



George Bellows
American, 1882 - 1925

Tennis Tournament

1920

oil on canvas

overall: 149.8 x 167.6 cm (59 x 66 in.)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.5

ENTRY

George Bellows was attracted to sporting themes as subjects for his paintings in part because he was an outstanding athlete. Although he was best known for his representations of boxing—a violent, popular activity associated with the working class—he also turned to the patrician sports of polo and tennis. Bellows was well aware that sports had strong social implications. In April 1910, not long after completing the third of his early prizefighting pictures, he spent some time in Lakewood, New Jersey, in his own words, “making studies of the wealthy game of polo as played by the ultra rich.” [1] A decade later, he took a similar interest in representing the genteel game of tennis, a sport in which, unlike boxing and polo, Bellows participated. His biographer Charles H. Morgan reported that while in Manhattan during the summer of 1921, “at frequent and regular intervals, tall George and Gene Speicher would take on small Leon Kroll and William Glackens in spirited doubles matches on the excellent courts at Ninetieth Street and Park Avenue.” [2]

The artist and his family spent the summer of 1919 in Middleton, Rhode Island, from where he made frequent visits to nearby Newport to work on a portrait of Maud Dale, wife of his patron Chester Dale. One of the attractions of the affluent and

fashionable resort town was the tennis tournaments that were held at the Newport Casino, a building that had been designed by the noted New York architectural firm McKim, Mead & White for the wealthy journalist James Gordon Bennett in 1879. After Bennett sold the building to the Newport Casino Association in 1880, it served as a “commodious place of summer meeting and amusement for fashionable society.” [3] The first US National Championship was held on its grounds in 1881, and the building now houses the International Tennis Hall of Fame. From 1915 to 1967, the annual Newport Casino Invitational, in which famous nationally ranked players such as Bill Johnston and Bill Tilden participated, took place there. J. Carter Brown noted that Bellows may have been inspired by seeing such tennis stars as “California Comet” Maurice Evans McLoughlin, whose “forceful style of play . . . made the game seem more and more a real, red-blooded sport.” [4]

In August 1919 Bellows painted two views of a tournament being played on courts at the Newport Casino—*Tennis Tournament (Tennis at Newport)* [fig. 1] and *The Tournament* [fig. 2]. Bellows then completed two lithographs in March 1920, *Tennis* [fig. 3] and *The Tournament* [fig. 4]. [5] Glenn Peck has noted, “Both lithographs are fresh and successful attempts at resolving the issues of perspective that hampered the earlier efforts in the oil paintings.” [6]

Shortly after, Bellows worked on two additional paintings whose compositions were derived from the lithographs: *Tennis at Newport* [fig. 5] based on *The Tournament* and the Gallery’s larger, apparently unfinished *Tennis Tournament* after *Tennis*. *Tennis at Newport* was completed in March and is very similar to its source. In June Bellows entered in his record book *Tennis Tournament*, which offers a somewhat modified, simpler version of its corresponding lithograph. In the print, the viewpoint is past the court’s centerline closer to the spectators, a second player is present (thus transforming the match into a doubles game), and there are fewer figures on the other side of the net at the far left.

Both of the 1920 tennis paintings present bird’s-eye lateral views of matches that were held on the grass courts inside the larger of the Newport Casino’s two quadrangles. Their titles indicate what aspect of the event Bellows wanted to emphasize in each. *Tennis at Newport* shows a doubles match seen from the left half of the court looking toward the arcaded facade of the Casino building, with spectators assembled along the foreground. It is clearly more a depiction of a social event than a tennis game. Much like the earlier *Crowd at the Polo Game* (1910, private collection), its primary interest is in observing the genteel, well-

dressed crowd watching the match.

The Gallery's *Tennis Tournament* represents a singles game seen from the right side of the court. The emphasis is on tennis, with the player standing over the baseline in the lower-right foreground, in the act of delivering an overhand smash to his opponent. Bellows moved the point of view up to the sideline so that only the spectators on the opposite side of the court are visible. He still devoted attention to the observers, contrasting their elegant, languid poses to the athletic gesture of the player.

Bellows's tennis paintings employ Jay Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, a system of proportions Bellows found useful in designing complex, multifigure paintings and lithographs from early 1918 until his untimely death in January 1925. These works also share a greatly simplified scale of color gradations and values that reflect the artist's interest in the revised theories that Denman Ross had recently published in *The Painter's Palette* (1919). [7] In the Gallery's painting, the emphasis on the chalk lines that delineate the court enhances the impression that the composition is composed of a series of receding horizontal bands that systematically progress from the foreground to the background, zoning off the playing area, the line of spectators, the trees, the architecture, and the sky. The sun is partially obscured by clouds, but prominent shadows are cast forward across the court. Evidently *Tennis at Newport* was set at a different time of day because the shadows fall in the opposite direction.

In tandem with his many treatments of the subject, the variety and richness of Bellows's painterly allusions to the works of other painters in *Tennis Tournament* reflect his ambition to bring as much knowledge and skill as possible to his depictions of contemporary life. The exaggerated use of perspective and shadow to enhance the composition's dramatic content is reminiscent of a device commonly employed by 16th-century Venetian masters like Jacopo Tintoretto (Venetian, 1518 or 1519 - 1594), as seen in his *Removal of the Body of St. Mark* (1562–1566, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice). [8] David Curry detected the influence of El Greco (Greek, 1541 - 1614): "Under troubled skies recalling Spanish Toledo as much as any American summer retreat, individual figures and groups strike poses conjuring elements of social performance." [9] Finally, Carol Clark and Allen Guttman have suggested that Bellows borrowed the figure of the man who reclines on the grass at the right from Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). [10]

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 George Bellows, *Tennis Tournament (Tennis at Newport)*, 1919, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot (1876–1967), 1967



fig. 2 George Bellows, *The Tournament*, 1919, oil on canvas, private collection



fig. 3 George Bellows, *Tennis*, 1920, lithograph on chine collé, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1983.1.92



fig. 4 George Bellows, *The Tournament*, 1920, lithograph on chine collé, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Reba and Dave Williams Collection, Florian Carr Fund and Gift of the Print Research Foundation, 2008.115.12



fig. 5 George Bellows, *Tennis at Newport*, 1920, oil on canvas, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, The James W. and Frances Gibson McGlothlin Collection, 2017.155

NOTES

- [1] Bellows quoted in Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 115. The experience resulted in three paintings of what Bellows called this “fortunately respectable” subject, *Polo Game* (1910, private collection, Houston, TX), *Polo at Lakewood* (1910, Columbus Museum of Art, OH), and *Crowd at the Polo Game* (1910, private collection).
- [2] Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (New York, 1965), 245.
- [3] *Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State* (Boston, MA, 1937), 239.
- [4] J. Carter Brown, “Tennis Tournament,” in *Sport in Art from American Museums*, ed. Reilly Rhodes (Indianapolis, IN, 1990), 80–81, no. 36.
- [5] Lauris Mason and Joan Ludman, *The Lithographs of George Bellows: A Catalogue Raisonné*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, 1992), respectively M. 71 and M. 72.
- [6] Glenn Peck, “Bellows and the Casino at Newport,” in *George Bellows' Catalogue Raisonné*, H. V. Allison & Co., 2009, <http://hvallison.com/ViewEssay.aspx?id=2>.
- [7] For a discussion of these two important influences on Bellows’s late work, see Michael Quick, “Technique and Theory: The Evolution of George Bellows’s Painting Style,” in *The Paintings of George Bellows*, by Michael Quick, Jane Myers, Marianne Doezema, and Franklin Kelly (Fort Worth, TX, 1992), 63–65 and 75–77.
- [8] For a discussion of this device in Venetian painting, see David Rosand, “Theater and Structure in the Art of Paolo Veronese,” in *Painting in Cinquecento Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto* (New Haven, CT, 1982), 147–148. Bellows used a similar compositional structure in *Gramercy Park* (private collection), completed in May 1920.
- [9] David Curry, “Life of Leisure: Polo, Parks, and Tennis, 1910–1920,” in *George Bellows*, ed. Charles Brock (Washington, DC, 2012), 141.
- [10] Carol Clark and Allen Guttmann, “Artists and Athletes,” *Journal of Sports History* 22 (Summer 1995): 106–107.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The finely woven, plain-weave fabric support is unlined and remains mounted on its original stretcher with its original tacking margins. [1] The artist applied paint wet-

in-wet over a commercially prepared, moderately thick white ground. [2] There is visible brushwork throughout the composition and impasto in the trees but very little glazing of the paint. There are several large unfinished areas in the figures that reveal intricate drawing in a line resembling pencil executed directly on the ground as a guide for the painting. Throughout the unfinished figures, rapidly applied brushwork that fills in the outlines of the drawing in broad, colored areas provides insight into Bellows's working method.

The painting is in excellent condition with very little cracking and only a couple of small losses of paint in the lower-right corner. The surface is coated with a layer of synthetic resin varnish.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] Because the initial examination report suggests the painting was unlined with its tacking margins intact, the tack holes were enlarged, and the painting was slack on the stretcher to the point of resting on the stretcher bars, it seems reasonable to think that the painting has never been off this stretcher. A reinforcing fabric strip of folded-over heavy-weight linen fabric was stapled to the weakened tacking margins in 1981.
- [2] The priming covers all of the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting; this usually indicates that the priming was commercially prepared rather than artist applied.
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PROVENANCE

The artist [1882-1925]; by inheritance to his wife, Emma S. Bellows [1884-1959]; her estate; purchased July 1969 through (H.V. Allison & Co., New York) by Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia; gift 1983 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Tennis Tournament

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

1969 George Bellows, H.V. Allison & Co., New York, 1969, no. 7, cover repro.

1986 Gifts to the Nation: Selected Acquisitions from the Collections of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1986, unnumbered checklist, repro.

1991 Sport in Art from American Museums, The National Art Museum of Sport [inaugural exhibition], Indianapolis; Phoenix Art Museum; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; IBM Gallery of Science and Art, New York, 1991-1992, no. 36, repro.

2000 George Bellows in Newport and Beyond, Newport Art Museum, 2000.

2012 George Bellows, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2012-2013, pl. 45 (shown only in New York).

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- 1973 Young, Mahonri Sharp. *The Eight*. New York, 1973: 126, color pl. 53.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 20, repro.
- 1991 Rhodes, Reilly, ed. *Sport in Art from American Museums*. Exh. cat. The National Museum of Sport, New York, 1991: no. 36.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 32, repro.
- 1995 Clark, Carol, and Allen Guttmann. "Artists and Athletes." *Journal of Sports History* 22 (Summer 1995): 105-107, repro.
- 2009 Peck, Glenn C. "Bellows and the Casino at Newport," *George Bellows' Catalogue Raisonné*. H.V. Allison & Co., 2009. Online resource, URL: <http://www.hvallison.com>. Accessed 16 August 2016.
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