

# TRACKING MR. BELLOWS

A Painter's Analysis of an Orphaned Oil, by *Christopher W. Benson*

THE FISHER PRESS 2021



A skeptic is a person who, when he sees the handwriting on the wall, claims it is a forgery.  
— *Dr. Morris Bender*

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This is a story about oil painting, and more specifically about my discovery of an unsigned, unattributed work which I think was made by George Wesley Bellows, a well-known American realist painter of the early 1900s. As I've been researching that picture, it's also become the fulcrum for a wider examination of the artform, which I myself have been practicing now for most of my sixty years. If I think Bellows made this painting, it's due to my long experience working with the same materials.

Virtually nothing is known about the painting in question, save whatever information it offers us in itself. It has no provenance beyond the mid-1980s, when it was bought in an antiques gallery in Pennsylvania. It hasn't got any identifying information fixed to its back or bars, as old paintings often have — traces of their travels akin to the colorful labels pasted on luggage in the days of the great ocean liners, the transcontinental railways and early air travel. We have only a torn fragment of a paper label with a simple decorative border and the remnants of the legend "Grand Central Terminal" set in a san-serif typeface. The initials "CAL", are scrawled vertically on the back of the canvas in grease pencil, but I can find no early 20th century American painter with those initials who worked in this style. There is also the commercial stamp of the stretcher manufacturer, *Fredrix*, one one side, along with the size of that bar, which is 19 inches.

These typographic traces — the label and the stamp — both match styles in circulation in the early 1900s.



From the label, we can conclude that at some point the painting either passed through Grand Central Station in New York, or else that it may have been exhibited in the Grand Central Art Galleries, an exhibition space for the *Painters and Sculptors Gallery Association*. This was a cooperative artist's group that John Singer Sargent founded in 1922, along with some other artists whose names were once well-known, but most of whom have since receded from the public mind.





## WHAT IS BAKED IN THE CAKE

So, who am I, and why am I talking to you about this? And what about the picture? Will I ever show you the *front* of the painting?

Well, you can of course skip ahead and take a look, as I suspect you already have done. If not, it's reproduced on page 42. But I have my reasons for ordering my introduction of the subject as I have, which — if the reader will gamely follow along — will make my thesis, as well as my reason for putting it forward, clear enough. It's a complicated, circuitous story, but the force of my analysis dwells in that complexity. We shall therefore begin at the beginning, which takes place about one hundred years ago at The Art Student's League, an art school in New York City.

No, I am not one hundred and twenty years old. I turned sixty last March. But my grandfather, were he alive, would turn one hundred and twenty this year, and he was a painting and printmaking student at the League in the early 1920s.

John Howard Benson ("Howard" to friends and family) came from a modest clan of waterfront merchants and seafarers in Newport, Rhode Island. On his mother's side, he could trace his line back to a cast of colonial notables, ranging from Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, and on through various ship's captains, governors and even a notorious pirate named Thomas Tew. The pirate was an uncle of Howard's

direct ancestor, also named Thomas, though this tie was fiercely denied in the family for generations, despite the name's recurrence through multiple descendants from the exact period and region whence the pirate came.

Howard's paternal ancestry can only be established as far back as a grandfather, John Andrew Benson, who emigrated in 1842 to New London, Connecticut by way of Nova Scotia and — through his father — from an unknown point of origin across the Atlantic. This may have been England, or even Denmark, as his heritage is recorded in different entries of the New London census as being traceable to both countries.

By the time all that history had funnelled down to Howard, he was the last in his line (a brother called "Bunny" having died as a little boy and there being no other extant Benson cousins to carry it on). His father, Gus, was an apparently mild-mannered, bespectacled shopkeeper with a thin face and a perennially split lower lip. We know he liked to play bridge, and that he had a prodigious mathematical ability. "*HE COULD ADD COLUMNS OF FIGURES IN HIS HEAD!!*" belted-out my grandmother whenever his name was mentioned — an effort, perhaps, to rescue his vaporous identity from the outsized persona of his wife Elizabeth, her mother-in-law, whom she always found a bit trying.

Elizabeth Perry Howard, who grew to adulthood in Newport during America's first Gilded Age, was a large, theatrical character who liked to dress up in the manner of



the grand dames of "The Avenue", where the Vanderbilts and their ilk had their palatial summer houses. She had round, handsome features, was quite tall, and in all other respects formidable. In his biography of Howard, my

father writes of Elizabeth: "... She likes flamboyant dress, smokes cigarettes, and wears perfume. After her husband's death in 1934 ... she keeps an Iver Johnson revolver in the drawer of her nightstand."

In the 1880s, Elizabeth had been among the first graduates of a new vocational arts training school in nearby Providence called The Rhode Island School of Design. The school was founded in 1877 by the Rhode Island Women's Centennial Commission, to "offer professional training to designers seeking employment in the state's textile and jewelry industries". Like Elizabeth, many of RISD's early students were women. Today, a woman with her talent, drive and character would have a career in painting or some other branch of the arts, but during that period, she married Gus Benson, raised a family, and augmented the household income by painting floral decorations in laquear on tin fire boxes and tea trays for hire. She also did reverse paintings on glass — usually pastoral scenes of ponds and rural farmsteads. She had a special fondness for dramatic, historical Naval engagements in which tall ships blazed away at one another, shrouded in cannon smoke; a nod, perhaps, to a famous Naval hero kinsman and namesake Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry of *Don't Give Up The Ship* fame. Elizabeth kept a studio room in the family house and may have chivvied young Howard from an early age towards the fulfilment of her own frustrated artistic and social aspirations.

Elizabeth Perry Howard  
ca. — 1885

Taken together, Elizabeth’s talents and grandiose persona were likely responsible in equal parts for a preponderance of colorful, opinionated, artistic characters in the generations of Bensons who followed. We can probably thank Gus for an ingrained and oppositional Yankee pragmatism that has always tended to regard that artistic inclination as the expression of a regrettable frivolity and self-indulgence.

We don’t know what Gus was like as a father, but it comes down in the family lore that Howard was something of a “momma’s boy,” being frequently got-up in his early youth in flouncy “Little Lord Fauntleroy” costumes, and given in his early adulthood to running after the posh set of girls in town. It may have been out of some self-conscious, manly impulse that he initially resisted the artistic path in favor of a hoped-for career as an officer in the U.S. Navy. Or, maybe he genuinely wanted to be an artist, but was discouraged by the men in the traditionally seagoing Benson family. We do know that the military career was urged by his “sensible” uncle Jack, who feared that the fluffery of an artist’s life would render the boy unemployable.

Like his father, Howard had a gift for math and passed his entrance exams for the Naval Academy’s prep school with high marks. Unfortunately, a childhood bout with rheumatic fever weakened a valve in his heart and he failed his physical exam, barring him forever from the service. It was at that point that Elizabeth’s influence

(and perhaps Howard’s own more secret aspirations) won out, and he packed himself off to New York City and the Art Student’s League.

My Grandfather was a talented guy. He drew well, had a gift for watercolor, and could certainly have been an oil painter had that medium called. But for whatever reason, it didn’t. He tried his hand at sculpture, and mostly focussed on the graphic arts, aiming initially at a career in illustration. At the ‘League, he took a special interest in printmaking, at which he excelled, both as a lithographer and an etcher. He was a favored protégé there of Joseph Pennell — one of the school’s revered instructors and a well-known printmaker of the time. Between Pennell’s connections and the charismatic, room-filling persona that Howard inherited from his mother (he was six-foot-four in an era of generally shorter men) he made connections among his fellow artists and in the New York community of curators, authors and society patrons, which would all serve him well later in his career.

Eventually, Howard became reasonably well-known, but curiously not as a fine artist. Much to his mentor’s disappointment, he returned to Newport from the big city in 1927, where he and a wealthy artisan/scholar colleague purchased a dusty little gravestone-carver’s shop. The business had been founded in 1705 by an English emigré named John Stevens, whose descendants, including two more named John, persisted there for

another 200 years, bashing away with mallet and chisel on handmade tablets and markers carved in the region’s native slate. The Stevens family’s work can be found in a rambling cemetery on a hillside near the shop. We lived beside it when I was a boy and I remember their slowly delaminating portraits of winged death’s heads, apple-cheeked cherubs and wigged merchant grandees poking at odd angles from the swells of tall yellow grass like rotting teeth emerging from the beard of an old Viking.

Having a gift for both drawing and sculpture, as well as a scholarly bent of his own, Howard infused that old vernacular carver’s trade with more elegant classical and medieval European letterforms and heraldic designs, and built it into a bespoke practice catering to a wealthy clientele up and down the eastern seaboard. He also later took a job teaching at RISD, his mother’s alma-mater, for which he designed a flourished calligraphic seal that is still in use today.

Before dying from that bad heart at age fifty-four, John Howard Benson had become a noted calligrapher and carver of incised lettering in stone. Over the next sixty-six years, his widow, Fisher, then my father — also John — and my brother Nick, each carried on at the shop, successively building its brand and reputation to ever greater heights. Without this rising acclaim, the economic survival of what was, in effect, a medieval tradesman’s business, would not have been possible in our industrial and technological age.

## LOOKING AT HANDMADE MARKS

Again, why am I telling you this? What on earth can any of it have to do with the attribution of an oil painting? Quite a lot, as it happens.

My brother and I came of age in the orbit of the John Stevens Shop. The celestial bodies of its system were our grandparent’s ramshackle Colonial house on the waterfront several blocks to its west, our own family’s house on the edge of the big old cemetery to the north, our uncle’s printing press and darkroom to the east, and our father’s best friend’s calligraphy studio to the south.

Nick began in his teens to carve stone at the shop, but I had known from an early age that I was good for nothing but painting. The only obstacles to that destiny that ever reared up in my path were what kind of a painter I might be, and how I would make my living at it. There being no convenient pile of family money to bankroll the project, the matter of a livelihood was most pressing. I was lucky though to have a faculty of willing and accomplished mentors on hand who were both able and eager to tell me both what I could do in pursuit of this end, and how it might best be done.

Throughout my teens and twenties, punctuated by sojourns in a couple of art schools, I worked as a carpenter and builder to make a buck while also migrating around the compass points of our little artisanal world, hungry to absorb understanding and skills, and also just



to bask in the benign, if sometimes exasperated, attentions of its rich cast of makers. Within the bounds of a single mile, I got a hands-on arts education as intensive as an advanced university program and administered by people who taught at some of our best art schools. My Quaker grandmother also modeled the simple, spiritually fulfilling creative life that she and Howard had built together. Before I actually went to art school, I learned skills related to photography, etching, drawing, oil painting, calligraphy and graphic design — much of it in direct apprentice-style work on paying jobs, rather than as abstract excercises in a classroom. I read literature and art historical texts, studied original works in museums and galleries — as well as on my own family’s walls — and took part in many a long, often heated debate with my unofficial faculty about the nature and meaning of art.

I don’t claim to have mastered any of the skills to which I was exposed during that time, any more than one ought to make such a claim on the strength of even a six year stint in a college’s undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Despite the title of that latter credential, true mastery, in the visual arts especially, is usually won through years of work. There are, of course, prodigies who break through to great achievements at an earlier age, but native genius can’t be taught. What training in the arts of any kind does teach the young aspirant is not how to *be* a good artist, but how to go on learning, through much subsequent practice, what it takes to become one.

Among many other aspects of art that I learned about in those years, a sensitivity to the subtlest nuances of handmade marks was perhaps the most important and, in the long run, the one which had the greatest impact on my subsequent career as a painter.

I’ve worked in many styles through my decades of handling oils: painting landscapes, seascapes, portraits and even some abstractions. Alongside my interest and experiments in all those different genres, my deepest engagement has always been with the marks that brushes, knives, rags and thumbs can make as they pull, scrape and push that greasy pigment across a variety of different grounds. For all that I resisted joining the family business in my youth, my mark-making is, and always has been, in some sense calligraphic. I understand my own paintings in those terms and have similarly developed a love and connoisseurship for the marks made by a long line of other oil painters, stretching back for hundreds of years, to the very first examples we know of this particular medium.

Every painter’s brushwork has a distinct identity that can be as telling an identifier of authorship as a written signature. We take it for granted that it’s difficult for a forger to reproduce another artist’s style, but what is even more difficult is to conceal the traces of one’s own painterly personality. It is so often the case that — when revealed to the public — forgeries which, for a time convinced some expert of their authenticity, can strike us

painters as the most preposterous fakes. How, we ask one-another, could anybody have believed *that* was a real — fill in the blank: Vermeer, daVinci, Pollock? In such cases, it isn’t the failure of the copy that stands out to us, but an inadequate concealment of the maker’s hand. Stylistic mimicry can look persuasive to those whose whole understanding of art is tied to style. But the deeper identity in a painter’s marks is hard to see without the knowledge born from direct practice, which is more qualified than categorical. Scholars and dealers may be astute connoisseurs, but on some level they believe a great artist’s identity is manufactured and put-on, when it is in fact grown.

The delicate balance between a painter’s material ability and that kind of work in which it will best express itself, is not intellectually conceived and then created by design. It is a mixture of organically-occurring traits that are known to the maker at the outset of his or her career, then tempered through years of experiment — often at incompatible types of work — until the most favorable form is discovered. We’re not only driven by an attraction to a style (expressionism, formalism, etc.) but also by the nature of our exact capacities, which determine the one approach that will suit us best. What makes a Pollock a Pollock is not the drip-painting method per-se, but the experiments with other methods which enabled him to know, once he found it, that it was the ideal one for him. Pollock didn’t “break-through” to that way of painting; it broke-through the potentials he always had.

In the case of letter-carving, every artisan who works in stone has a signature that is individual, idiosyncratic, and distinct from that of every other practitioner of the same art. This signature resides in the energy and shape of the marks that carvers make with their tools. These characteristics are not permanently fixed, but evolve through the different phases of a career so that the identities they comprise are not only the traces of a particular artist, but also of that artist at a particular time.



Six examples of the letter R carved in slate. Reading left to right in each row:

John Howard Benson  
James Casey  
John Everett Benson  
John Hegenauer  
Nicholas W. Benson  
Paul Russo

Above are six examples of the capital letter R. All were drawn and carved by hand and derive from the classical Latin alphabet of Imperial Rome. All were carved at a similar scale, using the same tools and the same slate material. But each was made by a different carver, at a different time, spanning three generations of inscriptional work made in Newport, Rhode Island.

It's easy to see what these letters have in common; most people looking at them mightn't even suspect that they were made by different hands. As a person who grew up surrounded by workers in this trade, including all but one of the six men who made these particular letters, I can mostly tell just by glancing at them who made which and when. My eye isn't infallible though, and I do often make mistakes. I can generally identify the products of my own family's shop, and usually know the characteristics of the different carvers who've worked there, but not always.

My brother, on the other hand, knows exactly who made what letters, when, where and how. He can identify inscriptions and individual letterers from long stretches in the history of his own art, and that of other countries as well. The reason why he is better able than I am to do this is in part due to his diligent study of the subject. But his acumen is equally the result of long years of practice. He sees the tiniest incremental differences in the way the chisel moves through this material or that, and in direct response to the blows of differently weighted mallets applied at differently spaced intervals of rhythm, driven by the distinct temperaments of different carvers. He knows intimately how our father, our grandfather and all the Stevens family carvers before them shaped their letters. He knows the work of his contemporaries on the east and west coasts of this country, as well as that of many of the English carvers across the pond where this

kind of inscriptional lettering has an even older tradition still regularly practiced. Herein lies the difference between a respectably informed academic understanding of letterforms, such as I have, and the deeper knowledge of those letters' makers.

In my lifetime, much direct artistic knowledge has been overshadowed, or even supplanted, by a range of scholarly disciplines and concerns that are now largely regarded as the whole matrix of art's meaning and quality. Yet much of art's actual meaning resides in what it is materially — in the unique kind of intelligence encoded in its manufacture. The analytic knowledge in which scholars specialize is part of the story, but that kind of knowledge cannot be superior to what a person who actually makes things knows about what they're doing. Not that an artist's historical knowledge is always equal to that of a scholar's; quite often it's not even close — not all artists care to absorb the minutia of contextual and sociological detail encoded in the art-historical record, though most do tend to study their own lines of influence with some care. Even so, a generation of people in and around the arts have allowed themselves to be persuaded, to some degree, that academic knowledge is the more important kind, and that is a big mistake. Being able to make things, and to make them masterfully, involves a different, but no less piercing kind of knowledge that scholars do not share, but which exerts a great deal of influence on our experience of all artistic things.

## THE LONG LINE OF EXPRESSIVE REALISTS

Between the ages of ten and fourteen, when I was first learning to paint, I fastened, as young artists do, onto that lineage of predecessors whose styles and natures felt most kindred to my own talents and inclinations. For me, this line started with those European oil painters who were called Modern prior to the rise of Modernism — especially the Spaniard, Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, and the Englishmen, Joseph Mallord William Turner and John Constable. All three were unusually expressive portrayers of their contemporary worlds long before the term *Expressionism* had been coined, and especially in their late works. The same can be said of several painters from the earlier Baroque period (though they were not all artists in the most emblematic Baroque style themselves): particularly Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn and Diego de Silva y Velázquez. Altogether, these five painters were the penultimate Old Master gods in the firmament of my personal Olympus. What they had in common that made them so was a vigorous brusqueness in their brushwork that could border at times on crudity,

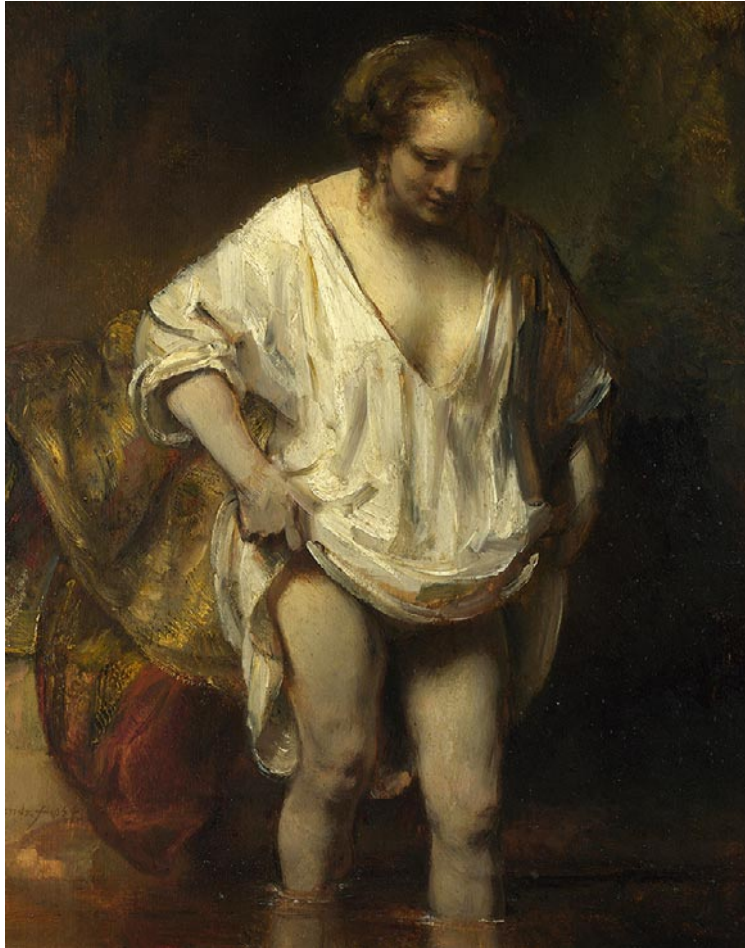
and which had yet evolved from foundations of solid representational skill, coupled to a virtuosic — if muscularly robust — graphic giftedness. To put it more simply, they all drew like gangbusters and managed through long careers to convert that draftsmanly mastery into an equal skill in manipulating and drawing with the paint itself. This is a different kind of representation from the exacting illusionistic rendering that high Renaissance or Mannerist painters such as Botticelli, Van Eyck, Holbein, Bronzino, or later Ingres, refined. Nor is it like the Neoclassicism of the Royal Academies that proliferated across Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries.



John Constable  
*Dedham Lock*, 1819-20



Rembrandt Van Rijn  
*A Woman Bathing*, 1654  
 – detail,



Francisco Goya  
*Fight with Cudgels*, detail  
 –1820-23

All my favorite painters in this line (and some others, like Eugène Delacroix) could be quite casual, especially as they aged, with anatomical accuracy. They sketched in the details in ways that would have been unthinkable to a more exacting, craftsmanly painter, getting general mechanics

right, but placing a greater emphasis on the authority and vitality of their mark-making than on the dogged precision of representational verisimilitude.

All these painters were *realists* in the sense that they portrayed something honest and direct about their worlds. Even when Rembrandt made a biblical scene, or Turner tackled the sublime, each nevertheless populated those visions with the unidealized artifacts, figures and other cultural furniture of their contemporary surroundings.

Later in the 19th century, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Jean-François Millet, then also Gustave Courbet Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot and Édouard Manet, each carried on in the same spirit, making frank reflections of the social and economic realities in which they lived, with



J.M.W. Turner  
*Rain, Steam and Speed—*  
 1844



Gustave Courbet  
*The Sea*, 1867



Jean-Baptiste-Camille  
Corot, *View of Volterra*,  
ca. 1865

an unromantic contemporaneity that was expressed as much through the raw physicality of their paint handling as in the subjects they chose to paint. Given that paintings very like this had already been made for over two centuries prior to the Impressionists' arrival, it has never been quite accurate to hail them as the iconoclastic Avant-Garde innovators that later chroniclers of that period have repeatedly described. The paintings of Manet and Degas especially (many of whose pictures were less literally "Impressionistic" than those of, say, a Monet or a Pissarro) did not pose any genuinely revolutionary depar-



ture from what had come before them in their own line (a lineage they frequently referred back to in their own work). They rejected the Neoclassical ideal promulgated in the Academie and Salon — the dominant artistic institutions of their time. But that was more of a reaction than an innovation.

As this expressive form was evolving in Europe, culminating in the Modernists' revolt against the Academy, some native variants were also emerging here in the U.S. Much as those expressive European realists stood apart from their more mannered contemporaries, both before and during the Impressionist age, Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Mary Cassatt and James Abbot MacNeill Whistler all stood apart from the distilled landscape idylls of the Hudson River School and the classicism of our own figurative *Beaux-Arts* academicians.



Édouard Manet  
*The Suicide*, ca.1877



Winslow Homer  
*Northeaster* – 1895



This tradition of expressive painterly realism was carried on into the middle of the 20th century — and even into the years of my own early student career in the 1970s — by artists as individually distinct as Giorgio Morandi, Andre Derain, Balthus and Lucien Freud across the Atlantic, and by Edward Hopper, Alice Neel, Jane Freilicher, Fairfield Porter and Albert York in the U.S. Together, these and many other similar artists represent a continuous strain of western painting that has lasted now

for at least four and a half centuries. They all chart a separate but parallel track to the more fashionable, ideologically-driven cycles that make the news. Its members are frequently claimed by one movement or another in that progression, but their discipline doesn't really change much, despite the march of time, because it was never entirely about propelling painting's forms or concepts along some triumphal art historical path. Manet likely saw Velasquez or Goya as contemporaries in spirit, rather than as anachronisms to be surpassed. What the painters in this tradition have consistently done is to honestly reflect whatever realities they encountered in their respective epochs. More mirror than soap-box, the ideological and stylistic concerns that periodically overtake art are irrelevant to the real aims and achievements of this kind of painting. It's about both itself, and the world that produces it — a poetic analog of lived-lives that evokes the vitality of the real through the reality of its material.



George Bellows  
*Blue Morning* – 1909



## AN EVER-PRESENT, ETERNALLY HUMAN ART

There is an ancient painting tradition in China that is centered on the imagery that a brush, loaded with ink, can conjure on a field of paper or silk. This discipline includes everything from the written word (or pictogram-mic Chinese characters) to landscape, portraiture and genre scenes of daily life. Overall, its forms are essentially calligraphic. The clearly handmade mark, laid-down on the ground with limited tools and media — all of which are used in very specific ways — defines the form. In *The Way of Chinese Painting*, by Mai-Mai Sze, the author opens the book with this description:

*In the vast literature of Chinese painting, there is continual reference to a tao or “way.” It is not a personal way, nor the mannerisms of a school. It is the traditional Chinese tao . . .*

The expressive realists of the west belong to a similarly long tradition that stands apart from our art historical line of schools and movements. Sometimes their works are incorporated into those movements, but they nonetheless operate on a path all their own. At their best, the individual masters in this line transcend the temporally localized issues of innovation, aesthetic advancement and cultural progress that are so absorbing to the scholar. In the subtleties of their practice, and by honestly reflecting whatever realities their work sought to mirror in its time,

these western painters are equally committed, however subconsciously, to capturing an overarching environmental and human reality, or “tao.”

The most superficial stylistic aspects of Chinese brush painting, as well as its sharply constrained media, have remained unchanged through thousands of years, so one who does not know that art well might be forgiven for thinking it all looks alike. But to those who are intimate with the form — and especially to the artists who make it — it is a tradition steeped in the most exquisite variations from one master to another. These differences reside entirely in the shape, duration and energy of both the individual brushstrokes, and in the way those marks combine in the aggregate of an evocative response. This is not only a matter of physical technique, but also of how the practitioner uses the tools to communicate the character of a subject, or a sense of its inherent nature and vitality. This is different from the sort of interpretive projection we might think of as illustration, but which in fact characterizes a great deal of representational painting: a kind of invocation, or caricature that caters to the viewer’s expectations or comforts, as in, “an ideal tree or mountain must look so” — what the painter Rackstraw Downes once called the “rhetoric” of a scene. The Chinese form is more responsive. It captures and re-experiences the subject afresh, distilling the substance or mood of a direct impression whose quality is not pre-determined in advance of the brush landing on the ground.



All of this can equally be said of our expressive western oil painting tradition, despite its aesthetics and materials being so radically different from the Chinese form. Consider some passages painted by several of the



western painters I have already cited. On the following two pages are six details of painted water, made by six different oil painters spanning two centuries in Europe and the U.S., the last being one of my own.

Left:  
Wang Fu – 1362-1416  
*A Scholar's Retreat amid  
Autumn Trees*

Right:  
Bada Shanren – 1626-1705  
*Landscape after Guo Zhongshu*



Six seascape details  
painted in oil, reading  
left to right in each  
row across both pages:

J.M.W. Turner  
Gustave Courbet  
Édouard Manet  
Winslow Homer  
George Bellows  
The Author



Looking at all these passages arrayed together, it's easy to see that they are as much alike, at the most superficial level, as the partnered Chinese landscapes shown on the previous page. The Chinese paintings were made around 1400 and 1650 respectively, which puts a distance of two hundred and fifty years between them. In the case of the seascape details, the first was painted by J.M.W. Turner in 1833, and the last (my own) was completed in 2003, with the Courbet, Manet, Homer and Bellows samples having all been done in a roughly seventy-year period right in the center of that span.

As is also true of the Chinese paintings, once one gets past the similarities of the method and subject, there is a tremendous, if subtle, difference between all these painters' treatment of the same kind of scene (a stormy coastal sea under a lowering sky). These differences are personal, temporal and even cultural without ever coming out and declaring themselves as such in any explicitly narrative terms. If they are good, or even great expressions of the art, that distinction is not due to their context, nor to their placement in an historical line, nor even to the relative celebrity of their various makers. Their quality lies in their own truthful and expressive nature. They can move us, not because they were made by somebody *important* whom we ought to revere due to an established status in the "Canon" of western art, but because each faithfully evoked what it feels like to be a human being, looking at the sea, in this world.



As is true of my brother's ability to recognize the tiniest variations of the makers' signatures in the six samples of the carved letter R, I am also able (because I work in the same tradition, and with the same tools), to know at a glance who painted each of these seascape passages. However much they may look alike as a group, each artist's hand is as distinct to my eye as the individual faces in a brood of closely-resembling siblings would be to one of their members. And yet, they all belong to one related tradition of looking at the world, of experiencing it, and then re-experiencing it through the physical act of making a painting.

Both the expressive realist line that I have been talking about, as well as the long Chinese brush painting tradition, are art forms that can and do have a broad appeal to the public through their commonly accessible subject matter. We all experience the landscape, the sea and our other surroundings and fellow beings in the natural world of which our often seemingly unnatural human world is a part. But both traditions are also quite esoteric, and therefore subject to a very specialized kind of knowledge and understanding. This is different from many other idioms of our contemporary art whose intentions and methods are more exoteric, at least insofar as they announce themselves externally. Many of the more conceptually-oriented arts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries announce the terms of their intent to the viewer ahead of time by telegraphing their explicit philo-

sophical, sociological or political aims: *"I think this way and want you to be persuaded of the validity and importance of my views."*

The intent of the more esoteric forms is oppositely-oriented. Their makers may have an object in view at the outset of their labor, but often find (and even hope to discover) some different understanding through the process of making than that which they originally sought. The artist may hope the viewer will see what she or he saw, but it is understood that control of that outcome is forfeit by the nature of the art, which aims to elicit fully unique and personal responses.

I suggested earlier that imitation and illusionism are not the object of this expressive kind of painting as they are in more classically or exactly rendered styles. To look at a painting by Holbein or Bronzino, or by a contemporary photo-realist such as the late Robert Bechtle, is to be dazzled by a technique so acutely detailed as to appear superhuman. We can't imagine how such things were made by mortal hands, and so they take on a magical aspect. Indeed, they may be intended by their makers to have that kind of impact — to inspire the same awe which the painter felt in the face of nature's complexity. This is a different, more refined artistry than we see in the ruder description of the expressive realists. But perhaps those painters are less determined to impress than to convey, or faithfully transfer the conditions of an impression. Their method is, as somebody once put it, more "controlled accident" than artful manipulation.



Hans Holbein The Younger  
*The Merchant Georg Gisze* — 1532



## THE PAINTERS IN MY FAMILY

As a young representational American painter in the 1970s and 80s, coming out of a New England coastal town and with long stretches also spent in the urban centers of Providence and New York, I fell easily into the realist traditions of those places and their people. These weren't just the old Yankees in my father's line, but also the Irish, Italian and German immigrants of my mother's, and many of my friends', heritages. We also lived in, or beside, working class Black and Latino neighborhoods in all those cities. The northeast of my childhood and early adulthood had its segregated tensions, but it was also a scrappy, multi-ethnic world with rich, overlapping cultural identities in the trades-people's class where artists tend to live and work.

After leaving college in the early 1980s, I had a studio on the then mostly industrial Brooklyn waterfront, and worked during the weeks as a carpenter — navigating the workman's underbelly of a city which hadn't changed much since the early part of the century. This was during the years of New York's most ravaged economy and with a corresponding crime rate that was the highest in its history. In cinematic terms, it was the setting of films like *The French Connection* and *Taxi Driver*, rather than the lighter-hearted, upper-middle-class world of *You've Got Mail* or *When Harry Met Sally*. It was a tough, dangerous place to live and work (in my years there I got propositioned by hookers a couple of times, offered drugs on the street and in the subways almost

daily, and witnessed robberies, beatings and even one shooting). But New York was also a dynamic, exciting place to be, and you felt like the veteran of a crucial life test once you'd learned its ways, labored in its workforce and come through all of that more or less unscathed.

Had I been an abstract painter, a pop artist or a conceptualist, I'd have certainly dug into those movements, but they didn't speak to me at the time. I looked at that work and learned about it, and even liked some of it, but it wasn't *my* art. I was also intensely skeptical of what was becoming an insatiable hunger among my classmates and contemporaries to make a splash in the downtown New York scene: to grab that coveted "fifteen minutes" of fame which Andy Warhol promised to the legion of artistic hopefuls pouring out of the art school mill and onto the streets of Soho and Alphabet City. The terrible urgency to concoct some sort of buzzworthy and innovative *look* that might win riches and critical acclaim, felt completely antithetical to what I already saw as a more rewarding long-game of creative evolution.

Not being interested in making artworld art myself, I gravitated instead to the painters who felt nearest to me in time, culture and creative temperament. These included Fairfield Porter — who had died in 1975, just as I was beginning to get serious about painting — and Alice Neel, who was still alive and had only recently achieved some late-life renown in the early 1980s. I looked carefully at a wide range of other contemporary realists too, such as

Rackstraw Downes, Neil Welliver, Janet Fish and England's Lucian Freud. I was also much taken with the earlier American painter Winslow Homer, and especially with Edward Hopper, whose major creative period in the 1940s and 50s was only a generation removed from my time. These artists were all connected to the cultural heritage I came from, as well as being the clearest recent members of the expressive, painterly line I was already settling into.

At the beginning of the 20th century, before the famous Armory Show of 1913 — in which European avant-garde Modernism so changed the character of American art — we had an indigenous modern movement here in a group centered in New York and Philadelphia, and influenced initially by two strong teachers: William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri. Chase was the more academically refined artist of the two, and the proponent of a tasteful, if somewhat warmed-over, variant of French Impressionism. He painted beautifully, but favored a whitewashed ideal of life in the monied coastal set. For me, his skillful, pretty paintings, are too decorous to really get the blood up.

Henri had a more down-to-earth approach. He and his most notable students — including John French Sloan, William Glackens and George Luks — were interested in the hardscrabble life on the docks, streets and in the tenements of working-class New York. Given the harder reality they portrayed, the group was awarded mocking nicknames like "*The Ashcan School*," or "*The Apostles of Ugliness*." They referred to themselves simply as "*The Eight*."

Artistic schools and movements are generally shaped by some commonly-held ideological orthodoxy. That's what makes them schools, and art historians frequently couch their valuations of the things that artists make within the context of their relationships to such schools. This is fine for the scholars, who naturally want some order on which to hang their analysis; and especially so if they can imbue it with the rationale of some advancing evolutionary path. The actual objective though, for a great many artists — and particularly for the more visionary among them — is more intuitive, self-expressive and independent. As a member of a school, you're indebted to a suite of foregone conclusions, and thus more liable to fit your efforts to them. The minute we submit to any form of group-think, we also risk giving up our ability to respond honestly to the world's surprises. Willem deKooning, the great abstractionist of the *New York School*, once attended a meeting in which a younger Robert Motherwell was attempting to persuade the group to embrace an official title. DeKooning famously responded: "*It is disastrous to name ourselves*."

Henri's group modeled an ideological coherence that may have felt constraining to George Bellows, another of his students. Bellows was extraordinarily talented, not only as a draftsman, but also as a natural, intuitive oil painter. He was one of those rare individuals who seem to understand from the first moment they pick up a brush exactly what it was made to do. This is no small thing. Oil paint is a tricky medium to handle, not least because we can continue to



work at it long after our first efforts have resoundingly failed, thereby adding insult to injury. The inclination to be finicky with outlines, rendering and blending in a material best suited to big muscular gestures and faceted planes of color, leads many a novice to descend rapidly into amorphous, muddy disasters. It can take months, if not years, to overcome these obstacles and begin to learn how to make the material speak clearly and with authority. A great many painters, including many who are well-known, never learn it at all. But Bellows did — right out of the gate.

As liberating as it may have felt at the time, the raw style that Henri encouraged wasn't exactly a natural fit for his turn-of-the-20th century students. They did have the Impressionists' recent example to show the way, but were also following on the heels of romantic American painters like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole, who had favored a more elegantly crafted method. Bellows, however, seems to have immediately figured out how to work in the style that Henri liked, as there is scant evidence — apart from a slew of Gibson Girl style drawn illustrations made for his college newspaper — that he had painted much at all before that.

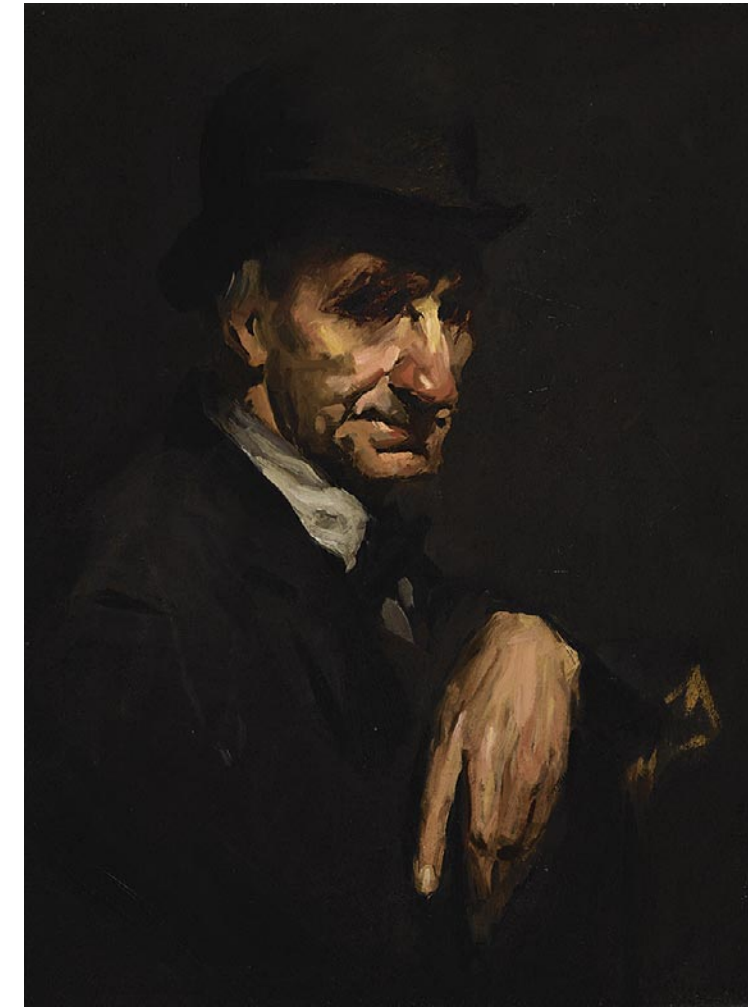
Bellows came to New York City in 1904. A native of Ohio, he had previously been at Ohio State University, where he was an athletic student with prospects for a career in either basketball or baseball, the latter which he played well enough to attract a scout from a professional team. Like my grandfather, he opted instead for a life in the arts

and came to Manhattan. He signed up at the New York School of Art, which was then presided over by both Chase and Henri. Among his classmates were the painters Edward Hopper and Rockwell Kent.

Bellows studied with Chase for a time, but soon fell under Henri's influence, and into friendships with some of his followers. Despite the association, he was his own man, and was never quite fully inducted as a member of that group, however much his art fit its ideals. He mixed and exhibited with its members, painting the same gritty world they did, but he didn't do so in any overtly doctrinaire way. As was also true of both Hopper and Kent, his was such a strong individual voice that he was soon winning attention on his own unique merits, which, as I've said, included a prodigious talent for slinging the paint. He quickly mastered the robust gestural style favored by Henri, while forging a language of his own that echoed the aesthetics of *The Eight*, even as he was surpassing them.

I wrote earlier, in reference to Jackson Pollock, about the exact confluence of a native ability to that style or method to which it is best suited, and from which combination of factors so much great painting arises. This kind of balance can take years, if not a lifetime to achieve. The iconic works of so many historically-revered oil painters came only after long careers of dogged, competent practice which finally gave way in late middle age to more soaring achievements for which they are known. Rembrandt was such an artist, as were Goya, Turner, and many others.

But every now and then the process is reversed and a new painter comes along who somehow steps directly onto that plateau where a particular gift and a particular method are perfectly aligned. Such was the case with George Bellows.



How he did it, we can't know, but that he did so is certain. One early painting from his student days, *The Black Derby*, is pictured at left. It is as easily and fluidly modeled, as expressive of its subject's character and emotion as a work from the height of the career of the great 17th century Dutch portraitist Frans Hals. Hals mastered a brisk, sketchy, expressive style that is so unlike the prevailing mannered norms of his time that it almost feels as if it had been made in ours. We see it in his *Malle Babbe*, above.

Frans Hals  
*Malle Babbe-detail*  
—1633-35

George Bellows  
*The Black Derby* — 1905



George Bellows  
*Both Members of this Club*  
— 1909



From there, Bellows went on to a vigorous run of portraits, urban streetscapes, waterfront scenes, scenes of the excavations for the new Pennsylvania Station then just beginning construction, snow scenes up and down the Hudson River, and a series of quick, electric *plein-air* sea-scapes from Monhegan Island in Maine. Among his most acclaimed early works was a series depicting the amateur boxing matches that were held in private clubs in the city.

Bellows painted quite quickly in those years, sometimes completing a major work in a single hours-long session, and often working completely from his imagination or memory. His palette, initially made up of duns, blacks, whites, ochres, yellows and reds, grew progressively more richly chromatic and experimental.



George Bellows  
*Sun Glow* — 1913

Over a short period of about fifteen years, between his time in school and his late-thirties, Bellows belted out a masterful body of work like nothing any other American painter was doing at the time or has done since. And then, as quickly as he'd begun, he shifted gears and began to lose hold of the magic. He went on painting, adding many more important works to his oeuvre before dying of a burst appendix at the tragically young age of forty-two. Some of these later works were still outstanding pictures — a suite of epic scenes protesting the First World War, some beautifully liquid portraits, and a powerful series of lithographs which were as graphically distinctive and masterful as his early oils. But in the paint, he lost that balance with which he had begun and his oils began to feel stiff and stilted.

George Bellows  
*The Palisades* — 1909



Twice now, I've cited Jackson Pollock's "Drip" paintings as an example of the balanced confluence of a specific type of ability and a perfectly corresponding, or enabling method. This is an issue of tremendous importance in understanding what makes truly great paintings what they are. It is a mistake to believe, as many academics do, that the emanations of artistic genius are somehow intellectually or deliberately manufactured. They are not. What made painters as various as Vincent Van Gogh, Hilma af Klint, Joan Mitchell or Richard Diebenkorn exceptional was an open-eyed journey through a series of methods. Initially, these were lesser but promising expressions of their potential, until at last (through more or less trial and error) they landed on that one approach which catalyzed their existing capacities to the greatest possible effect.

The writer Malcolm Gladwell made much of a calculated, mathematical measure of effort which he thought to be a prerequisite golden mean for any sort of exceptional achievement. "10,000 hours" he proclaimed; that's what it takes to achieve mastery in any field. Maybe for some, but such numeric formulae have little to do with the way that art actually happens. Yes, a masterful craft can take anywhere from a few years to a lifetime to perfect, depending on the kind and level of skill involved, but if great art was only dependent on great craft, neither Cezanne nor Van Gogh would be revered as they are. Bellows's later, more explicitly narrative paintings are arguably more expertly *crafted* than his early works, but as *art*, they pale in comparison.

From the minute he picked up the brush, for whatever reason, Bellows achieved something that thousands of subsequent hours of refinement and practice ultimately diluted. This is the reverse of the pattern followed by most other painters. I may aspire to make pictures as powerful as his, but while I was also a gifted young painter, it is only now — after a lifetime of circuitous quests down many diverging paths — that I glimpse the possibility of that kind of accomplishment in my view ahead. Art isn't only about what we are able to make; it's also about what we are able to *see*.

We marvel at young prodigies like Bellows, who seem touched by the gods. Artists like this do have outstanding talent, but they're also lucky to fall right into the most ideal balance of the particular talent they have, with that method, and way of looking at the world, to which it is most ideally suited — *and*, to do so without ever having to go on the quest. It's as if a child of six walked out the kitchen door at the height of the age of the Crusades and found the Holy Grail on a pile of vegetable peelings. Genius doesn't engineer those discoveries either by design or by some metric of hours invested. Whether they come by dumb luck, or through years of struggle, the result is much the same. What genius does do is to recognize the magic when it strikes and ride it hell-for-leather till that horse has run out of breath or gone lame. When that happens, it can be a hell of a let-down. Just compare Bellows's late *Dempsey and Firpo*, at right, to the fight scene on the previous page and you will see a thoroughbred who has lost his stride.



George Bellows  
*Dempsey and Firpo* – 1924