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39-01 George Bellows and the Ashcan School

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George Bellows, *A Stag at Sharkey's*, detail, 1909, The Cleveland Museum of Art

- This is Section 39 on the Ashcan School, roughly 1890 to 1920 and I focus on George Bellows but first…

The Ashcan School and the Eight: A Summary

- The Ashcan School was a loose collective of early 20th-century American artists, active roughly from 1900 to 1920, primarily associated with George Bellows, Robert Henri, and John Sloan. They were committed to New York City Realism, focusing on the vibrant, unvarnished scenes of everyday urban life—from crowded streets and tenements to saloons, boxing matches, and working-class figures. Their name, often considered derogatory, reflected their interest in the gritty, "ash can" reality of the city, in stark contrast to the idealized European styles dominating official art circles.
- The Eight refers to a specific group of artists who, in 1908, organized a pivotal exhibition at the Macbeth Galleries in New York. The eight members were Robert Henri, George Luks, William Glackens, John Sloan, Everett Shinn (the five core realists) plus Arthur B. Davies, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast (three artists whose styles differed but shared a desire for independent exhibition). This event was a rebellion against the restrictive exhibition practices of the National Academy of Design.

Impact and Legacy:

- The collective impact of this group was revolutionary. By championing scenes of contemporary American life with expressive, often rapid brushwork, they effectively shifted the subject matter of American painting. Their greatest legacy

was challenging the art establishment and fighting for the artist's freedom to choose their subject and exhibition venue. This independent spirit paved the way for the wave of European modernism that arrived with the 1913 Armory Show and fundamentally prepared the American art world for the 20th century.

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Ashcan School artists and friends at John French Sloan's Philadelphia Studio, 1898

Ashcan School artists and friends at John French Sloan's Philadelphia Studio, 1898

- Let us look at its origins. It all started with the Philadelphia Five: Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens, and Everett Shinn. These artists met in Philadelphia in the 1890s, often working as newspaper illustrators. Under Henri's influence, they embraced a philosophy of painting "**life as it is**," focusing on the **energy and grit** of the modern American city rather than idealised academic subjects.
- When they moved to New York, rejected the conservative National Academy of Design and formed a loose group called **The Eight in 1908**. This included the core Philadelphia Five, and three others (Arthur B. Davies, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast). The exhibition they held at the Macbeth Galleries was a landmark rebellion that asserted the artists' right to exhibit their work independently, regardless of academic approval.
- The name Ashcan School was first used, later, in 1916 by Art Young in an article (in The Masses). He wrote their work featured "**too many pictures of ashcans and girls hitching up their skirts on Horatio Street**." The Eight were amused by the term and continued calling themselves the Eight but in 1934 an art historian (Holger Cahill) used it as a formal description and the name has stuck.
- Horatio Street was in Greenwich Village and was frequented by artists, Bohemians and working-class families. They were known for painting urban realism—back alleys, crowded saloons, tenements, and ordinary working people.

- I have not yet mentioned **George Bellows**. **Robert Henri** as the **philosophical leader** who inspired the initial Philadelphia Five, and George Bellows was his student and his outstanding talent, subject matter, prolific output, and immediate critical success led to him becoming the prodigy whose electrifying canvases became the most famous visual shorthand for the Ashcan School's commitment to gritty, honest American realism. Today he is the best known member of the group and I have chosen 12 of his works to begin the talk followed by one work by five other leading members.

George Bellows (1882-1925), *A Stag at Sharkey's*, 1909, 92 × 122.5 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland

George Bellows (1882-1925), *A Stag at Sharkey's*, 1909, 92 × 122.5 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland

- George Bellows died young but his life was a brilliant flash in American art.
- He was born in Columbus, Ohio, to an architect father and a mother who campaigned against women smoking, He was a talented athlete, initially considering a **professional baseball career**. He dropped out of **Ohio State University** in 1904 to move to **New York**, intending to become an **illustrator**. He enrolled in the **New York School of Art**, studying under **Robert Henri**, the **spiritual father of the Ashcan School**. Henri's famous maxim, "**Forget about art and just paint what interests you**," became Bellows's creed. He was **fiercely disciplined**, working in a **cold studio** with an electric heater, which he called his "studio fire". A non-conformist, Bellows was politically a socialist, often sketching the brutal realities of urban life that others ignored.
- He was **happily married to Emma Story**, a fellow artist, and had two daughters. He died tragically young in 1925, **aged just 42**, from a **ruptured appendix**. His early death was described by a contemporary as "**the most terrible blow American art has ever suffered**."
- This is an early and quintessential Bellows work, completed when he was **just 27**, establishing his reputation for raw, visceral realism. It depicts an **illegal boxing match** held in a smoke-filled, claustrophobic saloon on Broadway, owned by retired boxer **Tom Sharkey**. The atmosphere is less about sport and more about **brute force** and **animalistic frenzy**. The composition is a chaotic tangle of **straining muscles, sweaty torsos, and contorted faces**.

- A “Stag” was an outsider who was given temporary membership of the club to enable them to fight.
- A popular, though **unverified, story** is that Bellows had to attend these illegal fights, **risking police raids**, to capture the energy and authenticity, often sketching on the back of his programmes. The work was initially **controversial**, receiving **strong criticism** for its lack of "**refinement**" and its "**brutality**," but others praised its "**unparalleled energy**." One critic noted its "**crude, powerful realism that makes you feel the thud of the gloves**."

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *Forty-two Kids*, 1907, 107 × 152 cm, Corcoran Gallery of Art (on loan to the National Gallery of Art), Washington D.C.

George Bellows (1882-1925), *Forty-two Kids*, 1907, 107 × 152 cm, Corcoran Gallery of Art (on loan to the National Gallery of Art), Washington D.C.

- Another early painting captures the **chaos of street life** on the docks of the **East River**, specifically the **naked abandon of boys swimming off a pier**.
- The title is literal: Bellows counted 42 children in the scene. The central figures are a **lively assortment of naked boys**, leaping, sprawling, and drying themselves on the wooden pier.
- Contemporary critics initially disliked the "**unpleasant subject matter**" and the "**crude drawing**" of the figures. However, it was later praised for its "**unsentimental but profoundly human**" observation. An early review in the New York Sun called it "**the poetry of the unwashed**," a backhanded compliment that captured the painting's essence.
- This work was painted during **Bellows's first year as a serious, professional artist in New York**. He lived in **poverty**, sketching constantly. He had rented his first small, freezing studio on Broadway. The painting's subject reflects the **social realities** of the time: the children of immigrants and the working poor using the **polluted river as their escape and swimming pool** during the oppressive New York summers. This was a **common sight**, yet considered too "**lowbrow**" for academic art. Bellows was **deliberately rejecting the refined European tradition**.
- Bellows used a **limited, almost monochromatic palette**, relying on browns, greys, and muddy blues, a common trait of the Ashcan School. He felt this subdued colour scheme made the subject matter feel more urgent and real,

eschewing decorative appeal.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *Portrait of Paddy Flannigan*, 1908, 76.8 × 63.5 cm, private collection

George Bellows (1882-1925), *Portrait of Paddy Flannigan*, 1908, 76.8 × 63.5 cm, private collection

- ***Portrait of Paddy Flannigan*** (1908) is a foundational work of the American realist movement. It moves past genteel portraiture to confront the harsh realities of early 20th-century urban poverty.
- This is a portrait of Paddy Flannigan, a young, impoverished street urchin—believed to be a former boxer—and elevates him to the status of a monumental figure, challenging the viewer's perception of dignity and social standing.
- Paddy stands dramatically posed against a somber, dark background, which intensifies the stark contrast of his pale, battered face and exposed torso. His **shirt is ripped** and hangs loosely around his arms, focusing the eye on his **bare chest**—a visual signifier of his **vulnerability and destitution**. Yet, Bellows's handling ensures that Paddy is far from pitiable. His **posture is resolute**, his **hand hooked confidently in a belt loop**, a gesture of ownership over his circumstance.
- Bellows employs a **vigorous, expressive brushwork**, particularly in rendering the boy's face, which is mottled with hues of red and yellow, suggesting recent bruises or the harshness of life on the streets. The most striking element is Paddy's direct, challenging gaze. He peers out from under **half-closed, puffy lids**, staring straight at the viewer with an air of **defiance and resignation**. By giving this working-class subject the theatrical staging typically reserved for Renaissance nobles, Bellows forces the viewer to acknowledge the resilience and complex humanity of those on the margins of society.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *Both Members of This Club*, 1909, 114.3 × 160.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

George Bellows (1882-1925), *Both Members of This Club*, 1909, 114.3 × 160.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

- This was painted the same year as ***A Stag at Sharkey's***, and is his second and most famous boxing work.
- It shows a brutal confrontation between a black boxer and a white boxer, with the title sarcastically alluding to the implicit racism of the era—both men are members of the "club" only in the ring, where they are reduced to commodities for the crowd's pleasure.
- The composition uses intense, dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, emphasising the sweat, blood, and strain. The figures are powerfully built, almost grotesque, their anatomy exaggerated to convey immense force. The crowd is a blur of contorted faces, reflecting a mob mentality. When it was exhibited one critic wrote, "**It smells of the prize ring, the sweat, the resin, and the blood**," while another simply stated, "**It is the strongest picture painted in America this year**."
- **By 1909**, his career was accelerating rapidly. He won the prestigious **Hallgarten Prize** from the **National Academy of Design**, marking a significant official recognition **despite his anti-establishment subject matter**. He was living on **1947 Broadway** and **financially supported himself partly through illustrating for magazines** like *The Masses* and *Harper's Weekly*, which reinforced his eye for journalistic detail.
- The **boxing craze** was a **massive popular phenomenon**, reflecting America's muscular, expansionist mood. However, **prizefighting was illegal** in New York

State **until 1920**. Bellows famously stated about the painting, "**I don't know anything about boxing. I'm just painting two men trying to kill each other**."

- The painting utilises a restricted palette of earth tones and dark reds, a hallmark of his early Ashcan style, lending the scene a somber, brutal gravity.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *New York*, 1911, 106.7 × 152.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

George Bellows (1882-1925), *New York*, 1911, 106.7 × 152.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

- This is Bellows's vision of a **busy, snow-swept intersection** in the **heart of Manhattan**, believed to be the area around **Madison Square and Broadway**. It shifts the artist's focus from individual events to the overwhelming **scale and drama** of the urban environment itself. Horse-drawn **carts struggle** through the slush, dwarfed by the towering buildings and the sweeping perspective. Critical reception was mixed; while some praised the "**magnificent vigour**" and "**powerful handling of atmosphere**," others found the technique too rough, calling it "**journalistic sketching elevated to a large scale**."
- The year 1911 was personally and professionally significant for Bellows. **He married Emma Story**, marking a period of stability in his life. The painting reflects his **growing confidence** and desire to tackle monumental subjects. This era was also a **high point for the Ashcan School's influence**, but Bellows was already **beginning to move beyond the dark tonalities** of his early work, introducing a greater sense of **light and atmosphere**. The subject, a severe winter day, highlights a **key cultural moment**: the shift from the **horse-drawn city to the motorised, modern metropolis**. The painting captures the last vestiges of 19th-century transport struggling against the inevitable march of 20th-century infrastructure.
- A fascinating, technical detail is **Bellows's use of Robert Henri's technique** of applying paint with spontaneity, almost "**alla prima**," directly on the canvas, to keep the brushwork fresh and energetic, mirroring the hustle of the city itself.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *Men of the Docks*, 1912, 114 × 163 cm, National Gallery, London

George Bellows (1882-1925), *Men of the Docks*, 1912, 114 × 163 cm, National Gallery, London

- This is one of **Bellows's largest and most ambitious canvases**, depicting a **group of dock workers** huddled together on a pier, the figures rendered with monumental weight and dignity. The men are shown against a **backdrop of the East River**, with ships and factories looming large, emphasising their precarious position at the margin of the industrial economy. The mood is sombre, yet the men possess a **rugged, almost heroic quality** in their struggle against the **cold** and the massive environment. The composition uses a **strong receding diagonal lines** created by the ship and the building, **pulling the eye into the deep space** of the working waterfront. When first exhibited, it drew attention not only for its subject but for its scale, which was unusually large for a contemporary American realist subject. The painting's **purchase by the National Gallery, London**, in 1927, was a **significant international recognition** of American modern art.
- In 1912, **Bellows was a father** for the first time, a development that often broadened his humanistic perspective. He had achieved considerable success, allowing him the freedom to **pursue large-scale projects** like this. The subject reflects the growing **societal awareness of labour issues**. The early 1910s saw **intense industrial unrest and strikes**, and Bellows was politically sympathetic to the working class, seeing them as the true, unvarnished substance of the nation. He was actively contributing to the **socialist magazine *The Masses*** at this time.

- A lesser-known fact is that Bellows used an **underpainting technique**, relying on a **reddish-brown tone** to establish the mood and tonal richness, visible in the dark areas, giving the painting a solidity reminiscent of older European masters like **Velázquez, whom he greatly admired**.
- This painting secured Bellows's place as a **painter of national importance**.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *Cliff Dwellers*, 1913, 101.5 × 106.7 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

George Bellows (1882-1925), *Cliff Dwellers*, 1913, 101.5 × 106.7 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

- This painting offers a **vibrant, chaotic, and panoramic view** of the crowded tenements of the **Lower East Side** on a **sweltering summer evening**. The title, ***Cliff Dwellers,*** is a **satirical reference to the city's inhabitants living stacked up in high tenement buildings**, like primitive people in vertical canyons. The scene is bursting with activity: people spill out onto fire escapes, stoops, and the street below, seeking air and community. **Children play, a man sleeps** on a fire escape, and **laundry hangs like banners**.
- Critics immediately recognised its **documentary power**, praising its "**humour and sociological truth**," though some found the sheer number of figures and the compressed space overwhelming. A contemporary review called it "**the honest chaos of poverty**."
- The year **1913 was pivotal** for Bellows and American art: he was instrumental in organising the **Armory Show in New York**, which introduced **European Modernism (Cubism, Fauvism)** to a shocked American public. Although a realist, **Bellows had an open mind** and was **supportive** of the modernist wave, even serving on the show's organising committee. This painting, however, is a strong defence of **American Realism**, proving that local subject matter could be just as compelling as **European abstraction**.
- The work's colour palette is **brighter and more varied** than his earlier, dark Ashcan pieces, showing the **influence of Impressionism** which Bellows began to integrate after seeing the works at the Armory Show. The painting is a visual

document of the immigrant experience—specifically the **Jewish and Italian communities** of the Lower East Side—and the intense pressure cooker of early 20th-century urbanisation.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *A Day in June*, 1913, 114 × 163 cm, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit

George Bellows (1882-1925), *A Day in June*, 1913, 114 × 163 cm, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit

- This painting marks a **clear shift in Bellows's subject matter** from the gritty streets to the **genteel pleasures of Central Park**. It depicts a sophisticated, **leisure-class crowd** enjoying a pleasant afternoon, suggesting Bellows's life was expanding beyond the lower-class subjects that defined the Ashcan School. The composition is a blend of portraiture and landscape, with fashionable women in **large hats** and **well-dressed men** promenading or relaxing on the lush lawn. The technique is noticeably **lighter and more Impressionistic** than his previous dark, dynamic works, featuring broken brushstrokes and a high-key palette to capture the dazzling sunlight and the soft green of the grass. The change in subject was both a **conscious artistic choice** to master light and a reflection of his **increasing financial success**, allowing him to observe a different side of New York life.
- **In 1913, Bellows was enjoying the fruits of his hard work**; he moved into a **more comfortable studio** and his family life was settled. This period reflects a self-imposed artistic challenge: to apply his **Ashcan principles**—painting "life" as he saw it—to **subjects of leisure**, proving that realism was not solely reserved for scenes of poverty or violence.
- The painting generated discussion among **critics**, who noticed the stylistic change. Some **accused him of selling out** to "**polite society**," while others saw it as a **maturation of his talent**, showcasing his ability to handle subtle light effects.

- A surprising detail is **Bellows's meticulous planning** for this piece, using a **system of colour notation**, possibly derived from the theories of Hardesty Gillmore Maratta, to achieve a specific harmony of greens and blues, making the painting less spontaneous than it appears.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *Portrait of Anne*, 1917, 128.9 × 106.7 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

George Bellows (1882-1925), *Portrait of Anne*, 1917, 128.9 × 106.7 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

- This is a **tender and intimate portrait of Bellows's younger daughter, Anne**, a subject that dominated his output in the mid-to-late 1910s. The portrait shows the child seated, her face captured with a serious and contemplative expression. The colour scheme is rich, **moving away from the earth tones** of his early realism towards a greater complexity, with deep reds, blacks, and blues creating a solid yet atmospheric interior. The focus is entirely on the sitter's character and psychological depth, a pivot from the external, public drama of his earlier works. The **portraiture of his wife, Emma**, and his two daughters, **Anne and Jean**, became a **crucial part of his later output**. Critics often praised these works for their "**psychological acuteness**" and "**unaffected tenderness**," seeing them as a balance to the violence of his boxing scenes.
- **By 1917, Bellows was an established figure**, spending summers in **Newport, Rhode Island**, and exploring different art forms, particularly **lithography**, which allowed him to rapidly disseminate his political and social commentary. This period of focusing on domestic portraiture coincided with **the turmoil of World War I**, providing a retreat into the stability of family life. The work showcases Bellows's exploration of the **Dynamic Symmetry theory** developed by **Jay Hambidge**, a complex proportional system that Bellows believed added **formal strength** and permanence to his compositions. While his paintings **appear spontaneously realistic**, his technique was often based on **sophisticated geometric layouts** beneath the surface. This marriage of formal theory with

intimate realism is a characteristic of his late style.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *The Murder of Edith Cavell*, 1918, 116.8 × 142.2 cm, Nebraska State Museum of Art, Lincoln

George Bellows (1882-1925), *The Murder of Edith Cavell*, 1918, 116.8 × 142.2 cm, Nebraska State Museum of Art, Lincoln

- This is Bellows's most **shocking and overtly political work**, part of his series on the **atrocities of World War I**. It depicts the **execution of the British nurse, Edith Cavell**, by a German firing squad in 1915 for **helping Allied soldiers escape occupied Belgium**. The scene is rendered with dramatic, expressionistic horror. The composition is **dark and tightly cropped**, forcing the viewer into the immediate moment of the execution. The work was **based on newspaper reports** and propaganda images, making it an act of moral visualisation. The **critical reception was intense**: the painting was both hailed as a "**necessary act of protest**" and condemned by some as "**sensationalist propaganda**" that lacked the authenticity of his earlier realist works.
- In 1918, **Bellows was deeply affected by the war** and felt art had a **moral obligation** to react to global events. He was working almost exclusively in **lithography** and illustration for a period, dedicating his skills to anti-war and pro-Allied imagery. This painting was reproduced as lithographic prints which are now held by the major museums in the US. It is a powerful testament to the shift in his art from chronicling the local social scene to engaging with global moral and political crises. It highlights the psychological stress of the war on the home front, even for those far removed from the fighting. Bellows viewed the **German Empire's actions as a monstrous violation of humanity**.
- A surprising fact is that this work, along with his other war pictures, **was created not for political profit but from a deep, almost religious conviction**,

contrasting sharply with the detached observation of his early New York scenes.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *Two Women*, 1924, 150.5 × 166.4 cm, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

George Bellows (1882-1925), *Two Women*, 1924, 150.5 × 166.4 cm, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

- George Bellows's ***Two Women*** (1924) represents a **departure from the raw, urban realism** of his earlier Ashcan School period toward a more formalised, classical approach to portraiture. **Painted near the end of his life**, this work shows Bellows's keen interest in **compositional theory and technical discipline**, influenced by his study of **Renaissance masters** and the structural concepts advocated by his teacher, **Robert Henri**.
- The painting depicts **two female figures**: one nude, seated and facing away, and one fully clothed. This juxtaposition of the **exposed and the concealed** creates a formal and **psychological tension**. The composition is **highly structured**, utilising geometric theories and a **flatter application of paint** that contrasts sharply with the heavy impasto of works like *Stag at Sharkey*'s. The nude figure's simplified form and pose **recall classical statuary**, while the clothed woman's vibrant dress and serene demeanour introduce a contemporary element.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *Dempsey and Firpo*, 1924, 129.5 × 165.7 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

George Bellows (1882-1925), *Dempsey and Firpo*, 1924, 129.5 × 165.7 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

- **Bellows's last great painting** returns to his iconic subject of the **boxing match**, depicting the dramatic moment in the **1923 fight** where the **Argentine boxer Luis Ángel Firpo** knocked the **American champion Jack Dempsey** out of the ring. **Bellows was ringside as a newspaper illustrator** and captured this sensational, fleeting moment with journalistic immediacy and artistic flair. The composition is a **dizzying swirl of action**: Firpo is a powerful, erect triangle of muscle, while Dempsey is flung violently backward, a tangled mass of white flesh and rope. The faces of the ringside reporters, including a **bald man often identified as Bellows himself**, are a chorus of shock and frenzy. **Painted in 1924, just months before his death**, this work shows Bellows at the height of his technical powers, having **moved his family** to a house in **Woodstock, New York**, for a more rural life.
- His return to the boxing theme symbolised his enduring fascination with raw human spectacle. The painting uses a vibrant, high-key palette and a complex, highly organised composition based on the principles of Dynamic Symmetry, which he was studying intensely at the time.
- A significant anecdote is that **Bellows's depiction is inaccurate**: he shows **Firpo punching with his left hand**, whereas the actual knockout was with the **right**. Bellows consciously **altered the facts** for dramatic and compositional effect, demonstrating that for him, truth was artistic, not merely documentary.
- **Bellows died on 8th January 1925, at the age of 42**, following a burst

appendix, a sudden and tragic event that **shocked the art world**. This work and others of his last period show a **move towards a simpler, more contemplative realism**, perhaps influenced by the **quiet life** he had cultivated in Woodstock. His final years were spent experimenting with a **complex technique involving glazes and thin paint** applications over a carefully constructed drawing, aiming for the **luminous quality of the Old Masters**.

- **His legacy** is defined by his **central role in the Ashcan School**, pioneering **American Realism** in the early 20th century. He is best remembered for his **dynamic and unromanticised** depictions of modern urban life, particularly his **dramatic boxing scenes** and gritty, yet dignified, portraits of the **working poor like Paddy Flannigan**.

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Robert Henri (1865-1929), *Portrait of Willie Gee*, 1904, 81.3 × 66 cm, Newark Museum of Art, Newark, New Jersey

Robert Henri (1865-1929), *Portrait of Willie Gee*, 1904, 81.3 × 66 cm, Newark Museum of Art, Newark, New Jersey

- We now come to **five more leading artists of the Ashcan School**. The first is **Robert Henri**, the **charismatic leader** and philosophical anchor of the Ashcan School.
- He was born **Robert Henry Cozad** in Cincinnati, Ohio, he changed his name after his father, a gambler and real-estate developer, **fled after a shooting incident**. Henri studied at the **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts** and the **Académie Julian in Paris**, embracing the dark tonalities of Spanish masters like Velázquez and Goya.
- His philosophy, "**Art for life's sake**" rejected the genteel subject matter of the American Academy, urging students like Bellows and Sloan to paint the raw, pulsing life of the city. He was an electric and influential teacher at the New York School of Art, shaping a generation of realists. He was known for his intense blue eyes and his unwavering belief in the individual's artistic vision. He once said, "**The object of painting is simple—to make a record of life**." He died in 1929, leaving a legacy as both a pivotal artist and an inspiring educator whose influence extended far beyond the Ashcan School.
- This portrait, painted five years before Bellows's major breakthrough, is a quintessential Henri work and an early manifesto for the Ashcan School's **humanist realism**. It depicts **Willie Gee, an African-American boy** from the working-class neighbourhood near Henri's studio, holding an apple. The composition is simple, using Henri's **characteristic dark, rich palette** and

broad, vigorous brushwork (the **Manet and Hals influence**) to focus intensely on the boy's face and personality. The background is a non-descript wash, ensuring the viewer focuses on the individual's character, not his environment.

- When exhibited, its **lack of sentimentality** and its subject—a child of the poor, without a wealthy patron—was a **deliberate challenge to traditional portraiture**. Critics were divided, with some finding the subject "**too common**" but admitting the portrait's "**extraordinary spirit**." At the time, Henri was the leading voice of the realist rebellion in New York. The political and social context was one of growing social reform movements, and Henri's choice to paint a child of colour with dignity was a quiet, powerful statement against prevailing racial stereotypes in American culture.

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William Glackens (1870-1938), *At Mouquin's*, 1905, 122 × 91.5 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

William Glackens (1870-1938), *At Mouquin's*, 1905, 122 × 91.5 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

- **William Glackens was a founder of the Ashcan School**, initially working as an **acclaimed newspaper illustrator** in **Philadelphia** alongside Sloan and Luks before moving to New York in 1896. He studied at the **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts** and briefly in **Paris**, where he was heavily influenced by **French Impressionism**, particularly **Manet and Renoir**. Unlike the dark realism of many Ashcan painters, Glackens became known for a **bright, vibrant palette** and subjects focused on fashionable society, parks, and café life.
- He was a **quiet, gentle man**, often described as having an "**easy-going temperament**" and a sharp eye for colour. He once told a friend, "**I love all the things that are alive and changing**." He became a **pivotal figure in American modern art**, not just through his painting but as an **advisor to collector Albert C. Barnes**, helping him amass one of the world's most significant collections of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art. He died in 1938, a respected figure who bridged the gap between American realism and European modernity.
- ***At Mouquin's*** depicts a **fashionable New York restaurant**, a popular spot for the artistic and social elite. The scene features a man and a woman dining, surrounded by the subtle glamour and mirrored reflections of the establishment. The woman's face is turned away from her cheerful companion, **appearing melancholic or detached**, hinting at a complex, possibly strained psychological state. The composition's **use of mirrors to multiply the space echoes Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère***, a sophisticated European touch.

- The work was initially praised for its "**Manet-like sophistication**" but was considered too focused on bourgeois life by some purist realists. Glackens painted this while still associated with the gritty Ashcan group, but it shows his preference for the more pleasurable, stylish aspects of urban documentation. At the time, the subject reflected a new American **fascination with high-end leisure and social spaces**, where new relationships and private dramas unfolded in public view. Glackens was using his reportorial eye to document social life, not just poverty.
- A remarkable fact is that Glackens's primary job was illustrating the Spanish-American War in Cuba for *McClure's Magazine*, a stark contrast to the sophisticated urban scene depicted here.

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George Luks (1867-1933), *The Old Duchess*, 1905, 91.4 × 66.4 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

George Luks (1867-1933), *The Old Duchess*, 1905, 91.4 × 66.4 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- **George Luks** (pronounced “Lukes”) was the **most flamboyant and arguably the most boisterous member** of the Ashcan School, a man known for his **drinking, brawling, and larger-than-life personality**.
- Born in **Pennsylvania**, he **studied in Europe**, briefly in **Düsseldorf, London, and Paris**, but claimed his true training came from "**the slums and docks**." He was a **newspaper illustrator** in Philadelphia and New York before becoming a painter. Luks believed in painting with raw, uninhibited force, once declaring, "**Goya, Hals, and Velázquez are the three greatest painters. I am a pupil of all three**." His approach was one of **exuberant, almost grotesque realism**.
- His personality was captured in the quote, "**They can’t teach it. You gotta know it. I’m the best there is! I’m a genius!**" He died in 1933 after **collapsing on a New York street**, allegedly following a **bar fight**. His legacy is his unbridled energy and his powerful, compassionate portrayal of the city's overlooked outcasts.
- ***The Old Duchess*** is his powerful, unsentimental portrait of an **elderly, working-class woman**, possibly a **street vendor** or a neighbourhood character, captured in a moment of stoic rest. The woman is seated in simple, dark clothing, her hands clasped, her face a road map of a hard life. Luks uses a **thick, pasty impasto** and a dark, sombre palette, lending the figure a powerful, almost sculptural presence against the flat background.
- **The term "Duchess" is used ironically**, granting this humble, common woman

a title of nobility, suggesting the artist's belief in the intrinsic dignity of his subject. When first shown, critics were struck by the painting's **brutal honesty**. One reviewer noted its "**crude energy**" but admitted that Luks had "**painted a soul, not a mere likeness**." This work exemplified the Ashcan ideal of finding meaningful art in the ordinary and the lowbrow. Luks, in 1905, was fully immersed in documenting the immigrant areas of the Lower East Side, relying on the vibrant street life for inspiration.

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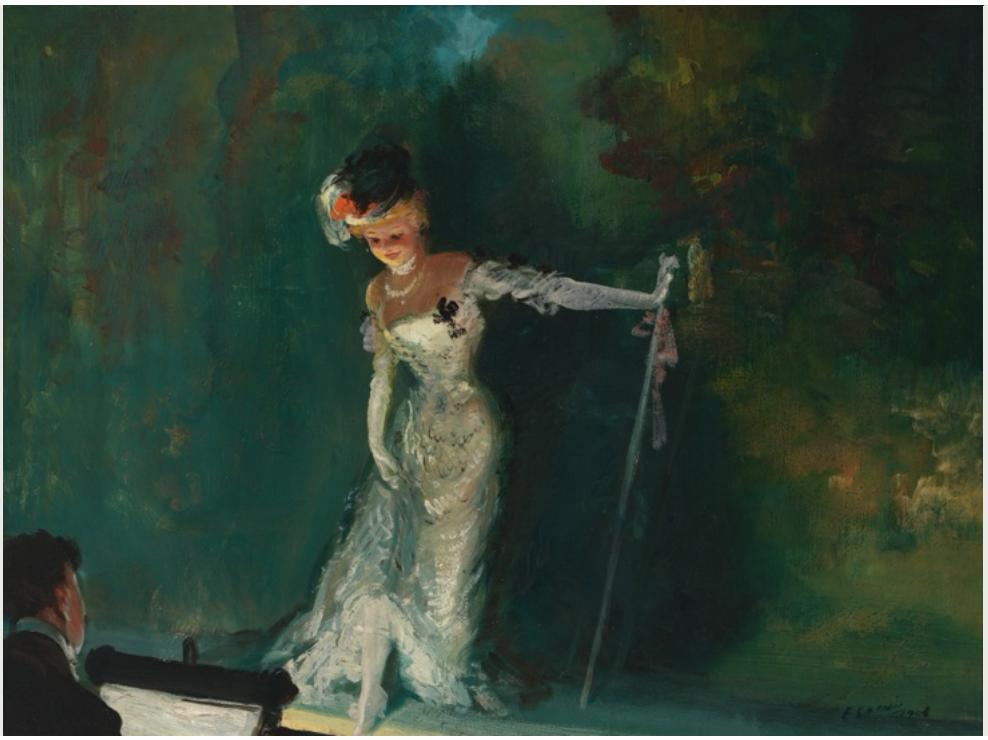

Everett Shinn (1876-1953), *Revue*, 1908, 46 × 61.6 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Everett Shinn (1876-1953), *Revue*, 1908, 46 × 61.6 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

- Everett Shinn (pronounced “shin”) was the Ashcan School’s **master of theatrical and interior urban scenes**.
- Born in **New Jersey**, he studied **industrial design** before becoming a **newspaper illustrator for the Philadelphia Press**, where he was part of the original “**Philadelphia Five**.” He **moved to New York** in 1897. Shinn’s style was heavily influenced by the **French artists Degas and Forain**, focusing on scenes of working-class entertainment—vaudeville, music halls, and theatres—captured with dynamic perspective and an almost theatrical flair. He was an **excellent decorative painter** and muralist, leading to a **successful career painting murals** for the homes of wealthy patrons like **Stanford White**.
- He was known for his **dapper dress and turbulent romantic life**, earning him a reputation as the group’s ***bon vivant***. He died in 1953, the **last surviving member of The Eight**. Shinn’s focus was less on social criticism and more on the glamour and artifice of city spectacle. He famously said, "**I love to see the expression of people enjoying themselves**."
- “By 1903, the theatre and **thriving vaudeville houses** that drew **crowds from every social class** had become Everett Shinn’s **primary subject**. Typical of much of Shinn's work, *Revue* shows a fragmentary glimpse of the theatre from which the whole scene can be imagined. Shinn uses **broad, loose brushstrokes** to reveal a dancer, her **face warmly bathed** by the footlights, **exposing her ankle in mid-curtsy**. His brushwork picks out the dainty ruffles and elaborate

textures of the dancer's dress, while at **lower left** the gently oblique point of view includes the **orchestra leader**. *Revue* was one of the paintings **Shinn selected to represent his work** in the landmark 1908 exhibition of urban realism organised by **Robert Henri at the Macbeth Galleries in New York**. The Eight, as the eight artists in the show were quickly dubbed, **had individual styles**, but all were rebelling against the rarefied and aristocratic themes long demanded by the academic establishment." (Whitney)

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John Sloan (1871-1951), Backyards, Greenwich Village, 1914, 66 × 81.3 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

John Sloan (1871-1951), Backyards, Greenwich Village, 1914, 66 × 81.3 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

- **John Sloan** was perhaps the **most socially conscious and empathetic painter** of the Ashcan School, often called the "**Boswell of the American scene**."
- Born in Pennsylvania, he also worked as an **illustrator for the Philadelphia Press** and was heavily **influenced** by **Robert Henri**. Sloan settled in **Greenwich Village,** New York, in 1904, becoming a tireless chronicler of the **everyday life of ordinary citizens**, particularly women. He was **politically active as a socialist**, serving as the art editor for the socialist magazine ***The Masses*** from 1912 to 1916.
- Unlike Bellows, whose realism was often dynamic and sensational, Sloan's was intimate and observational, **capturing quiet moments** of human activity. He was a **meticulous artist** who kept detailed diaries, providing invaluable insight into the Ashcan movement. He once stated, "**I am still of the opinion that the study of life is the only worthwhile thing**." He lived a **long life, dying in 1951**, remembered for his gentle satire and honest portrayal of the American experience.
- ***Backyards, Greenwich Village*** is a superb example of Sloan's dedication to capturing the hidden, private life of the city. It depicts the **rear of tenement buildings** where women are engaged in mundane, everyday activities: **hanging laundry**, talking, and simply existing in their small, shared, semi-private spaces. The composition uses the **clotheslines and fences as a grid** to frame these intimate scenes.

- Critics praised its "**warm humanity**" and its honest, un-romanticised view of urban domesticity, calling it "**a poem of the clothes-line**."
- By 1914, **Sloan was deeply engaged in socialist politics**, and this painting reflects his belief that the life of the common person was the most worthy subject for art. The shift of focus to Greenwich Village backyards reflected the artist's own move to the area, documenting his immediate surroundings. A charming, little-known detail is that Sloan often observed these **scenes from his own window**, treating his easel like a surveillance device to capture human moments unaware.

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George Bellows (1882-1925), *A Stag at Sharkey's*, 1909, 92 × 122.5 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland

George Bellows (1882-1925), *A Stag at Sharkey's*, 1909, 92 × 122.5 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland

- I return to the first work I showed you, *A Stag at Sharkey's*, a work that defines the whole School.
- It breaks away from the **academic tradition** by **showing the** raw, unglamorous heart of early 20th-century New York—specifically, an **illegal boxing club**.
- It uses **vigorous, energetic brushwork** and **stark contrasts** to capture the brutal, fleeting moment of human conflict, again rejecting the polished academic style of the era.
- And it shows the unseen side of city life, **focusing on working-class entertainment and unrestrained passion**, which was the **core mission of the Ashcan artists**.

39-01 George Bellows and the Ashcan School

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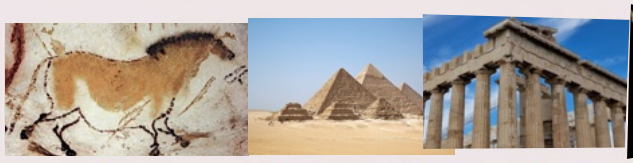
George Bellows, *A Stag at Sharkey's*, detail, 1909, The Cleveland Museum of Art

- That brings me to the end of my talk. The Ashcan School left a lasting legacy. It broke away from the old academic traditions and founded a new modernism based on realism, American Realism.
- Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.



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