithograph *Preliminaries to the Big Bout* (figure 5). A group of wealthy patrons occupies the foreground, the top-hatted men accompanying women in elegant dress. The ring and the boxing action recede into the background. Rather than qualifying rounds, the preliminaries to this fight are the parade of wealthy patrons showing off their evening wear.

The middle-class men who fueled the boxing craze throughout the 1910s and 1920s did not limit themselves to spectatorship, however. Just



FIG. 5 George Bellows, *Preliminaries to the Big Bout*, 1916.

as Roosevelt advocated, these men also took classes in boxing. Such classes are the subject of another Bellows drawing, “*Superior Brains*”: *The Business Men’s Class* (figure 6), published as a double-page spread in the April 1913 issue of *The Masses*. The drawing depicts the folly of upper-class men, who appear more like ballerinas than like boxers, trying to lead a strenuous life. Its title/caption is a pun, referring both to the men’s weight-lifting class and to their socioeconomic one. The students in the class are variously thin and fat, young and old. Some struggle to raise their barbells, while others gracefully succeed. A number of them, following the instructor’s lead, are foppish and place one hand on a hip that sways out to the side. A sign on the wall announces “Social Half Hour in the Social Parlor.” Bellows, who had himself been a member of a YMCA in Ohio and had lived in a “Y” upon his arrival in New York City, in part testifies here to the differences between the atmosphere of the YMCA and that of boxing clubs such as Sharkey’s. When compared with the boxing paintings it becomes clear that Bellows positions competing versions of masculinity as inherently tied to class. In opposing these men’s desire to achieve a masculine physique to the masculinity of his boxers, Bellows seems to be saying that businessmen might aspire to the masculinity of the working class, but it’s clearly out of their reach.

The students in *The Business Men’s Class* may be the same men who appear in Bellows’s cartoon *Jury Duty* (figure 7), published in *The Masses*



FIG. 6 George Bellows, “*Superior Brains*”: *The Business Men’s Class*, *The Masses*, April 1913.



FIG. 7 George Bellows, *Jury Duty*, *The Masses*, April 1915.

two years later, in April 1915. Initially drawn as a comment on the elitist jurying of artworks for inclusion in exhibitions, when published in *The Masses*, the cartoon takes on a second meaning. *The Masses* regularly published cartoons on suffrage, and Bellows's *Jury Duty* may be understood to engage with the suffrage debate by invoking the fact that women could not serve on juries before ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919. Regardless of the reading, it is clear that, rather than being involved in serious debate, this large group of men appears to be socializing in an upper-class social institution—a true old boys' club. Although some of the men are young, this is not the urban heterosocial environment that was becoming increasingly popular in the city in this period. Several men examine a painting, others stand together smoking a cigar, and still others seem to be laughing together, perhaps over a recently told joke. Like the men in *The Business Men's Class*, these men are, for the most part, lean and wiry, belonging to the outdated nineteenth-century ideal of manhood. Several of them appear to be dandyish—one holds his hand to his cheek and another sports a jaunty monocle. These affectations, though not necessarily considered effeminate in the nineteenth century, were fast coming to be thought so in the 1910s. In short, the image seems to represent outmoded forms of male sociability. Read as a comment on suffrage, Bellows's image criticizes the fact that jury service, an obligation of fundamental importance to the working of the democracy, has been kept to the select few—privileged

by virtue of their gender, race, and socioeconomic class. A working-class defendant, for example, could hardly see this group as a jury of peers, and certainly no woman could. The cartoon's caption transforms an image of a group of men into a critique of bourgeois masculinity.

Elite men came under attack from Bellows for their religiosity as well as frivolity. Bellows was intent on exposing the hypocrisies of evangelists—one in particular. He had a sharp antipathy for Billy Sunday, the most famous itinerant evangelist preacher of his day. Formerly a professional baseball player too, Sunday became extremely wealthy as a traveling preacher and hobnobbed with many of the elite, among them Theodore Roosevelt. John Reed, the prominent communist journalist who wrote at times for *The Masses*, accused Sunday of being a pawn of big business. Reed was also a regular contributor to *Metropolitan Magazine*, which commissioned Reed and Bellows to cover a major rally of Sunday's in Philadelphia in 1915. Though not as radical in its politics as *The Masses* and with a broader readership, *Metropolitan Magazine*, like *The Masses*, focused on politics and cultural critique. Bellows published two drawings in its May 1915 issue (figures 8 and 9).³⁶ In both, he uses the spatial organization of his compositions to indicate Sunday's elite status. Although Sunday reaches down to shake the hands of audience members in *The Sawdust Trail*, he is nevertheless set apart from the swooning mass of people who appear below him. Furthermore, the spatial organization of the image lampoons Sunday's preaching, for even as he attempts to appeal to the "masses," he obviously sees himself as above them.

Sunday, a supporter of temperance, opposed the pleasures of working-class culture that Bellows regularly portrayed. In a sermon, Sunday quipped,



FIG. 8 George Bellows, *Billy Sunday*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, May 1915.

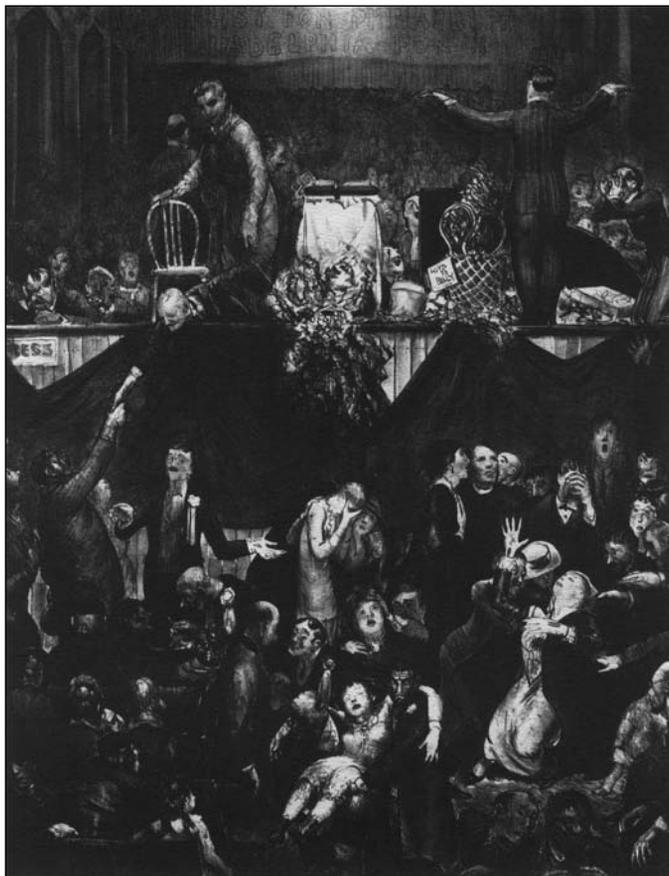


FIG. 9 George Bellows, *The Sawdust Trail*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, May 1915.

“Sow a card party and you’ll reap gamblers. Sow a dance and you’ll reap prostitutes.”³⁷ Bellows despised Sunday’s style of preaching as well as its content. He also opposed the spread of organized religion and anyone attempting to judge those who played cards or attended dance halls—popular working-class haunts of heterosociability. Bellows wrote that he believed Sunday to be “the worst thing that ever happened to America. . . . He is against freedom, he wants a religious autocracy, he is such a reactionary that he makes me an anarchist.”³⁸

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, diverse actors were actively debating the meanings of freedom and what America should be. Though radical politics had been both present and visible within American urban culture in the early 1910s, by the summer of 1917, when Bellows

penned this quote, the United States had entered the Great War in Europe—encouraged, to a large degree, by Theodore Roosevelt and others who opposed Wilsonian isolationism and nonaggression. Radicalism—and anarchism in particular—came to be identified as “un-American.” Bellows’s claim that Sunday had made him into an anarchist could be seen as opposition to the war and to claims of American superiority, whether based in race, religion, or political ideals.

Bellows’s images of Billy Sunday were not his only jabs at evangelism, but they were his sharpest. He published other cartoons and illustrations and exhibited works in which he ridiculed religious attempts to dictate morality, especially those aimed at the working class. Against the backdrop of Bellows’s derision of Christian preachers, *The Savior of His Race* takes on added meaning. Within discourses such as changing views of an implicitly race-specific masculinity and Roosevelt’s advocacy of the strenuous life, Jess Willard’s defeat of Jack Johnson was positioned as a vindication of white Americans, demonstrating not only that the white man was mentally superior to nonwhites—more advanced, more civilized, more intelligent—but also that, with training, he could vanquish a nonwhite challenger in a physical feat such as boxing. To describe Jess Willard as a racial savior thus positions him as the one who proves that, despite allegations of an overall decline of masculinity concomitant with urbanization, white Americans will prevail. But the figure at the center of Bellows’s drawing does not look like a savior. Regardless of the attention of those around him and the composition that emphasizes his central role, this man does not appear powerful. The contrast between the desire to see Jess Willard as a savior and the man’s obvious lack of power is, of course, the point of the cartoon. That boxing could demonstrate the ascension of a racial, religious, or class ideal appears as ludicrous.

The Savior of His Race thus evidences a range of points of view that are found in the other images Bellows used to document the leisure activities of urban Americans, including sporting events. These activities brought together into one frame individuals from differing socioeconomic backgrounds. The boxing paintings have too often been read as timeless depictions of masculinity that only coincidentally might touch upon race. Closer readings of these works alongside Bellows’s drawings and political cartoons, *The Savior of His Race* among them, indicate that Bellows was addressing not only American racial politics, but also the complex social dynamics being tested in boxing arenas. Bellows used his images to offer

his own comments on changing ideals of masculinity and the intersections of race and class among early twentieth-century Americans. He was critical of anyone who claimed to dictate morality or claim superiority over the working class. Bellows took advantage of text, whether in the form of a caption or a title, to focus the message of his images. This is the case with both his periodical illustrations and his paintings, which are often given pointed titles. But clearly it is in his graphic satire, published in modern periodicals and especially in the radical press of his time, that his most direct statements emerge.

Sadly, George Bellows lived only to the age of forty-two, dying in 1925 of complications following appendicitis. His career did not extend far beyond the Ashcan years, and there is no extensive biographical material available on his life.³⁹ Unlike an artist such as his contemporary John Sloan, he left no diary that might tell us his thoughts either during his career or from later in life looking back on this time. Of course, first-person accounts do not always provide us with the “truth” about an artist’s production, and our readings are valid with or without such accounts. What is crucial in interpreting Bellows’s work, however, is an understanding of the discourses around race, class, gender, and religion that circulated in his time, as well as careful attention to the full range of his production, whether in paint, in pen and ink, for galleries, or for periodicals.

NOTES

1. Although, earlier in 1915, *Collier's* magazine had commissioned Bellows to produce three drawings of the white boxer Jess Willard, I have been unable to locate the drawings there, based on my review of *Collier's* issues from 1913 through 1917.

2. By “print culture,” I mean here print forms that circulated in mass production, such as magazines, journals, and newspapers. Although not all of Bellows’s publication venues could be described as popular culture, given that a magazine such as *The Masses* was part of the radical press, nevertheless, I distinguish here between his “fine art” works and those images of his that were in broader circulation.

3. Johanna Drucker, “Who’s Afraid of Visual Culture?” *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (1999): 37.

4. See, for example, Charles Harrison, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Open University, 1993), and Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

5. Drucker, “Who’s Afraid of Visual Culture?” 38.

6. For an excellent example of this shifted approach to the definition of modernism in the visual arts, see Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

7. Robert Conway, *The Powerful Hand of George Bellows: Drawings from the Boston Public Library* (Washington, D.C.: Trust for Museum Exhibitions, 2007).

8. James W. Tottis, ed., *Life's Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure, 1895–1925* (London: Merrell, 2007), 9.

9. Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Robert Haywood, "George Bellows's 'Stag at Sharkey's': Boxing, Violence, and Male Identity," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 3–15; Linda Ayres and Jane Myers, *George Bellows: The Artist and His Lithographs, 1916–1924* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1988); Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

10. Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America*, 4.

11. Linda Ayres, "Bellows: The Boxing Drawings," in *Bellows: The Boxing Pictures* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1982), 53.

12. Quoted in Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York: Reynal & Company, 1965), 77; uncited.

13. *Ibid.*, 34.

14. *Ibid.*, 69.

15. Haywood, "George Bellows's 'Stag at Sharkey's,'" 5.

16. See [http://www.georgewesleybellows.org/Club-Night-\(or-Stag-Night-at-Sharkey's\).html](http://www.georgewesleybellows.org/Club-Night-(or-Stag-Night-at-Sharkey's).html), accessed October 10, 2010.

17. See http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tinfo_f?object=30667, accessed October 10, 2010.

18. Morgan, *George Bellows*, 69.

19. The painting was originally titled *A Nigger and a White Man*. I have found no information that explains when or why the title was changed.

20. Gail Bederman points out that, for early twentieth-century Americans, "manliness" was a term used to describe the traits that were desirable in men, whereas "masculinity" signified those traits—good or bad—that all men were believed to possess. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18. Here the terms are used in their more contemporary, interchangeable sense.

21. For literature on the changing meanings of masculinity in this era, see Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Judy Hilkey, *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (New York: Free Press, 1996); E. Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood," *Journal of Social History* 16 (Fall 1983); Kevin White, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

22. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 8.

23. *Ibid.*, 16.

24. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man*, 6–7.

25. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 84.

26. *Ibid.*, 171.

27. This discussion of Barthes's analysis of the relationship between text and image draws on the following essay: Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

28. Johnson was arrested under the Mann Act in 1920 when he sent his (white) girlfriend Belle Schreiber a train ticket from Pittsburgh to Chicago to come see him. The Mann Act made it illegal for men to transport women across state lines for purposes deemed to be illicit. Johnson's arrest clearly exemplifies the misuses of this act. He served one and a half years at Leavenworth for his arrest.

29. Bellows based his lithograph on a drawing he had done previously, which had been titled *The Knockdown*. The reason for the title change is not known. See Conway, *The Powerful Hand of George Bellows*, 76.

30. Such emotions were not likely to have been Johnson's actual response, given his penchant for enjoying his successes in public.

31. L. C. Moise, "The Last Ounce," *The American Magazine*, April 1913.

32. Ayres, "Bellows: The Boxing Drawings," 54–55.

33. See for example "The Great American Game" in *Harper's Weekly*, May 2, 1914, pp. 16–17.

34. Art Young, *Art Young: His Life and Times* (New York: Sheridan House, 1939), 277. It is important to note, however, that some of *The Masses* artists expressed their opposition, and eventually a number of them actually quit the editorial board, because of the magazine's insistence that political content be ascribed to all of the imagery in the magazine.

35. What we do know of *The Masses* editorial board meetings comes from memoirs and autobiographies of the members of the editorial board. There are a few limited examples of political cartoons for which the story of their conception or captioning does exist. Unfortunately, no such information is available for Bellows's *The Savior of His Race*.

36. Bellows used one of these drawings, *The Sawdust Trail*, as the basis for a later painting with the same title.

37. Quoted in Conway, *The Powerful Hand of George Bellows*, 59.

38. George Bellows, "The Big Idea: George Bellows Talks About Patriotism for Beauty," *Touchstone*, July 1917, 270.

39. Bellows did have a biographer, Charles H. Morgan. Other scholars, however, have questioned the accuracy of this biography, given Morgan's lack of citations and reliance on his personal acquaintance with Bellows. There are also some writings by his wife, Emma Bellows, that provide some clues to his work, but these too were written retrospectively. See Haywood, "George Bellows's 'Stag at Sharkey's.'"