George Wesley Bellows (American, 1882–1925)  
*Portrait of Geraldine Lee, No. 1*, 1914  
Oil on canvas, 22 3/8 x 18 5/16”  
University purchase, Bixby Fund, 1966  

Although best known for his paintings and lithographs of the boxing ring and life on New York’s Lower East Side, as well as his interest in social realism and art theory, George Bellows painted some one hundred and forty portraits during his short career. In his 1914 work *Portrait of Geraldine Lee No. 1*, painted during one of his summer trips to Monhegan Island, Maine, Bellows depicted the daughter of a local fisherman in an inventive yet slightly discomforting composition marked by strong tonal contrasts, dramatic lighting, and a limited color palette. Using portraiture as a means to experiment with composition and color, Bellows infused what was traditionally a more conservative artistic genre with the same creative energy that marked his depictions of urban life and mass entertainment.¹ In a review of a 1916 exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute, one critic wrote, “*Geraldine Lee No. 1* was as interesting for lighting and pattern of mass and colour as it was for Geraldine Lee.”² This portrait is further complicated by the evidence that Bellows cut down the work years after its completion—from a size of 28 x 30” to its current dimensions of 22 x 18” inches. This essay will examine how Bellows’s original 1914 portrait as well as his subsequent act of cropping were both uniquely informed by the artist’s engagement with a new urban visuality emerging in New York City during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Working primarily in New York City, George Bellows is often associated with the group of American urban realist painters known as the Ashcan school. While these artists never formed an official school, their work commonly presented a distinctive vision of the daily realities of urban life. The rapid proliferation of mass entertainment, including vaudeville, early film, sporting events, commercial illustrations, and comics, directly informed both their artistic practice and subject matter. By the 1910s, the intensity and glow of electrical lighting introduced new bright hues, colors, and spotlight effects to theatrical performances as well as everyday street life. In addition, New York was the early hub of the film industry, and, by 1910, weekly attendance at over four hundred movie theaters had neared 1.5 million, or a quarter of the city’s entire population.³ This new urban visuality encompassed both the visual environment of the city as well as the social experience of seeing and being seen that had become a part of everyday life in the modern city. In *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*, art historian Rebecca Zurier elaborates the complex dynamics of “urban vision” of this period, which she locates at the intersections of mass media, fine art, and the lived experiences of the Ashcan artists. As she argues, the work of Ashcan artists such as Bellows was marked by a “thematics of sight” in which “acts of spectatorship not only provided subject matter for their images but also contributed to a larger urban culture of
looking in which both art and artists participated. Many of these artists were particularly interested in forms of urban looking such as voyeurism and the daily experience of city dwellers observing each other in public and private spaces. These habits of looking were reinforced in the popular media of the period through newspaper comics, photojournalism, and the early cinema’s strategies of framing and display.

Bellows frequently incorporated the urban subject matter of New York into his work, embodying the accelerated pace and chaos of urban experience. While much of his portraiture related to family and small-town life, Bellows embraced a new urban viewpoint in these works as well—as evidenced in the graphic style and dramatic lighting of *Geraldine Lee No. 1*. Trained primarily in the graphic arts, as were other Ashcan artists, he challenged conventional artistic standards with his fast-paced drawings from this period, and this energetic visual vocabulary was transferred to his paintings. In *Geraldine Lee No. 1*, Bellows’s depiction of the subject’s face is marked by lack of detail and a caricature-like quality. During this time in his career, Bellows also adopted the limited color palettes of Denman W. Ross, an art theorist and design professor at Harvard. Ross wrote several texts in the early 1900s advancing his theories of “pure design” and the exploration of abstract language in the visual arts, including brief discussions on the impact of electrical light on color. Bellows’s application of Ross’s pre-arranged color palettes heightened the range of tonal values and contrasts available to achieve dramatic effects. By increasing the intensity of the directed lighting effect through higher values on the Ross scale, Bellows presented Geraldine Lee’s face as washed-out, over-exposed, and in abrupt contrast to the dark background and area of deep shadow to the right of the sitter’s head. The painting’s theatrical lighting noticeably minimizes the details of the young woman’s face while the artist’s quick, reductive brushwork imbues the portrait with a sense of on-the-spot vividness and immediacy.

More significant is the severe act of cropping that distinguishes the first from the second state of *Geraldine Lee No. 1*, further suggesting Bellows’s artistic response to the urban culture of looking and spectatorship. While it is unclear when this portrait was cut down, it seems likely that Bellows himself performed this calculated act at some point between 1919 and his death in 1925. Bellows removed areas of the painting—predominantly from the bottom and left side—that included more information about the portrait’s sitter and the space she occupies. In its 1914 state, the composition presented a three-quarter-length view of the woman sitting in a chair with her left arm resting on her lap and her right arm reaching toward a small dog in the lower-left corner. The strict geometric composition underlying the original portrait, common throughout Bellows’s work, is disrupted in the subsequent format. In addition, the specific cropping of this portrait drastically alters the viewer’s perceived distance from the subject, creating a sudden close-up—an effect becoming more common in popular visual forms of the period such as film and graphic arts. The woman’s disconcerting gaze becomes more focal to the portrait, in part enacting the experience of actor-to-viewer engagement that was being applied in early vaudeville film shorts. Bellows’s cropping not only brings the viewer closer to his subject, but the asymmetrical and skewed framing of the figure’s face gives the painting a snapshot-like quality that further suggests informality and immediacy.

While there is very little information available about the motivation behind Bellows’s cutting down of this painting, the act of cropping itself raises a series of questions about spectatorship and the complicated relationship between image and viewer. Bellows experimented relentlessly in search of a new language in which to capture his experience of modernity, and portraiture was a common location for these experiments in color and design. The artist’s dramatic pictorial language and subsequent cropping of *Geraldine Lee No. 1* highlights his
interest in new forms of looking that were an integral part of daily life and the mass visual entertainment of the period—inviting the viewer to enact these forms of urban looking as seen on the screen, in the papers, and on the street. Through this portrait, Bellows adopted and transformed the conventions of emerging popular visual media within the traditions of the portraiture genre to engage with the changing experience of urban life and the modern city.

5 Bellows contributed drawings and cartoons to anarchist publications throughout his career and served as the art editor at The Masses in the 1910s.
7 From a transcript of the entry in George Bellows’s painting diary pertaining to Geraldine Lee No. 1, we have information that lists the painting being exhibited in its original larger size until 1919, and then the note “cut down 22 x 18.” Photographic reproductions of the painting in its full size were also printed in publications connected to the exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Academy and the Chicago Art Institute in 1915, as well as in a 1919 issue of Art and Decoration. As Michael Quick notes, it is known that Bellows cut down or destroyed other paintings of his, and that at least three other portraits from the period 1914-15 were also cut down to the same size as Geraldine Lee No. 1: Portrait of Emma in a Night Light (1914), Girl in Blue Green (1915), and Lucie (1915). See Quick, The Paintings of George Bellows, 233, n. 58; Michael Quick, “George Bellows, Portrait of Geraldine Lee, No. 1.” in A Gallery of Modern Art at Washington University in St. Louis (St. Louis: Washington University Gallery of Art, 1994), 148, 200, n. 7.
8 During the 1910s, Bellows adopted the compositional strategies of Hardesty Maratta, which stressed an internal geometry. Bellows combined this geometric scheme with his dependence upon golden-section analysis of the painting’s rectangle. See Quick, “Technique and Theory,” 38-42.
9 For a discussion of actor-to-viewer engagement in early-twentieth-century film, see McDonnell, 24-25. Zurier, Picturing the City, chap. 8, addresses issues of spectatorship, camera positions, and close-ups in early American film.
10 During this period, photography also played a significant role in enabling new forms of seeing. The work of Ashcan artists overlapped and communicated with the work of documentary photographers, amateur street photographers, and photojournalists who also took as their subject the working poor and the urban environment. In addition, the first popular, low-cost camera was introduced by Kodak in 1900 (the Brownie), providing the means for individuals and families to begin producing hundreds of their own images. By 1915, at least 1.5 million amateur photographs were being produced each year, including a large number of snapshot family portraits. See Barbara Levine and Stephanie Snyder, Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006); and Sarah Greenough et. al., The Art of the American Snapshot: 1888-1978 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).