

Naming the Nude



Nude, Miss Bentham, George Bellows, 1906, oil on canvas,
182.9 x 91.4 cm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello, and welcome to another of our online talks given by staff the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham. I'm Becca Randle, the Learning and Engagement Co-ordinator. My talk, focusing on American artist George Bellows's 1906 painting, *Nude, Miss Bentham*, was originally written for International Women's Day, on 8 March 2020. I will discuss nudity, objectification, class and identity and the relationship between all of these themes in the work. To do this, I'll be talking you through the story of the painting's model and providing a background to the artist, whilst asking questions about how the painting can be interpreted today.

Miss Bentham's body type is unconventional for a nude model of the period – and even in 2015 *The Guardian* described her as 'splendidly sturdy'. She is not depicted as slight or dainty and, although nude, she is not seen in as exposed a position as, say, a reclining nude. However even with these signals of physical strength acknowledged, there is a definite vulnerability in this painting. She is engulfed by darkness, and looks away from the viewer, an age-old signal of submission. Miss Bentham appears matter-of-factly represented and, although nude, not in a traditionally seductive pose. Her facial features are not the idealised features of an anonymous woman, they are distinct, and through this visual description she could be identified in a crowd. Lastly, we notice the painterly style of Bellows in this piece. Her feet, for example, are merely suggested, using broad brushstrokes. Her flesh tones are realistic, incorporating reds and blues, in sharp contrast to the porcelain figures customary at the time, and foreshadowing later painters such as Lucian Freud from the late 1950s and even Jenny Saville in the 1990s.

In interpreting this work it's important to discuss briefly the concept of the 'male gaze', first coined by influential film theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975, and the effect of the anonymous nude on this work's meaning. Professor A. W. Eaton, a feminist art philosopher at the University of Chicago, described the male gaze as, 'the act of depicting women and the world, in the visual arts, from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer'. If the nude is unnamed, the identity of the sitter is removed

and the focus is on the physical body rather than the person. She is not an individual with a life and a story but an object to be viewed. In a world of predominantly male artists painting to appeal to male viewers, a view of women is produced through the 'male gaze'.

The Barber portrait has been re-titled several times. Until at least the 2014, when it was sold by the Collisart Gallery to the Barber, the painting was usually called *Early Nude* or *Early Standing Nude*, overlooking the woman's name. Many of the nude women represented in art collections are not named, while women who are named are usually clothed, come from wealthy and elevated social backgrounds, and are shown in commissioned portraits. With this in mind, what does this image do for women - is it just another objectifying image of womankind that we are so used to seeing in most art collections? Or is there more to it? To find out, we need to go to the story of who Miss Bentham was and indeed who George Bellows was.

Who was Miss Bentham?

Through the research of Deborah van den Herik, a Utrecht University postgraduate student who completed a placement at the Barber in 2015, we now have much more information about the possible identity of 'Miss Bentham'. The 1910 census of Manhattan, in the State of New York registered a 25-year-old single woman named Harriet Bentham in Manhattan, the only 'Miss Bentham' of the right age to fit our model. The Miss Bentham recorded in the census lived on West 22nd Street, a forty-five-minute walk from Studio 616 where Bellows painted *Nude, Miss Bentham* in the early autumn of 1906. The census shows that she left the land of her birth, England, and arrived in the United States in 1903 at the age of eighteen. Harriet Bentham was one of the many European immigrants who made their way to New York in the early twentieth century. There is no record of her parents living in New York, suggesting that she crossed the Atlantic on her own, a dangerous journey to undertake, considering that one in seven passengers did not survive the voyage.

What kind of life would Harriet have had before making a journey like this? The only other document found mentioning 'Harriet Bentham' was the 1901 UK census where she is registered as the daughter of a James and Susan Bentham. At that time, the family was living in the village of St Nicholas, County Durham. Harriet's father and her two older brothers were registered as coal miners. It was a working-class family with the men employed in the predominant industry of the area. Harriet, sixteen years old at that time, is not recorded as being in employment. Harriet's status as an illegitimate child, makes it difficult to find more information about her. The only other facts known about the Bentham family are that James, Harriet's father, died in 1931 in County Durham, at the age of 85, having had a total of seventeen children with three wives. Unfortunately, no record of a Harriet Bentham travelling from England (such as a passenger list) or arriving in the United States has been found. She possibly travelled under a false name, which would make it almost impossible to place her on a specific ship.

Assuming it is the same Harriet Bentham who appears in Manhattan in 1910, she found residence in the house of the widow Jenny Thompson as a lodger. Significantly, Harriet was the only resident recorded as a 'lodger'; the others were described as boarders. A lodger would have undertaken domestic tasks themselves, and this difference is suggestive of a more limited income. The 1910 census notes that Harriet Bentham was out of work. Remarkably, the number of weeks Harriet was out of work during 1909 was noted as nil. The existing information on Harriet Bentham sketches an image of a brave young woman travelling across the Atlantic by herself, having difficulty finding work in the crowded city of New York. This could have led to measures considered desperate in 1906, such as working as a nude model.

These fragments of Harriet's story raise more questions than answers: why did she emigrate to America? What kind of work was she doing in 1909? Did she get married and so change her name, or was she dead before the next census of 1920? However, even knowing a little more about Harriet Bentham humanises her and helps us empathise with her situation and the indeed the situation of the immigrant class in the USA, and particularly in New York, in the early 1900s.

To understand more about this image, it's important to explore the artistic motivations of George Bellows as well as the position of Harriet Bentham. Bellows was the son of an architect, born in 1882 in Columbus, Ohio. In 1904, he moved to New York to study at the School of Art under Robert Henri. He became part of an artistic group known as the Ashcan School that favoured such gritty subject matter as depictions of tenement blocks, dockyards and boxing matches. As is often the case with names given to groups of artists, the Ashcan School was intended to be a derogatory name invented by their detractors, an equivalent today might be the Trashcan School or Dustbin Group, suggesting that their work was crude, every day and perhaps unsightly. Its members were socially conscious, their urban New York scenes depicting the crudity and chaos of the working-class experience and satirising the upper classes.

Bellows contributed illustrations to *The Masses*, a socialist monthly publication. As the editor, Floyd Dell, wrote; 'it stood for fun, truth, beauty, realism, freedom, peace, feminism, revolution'. This publication advocated for freedom of speech, racial equality, birth control, and women's suffrage, and fiercely opposed sweatshop labour and militarism. Bellows's position regarding women's rights in his life and work can be illuminated by looking at his personal correspondence. A letter from his wife, Emma in 1910 reads: 'I have just been reading in Life [Magazine] that "women are gradually losing their beauty because of their athletic amusements and their masculine habit of thinking." What do you know about that? Further insult is added by saying we are no longer soft, lovely, dependable creatures but hard as nails, angular and argumentative.' Perhaps this description might make us think of Miss Bentham. In May 1912, Bellows and his wife Emma participated in a march along Fifth Avenue for women's rights and two years later they joined a protest by unemployed workers.

So what does all of this tell us?

Well, this indicates that Bellows was aware of the changing attitudes towards women and of beauty standards, he was affiliated with a magazine supporting feminist ideas and he participated in activism for women's rights. We also know from other works that Bellows was concerned with showing the reality of the working classes, including the reality of women. It's also been suggested that Bellows didn't name

Harriet to save her dignity- would Harriet Bentham want her identity revealed?

We know that Harriet was working but poor and although we cannot know, we can question: would Harriet have chosen to model nude had she not needed the additional income? Although he created a platform to tell a story of working-class experience, Bellows was not himself working class. Did the Ashcan School treat the working classes as specimens, put on display to further their own artist careers? By today's standards Bellows could be seen as exploiting Miss Bentham's underprivileged position, and even without the financial aspect of the work carried out by Miss Bentham as a nude sitter, the expression of her situation has come through the voice of a male middle-class painter.

Be that as it may, for its period I think this work is doing something new and brave – by the act of depicting Harriet, Bellows underlines the existence of the working-class female body and explores the changing attitudes towards femininity. Artworks and artefacts often don't give us clear cut versions of history - they can therefore encourage us to see the many layers of complex relationships between individuals, artists and wider society. Ultimately, there is a balance that needs to be struck between interpreting artworks within our own modern social context and understanding the context of the time.

What do you think? How does Harriet Bentham come across to you in this painting? We would love to hear your thoughts and ideas, or answer any questions you have. Send us a message via our social media platforms or email the gallery (at info@barber.org.uk).

Speaker info

Becca Randle joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as Learning and Engagement Coordinator in 2016. She works on a variety of projects including contributing to the teaching of modules for University of Birmingham undergraduate courses, the production of learning resources, workshops and public events. She programmes and delivers the Barber's young people's programme, the Barber Collective and coordinates volunteers, guides and freelance artist educators.

Having recently completed a postgraduate degree in Museum and Gallery Education at University College London, Becca's research interests include the pedagogical and social function of the museum and art gallery. Particularly, foregrounding hidden histories such as Colonial legacies in collections through creative collaborative working practices.

Becca is also a West Midlands Area Representative for Engage, the National Association of Gallery Education. Prior to the Barber, Becca worked at Ikon gallery, Birmingham, as well as in community arts and alternative educational provision for young people.

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

Meagher, Michelle. 'Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetic of Disgust', in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 18:4 (2003), pp. 23-42.

Select resources list

'Feminist Art', <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/feminist-art>.
Published online: 2017.

'Ellis Island National Museum of Migration',
<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/immigration-museum>.

'You put yourself in his place: George Bellows and the Limits of Bodily Knowledge', Dr. John Fagg's symposium at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., <https://www.nga.gov/audio-video/wilmerding-symposium/wilmerding-2018-fagg.html>. Published online: 2018.