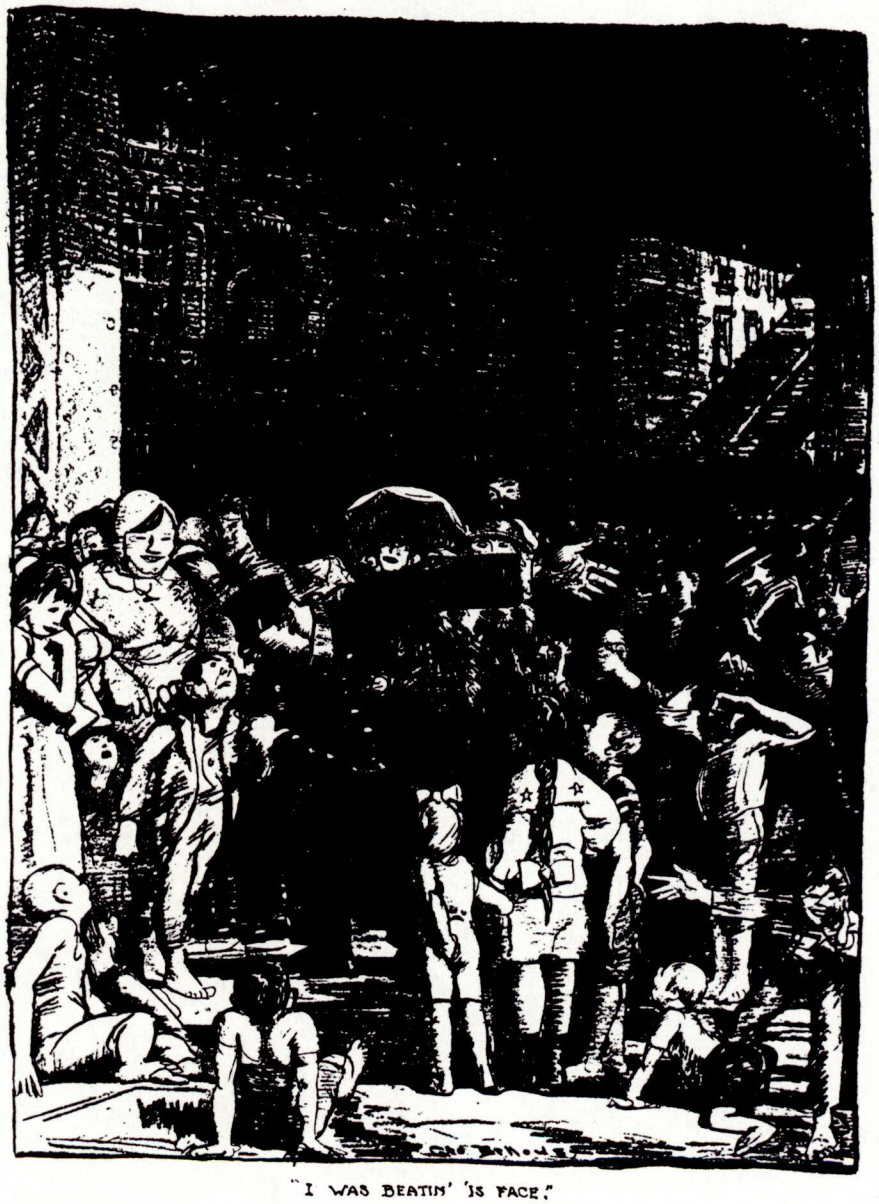
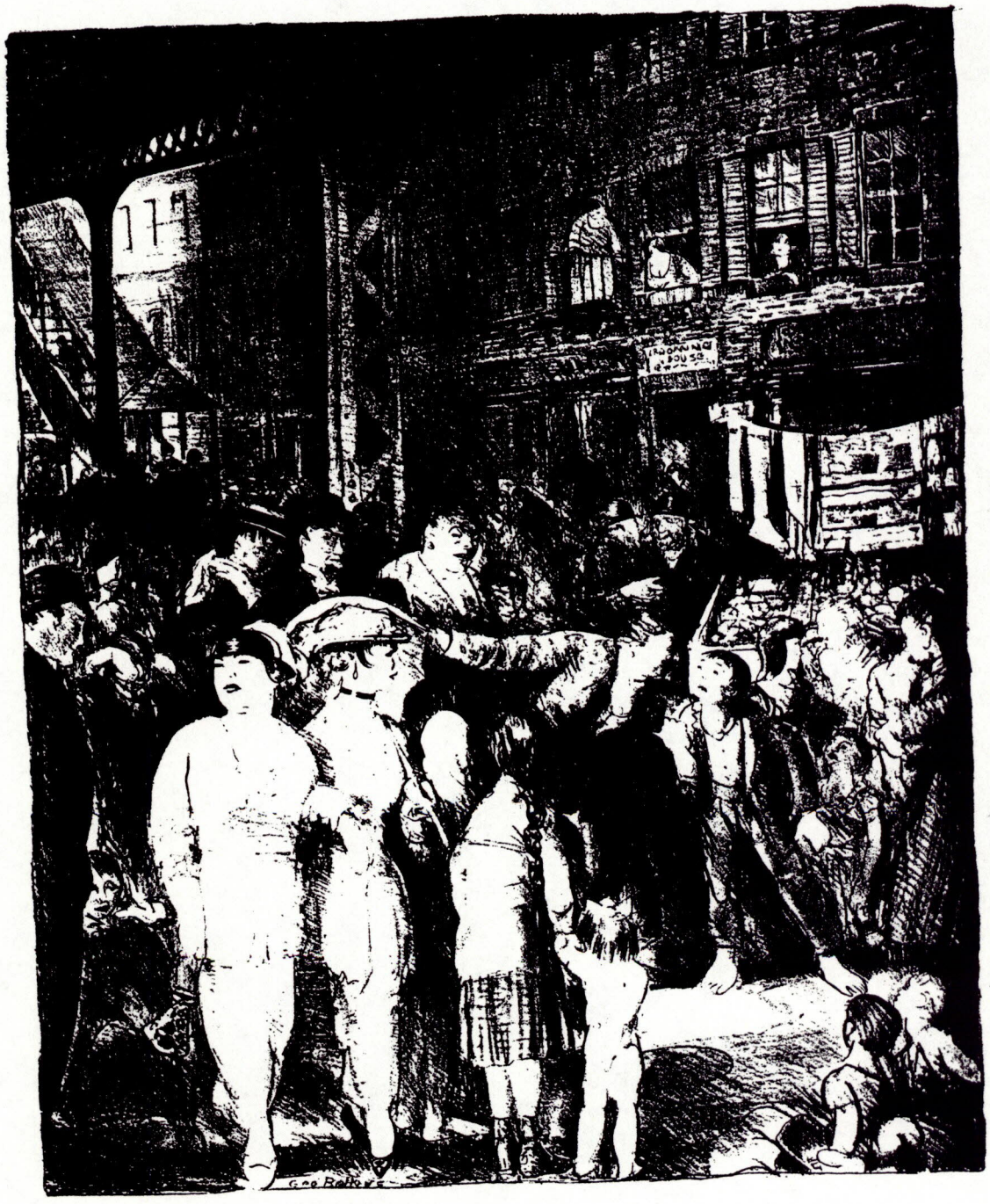


12.
I Was Beatin' 'is Face, 1913
Crayon, ink, and graphite on paper
24 ¼ × 18 in.
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,
Kansas City, Missouri;
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert O.
Peet


11
GEO BELLOWS

I WAS PUNCHIN' HIS FACE
Kit-Kat Essay by Irvin M. Lippman on March 18, 1997
Columbus Club

On my first visit to the Columbus Club I was struck by this framed print which hangs in the members' lounge. This lithograph by George Bellows, entitled The Street, was a gift from Richard Hamilton in memory of Carlton Dargush, Jr., Frederick W. Leveque, and Edgar T. Wolfe. It would not be surprising to find a work by George Bellows in this Club. George Bellows is unquestionably Columbus' most well known artist. He was born and raised in this city, the son of a Columbus contractor. In 1901, he entered Ohio State University where he took to making cartoons and sports illustrations for college publications while playing varsity basketball and baseball. Refusing offers for a professional athletic career and rejecting his family's wishes that he become a minister or architect, Bellows decided to continue his study of art without completing his senior year of college. He thus escapes Dan Heinlen's alumni records

Like Roy Lichtenstein, some fifty years later, we have an artist who left Columbus for fame and fortune in New York. The great difference being Bellows always remained an artist from Columbus, Ohio. So it is certainly in character to find a print by George Bellows here; however, it is the story depicted, an illustration of street life on the Lower East Side in New York, that at first glance seems incongruous. The subjects depicted in the other works of art in the members' lounge are more predictable: a view of the Broad Street Bridge, Cardinals (our state bird) perched on the Columbus Club front gate, a portrait bust of Robert Jeffrey (a Club member and Mayor of Columbus from 1903 to 1905), and a bronze by Frederic Remington (a must in every gentleman's club, in the same way that a Henry Moore is the defining sculpture in front of most art museums).

It was during my job interview three years ago that I first came to

this Club as a guest of Don Casto. I recall seeing the print (which I would like to enlarge for you in this slide). I was impressed how free-thinking these Club members must be to so prominently exhibit a work which is about the disparity between the classes and the influx of immigrants. Furthermore, this print had been made in 1917 for publication in the monthly magazine The Masses which was well known for its relentless satire of bourgeois culture. The magazine's opposition to World War I resulted in Federal censors closing down the publication in December 1917.

This lithograph is actually based on an earlier drawing that George Bellows created. This drawing appeared in Harper's Weekly in April of 1914. The title of the drawing, I was Beatin' is Face, and its subject -- city life at the beginning of this century -- is the somewhat blurred focus of my Kit Kat essay tonight.

In Harper's Weekly, this drawing illustrated a story by Curt Hansen. Hansen had written a morality tale of religious and ethnic prejudice that told of an ongoing argument between two boys, one Jewish, the other Irish. The story tells of Officer Brannigan breaking up a fight between Steve Reilly and Abie Lubin. I won't go into the details of the story except to say that the boys came to resolve their differences, formed an alliance, and went on to beat up an Italian kid down the street.

The two women (one with a parasol), somewhat hidden behind the policeman, move forward to become much more prominent in the Columbus Club lithograph. The first thing that strikes me, is the profoundly different body language seen in our characters. The two women in white are elegant, erect, and restrained in a street scene swirling with activity. They have great attention to comportment, illustrating the idea that the rich move differently from everyone else. In their glance there is a mixture of concern and condesention.

The policeman in the drawing has been replaced by a scolding

woman who has pulled the boys apart. The particulars of the original narrative have all but disappeared, but the overriding story of the meeting between different cultures is even clearer.

Like us, the two ladies are spectators, outsiders, looking upon life on immigrant streets. Other than police officers, politicians, teachers, fire fighters, and social workers, few had reason to venture into these parts except the people who lived there.

Bellows brilliantly captures the density of life and the lack of privacy in tenement neighborhoods that drove people into the streets. That Victorian sense of privacy and decorum that shunned such exposure was still alive in 1917. To outsiders, immigrant life could appear alien, fascinating, and threatening. New York was already becoming a city where the middle class believed in separating work and residence, in which fathers left daily for the world of business and mothers stayed home to run the household; the Lower East Side violated basic norms of respectability by flagrantly mixing labor and home life.

By the time Bellows made this print, the tenements in the Lower East Side were filled with a burgeoning immigrant population. By 1910, New York had a population of 4.7 million, an increase of 1.3 million since 1900. (By contrast, Columbus' population in 1910 was just over 180,000; but even that was a 45% increase over the population a decade earlier. It is not an overstatement to say that people were flocking to cities.)

The Lower East Side saw an influx of Italians, Russians, Rumanians, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Greeks, and Poles. Jews from Eastern Europe comprised one of the largest ethnic enclaves; in 1920, the Jewish immigrants totaled 400,000 in the Lower East Side alone. Pushcart vendors sold inexpensive clothing and ethnic food on Orchard Street and household items on Grand Street.

At first glance, the street seems an outpost of the Old World in the

heart of America -- a powerful meeting between the cultures of Europe and America. The barefooted youth and the indecorous young girl scratching her rear end clearly tell us that this is not uptown! This neighborhood was a prototypical big slum, its conditions decried by reformers and artists. In Bellows' New York at the beginning of this century, you will find sensational exposes such as The Nether Side of New York which pandered to the public's fascination with the darker elements of the city. The very title of Jacob Riis' most famous book, How the Other Half Lives, followed this pattern of dividing the urban environment into distinct halves.

By the 1900s, the media (popular magazines such as Cosmopolitan and Harper's) were printing an enormous number of stories and images to satisfy the public's seemingly insatiable curiosity about the "social problem" of the urban poor.

In 1900, New York's Lower East Side was the most densely inhabited place in the world. So it is not surprising it was much the topic of urban reformers. The street environment figured as a prime target for attack. As the chosen playground for tenement district youth, streets were considered dangerous for the children, like our Abie and Steve. The theories of child development at the time stressed the importance of play for the moral development of young people. In the 1914 book entitled Boyhood and Lawlessness, the author writes "a boy without a playground is the father of a man without a job." Children playing in the street, or swimming in the polluted East River were frequent subjects for Bellows. Our athletic-minded artist certainly supported his contemporary advocates of playground reform, who argued that supervised play, in an orderly environment, offered a safe alternative to the hazards of impromptu games on streets. Architects and planners claimed that the creation of parks and public works would not only beautify the city but Americanize a fragmented population by creating images of civic unity. By 1912, a practicality set in as city planners also began to talk about zoning and limitations of land use, segregated housing and manufacturing,

and improving modes of transportation.

Of these efforts, the most immediate impact upon life on the Lower East Side came from the elevated railway. It looms large in Bellows' street scene, rising overhead above the Old World exoticism. The elevated train will come to supersede the horse-drawn wagon below it and come to bring the recent immigrant on the Lower East Side to a much larger world.

Here was the rapid means to transform the lives of both immigrants and native New Yorkers. This was the earliest form of rapid transit in the United States, first constructed in 1867 along Greenwich Street and 9th Avenue. The need to move large numbers of people between southern Manhattan and the developing northern reaches of the City encouraged a search for a faster alternative to the streetcar.

In 1913, new rapid transit lines were being built and old lines were being rebuilt to accommodate steel subway cars. Express trains were being introduced. The elevated reached its greatest level of use in 1921 when it carried 384 million passengers. After 1923 a number of lines were abandoned amid a growing perception that they were noisy, unsightly, and obsolete given that subways were being built parallel to them.

The train gave people mobility to first find employment outside of where they lived and eventually to afford to move out and find housing elsewhere. This worked so well that today you will find another set of foreign immigrants from China, the Dominican Republic, and the Philippines in this area, along with a young population gentrifying the neighborhood. The Rosens Dry Goods Store in Bellows' print has been replaced with Banana Republic, Armani, and J. Crew.

The rapid change which Bellows foretold, of course, never stops happening. This street scene of 1917 just holds on to a moment along the way. A moment far more complex than the breaking up

of a streetfight. The motion created on the street, the promenade of the bourgeois, the speed of the trains will become faster and faster as the century progresses. The elevated train is the symbol of a quickly changing city -- it is about mobility, literally and figuratively.66 It was about people getting ahead economically, being able to get to better paying jobs across town.

As we broaden our perspective beyond this street scene, we come to see that the movement in the City was not only horizontal but vertical as well. The most dramatic symbol of the city's growth and personal potential for wealth, was the Woolworth Building, called the "cathedral of commerce" completed in 1913. With 60 stories, it was the tallest building in the world until it was surpassed in 1929 by the Chrysler Building. Frank Winfield Woolworth, who had started out as a clerk in a grocery store before venturing into the five- and dime-store business, paid $13 million in cash for this building designed by Cass Gilbert. Then and now, even when it is dwarfed by the 110-story World Trade Center, the Woolworth Building with its gothic towers has a sense of soaring imagination. It was a beacon for the most humble citizen in this country announcing that there was no limit to the financial opportunities available. The elevated train had liberated the poor and the middle classes from the insularity of their neighborhoods, giving everyone access to all parts of the city and particularly to its symbolic and economic heart: downtown.

The values implicit in Bellows lithograph are, in fact, conservative; despite this print having appeared in a radical magazine. Bellows' treatment of urban subjects provided an authentic American art -- pictures about the bigness and boldness of New York, as well as an homage to the great potential for economic success and prosperity.

Bellows, himself, had achieved this. In 1911, an art journalist for the Telegraph called Bellows "the most successful young painter in New York" and asked him how he accounted for his "immediate" recognition. Bellows' response was uncharacteristically humble as

well as acutely perceptive: "Others paved the way," he said, "and I came at the psychological moment."

The city from whence he came -- Columbus, Ohio -- had its similarities to New York's Lower East Side. Columbus was still a compressed city, with industrial, business and residential properties along both banks of the Scioto riverfront, a haphazard and uncontrolled rag-tag collection of buildings. The area was generally perceived as a run-down slum slated to be cleared in a 1904 city plan which would create a "serviceable and beautiful park system." This plan was replaced by a 1908 plan which called for a complete rebuilding of the center of Columbus. The plan envisioned a Mall extending west from Fourth Street (and the Columbus Club) to the west side of the river, with the Statehouse as the focal point. A bond issue was discussed for 1912 to get the plan adopted and to establish a permanent planning commission for Columbus, however it failed to materialize.

No urban planning could have provided as swift a solution to reforming this area then the flood which hit Columbus on March 25, 1913. Three to 22 feet of water covered the land from the Scioto to the Hilltop. 4,400 buildings were destroyed or damaged, four bridges were torn out and there was a loss of over 100 lives.

The flood and the improvements it sparked presented an opportunity to look at the riverfront as an asset rather than a liability. The economy was strong and the city was feeling growing pains. Bexley was developing as an exclusive suburb near the city, the suburb of Grandview was expanding; and in 1917, King Thompson and his brother Ben embarked on what still remains the most successful single real-estate venture in the city's history -- the creation of an entirely planned and very exclusive residential community at the end of the northwest Columbus streetcar lines -- Upper Arlington.

By 1919, Columbus had 140 miles of street railway; the cost of eight tickets was 25 cents. And as in New York, this public

transportation enabled the working class to find housing and new opportunities away from the grime of downtown.

There were severe problems of growth: but there was a motivation that activated citizens in the pre-World War I period. The most serious urban problem of all may be the absence of any positive sense that the future can be better than the present or the past. George Bellows, was conditioned here in Columbus to believe in progress and the idealistic attempt to create spatial unity and public amenity in our cities. This is the center of a debate that continues today in Columbus, New York, and virtually every city.

This leads me to the conclusion that this lithograph by one of our favorite sons of Columbus is a most appropriate memorial to Carlton Dargush, Frederick Leveque, and Edgar Wolfe, known in their time to be the captains of commerce and progress. And this lithograph, The Street by George Bellows, is a reminder to us all when we come to this club that the physical fabric of our city needs constant attention.