

Arts & Antiques

A Diversity of American Art Comes to London - Spring 2013 by Abby Cronin

This spring, four of London's major galleries are exhibiting a remarkably diverse array of American artists' work. You will find *American Indian Portraits* by George Catlin at the National Portrait Gallery, Frederic Edwin Church's *Landscape Oil Sketches* at the National Gallery, *George Bellows: An American Realist* at the Royal Academy of Arts and *Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective* at Tate Modern. Whatever your taste in art, you can easily satisfy your interest and curiosity by heading out to view the innovative work by these exceptional artists. Catlin's portraits documented the Native American peoples in the 1830s. Church's magical mid-19th-century landscapes are a vivid record of nature's wonders. Bellows, a leading member



© George Bellows. *New York, 1911*. Courtesy of the Royal Academy of Arts

of the Ashcan School in the early years of the 20th century, painted realist visions of urban life, war sketches and life at sea. By contrast, Pop artist Lichtenstein's post-war work largely portrays contemporary satirical images and sculptures based on his interpretation of 20th-century commercial and comical sources. Collectively, these artists have given us a rich and varied legacy.

The National Portrait Gallery is privileged to be able to host an exhibition of George Catlin's series of *American Indian Portraits* (aka Native Americans or First Nations). Catlin (1796-1872) was born in rural Pennsylvania and had ambitions to be an ethnographer, a geologist and a painter. He began his artistic career as a painter of miniatures, but with the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 he felt a sense of urgency to document the lives of indigenous peoples, Native Americans, because they represented a vanishing way of life. They were, he felt, a crucial feature of American 'national art'. He made five trips to the Western frontier regions of the United States in the 1830s where he painted several portraits of American Indians and recorded their manners and customs. Pictured here is *Stu-mick-o-sucks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe*, whom Catlin found on his trip in 1832 to the mouth of the Yellowstone River. The Blackfoot chief sat for him. It is said that this Plains warrior image contributed to stereotypical representations for all American Indians, an image which has endured to this day. This painting together, with over

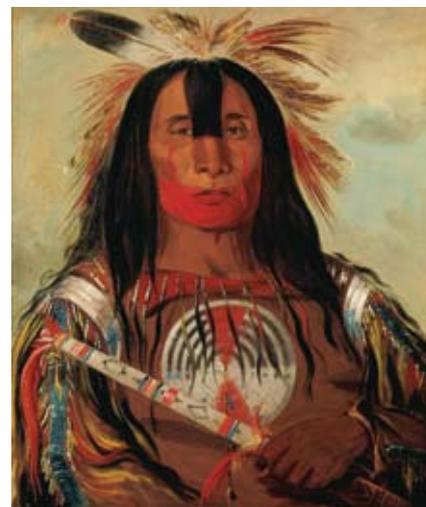


© George Bellows. *Stag at Sharkey's, 1909*. Courtesy of the Royal Academy of Arts

sixty exhibits, is on loan from the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., where it has been housed since 1879. The British Museum has also contributed to the exhibit.

Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), one of the major figures of the Hudson River School, promoted and developed the great tradition of American landscape painting. In his passion for making outdoor oil sketches he produced a unique series of informal and spontaneous paintings that captured the natural beauty and wilderness of the Hudson Valley area in upstate New York. As he gained in fame and fortune, he travelled widely, visiting Canada, Ecuador, Jordan and Jamaica; he recorded views of these foreign destinations in the form of oil sketches. Although Church was mesmerised by the extraordinary beauty of nature, he was also conscious that this was a period of intense industrial growth in the United States. He sensed a precarious tension between nature and civilisation and feared the natural wilderness might soon disappear. With this point in mind, his paintings reflect the language of a national landscape, the essence of a yet-unspoiled new nation.

Among the 26 small oil sketches (approximately 12.5" in New York State x 20") and two

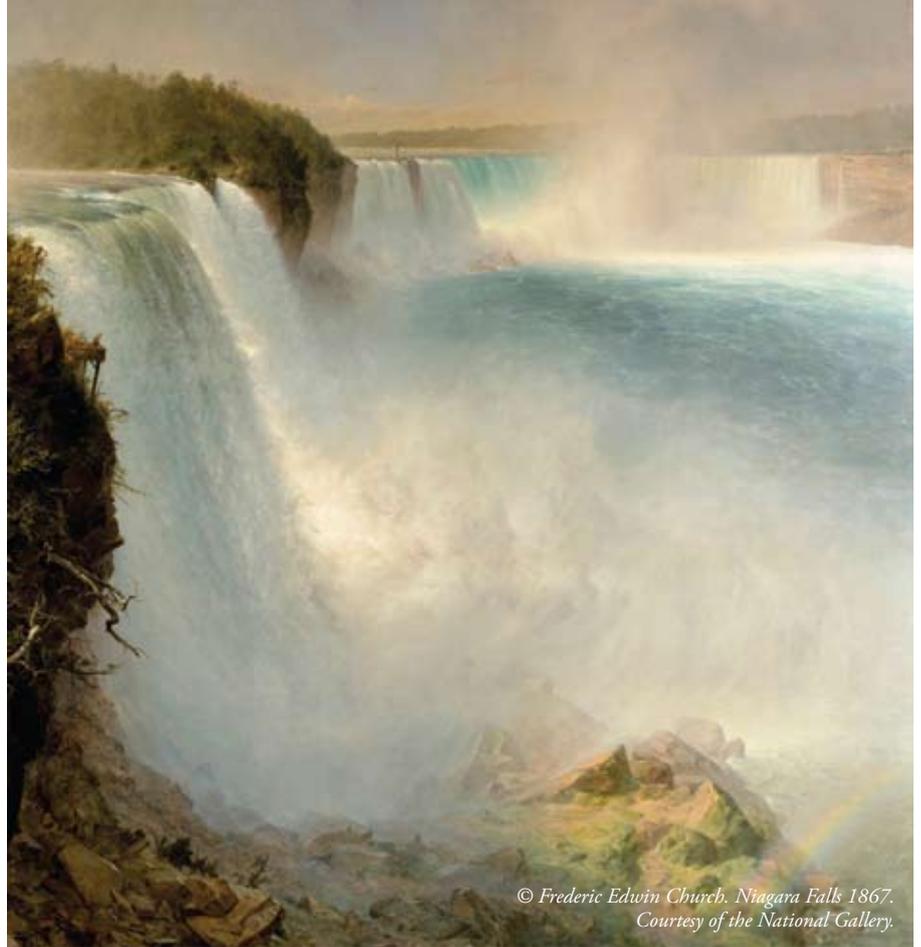


© *Stu-mick-o-sucks, Buffalo Bulls Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe Blackfoot/Kainai*, by George Catlin, 1832. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

full-scale paintings in the exhibit, visitors will encounter diverse views of nature. Church skillfully framed natural features in landscape settings; many embody warm tonal sunsets with graceful clouds hovering. In his sketch *Rising Sun*, the glint of sun rising over a distant mountain range is balanced by a calm, luminescent river in the foreground. Immense icebergs from his voyage to Newfoundland rise gracefully beneath an iridescent sky. He mastered the difficult technique of painting water. Gaze at his vivid large-scale view of *Niagara Falls, from the American Side*, 1867. You can almost hear the water rushing –falling and crashing to rocks below. Mist and spray hover in the air. Look closely and you can see two people perched on a flimsy wooden platform on the far left side. The painting was sold to the Scottish-American businessman, John S. Kennedy, who presented it to the Scottish National Gallery in 1877.

One of Church's most memorable works was a small oil painting which made a striking patriotic statement. In 1861, only weeks after the outbreak of the American Civil War, he painted a vision of a tattered 'Stars and Stripes' set against a spectacular sky at dawn. Entitled *Our Banner in the Sky*, the cloud formation looks like the American flag flying from a barren tree. Stars shine through a glimpse of blue sky. It quickly caught the attention of the public and Church arranged to have it reproduced as a chromolithograph. It sold hundreds within only a few months.

Church's home, Olana, was built on a hill-top with a magnificent view over the Hudson River valley. Church wrote to a friend, "I am building a house and am principally my own architect." You can almost see Olana in the distance when you view his oil sketch *Clouds Over Olana*. The architectural plans for Olana, completed in 1872, were strongly influenced by Church's preference for mixing Victorian, Middle Eastern and Moorish elements. Described as a Persian fantasy, Olana is as beautiful today as it was when built. It is open to the public and well worth a visit. *Through American Eyes: Frederic Church and the Landscape Oil Sketch* is a small but highly



© Frederic Edwin Church. *Niagara Falls* 1867. Courtesy of the National Gallery.

significant exhibit of wilderness landscapes not only of the Hudson Valley but of locales as far afield as Arctic icebergs. Find time to see it in the National Gallery.

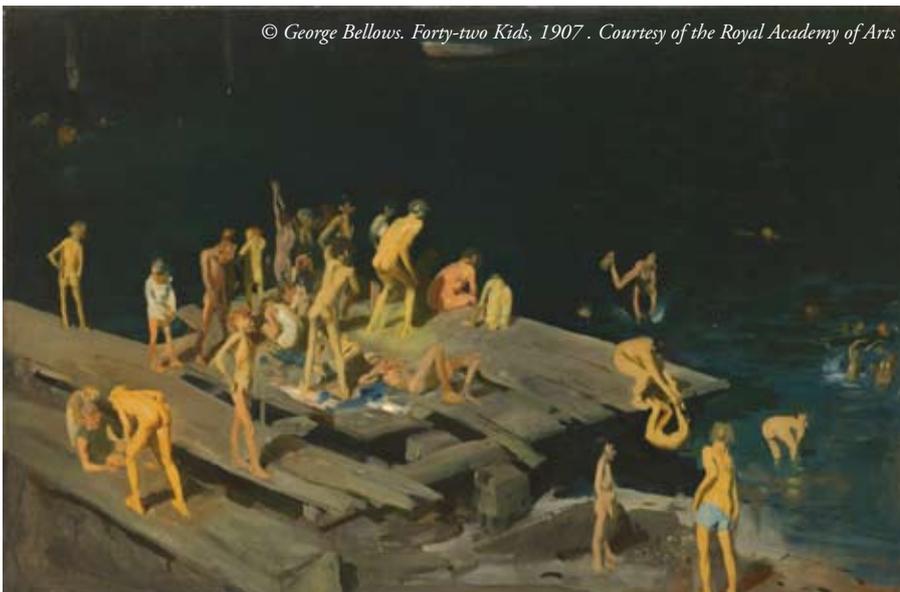
The sublime wilderness landscapes of Frederic Church fade as we move on into the 20th century. George Bellows' (1882-1925) art highlights the precarious tension between nature and civilisation. His paintings captured the rapidly changing, often brutal urban landscapes in early 20th century New York City. In 1904, aged twenty-two, he arrived there from Columbus, Ohio where his talent in athletic pursuits such as baseball had been in conflict with his distinct artistic bent. He trained at the New York School of Art and encountered the dynamic artist Robert Henri, who encouraged him to observe all manner of real life surging around him. Before the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 the United States was bursting with change. Nowhere was this more apparent than in New York City. Bellows' images reveal the chaos, power and upheaval driving the

modernisation of the urban landscape.

Bellows' study *New York 1911* shows the density of life in a throbbing metropolis. Juxtapose this painting with his studies of building sites. Numerous works captured the excavation of the city. Bellows' sketches and paintings of Pennsylvania Station under construction are among his most famous. The life of tenement dwellers living in over-crowded conditions on the streets of the Lower East Side is the focus of many canvases. His renowned work, *Forty-two Kids* (1907), depicts kids from the streets at play in the East River. Here we see young boys stripped and plunging into the murky river water while others lie about chatting. These urchins passed time without toys, swings or skates, unlike their well-to-do contemporaries. Bellows' lithographs and watercolours portrayed these subjects vividly. One painting entitled *Why Don't They Go to the Country for Vacation?*, (1913) presents a truthful picture of the poorer classes as do *Cliff Dwellers*, 1913 and *Paddy Flannigan*, 1908. The media at this time printed stories and images of the 'social problem' in their midst.

Boxing fascinated Bellows. *A Stag at Sharkey's*, (1909) features fighters in the ring while a gleeful cigar-chewing audience revels excitedly as they watch the ferocious match. A gritty, dingy back-room atmosphere pervades these early boxing paintings; here is a parable of human force, of violence. Perhaps these images were particularly compelling because boxing was not yet legal in New York State. They convey the visceral, powerful realism, vigour and ferocity that thrived in the male-dominated society of the period. He worked on the boxing theme in the years 1907-1909;

© George Bellows. *Forty-two Kids*, 1907. Courtesy of the Royal Academy of Arts



in that brief period Bellows became recognised as one of the most talented young artists in New York. As his short career progressed, his subject matter changed from revealing the raw energy and harsh realities of a turbulent, modernising New York City to picnics in Central Park, the coastal shores of Maine, portraits and the carnage of the Great War.

These exhibitions are made possible by the Terra Foundation, founded in 1978 and dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for national and international audiences. www.terraamericanart.org/

Dates: George Bellows. Royal Academy of Arts. 16 March - 9 June 2013

Through American Eyes: Frederic Church & the Landscape Oil Sketch. National Gallery. 6 February - 29 April 2013

George Catlin: American Indian Portraits. National Portrait Gallery. 7 March - 23 June 2013

References: Three Exhibition Catalogues

1. *George Catlin: American Indian Portraits. Pratt, S & Carpenter Troccoli, J. National Portrait Gallery in Collaboration with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. 201*

2. *Frederic Church and The Landscape Oil Sketch. Wilton, A. National Gallery Company, London 2013*



© Frederic Edwin Church. *Our Banner in the Sky* 1861. Courtesy of the National Gallery.

3. *George Bellows. Brock, C. Produced by the Publishing Office National Gallery of Art, 2012*

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George Bellows, *Slip of Liberty's Head*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 92 x 125.6 cm. The Courtauld Institute of Art, Harold B. Miller Collection. Photo © The Courtauld Institute of Art.

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