Images of sports appear in Greek art, in profusion, and in the work of many of the major artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. American and European museums have mounted exhibitions of "Sports and Art" and there is a lively, inconclusive debate among the philosophically inclined: Are sports themselves a form of art? Sports historians have often exploited the painter's or the printmaker's art to provide images of ludic activities. What reader of sports history is not familiar with William Hogarth's cockfights and cricket matches, with the racetrack scenes of Edgar Degas, with the many boxers painted by Thomas Eakins and George Bellows, with the rugby players painted by Henri Rousseau and Max Beckmann? The problem with such illustrations is just that: they tend to remain at the level of illustration. The images are instrumentalized, and Currier and Ives seem more useful because more mimetically realistic-than Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's hockey players or Edward Hopper's cyclists.

Without pretending to the expertise of professionally trained art historians, sports historians can do more to ask about the artists' interpretation of sports. What does the picture or the statue reveal about the nature of the activity? What does it imply about the place of the activity in the culture? To provide at least a glimpse of some terra relatively incognita, we-an art historian and a sports historian-have explored the work of a number of American artists. Our far-from-exhaustive-or-definitive comments are meant as enticements to the sports historian to see art as interpretation rather than as illustration.

The work of Benjamin West, the first American artist to achieve international renown, included at least one memorable evocation of colonial sports: The Cricketers (ca. 1763, oil on canvas, The Brook Club, New York). The five young sportsmen are the Virginian aristocrats James Allen, Andrew

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3. Other than for direct quotations, our references are to books and articles by art historians because sports historians do not need to be reminded of their own work.
agriculturalist and breeder Charles Henry Hall’s commission of Alvan Fisher for such a group. The undated picture, *Eclipse, with Race Track*, is probably one of a group of at least six portraits of the renowned horse Fisher painted between 1822 and 1823 in hope of selling them to Charles Hall’s influential friends. It is possible that this picture is the one about which Fisher wrote to Hall, telling him that he had begun the portrait and planned to take it with him to the races at Union Course. By bringing the unfinished portrait with him, Fisher no doubt hoped to garner new patrons, but also to advertise the authenticity of his equine portraits, taken firsthand at significant moments in a horse’s racing life. Visiting Long Island’s Union Course was a good idea. There, on May 27, 1823, 60,000 of antebellum America’s turf fans witnessed one of the era’s celebrated intersectional races. *Sir Henry*, owned by William R. Johnson of North Carolina, ran against *Eclipse*, owned by Cornelius Van Ranst of New York. *Sir Henry* won the first of the three four-mile heats and *Eclipse* won the second. As the horses galloped by in the third and decisive heat, John Randolph of Roanoke, one of Virginia’s congressional representatives and an ardent Southern nationalist, sought to influence the outcome by shouting at *Eclipse’s* jockey, “You can’t do it, Mr. Purdy! You can’t do it, Mr. Purdy!” But Mr. Purdy (and his mount) did it. Samuel Purdy appears in

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Allen, and Ralph Wormley, and their equally aristocratic South Carolinian friends, Ralph Izard and Arthur Middleton. Posing proudly with their cricket bats (and Middleton’s dog), they silently proclaim their social and their ethnic status. (What pastime was more English than a game of cricket?) Although Boston’s John Singleton Copley, West’s pupil-by-correspondence, did not paint his cricket picture during his American years, one of the most brilliant and romantic portraits of his London career (which began in 1774 and lasted until his death in 1815) presents a nine-year-old boy resting languidly on his cricket bat. This boy, Richard Heber, left leg forward, leans to his right, displacing some of his weight to his cricket bat. His left hand holds the ball. Framed by a luxurious, pastoral landscape, he poses with his shirt slightly open, which seems appropriate for sport’s relative dishabille. Yet this clearly is a pose in aristocratic dress with sporting props, and not an evocation of the activity of the game itself. In its brilliant color and evident brushwork, Richard Heber, painted in 1782, reveals the profound influence of Copley’s Italian and English experiences on his approach to art. But no aspect of the portrait seems quite as British as the pose, with which Copley experimented in a chalk drawing (Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware). Copley settled upon the left arm pulled up, showing the boy holding his coat in the crook of his arm and emphasizing his prominent grip on the ball. Young master Heber knew exactly where he stood.

Like their nineteenth-century British counterparts, wealthy Americans sought amusement (and status) at the racetrack. The American tradition of painting portraits of thoroughbreds began in 1822 with New York

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5. Eighteenth-century sportsmen were not always painted at their ease. Although no American painter emulated the winterlandschappen of Holland’s Hendrik Avercamp, Gilbert Stuart did manage a 1782 portrait of William Grant gliding along London’s frozen Serpentine. Stuart’s elegant skater can be compared to Winslow Homer’s coy glider in his wood engraving with the double-edged title, Cutting a Figure (Every Saturday, February 4, 1871), and each contrasted with Alex Colville’s Skater (1964). Seen from behind, face hidden, the twentieth-century athlete bends forward and hurtles through an abstract landscape of gray, green, blue, and white. The painting, in the Museum of Modern Art, is illustrated in Reilly Rhodes, ed., Sport in Art from American Museums (New York: Universe, 1990), p. 109.
Fisher's canvas, *Eclipse, with Race Track*, but the center of attention is clearly the horse, held by its proud owner. The descending status of horse and owner, linked by the tight rein, to jockey, placed slightly behind, to groom, seen kneeling to fold the horse's blanket in the shadows at the lower right, is made abundantly clear in the composition. Contrary to the connotations of his name, Eclipse stands in a circle of light that falls upon him through a break in the clouded sky. The background shows a grandstand of a course before the race, with gathering crowds and another horse led around the track by its groom, all set in idyllic rolling hills, punctuated with a white church spire. The central scene is framed by a ravaged tree in the right foreground, and a leafy one at left middleground that, together with the low horizon and wide expanse of sky, suggests Fisher's commitment to landscape painting, to which he turned increasingly after 1825.

*Eclipse, with Race Track* records America's adoption of the English sport as well as American artists' reliance on an English tradition of equine portraits, especially those of George Stubbs, whose work Fisher probably knew through engraved reproductions of his paintings. But as English as it may seem, Eclipse also heralds a new American concern with landscape, which became the preeminent form of American artistic expression in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Even as many American artists began to paint their landscape, some looked to the landscape's first inhabitants as new subjects for their brushes. George Catlin set out in 1832 to see Indians in the western territories, rather than paint the few who came through eastern cities as delegates en route to the federal government. In *Archery of the Mandan*, painted between 1835 and 1837, we see an aspect of Indian life that Catlin wished to emphasize for his eastern viewers and readers:

> [T]he young men who are the most distinguished in this exercise, assemble on the prairie at a little distance from the village, and having paid, each one, his "entrance-fee", such as a shield, a robe, a pipe, or other article, step forward in turn, shooting their arrows into the air, endeavouring to see who can get the greatest number flying in the air at one time, thrown from the same bow.8

This contest, like the horse race that Catlin witnessed on the same day, was part of Mandans' celebration of the safe return of a war party against the Riccarees. What most immediately strikes the sports historian is the difference between this contest and those staged by Renaissance and early modern archers in the guilds of Flanders, Picardy, and the Rhineland. Although the Mandans, like the Europeans, quantified the competition ("the greatest number" of arrows), they shot rapidly, without taking careful aim at an abstractly configured geometrical target of concentric rings. The most likely reason is that the Mandan hunter and the Mandan warrior released his arrows against a

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George Catlin (1796-1872), *Archery of the Mandan*, 1835-1837 (oil on canvas, 49.7 x 70.0 cm) (National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.)

herd of buffalo or a hostile war party. He obviously prized the kind of quickness depicted by Catlin.

Images like *Archery of the Mandan* appealed to eastern audiences on several levels. Simplified, even schematic, Catlin’s work is likened by an art historian to an anatomy demonstration in a classical frieze of figures striking distinctive poses. The artist stressed his firsthand observation which must have given his works a great sense of “authenticity” to his viewers. Another art historian suggests that easterners, who had their own competitive games, might have felt a bond with Indians depicted in works by Catlin. At the same time, however, any visual encounter would have been dominated by the overwhelming exoticism and racial difference that whites perceived. That prizes, in the form of booty collected in the foreground of the picture, and the ritual display of male physical prowess were part of the Indian game could not have been missed by Catlin’s audience.

Various kinds of hunting were favored subjects of George Catlin in the 1830s, and the following two decades marked the height of popularity for the theme, from subsistence hunters on western plains to society sportsmen in eastern marshes. William Ranney turned a year’s experience with the army in

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the American West into material that established his career as a painter of the white, western hunter. Ranney was one of the founding members of the New York Cricket Club, and although he is not known to have painted this sport, he turned his avid interest in bird hunting in the New Jersey marshes into a number of paintings. While one American myth celebrated the lone hunter, like James Fenimore Cooper’s Deerslayer, Ranney shows the familial aspects of the sport in his 1850 *Duck Shooting*, where his brother kneels and stretches out his hand to receive the bird from the mouth of the obediently sitting, highly anthropomorphized dog. That the scene was “close to home” also may be evident in the landscape of the Hackensack Meadows, near the artist’s studio. In a tightly organized, triangular composition, Ranney links men, rifles, and dog as equally important in a successful hunt where male camaraderie in the outdoors is held up as an ideal. Men work together and with nature even when in a contest against nature. The autumnal darkness of the background suggests that failure to cooperate might be dangerous.

Sporting scenes were prominent in America’s new “national art” and were fostered by the American Art-Union, an institutional patron whose directors annually exhibited works in New York and also distributed

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George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879), *Shooting for the Beef*, 1850 (oil on canvas, 33⅜ × 49¼ in.) (The Brooklyn Museum, Dick S. Ramsay Fund)

engravings of a chosen painting to a national membership. Ranney and George Caleb Bingham owed part of their success to the Art-Union, which purchased and exhibited Bingham’s *Shooting for the Beef* of 1850.

In Bingham’s version of rural sports, Ranney’s helpful dog has become a whole pack of good-natured canine spectators to a genial test of marksman­ship. The prize animal, identified as a fat ox in the description in the *Art-Union Bulletin*, to be butchered and portioned out to the winners, is the only participant to engage us with his less-than-happy stare, perhaps as way of commentary on the outcome of the proceedings. This western sport, well documented in literary reports about the West in the 1830s and 1840s, was a new subject for Bingham, who perhaps was inspired by the success of eastern sporting scenes, particularly of the turkey shoot.

In *Shooting for the Beef*, Bingham stresses the role of sport in maintaining community in new western towns, this one just a clearing in a bend in the road, marked by a simple building whose sign tells us it is both Post Office and Grocery and so serves essential roles of communication and sustenance. That this contest for the beef takes place quite literally in the shadow of such a building places the event in its proper context, as sport, as a supplement to needs already more or less fulfilled. The contestants smile as they wait their turn, and seem to take pleasure in each other’s company. Bingham presented his audiences in St. Louis and New York with a particular view of western life, that of a dozen polite men, neatly dressed in clothes of bright, clear colors. They bask in a warm Missouri light which, along with the picture’s

One of the few sports where women could compete as equals with men was croquet, introduced into America in the years just after the Civil War. In vogue for a brief time, the sport hardly liberated women to physical activity, as they remained restrained within huge skirts bound to tiny waists. Winslow Homer, perhaps attracted to the opportunity to paint fashionably dressed women out-of-doors, between 1865 and 1869 devoted five canvases to the game. Ambiguity marks his 1866 \textit{Croquet Scene} in which three women, presented as fashionable types, stand around a lone man who bends down to position a bail for one of the women’s imminent croquet shot. Is his gesture merely polite, to accommodate the women for whom bending over in hooped shirts was nearly impossible? Why, as the central figure in the composition positioned between two women and touching the skirt of each, is his face hidden from us? That the game was a scene for social mixing, especially during the long intervals between any one participant’s active play, is clear. Young women valued the game for bringing them into contact with young men, whose ranks had been decimated by the Civil War. Using mallets aggressively to send balls rolling through hoops may even have had sexual connotations. Whether or not Homer’s
Artists and Athletes

Winslow Homer, *The Bridle Path, The White Mountains*, 1868 (oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 38 in.) (Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts)

contemporaries felt a sexual frisson on the field of play, his croquet pictures put women on display in the sunlight, where they strike athletic poses in brightly colored, highly fashionable clothes, and certainly dominate the few men who dare to enter the artist’s field. 13

Marriage, or its prospects, may also be a sub-current of Homer’s 1868 *Thee Bridle Path, The White Mountains*. 14 It is not the aural double entendre of title alone that leads us to this speculation, but also Homer’s attention to the subject of women in post-Civil War America, coupled with our understanding that many more of these women remained unmarried than would have before the war. 15

Marriageable or not, Homer’s young rider is certainly one of the many post-war Americans who populated this summer resort area. Homer himself was a tourist there in the summers of 1868 and 1869, yet this painting does not correspond to any particular view on Mount Washington’s Crawford Path. 16 Homer rather draws our attention to riding as a leisure activity, one


14. We are grateful to Christopher Kent Wilson who suggested this in conversation some years ago.

15. There is the provocative possibility that Homer may have known William Ranney’s *Virginia Wedding* (now at the Amon Carter Museum and possibly originally titled *The Fowler’s Return*) painted in 1854 and exhibited soon thereafter. Ranney’s presentation of nine joyful couples in eighteenth-century attire riding two-by-two on horseback suggests a focus on youthful marriage that Homer’s painting, in its single figure with expressionless face, may counter. (We are grateful to Mark Thistlethwaite and to Sarah Cash for providing information on *Virginia Wedding*.)

increasingly popular with women in the 1860s as steamboats, trains, and horsedrawn omnibuses freed eastern women from horseback riding as a means of travel. In Homer’s scene, the young woman’s horse, seen in midstep, deftly negotiates a rocky terrain, but the rider herself stares down at the path before her, seemingly unaware of the scenery that we imagine to be a goal of her ride. Her demeanor underscores the seriousness with which Americans of the leisure class sought mountain summits as antidotes to the lows of urban life.

Thomas Eakins, Homer’s contemporary, and with him considered one of America’s great “realist” artists of the late nineteenth century, also painted scenes of post-Civil War urban middle-class leisure pursuits. After four years of formal study in Paris, Eakins returned to Philadelphia, a city whose post-war technological changes had accelerated since the artist’s 1866 departure. The new technology had affected the sport of sculling, in which Eakins participated, as new shells were constructed of several layers of varnished paper applied to a light wooden frame. The result was a craft that weighed one twentieth as much as the boats used in earlier races on American rivers. The invention of iron outriggers allowed the oarsman to row far more efficiently than had been possible before the movement of the pivot beyond the rim of the shell. The sliding seat was another innovation that facilitated the transfer of kinetic energy. In this technologically modern scull, so different from the unwieldy barges propelled by teams of watermen, sat a single athlete. One of the most renowned of these oarsmen was a close friend of Eakins, who made him the subject of one of his finest paintings, The Champion Single Sculls, now called Max Schmitt in a Single Scull, of 1871.

Unlike the first Currier and Ives print of the sport (1867), which depicted an awkwardly horizontal pair of professional rivals against an equally horizontal background cluttered by steamships and sailboats, Eakins’s tribute to the solitary amateur athlete placed Schmitt obliquely in what seemed an almost pastoral landscape of autumnal quietude. But it is a landscape embedded within the city. Only after the eye has rested for a time on Schmitt does it travel downstream to another single scull, then to a small boat with two rowers and coxswain in distinctive Quaker dress, and to a steamboat set deeply in the illusionistic space of the Schuylkill River, beyond the trusses and arcaded piers of two bridges. A portrait of his city as much as it is of his friend, Eakins’s picture asks us to contemplate the athlete’s sacrifices. We know he is a champion, and yet, balding, squinting in the late afternoon sun as he turns to look over his right shoulder, and slumped in well-worn undershirt, he is an untraditional hero, one on whose face and body are written the strain of modern urban life. The outdoor setting and the evidence of athletic competition itself can be seen as compensation for what Eakins’s contemporaries referred to as the “nervousness” of American life.17

Max Schmitt was the first of six oils and five watercolors Eakins made before 1874 when he abandoned the subject, but this is the only one in which the artist included himself in the composition. As the stocky man vigorously rowing away from us in the middleground, (Elizabeth Johns calls him metaphorically a “single sculler all his life.”) By doing this, and also by signing and dating the painting on the stemboard of that shell, Eakins further specified his scene, making himself witness to Schmitt’s win of 5 October 1870, and identifying himself as an active athlete in his beloved city.\(^{18}\)

Eakins, who would paint scenes of coaching, wrestling, and boxing as well, completed a series of hunting pictures between 1873 and 1876. As Eakins’s own sculling informed his rowing pictures, so, too, did his personal hunting experiences affect these scenes. Begun in the fall of 1873, his work was interrupted by severe debility from malaria caught while hunting and sketching in soggy marshes. He was forced to give up the sport, but pressed on with its imagery. Among the most poetic of these works is the 1874

\[\text{Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), } \textit{Max Schmitt in a Single Scull,} \text{ 1871 (oil on canvas, 32}\frac{1}{4}\text{ x 46}\frac{1}{4}\text{ in.) (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, 1934, Alfred N. Punnett Fund and Gift of George D. Pratt)}\]

watercolor *Whistling for Plover*. When black men appear in his other hunting pictures, Eakins shows them as hired guides or pushers. But in *Whistling for Plover* he isolates the African-American as his central subject, who we suspect is bagging plover for himself and not for hire. Other hunters dot the landscape, their prostrate forms as inert as the felled birds surrounding the central whistler. Eakins identified this man as William Robinson of Backneck, sometimes called "The Neck," a community of south Philadelphia in an area of particularly fine hunting between the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers.¹⁹ Eakins later published two illustrations for an article on the area in which the author described marsh hunting:

> In summer no gunner haunts the Neck; in the spring and winter a few wild fowl and snipe are sometimes bagged. But in the fall—on the first of September—sportsmen, boatmen, and "pushers," who propel the flat-bottomed skiffs through the reeds, swarm into the Neck. Anybody who can beg, borrow, or steal a fowling piece sallies forth, and many are the pepperings of shot that worthy citizens receive from their unskillful brethren in search of the coveted reed-bird... Toward sunset the reed-birds congregate in

large flocks, and then the slaughter is great, and the noise is like that heard on any unusually jubilant Fourth of July. Rail-birds are also objects of pursuit in the Ma'sh; but rail-shooting can be enjoyed only at high tide as the boat must be pushed over the reeds.\textsuperscript{20}

In many ways \textit{Whistling for Plover} is the antithesis of Eakins’s other marsh-hunting pictures, whose dominantly horizontal compositions are punctuated by the vertical poles of pushers. In \textit{Whistling for Plover} nothing disturbs the design dominated by insistent flat marshlands. Eakins devoted two thirds of his sheet to pale, cloud-filled sky, Only the crown of Robinson’s straw hat and a few faint sails disturb the line separating the two bands of his composition. High-keyed in its color and filled with light, the landscape competes with the carefully observed and precisely drawn portrait of the hunter who makes ready to unbreech his shotgun and aim at birds attracted by his whistle. Robinson’s puckered lips make specific his ability to imitate nature’s sounds and so control his natural surroundings in ways he may not have been able to his social or economic life in a segregated Philadelphia community.

An interesting footnote to \textit{Whistling for Plover} is Eakins’s gift of it to S. Weir Mitchell, the Philadelphia physician and novelist who advocated the “rest cure,” or complete removal from everyday life, for women who suffered from nervous disorders which Mitchell, among others, believed were brought on by modern stresses. As men were advised (particularly by Horatio C. Wood, another Philadelphia physician-friend of Eakins) to cure stress by participation in sport or, as Eakins did, by going west to sleep, eat, and revive out-of-doors, so women were confined to bed, force-fed, and subjected to electrical shock treatments.

In 1875, the year before baseball’s National League was founded, Eakins painted a watercolor devoted to the sport.\textsuperscript{21} In this work, \textit{Baseball Players Practicing}, Eakins posed two players, one of whom is positioned to bat. The artist rendered this scene with great precision, yet there remain certain problems in interpreting the players’ positions. Eakins may have been less familiar with this sport than he was with rowing or hunting, or he may have recorded one of the earlier configurations of the field.\textsuperscript{22}

The figures, specific yet unidentified, were especially admired by Earl Shinn who, in a contemporary exhibition review, favorably compared them to an ancient ideal:

\begin{quote}
The selection of the themes in itself shows artistic insight, for American sporting-life is the most Olympian, beautiful and genuine side of its civilization from the plastic point of view. . . .The
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{21} Kathleen Foster proposes that the work is from the spring or summer of 1874 and that Eakins signed and dated it in January 1875 in time for the American Watercolor Society exhibition. See Foster 1982, p. 222, note 72.

\textsuperscript{22} See Foster 1982, p. 221, note 70.
forms of the youthful ball-players, indeed, exceed most Greek work we know of in their particular aim of expressing alert strength in a moment of tension.23

In a letter to Shinn, Eakins had described the specific moment he depicted as "just after the batter has taken his bat, before the ball leaves the pitcher’s hand. They are portraits of Athletic boys, a Philadelphia club."24 So Eakins made it clear that his subject was not just baseball, which was already acclaimed as America’s national sport, but Philadelphia baseball, and he sets his players against the bleachers of a local stadium, peopled by just a few spectators.25 The most prominent spectator sits on the ground in front of the stands, his figure a compact circle created by the comfortable position he


24. Eakins to Shinn, 30 January [1875], Richard Tapper Cadbury Collection, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa., quoted in most literature on this watercolor, but with full citation in Homer 1992, p. 69.

25. William Innes Homer identifies the stadium as one at Twenty-fifth and Jefferson streets in which the Philadelphia Athletics, a semiprofessional team, played. See Homer 1992, p. 69, note 29.
William Morris Hunt (1824-1879), *The Ball Players*, 1877 (oil on canvas, 41 x 61 cm) (© The Detroit Institute of Arts. Gift of Mrs. John L. Gardner)

takes, hands clasped around his knees. With his signature\(^{26}\) positioned against the wall, in the same relationship to the batter as the spectator is to the second player, Eakins placed himself in the work, here symbolically watching even as he had painted himself observing Max Schmitt.

It seems important that this is a practice session, for as he had with *Max Schmitt*, Eakins focuses our attention on the routine of practice rather than on the less frequent punctuation of competition in an athlete's life. The artist draws our attention to a particular moment in a proscribed sequence of motions and, as Theodore Stebbins has written, "... the mood of the watercolor is more one of reverie than of exaltation. ... as the ball-players stand poised in late afternoon sunlight, the artist trying to make sense of an increasingly complex world through the ritual of sport."\(^{27}\)

Baseball, invented by middle-class urbanites "more expert with the knife and fork at post-game banquets than with bat and ball on the diamond."\(^{28}\) quickly acquired pastoral connotations that belied its origins. While Eakins set his 1875 baseball watercolor in a diamond backed by bleachers, William Morris Hunt chose a rural background for his *The Ball Players*. Painted toward the end of Hunt's life, which was cut short by drowning in 1879, *The Ball Players* is one of a number of landscapes with figures that date from the productive summer and fall of 1877 he spent on Cape Ann, at Magnolia,

\(^{26}\) The inset signature and the pencil margins indicate that Eakins intended to crop the image. See Foster 1982, p. 222, note 72.

\(^{27}\) Stebbins 1976, p. 168.

Winslow Homer, *Snap the Whip*, 1872 (oil on canvas, 22¼ x 36½ in.) (The Butler Institute of American Art. Youngstown, Ohio)

Massachusetts. Hunt had purchased and remodeled an old barn whose field served as the setting for *The Ball Players*. As part of the preparation for this painting, he sketched the scene in charcoal (*Baseball*, 1877, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and made several important adjustments between paper and canvas: he increased the size of the field in proportion to the houses along a high horizon, he placed the pitcher further away from the two foreground figures, and he omitted two small outfield players. By doing this he isolated each player from the others and from the houses at the edge of the field.

The years just before Hunt’s summer at Magnolia were marked by a number of personal and professional crises. His lifetime’s work was destroyed in a studio fire in 1872, and he separated from his wife and family in 1873. Losses that might underlie the meaning of *The Ball Players*, expressed in ghost-like figures Hunt sketchily drew and evanescently brushed onto his canvas. This particular game consists of a trio of players, or a pair of players observed by a third, whose feet are firmly planted on the ground and hands set upon his hips in concentration on the game that he, and we through him, watch. Far from the urban centers of professional baseball, Hunt was surely not the only American to be attracted by a pick-up game of summer baseball. A single generation after the game’s invention, it had already become a vehicle for lonely nostalgia.

Winslow Homer may have experienced a similar mood when he contemplated the gradual disappearance of traditional children’s games as more and more boys and girls were drawn into the world of adult-sponsored modern sports. “The country boy roams the hills and has free access to ‘God’s first temples,’” commented F. D. Boynton in 1904 (quoting William Cullen Bryant).

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"What," he asked with a flourish of rhetoric from John Milton, "can we offer to the city boy in exchange for paradise lost? His only road to paradise regained is [through] the gymnasium, the athletic field, and the playground." Painted a generation earlier, in 1872, Homer's *Snap the Whip*, seems to be a rural vision of childhood interdependence learned through the joy of a game. But even here urban life intruded, in the form of Homer's models for the children. A visitor to Homer's New York City studio in the summer of 1872 reported in the *New York Evening Telegram* that the artist's "models for the childish games he intends to play in oil" were "the idle gamins of the street." Homer's picture of seemingly innocent childhood play set against the backdrop of a rural one-room school house had political implications. If we believe the *Evening Telegram*’s reporter, Homer quite literally turned "the idle gamins of the street." who probably were regarded as the children of immigrants and whose very presence in American cities was seen by some as a threat to national life, into perfectly behaved, barefoot (well, most of them) boys, idealized in contemporary literature as well as in the tracts of reformers.

The debate about Americanizing immigrant children through education and organized play intensified by the turn of the century, and it sets the backdrop for Maurice Prendergast's 1901 watercolor, *The East River*. Might

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not Prendergast’s playground represent Boynton’s paradise regained? It is clearly in the city, right along the banks of an urban river, plied by sailing ships and tugs alike. A slice of gray-green sky along the upper edge of the paper is as filled with the smoke of ships’ stacks and the industry on the far shore of an island as it is with clouds. The children are well dressed and appear to be exceedingly polite. Younger children hold the hands of older ones, they share in the sandbox. Although one girl stands on a swing, this hardly seems out-of-order in a scene peppered with adults who are gently, unobtrusively, in charge. A corner of grass and a view of the river give semblance of the country quite literally caught in Prendergast’s grid of swings to provide children an oasis in the city.

Prendergast’s image of middle-class play contrasts sharply with scenes of his fellow artists who banded together to exhibit as the “Eight” in 1908. George Luks painted street children dancing for their livelihood, and Robert Henri chose immigrant children off the street to use as models for his portraits. Their situation was clear in their faces, their dress and their demeanor, but none as clear, perhaps, as those painted by George Bellows, a slightly younger member of the group now sometimes called “ashcan” artists. Bellows’s Kids (1906, oil on canvas, Collection of Rita and Daniel Fraad) and his 1907 Forty-two Kids defy any reformer’s zeal. They lurk, they gamble, they smoke, they urinate in public, and they swim nude off a broken-down dock in a grimy urban river, far from the manicured, well-equipped
Artists and Athletes

George Bellows. *Both Members of this Club*, 1909 (oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 63 3/8 in.) (Chester Dale Collection. © 1994 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington)

playground of Prendergast’s *East River.* These artists made the range of children’s play their subjects, and their images are embedded in the web of contemporary New Yorkers’ reactions, from a celebration of childhood freedom to a desire to channel and control their play.

Turn-of-the-century, middle-class reformers also concerned themselves with lower-class adults and their saloon-based recreations. Prize fights staged in back rooms both disturbed and attracted these reformers. The saloon was by no means the only venue. Boxing, often referred to as “sparring” in order to evade the laws that banned pugilism, was also a popular collegiate sport, especially with young men worried that an interest in books might cause them to seem “unmanly.” Theodore Roosevelt boxed and championed the sport, seen as middle-class, even gentlemanly in Thomas Eakins’s three late-nineteenth-century boxing paintings of the Philadelphia Arena. But the ambiance of collegiate “sparring” was a world apart from the sheer brutality of commercial prizefighting. And it was prizefighting, seen as part of working-class life, that fascinated twentieth-century artists like George Bellows. As a young artist struggling for recognition, Bellows introduced himself to the New York art world with a series of brutal boxing pictures painted


between 1908 and 1910. The particular tension of these pictures, included among them Both Members of this Club of 1909, defined the peculiar mix of prizefighting, masculinity, race, and culture in the first decade of the twentieth century.35

Bellows’s biography plays a role here. He committed himself early to an artistic career, and yet, possibly to counter a contemporary perception of an artist as effete, he competed in team sports (baseball and basketball) at Ohio State University. He moved to New York City in 1904 to study art, and stayed for a time at the YMCA on 57th Street. A change of lodgings may not seem so important for a young art student, but Bellows himself later remarked on it: “Before I married and became semi-respectable, I lived on Broadway opposite The Sharkey Athletic Club where it was possible under the law to become a ‘member’ and see the fights for a price.”36 The backrooms of clubs such as Sharkey’s, inspiration for Bellows’s early boxing pictures, were then prime targets of the Young Men’s Christian Association’s reformist zeal.

If Bellows brought to Sharkey’s some of this middle-class zeal, and a part of his proper midwestern upbringing, he was not alone, for men of different classes mingled in the backroom crowds, attracted by the illicit aspects of the fights. The ambivalence of “respectable” Americans may help to explain why Bellows’s pictures were immediately accepted into prominent exhibitions and received generally favorable reviews. The way he presented the fights—as artistic interpretations, inspired by eyewitness experience of vicious encounters observed by blood-thirsty audiences—was also important. Bellows doesn’t outwardly condemn the fights, but neither does he unequivocally affirm them. If these pictures celebrate masculine power, they make equally clear the high price of such display. As Marianne Doezema sums it up, Bellows presents a world in which “. . . condemnation and adulation coexist.”37

Both Members of this Club is the last in a series of four works Bellows devoted to boxing between 1907 and 1909, and to it he added an issue, that of race, not present in the first three. He originally titled the painting A Nigger and a White Man, thus foregrounding the racial aspects of the encounter.38 Bellows began work on the picture in the autumn of 1909, a year after Jack Johnson wrested the heavyweight title from Tommy Burns. Against a social background of heightened popular attention to a series of “great white hopes,” the painted images become luridly significant. It isn’t known whether or not Bellows saw an interracial bout at Sharkey’s or another dub in the fall

38. We are especially grateful to Marianne Doezema for her work on Bellows’s sporting pictures and particularly for clarifying our discussion of this painting.
of 1909, but his original title and the prominence, even dominance, of the black athlete (the white man’s face is clearly bloodied and expresses pain), propel this painting beyond the specific reporting of an event. The artist’s technique, too, reinforces that his work is artistic response and not illustration. Although Bellows wrote that “Prize fighters and swimmers are the only types whose muscular action can be painted in the nude legitimately,” the musculature of these fighters is defined not by carefully constructed illusion, as in Eakins’s portraits of boxers, but instead by long, sweeping strokes of color, whose evidence of energetic application echoes the physical exertion of the athletes themselves. Compositionally, too, Bellows’s insistence on a defining triangular shape formed by the limbs of the two pugilists, reinforces the self-conscious artistry of his presentation.

Bellows gives us, his audience, a position above the crowd of raucous participants. We look down on the tops of heads, some balding, some hatted, in the immediate foreground, and at an array of faces, many of them splattered with the fighters’ blood, on the opposite side of the ring. Eerily illuminated by his studio light, meant to simulate the artificial light of a back room, and set off against a deep, black background, they leer and shout as they close in on the two fighters, perhaps in anticipation of a bloody conclusion. Bellows includes no officials, no one who might be responsible for organizing or rationalizing this sport, or even for stopping it before one man is critically hurt.

Within three months of finishing it, Bellows retitled his picture Both Members of this Club, changing the emphasis to include reference to saloon owners’ circumvention of the state law by admitting patrons and fighters as “members” to “private” fights protected from police raids. But his new title resonates in other ways, asking us to consider that black and white men were members of the same club, at least as fighters. Does this mean that, in this era marked by outward and brutal racial hostility, the possibility existed that membership in a more broadly constructed “human club” might be extended to all men? Or should we focus on the opposition of a white man, whose face we see expressing pain, and a black man who might have been seen as a faceless battering machine?

The backroom of Tom Sharkey’s saloon is a world apart from the setting of another of Bellows’s sporting scenes, the carefully tended lawns of The Casino at Newport. Bellows and his young family chose to spend the summers of 1918 and 1919 at Middletown, Rhode Island. But it was not only the sea, an essential inspiration to him in previous years, that attracted Bellows during those summers. Sailing and tennis dominated the sporting life of the

40. Many of our ideas about Bellows’s boxing pictures were stimulated by Jerry Smolin’s work on an American Studies honors thesis at Amherst College (1990), and we are grateful to him for the many conversations we have had over the years. In addition, we thank Jonathan Werner, class of 1995, for his thoughtful observations about this part of the article.
affluent resort community of Newport, and Bellows made frequent visits to The Casino to watch the nationally ranked tennis players its tournaments attracted. Such polite surroundings must have presented a marked contrast to the subjects to which he devoted most of the year 1918—the German atrocities against the Belgians during World War I. Far from the horrors of that war, the graceful arcades of McKim, Mead and White’s shingle-style Casino, site of the First National Lawn Tennis Tournament in 1881, provide a backdrop for Bellows’ game, played in the lengthening shadows of a lushly verdant summer afternoon. Tennis Tournament was painted in Woodstock, New York, and left unfinished in the summer of 1920. In this painting, a small crowd has gathered around the court. Fashionably dressed, the women wear stylish hats and protect themselves from the sun with colorful parasols, while the men are in summer attire of dark blazers and white flannel trousers. Our bird’s-eye (or umpire’s-eye) view takes in one side of the court as a singles player stretches up and back for an overhead smash. His energetic effort in marked contrast to the spectator on his right who lounges on the grass in a pose Bellows borrowed from Edouard Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe (a pose

which itself had a long artistic legacy. No greater contrast from Bellows’s all-male backroom crowds at Sharkey’s could be found than these Newport summer residents, on the grounds of another kind of private club.

Another sport then redolent with upper-class associations was golf. The game, imbued with the aura of its Scottish origins, was still dominated by white men of British ancestry, but by the 1920s, when Childe Hassam painted *The Dune Hazard, No. 2*, golf was played on public links as well as in country clubs and on private estates. A sportsman himself, Hassam played golf in East Hampton, Long Island, his summer home, at the Maidstone Club, which he is said to have described as a country club discovered by artists. The site of this painting may indeed be the Maidstone Club, its dune hazard seeming to be more naturally formed by the ocean than constructed by a golf-course designer. Hassam’s particular choice of this sport, which relies less than others on the power and speed of youth, may be owing to his own advancing age. The golfer who stands in the foreground of this picture is not identified, but it is harmless sentimentality to imagine Bobby Jones there against the background of grass, sand, and pale blue sky. As the United States rushed and roared into the “Jazz Age,” Hassam’s quietly secluded vision of one side of American life must have seemed to many almost as anachronistic as his impressionist style.

In the 1930s, golf was satirized as the suburban pastime of bloated philistines in Paul Cadmus’s *Aspects of Suburban Life: Golf* (1936, oil on canvas, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Transfer from the U.S. Department of State). Boxers rather than

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golfers seemed to embody the spirit of the age, none of them more fully than Joe Louis. For white Americans, acceptance of a black heavyweight champion came when Louis entered the ring in 1938 for a rematch against Max Schmeling, the only fighter who had ever knocked him out. Although the German boxer was perceived as Adolph Hitler’s standard bearer, he was not a Nazi. His American manager was a Jew and Anny Ondra, with whom Schmeling was then in love, ran a German film company dissolved by the Nazis because two-thirds of the stockholders were Jews. In the minds of most Americans, however, Schmeling’s personal allegiances were irrelevant. Hitler was for Schmeling, was he not? Franklin Delano Roosevelt was for Louis, was he not? What else did one need to know?

On 22 June 1938, seventy thousand fight fans paid $1,015,012 to sit in Yankee Stadium and watch a battle that lasted less than one round. On the streets of Harlem there was jubilation. New York Police Commissioner Lewis Valentine demonstrated goodwill (or simple prudence) by banning vehicular traffic on 7th Avenue from 125th Street to 145th Street. It may be an exaggeration to say, as one of the champion’s biographers did, that “even blatant racists had to accept Louis as America’s representative.” But everyone who was not a blatant racist did. The second Schmeling fight, unlike Max Baer’s 1933 victory over the German champion, became a legendary event.

Newspaper cartoonists who had tended to portray black fighters as "savage, ape-like creatures." seemed suddenly to realize that Louis was a handsome man.

The most interesting visual interpretation of the Louis-Schmeling fight is Robert Riggs's oil of about 1939, entitled The Brown Bomber. In this picture, a grim-visoraged Louis, whose skin has been lightened by the artist to almost the same hue as the German's, leans over Schmeling, who has fallen to hands and knees and seems to want nothing more than to crawl away to safety. Since the referee also hovers over the beaten fighter, he and Louis form a kind of arch under which Schmeling sprawls in utter humiliation. The ringside fight fans bend forward too, which gives the entire scene an air of dynamic instability. The towel thrown into the ring by Schmeling's second flutters toward Lewis like a banderole around a deity or hero in an early Renaissance picture.

In The Brown Bomber, all eyes are on the fallen fighter. In Edward Hopper's French Six-Day Bicycle Rider, painted in 1937, no none looks at

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anyone else. For this picture, Hopper drew upon his own experience as a bicyclist and, more specifically, on his attendance at the International Six-Day Bicycle Race, held at Madison Square Garden in November 1936. Several years later he wrote about a particular racer he had observed and sketched:

I did not attempt an accurate portrait, but it resembles him in a general way. . . . He is supposed to be resting during the sprints while his team mate is on the track or at the time when "The Garden" is full in the afternoon or evening, when both members of a team are on the alert to see that no laps are stolen from them. This rider that suggested the one I painted, was young and dark and quite French in appearance.⁴⁶

These apparently anomic figures are familiar actors from Hopper's painted cast of contemporary Americans. They resemble the bosses and their secretaries, the gas station attendants, the overnight motel guests, the theater ushers. The sportsman, rare in Hopper's work, is not immune to this pervasive loneliness and isolation. The cyclist's outstretched legs make a bloodless contrast to his bright red jersey, the color of which resonates against its complementary green of the cabinet's curtain. Like the cynical, dishonest cyclists who disturb the Spanish idyll in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Hopper's figure suggests that sports offer no privileged sanctuary from the stresses, uncertainties, and dislocations of modernity. It is difficult to imagine that any twentieth-century artist, not even those addicted, like Andy Warhol, to popular culture, could fill a canvas with figures as confident and self-assured as West's and Copley's cricketplayers.