A “Peculiarly American” Enthusiasm: George Bellows, Traditional Masculinity, and The Big Dory

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My Honors Project, A “Peculiarly American” Enthusiasm: George Bellows, Traditional Masculinity, and The Big Dory investigates the portrayal of masculinity in the oeuvre of the much-lauded yet enigmatic American painter George Bellows (1882-1925). Rather than relying on Bellows’ urban works for source material, a significant portion of this investigation is conducted via a case study of Bellows’ 1913 panel The Big Dory, a scene of fishermen pushing a boat into the North Atlantic off Monhegan Island, Maine that the artist painted during a sojourn on the island in the months after his involvement in the landmark Armory Show in New York. The paper situates The Big Dory within the greater context of the history of the depiction of Maine through the lens of the heroic fisherman. Bellows achieved a heroic effect by forcing the viewer to focus on the labor of the fishermen via their positioning in the near middleground and by echoing the hues and forms of the men elsewhere in the painting, giving the work a sense of visual unity. I argue that these strategies highlight Bellows’ interest in tradition rather than modernism. Armed with this knowledge, Bellows’ other works come more sharply into focus. I reveal that the traditional heterosexual mode of white male identity Bellows represented in The Big Dory was not simply echoed in Bellows’ personal comportment, but in fact pervaded his oeuvre; such masculinity was a reaction by patriarchal American society against the perceived growth of other influences in the early twentieth century. The portrayal of such masculinity is then established as the key underlying feature of the sense of “Americanism” which has traditionally dominated reception of Bellows’ art.

My Grua/O’Connell Research Award was crucial to the successful completion of my Honors Project. It allowed me to visit and conduct research at both Monhegan Island and the George Bellows Papers at Amherst College. These research trips were crucial to the quality of my project and helped my project receive honors. This summer I have, with the encouragement of my advisors, been editing my paper for publication. My intent is to continue my study of art history in graduate school and eventually to earn my doctorate, and my success with this project will be key to accomplishing those aims. I would like to thank the Grua/O’Connell Research Award for the invaluable support that it provided to my project—without such help it would surely have been a significantly less successful endeavor.

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