Representing Maine Coastal Industry in Early Twentieth Century American Art

Caitlin Beach ‘10

The Maine coast has long played an important role in the American landscape tradition. Artists, fueled by an interest in developing a national artistic vocabulary through representational landscapes, were drawn to the dynamic interplay between water and land at the shore. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, art continually reflected escapist values of the artist and the viewer, both of whom sought solitude in a natural landscape with minimal human presence. Evocative landscapes by realist painters Winslow Homer and Robert Henri reveal an impulse to dramatize the Maine coast, locating the image’s narrative value within the dynamics of nature’s force. When George Bellows, a student of Henri’s at the New York School of Art, arrived in Maine in 1911, he continued to paint in a manner that recalled the work of Homer, and more recently, Henri. However, Bellows soon began to complicate the well-established landscape tradition by bringing attention to not only the coastline, but the people who labored there as well. Bellows’s Maine paintings from 1913-1916 reveal a shift from pure landscape to more peopled landscapes recalling the genre tradition. In comparison to Homer and Henri, Bellows removes the sense of immediacy with the sea by interrupting the direct connection between the viewer and the water with figures (see Cleaning Fish, 1913), thus establishing a primacy of human presence and interaction with the coast. My summer research has largely concerned Bellows’s self-emancipation from an existing Maine landscape idiom to a body of work increasingly implicated with the worlds of labor and work on the coast. By focusing primarily on Bellows’s work, I have been able to better understand broader themes concerning the representation of Maine coastal industry in early 20th century American art.

How do Bellows’s images relate to the realities of coastal industry in early 20th century Maine? His paintings of coastal societies at work coincided with a period of transformation for Maine industry. The economic boom of the Gilded Age in the last quarter of the 19th century ushered the country into a new age of mass production and industrialization. This rise of big business and mechanized production hit Maine particularly hard, resulting in the marginalization of smaller industries such as fishing, lobstering, and boatbuilding. Contemporaneous with this marginalization, however, was the development of the state’s tourist industry. Small, waning industries thus became fodder for a constructed tourist imagination of the Maine coast as the unspoiled and quaint image of rusticity. At first glance, Bellows’s work seems to parallel this Maine myth of an unspoiled coast: the 1916 painting Matinicus reveals no intimation of struggling industry or a rough lobstering life. However, another 1916 image, Shipyard Society, shows the confluence of two worlds: the laboring world of the coast complicated with an influx of tourism. Bellows, rather than representing the harsh realities of industry itself, addresses the more abstract phenomenon of the transformation of Maine coastal society from a world of work to a world of leisure. By moving away from purely representational landscapes, Bellows developed his own idiom of interpretation of the Maine landscape, abandoning the picturesque tradition for something more contemporary and socially influenced.

Much of my summer research remains indebted to a number of institutions that graciously opened up their collections and archives to me: the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Colby College Museum of Art, Portland Museum of Art, Maine Maritime Museum, and the Farnsworth Museum of American Art.

Images

Left to right: Cleaning Fish (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art), Matinicus (Portland Museum of Art), and Shipyard Society (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)

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