

1-28-2014

Rain on the River

RISD Museum

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Recommended Citation

RISD Museum and Drury, Fritz, "Rain on the River" (2014). *Channel*. 3.
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I'm Fritz Drury. I'm a professor of Illustration at RISD. Today we're looking at *Rain on the River* by George Bellows from about 1908. In this painting of the Hudson River from somewhere up along the higher parts of Riverside Drive, Bellows is working at a historical moment for American painting. He is absorbing and moving on from French Impressionism, the impact of Impressionism, and specifically the reinterpretation of that school – the Ashcan School – in America, with increased role for the gritty, industrial, social fabric of America, and New York in particular, at that time. You can certainly feel that here in this painting, which is dominated by really blunt gray.

For me, the first impact of this picture is just one of grayness. It's a grayness that is even beyond the gray of a rainy day in New York, which is really saying something. Also, we have some nature with rocks and the park here, and of course the river itself, but also a good bit of industry. There are rail yards and what looks like a horse cart being drawn along. It's the intersection in New York of the natural landscape with the very active industrial fabric that existed at this time.

This is a painting about painting, as far as I'm concerned. Yes, there certainly are aspects of historical interest and our historical interest, but love of the act of painting and its physical side in particular is so apparent here. Bellows loves to pick up a great wad of paint and just drag it over the surface of the canvas. He appreciates that dimension of painting, which is not color and it's not graphic form, but it's textural form. It's almost a form of sculpture.

This painting seems so heavy to me, that it might fall off the wall. It's a very strong forceful thing that encourages the young painter – for example, I was in my 20s when I first saw this painting – to go for it, and to be very physically engaged with the creation of the work of art.